

# Intentions in Action

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In the course of his theory of intentionality, John Searle introduces the operatory notion of “intention in action”. He argues that not all intentions are formed prior to the actual action being taken place. Some intentions emerge and evolve during the performance of a given action. That is the case, for instance, when someone suddenly hits another man<sup>1</sup>. There are several features that help Searle to distinguish between this sort of intentions and the more commonly considered “prior intentions”. First of all, when expressed they present themselves under two different forms: “I will do A” or “I am going to do A” indicates a prior intention; “I am doing A” indicates an “intention in action”. In the latter case, intention and action are inseparable (Searle, 1983: 84). The way Searle assimilates “intentions in action” and actions themselves is very interesting and proves to be, indeed, the core of his argument on the subject of intentions. Their pervasiveness eliminates the idea that we could have something like “pure actions”, as could be the case with the man that “suddenly gets up and starts pacing about the room” (1983: 84) while thinking on a philosophical problem. However unconscious or “automatic” an action appears to be, it is always accompanied by an “intention in action”. In this point, Searle’s text suffers an interesting development. By the beginning of the chapter, Searle clearly mentions that “all *intentional actions* have intentions in action” (1983: 85). But after a few pages, he is ready to drop the adjective “intentional” and simply postulate, “all action is a composite entity of which one component is an intention in action” (1983: 107). The notion of “intention in action” seems to have

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Searle, J. (1983), *Intentionality - An essay In the philosophy of mind*, 1983, p. 84.

acquired such a weight that it can now be clearly specified that “there are no actions, *not even unintentional actions*, without intentions” (1983:107). That is, one has to have an “intention in action” not only to have an intentional action, but also to be able to classify an event as an action.

It would be interesting to compare Searle’s notion of “intention in action” with that of “pure intention” as proposed by Davidson<sup>2</sup>. In a way they seem to be the most extreme far-ends of the spectrum of possible connections between intentions and actions. The first is so tightly connected to the action that is hard to realize in what way it can be extracted or thought of independently of the event that is taking place. The second is so distant from any action that is quite difficult to understand what it could really mean or how could it be still acknowledged as a *full-blown* intention. In fact, the close intimacy between “intention in action” and action explains, in Searle’s view, why “there is a more intimate connection between actions and intentions than there is between (...) beliefs and states of affairs” (1983: 107): actions contain intentions in actions whereas states of affairs do not contain beliefs or desires.

I shall attempt to follow Searle’s notion of intentions in action in a threefold way. First of all, I’ll examine the global notion of Intentionality. Secondly, I’ll try to understand how the connection between prior intentions and intentions-in-action can be thought to occur. And thirdly, I’ll question the possibility of intentions in action as a distinctive kind of Intentional state.

## **1. Intentionality**

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Davidson, D., *Essays on Actions and Events*, p.83.

First of all, we have to understand the role that intentions in action play in the economy of Searle's views on Intentionality in general and on intentions in particular.

Briefly, Intentionality is the stipulation of conditions of satisfaction and constitutes a wide notion overarching different sorts of mental states. Descriptive statements about the world represent their truth conditions just like promises represent their fulfilment conditions and orders represent their conditions of obedience. This also means that in order to be classifiable as Intentional any mental state or event has to be about or directed at something in the world. In order to analyse whether a given mental state is *satisfied* or not, we must consider two different and, in a way, complementary kinds of *adjustments* between itself and the "independently existing world": the direction of fit and the direction of causation. Searle recovers these two notions from his theory of speech acts and, particularly, from his distinction between the "assertive class" (statements, descriptions, etc) of speech acts, on the one hand, and the "assertive" (orders, commands, requests, etc) and "commissive" (promises, vows, pledges, etc) classes (cf. 1983: 7) of speech acts on the other. A descriptive proposition member of the first class has to match the world. If it succeeds in doing so it is true, otherwise it is false. I.e., it is the proposition's *responsibility*, so to speak, to fit the given state of affairs. The direction of fit is then said to be word-world. In this case, it is the state of affairs that *causes* the proposition. In the case of the commissive and directive classes – of which intentions constitute an important set of members – the *responsibility* lies with the object or state of affairs to which the particular statement is being directed. "If I give the child the order 'Close the door!' and the door remains open, it is not I who am a liar but the child that is disobedient"<sup>3</sup> It was the state of affairs that did not *fit* the statement. The direction of fit is said to be word- or mind-world. The direction of causation is from

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<sup>3</sup> From A. Kenny, *Wittgenstein*, p. 112.

world to mind or word. There is obviously here an asymmetry between both directions: the world fits the way I intend it to be only if I cause to be that way, and the proposition fits the world it is supposed to describe only if indeed the world was its cause. The *neatness* ((1983: 96) of this asymmetry will prove to be a major factor in the introduction of intentions in action.

Although integrated in the philosophical tradition that assimilates “directedness” or “aboutness” to Intentionality, Searle is particularly careful in the way he distinguishes his language-based account<sup>4</sup> from the more classical definitions of the term. First of all, beliefs, fears, hopes and desires have to be *transitive* in order to be classifiable as Intentional, i.e., they have to be about something (1983: 1), i.e., they have to have a specific content. The usual test to determine whether some mental state have Intentional instances consists then to ask “What is S about? What is S of? What is it an S that?” (1983: 2). In all these cases we are asking for the set of conditions that satisfy the description of this mental state. Secondly, Intentional states are not necessarily conscious states<sup>5</sup>. Most of the beliefs that constitute each person’s network of beliefs were never explicitly addressed or contemplated. They remain, nevertheless, Intentional for their content is easily accessible. Thirdly and more significantly – and this point will become paramount in Searle’s parallel between intentions and perceptive states – intentions and intending are just a case of Intentionality side by side with states such as beliefs, desires, hopes, ambitions, etc. The way intentions are said to be directed towards an eventual state of affairs is *not* a special kind of Intentionality<sup>6</sup> – this, again, will prove to be essential when comparing the Intentional contents (i.e., their conditions

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. 1983: 5.

<sup>5</sup> “Intentionality is not the same as consciousness. Many conscious states are not Intentional (...) and many Intentional states are not conscious (...)” (1983: 2). This constitutes an important step in order to understand intentions in action as Intentional states since most of the time they are not conscious to the agent.

<sup>6</sup> This is in fact the reason why Searle distinguishes the technical term of *Intentionality*, by capitalizing the word.

of satisfaction) of both intentions and perceptions. The suggestion that intentions may be some special or even paradigmatic instantiation of Intentionality has lead, for instance, to the wrong notion that beliefs and desires must, in a way, “intend something” (1983: 3). Fourthly, Intentional states are not to be confused with mental *acts* either. When involved in an Intentional state – like believing it is raining – we are not *doing* anything. The *test* proposed by Searle in order to acknowledge this point is interesting in regard to the question of intentions in action: if someone asks us “What are you *doing now*?” the rules of our common *language game* do not prompt us to utter an answer of the sort “I am desiring to go out to dinner”. Instead, we would say something like “I am leaving to go to the movies”. The *act-level* and the *state-level* are to be kept apart in this respect.

Following this specific description of Intentionality, Searle’s question is clearly outlined:

“What exactly is the relation between Intentional states and the objects and states of affairs that they are in some sense about or directed at? What kind of a relation is named by “Intentionality” anyhow and how can we explain Intentionality without using metaphors like “directed”?”

It is in order to answer these questions that Searle approaches the subject of Intentionality with the aid of his theory of speech-acts<sup>7</sup>. Analogous to speech acts, Intentional states are said to *represent* objects and states of affairs (1983: 4, 11, 13). Now, since intentions in action will later be described as *presenting* but not *representing* their respective bodily movement we have to take a closer look at what Searle means by “representation”. The proximity between speech acts’ representation and its Intentional counterpart is particularly useful in order to disengage the notion of “Intentional

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<sup>7</sup> It must be added that although Searle’s account for Intentionality is deeply based in his theory of speech acts he does not mean to imply “that Intentionality is essentially and necessarily linguistic” (1983: 5). Both animals as small babies can be said to have Intentionality in spite their lack of linguistic skills. Language functions only as a “heuristic device” that helps us get a better understanding of what is going on in the case of Intentional states. More than that, it is language that derives from Intentionality and not the opposite.

representational content” from any ontological assumption (1983: 12). An intention or a belief constitutes a “representation” only because it has a propositional content and a “psychological mode” (1983: 12) or what Searle called, in the context of the “speech acts” theory, an “illocutionary force”<sup>8</sup>. “Representation” is the name of the connection between both these elements, and, namely, the way a given psychological mode attributes a direction of fit to a given propositional content.

If I command the child to open the door, my Intentional state can be represented by a formula such as “Command (The child opens the doors)”, “Psychological State (Content)” or “S (r)” (cf. 1983: 6), thus distinguishing both components. Notice then how the neutral propositional content is ready to be adopted by numerous other psychological modes: “Believe (The child opens the door), Desire (The child opens the door)” etc. In a way then, “any prescription can be conceived as a description, and any description as a prescription”<sup>9</sup>.

There are thus numerous ways to linguistically *notify* objects or states of affairs and the effective presence of that some object or state of affairs is no longer a necessary condition of the propositional meaning. That is why – I think – Searle dismisses all ontological implications from his notion of “representation”: the proposition involved is not the *object* of an Intentional state but rather its *content* (cf. 1983: 18), i.e., it is not something that is being used by a certain Intentional state (in which case, the state would become an *act*) but rather an intrinsic component of that very state. Thus, it can be said, for instance, that “the belief is identical with the proposition construed as believed” (1983: 19). Or as Wittgenstein would put it, “it is in language that expectation

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<sup>8</sup> Following Wittgenstein’s suggestive example in his treatment of this very same subject<sup>8</sup>, we can adopt here the “language of chemistry” and distinguish between the propositional *radical*, i.e., the content in a neutral regime, and the *indicator* of mode (cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, . §22).

<sup>9</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Notes*.

and satisfaction touch each other”<sup>10</sup>. In this point, Searle’s notion of intentionality seems very close to that of Husserl’s. The husserlian intentional object is not a fact nor requires to be connected with any fact. It is an inextricable part of the formulation of desire or expectation.

The neutral *radical* that describes the supposed referent of the Intentional representation can be stated either as being present or not present, problematic, waited for, apologized, desired, demanded, intended, etc. All that matters to Searle’s enquiry, then, are the logical properties of such a statement. The logical function of all these psychological modes lies in the way they attribute the neutral content a specific direction of fit, telling us where to look for the conditions that satisfy that same content. And the logical function of the content is to determine a specific set of conditions of satisfaction – my order is satisfied if and only if the child opens the door by way of my commanding her. The important conclusion of all this, then is that “the specification of the content is already a specification of the conditions of satisfaction” (1983: 13), i.e., “there is no way an agent can have a belief or a desire without it having its conditions of satisfaction” (1983: 22). Thus, any Intentional state is intrinsically a representation and Searle is dismissing here Dennett’s assumption that in order to have a representation one has to elicit the presence of “some agent who uses some entity – a picture or a sentence or some other object [i.e., what we called the “propositional radical”] as a representation”<sup>11</sup>. This constitutes an important specification of Searle’s use of “representation”: Dennett’s point is valid for the cases he mentions, i.e., cases of “derived Intentionality” such as pictures or sentences. In these cases, we can indeed separate the actual entity – say, the picture of a flower – from its usage *qua*

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<sup>10</sup> *Philosophical Investigations*, §445. Wittgenstein’s concept would also dismiss the ontological separation between “internal intention” and “exterior object” as proposed, for instance, by Russell (cf. N. Gier: "Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Behaviourism" in *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 13, n.1, January 1982, pp.46-57).

<sup>11</sup> D. Dennett, *Brainstorms*, 122-5, quoted in Searle, 1983: 21.

representation. But this isn't so in the case of Intentional states: they are always and intrinsically representations, but not of something that could supposedly exist *outside* them. If we say that someone is conscious of the conditions that satisfy her belief we are not postulating a second level Intentional state overlooking the *original* state of belief, i.e., we are not saying that she is *using* her belief. The conditions of satisfaction are not *imposed* on the belief; they are an intrinsic part of it.

## 2. Intentions

One way to scrutinize – albeit partially and without sufficient detail (cf. 1983: 36) - the complex beam of logical relations connecting psychological mode and Intentional content would be to engage in the sort of “Bel” and “Des” analysis exemplified by Searle (1983: 29-36). There can be different degrees of *proximity* between the psychological state *S* and content *r*, or, to put it in another way, different levels upon which the propositional content can be presented. There is, namely, a *chronological* difference between the various ways of delivering that neutral content. We can see how this is, to some extent, measurable, by looking at the way Searle tests and acknowledges the fact that “all Intentional states (...) contain a Bel or a Des or both, and that in many cases the Intentionality of the state is explained by the Bel or the Des” (1983: 35). (Notice that this does not mean, as Searle proves it, that all Intentional states are reducible to Bel and Des.)

But what are “Bel” and “Des”? They correspond to the broad categories of “beliefs” and “desires” that many philosophers tend to think as constituting the most basic Intentional states. If we take them as constituting some sort of *action operators*



they seem to participate of all our Intentional states<sup>12</sup>. Beliefs seem somehow to be connected to the present, and more specifically, to our present *matrix* of beliefs, while desires seem to be mainly directed to the future, although Searle is careful enough to note that “we will need to allow for cases of “desire” directed of states of affairs known or believed to have occurred in the past” (1983: 29) (e.g., “I wish I hadn’t done it”). Arguably, our connection to our beliefs is a *closer* one than our connection to our desires.

Let us turn to the “hardest case” of Intentional states, i.e., to intentions. Belief requirements are a usual component of philosophical approaches to the concept of intentions. The acceptance of the *Strong Belief Requirement* entails that if S intends to do A, S believes that she will do A<sup>13</sup>. A more *modest* version places a “*negative belief constraint*”<sup>14</sup> on intentions: S intends to do A only if she *does not believe* that she (probably) will not do A. The *Strong Consistency Requirement* determines that intentions have to be in a strongly consisted relation to one’s general set of beliefs: if I intend to do A then I should not have any beliefs inconsistent with the belief that I will A. And it is also clear that the logical relations between the psychological state of intending and its Intentional content do have something in common with those pertaining to the Intentional state of desiring. Therefore, and to some extent, it can be said that a netting of beliefs and desires constitutes a significant part of the logical relations involving the psychological mode of intentions and its propositional content:

"Intend (I do A) --> Bel (♦I do A) & Des (I do A)" (1983: 34)

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<sup>12</sup> For an extensive list of Intentional states, cf. 1983: 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. B. Enç, *Determinants of Action*, 2000: 14.

<sup>14</sup> A. Mele, *Springs of Action*, 1992: 130.

However, there is nothing in this formula that could account for the “special causal role of intentions in producing our behavior” (1983: 34), or in Mele’s suggestive expression, the “executive dimension”<sup>15</sup> of intentions, which they share with decisions.

### 3. Intentions in action

It is precisely in order to be able to account for this *executive dimension* that Searle has to move one step further from more traditional theories of intention and introduce the notion of “Intentions in Action”. By doing so he introduces a kind of “bi-dimensionality” to the very notion of “intention”, somewhat akin to the political separation of legislative (“prior intentions”) and executive (“intentions in action”) powers. The problem with intentions in action derives from the fact that they seem to lack the deliberative stage that some authors find co-essential to the very notion of intending. They are so deeply knotted with actual action that they fall under the category of “alleged instances of intending to do something in which one has no plan, no history of deliberation that resulted in a decision to do that thing” (Enç, 2000: 23). The question is then, how do intentions in action stand in relation to the more standard notion of “intention” and whether they meet the common criteria that were developed in order to segregate “intentions” from other close notions, such as “decisions” or “desires”.

So why does Searle require this *separation of powers*? Intentions in action acquire a strategic importance within Searle’s theory of intentions for at least three major reasons. With their introduction it is possible: a) to leave the *Bel and Des* reductionist explanation of intentions; b) to further develop the explanatory parallel

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<sup>15</sup> Mele, 1992: 154: “I argue here that intention has an executive dimension that goes well beyond belief/desire complexes, standardly conceived.”

between theory of perception and theory of action by acknowledging the existence in the latter of cases of “presentation” as a specific kind of representation (cf. 1983: 79); c) to preserve a sufficient level of generality or even a certain *fuzziness* in the propositional content of “prior intentions” without which – as we shall see – the total set of their conditions of satisfaction would be enormously complex. Let us start with this latter point.

Actions constitute the conditions of satisfaction of intentions (cf. 1983: 81). But it does not follow from this that any action will do or that anything that satisfies an intention can be classified as an intentional action. What characteristics must an action have *vis-à-vis* the intention’s content in order to be classifiable among the intention’s conditions of satisfaction? Or to put it in reverse, what does an intention require from an action?

The level of specificity or *grain* of prior intentions is limited in two ways. On the one hand, the spectrum of their conditions of satisfaction cannot be so wide as to become impossible to account for phenomena of deviance. Given Chisholm’s famous example of the uncle’s murder (cf. 1983: 82), it is clear why the nephew’s killing his uncle by running him over does not mean that the conditions of satisfaction of his intention were met. Although the actual death was an event represented in the intentional content, it did not “come about ‘in the right way’ “ (1983: 82), i.e., the Intentional state did not stand itself in a correct set of causal relations with the rest of its conditions of satisfaction (1983: 85). The actualization of the final event postulated by the intention’s content is a necessary but insufficient condition of its satisfaction. We realize, again, the importance of “intentions in action” through the acknowledgement that the event has to come about ‘in the right way’ means that it must derive from the

appropriate complex intention in action *ignited* by the prior intention<sup>16</sup>. Nothing else will do. In a way, then, if the final result (e.g., the uncle's death) is just a necessary condition of satisfaction, the intention in action (calmly driving to his uncle's and shooting him) could be, if indeed *ceteris paribus*, a sufficient condition (the problem being, of course, that seldom things remain equal during the course of action...)

On the other hand, the prior intention's content cannot be so specific as to make its satisfaction a completely pre-determined affair, i.e., the notion of "the right way" cannot be over-specific. This is what, in fact Searle means when he writes about the "relative indeterminacy of prior intentions" (1983: 93), which is one of the bases for his distinction between representation and presentation of conditions of satisfaction. It seems too complicated to assume that a prior intention should incorporate in its propositional content the entire set of events that would eventually lead to its final goal. If this were true, the set of events would indeed *become* the goal and that is not true of prior intentions. When intending something we do coordinate a possible set of events towards a final goal. But this set of events is modifiable by way of its being confirmed or infirmed during the course of action. The final goal acts as *focal point* for this permanent monitoring, re-evaluation and re-coordination, and this is part of the role of being the *only* necessary event in the *package*<sup>17</sup>. Any basic act that is added to the package during the process is equally intentional and acquires a position in the set of conditions of satisfaction. It is reasonable to expect that the complete set of basic acts be somehow *virtually* represented by the prior intention, but not that they are *a priori* a part of the conditions of satisfaction<sup>18</sup>. Their being *virtually* represented means that they are

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<sup>16</sup> If someone asks the nephew "What are you doing *now*?" when he runs over the man on the sidewalk, he shall eventually answer, "I don't know".

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Enç, 2000: 36.

<sup>18</sup> This agrees with Chisholm's and Enç's refusal of the principle according to which "when one intends to execute the whole package (...) one intends to execute each and every component of the package" (Enç, 2000: 37).

not effective members of the prior intention's representational content (how could they be?), but that they are *represented* via the intention in action that is indeed one of its members. They are, so to speak, a content within a content. Carrying out the prior intention of murdering his uncle, the nephew shifts from second gear to third gear. When forming his prior intention, he "never gave it a thought" (1983: 85) although the action of shifting gears was clearly intentional because "for every conscious intentional action there is the experience of performing that action, and that experience has an Intentional content" (1983: 90), i.e., a set of conditions of satisfaction framed in a certain psychological mode. But it is hard to understand how much weight can be given to the fact that the nephew "never gave a thought" to this change of gear (cf. 1983: 85). How could that not be part, at least in potential, of that prior intention? Surely he had to realize, although potentially, that he had to change gears in order to get to his uncle's. Intentions in action never seem to exhaust in themselves, which is what Searle suggests with his idea that "We just act"; they are always *transitive* experiences of acting. And this seems to be true both for intentions in action realized in the process of fulfilling an overarching prior intention and for *unframed* intentions in action. If someone bursts into the room and asks the absent pacing man (cf. 1983: 84) "What are you doing *now*?", there seems that the rules of the appropriate *language game* would inevitably prompt him to say that he is thinking about a philosophical problem. If someone calls the driver and asks him the same question while he's changing gear, it also seems reasonable to expect he'll mention his prior intention "I'm off to the mall"<sup>19</sup>. Only if someone were already in the room at the moment when the man starts pacing around the room, or if the interlocutor were already in the car when gears are changed, would the intention in action become conscious. That is, only if the interlocutor was *already aware of the*

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<sup>19</sup> We are twisting Chisholm's example a bit since it is not plausible that the driver would blatantly admit that he intended to kill his uncle. Cell phone conversations can be easily tapped...

*agent's main Intentional state to begin with.* So, it seems that prior intentions are much more pervasive than Searle suggests them to be. Intentions in action only have meaning within the larger framework provided by prior intentions. That is, if they were not simply instrumental or subsidiary (cf. 1983: 84) in the context of a larger intention, they would not subsist by themselves. If we were to “launch” an intention in action as a mere gratuitous entity, outside any prior intention, the intention in action would automatically transform itself, so to speak, into a prior intention (compare the shifting from second to third gear within the context of fulfilling the conditions of satisfaction of a prior intention, and what would the *pure act* of changing gear be like). The moment we become aware of the need to change gear *per se*, we are immediately *representing* it, i.e., stipulating its conditions of satisfaction instead of merely presenting them. Therefore, the acknowledgment of putative intentions in action requires the presence of an overarching Intentional state (e.g., thinking of a philosophical problem or intending to drive to the mall or to kill one's uncle). She's “just walking” around the room *because* she's engaged in a serious philosophical problem and he's “just changing gear” *because* he's driving to the mall”? <sup>20</sup>

These examples are obviously connected to Searle's distinction between the “representational” character of prior intentions (illustrated by the questions asked by the outsiders) and the “presentational” character of intentions in action (the insiders' questions). Searle considers that the prior intention is capable of “representing” “the *whole action* as the rest of its conditions of satisfaction” (I, p.93), i.e., its conditions of satisfaction = itself + the *whole action*. The intention in action, however, cannot represent. All it can do is to *present* the actual “physical movement as the rest of its conditions of satisfaction” (I, p.93), i.e., its conditions of satisfaction = itself + the

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<sup>20</sup> It seems then that Mele is right when he points out that “Searle has not shown that we can act intentionally without prior intentions” (1992: 184).

physical movement. The question seems to be, then, that in order to have just a “pure act” or intention in action, we need to perceive the existence of an overarching Intentional state.

The difference between presenting and representing the state’s conditions of satisfaction is directly linked to Searle’s parallel between action and perception, which the author uses to explain how prior intentions, intentions in action and the bodily movement “get together” (1983: 94): the formal relations between the three are the mirror image “of the formal relations between the memory, the visual experience of the flower and the flower”. Their being mirror images of each other means, of course, that their directions of fit and causation stand in juxtaposed symmetrical relations. When we say that the prior intention causes the intention in action that causes the bodily movement, the direction of fit is world-mind and the direction of causation is mind-world. When we say that the object causes the experience of seeing the object that causes the memory, the direction of fit is mind-world and the direction of causation is world-mind. Notice that the verb “causes” does not mean entirely the same thing throughout these vectors. When we say that the prior intention *causes* the intention in action we are saying that it *stipulates its conditions of satisfaction* whereas when we say that the intention in action *causes* the bodily movement, we are actually saying that it *presents the satisfaction of its conditions*. The connection with the actual bodily movement is so intense that the use of “cause” here is rather an awkward one since we could almost equate the psychological mode and the actualization of conditions of satisfaction. Spontaneity, suddenness, impulsiveness, instantaneous reaction, these are all expressions connected to Searle’s examples of intentions in action. Take for instance, the case of the slapping man (1983: 84). But in this case – as Mele argues (1992: 184) – a whole sort of *chronological questions* arise. If a sudden action leaves insufficient time

to form a prior intention, how much time do we need for that? What is the time *gap* that allows us to distinguish between a prior intention and an intention in action? How can we really determine whether an *intention* is so deeply embedded with action that it can no longer be classified as “prior”? And in view of that close proximity, how can we calculate exactly the direction of fit or causation between them, given the intense flux of stimuli and responses that characterize an actual acting?

A connected question arises from the fact that intentions are commonly described as entailing a modifiable *plan* of actions conducive to a final goal. The plan chosen upon deliberation will monitor the succession of events but will also be permeable to perceptual feedback and alteration (if one road is blocked, I will take another). However this doesn't seem an attribute of intentions in action since they are not representations of their conditions of satisfaction and there seems to exist no *time gap* between the supposed deliberation and its fulfillment. But isn't the notion of a “non-modifiable intention” something quite different from a full-blown intention?<sup>21</sup> And also because they don't represent their conditions of satisfaction, intentions in action, of course, are completely detached from any Belief Requirement. Since we cannot report any “history of deliberation that resulted in a decision to do that thing” (Enc, 2000: 23) it is also unlikely that we can connect an intention in action to the agent's belief that she will do A or to the agent's *not believing* that she (probably) will not do A.

In a way, it seems that we can only refer to intentions in action only in a retrospective mode for when we acknowledge them we are no longer referring to them as pure presentations of certain conditions of satisfaction but as *representations in retrospect* of conditions of satisfaction: the question “What are you doing now?” tends

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<sup>21</sup> “It is important that intentions typically are not momentary states but endure from the time of decision to the time of intended action, although they can, of course, be modified by later reasoning and abandoned if one changes our mind or forgets.” (G. Harman, *Change in View*, 1986: 78).



to be interpreted as “What were you doing just now?” And the answer “I’m just walking.” tends to be interpreted “I was just walking.”, also because the psychological state of an intention in action is already lost, so to speak, when we answer the question: the very event (e.g., our interlocutor’s question) that prompts the supposition of an intention in action deletes it as an actual presentation. Instead of “intentions in action” we should probably use the term of “posterior intentions”. Since the deliberative component is absent, we are only left with the explanatory potential of intentions.

Searle continues to “probe” the parallel between intention and action by returning to Wittgenstein’s famous question “If I raise my arm, what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm went up?” Searle’s answer, of course, is that we are left with an “experience of acting”. To the analogous question of “If I see the table what is left over if I subtract the table?” (1983: 87) we get an analogous answer: we are left with a “visual experience”, i.e., “a certain form of presentational Intentionality”. But is this really so? If we remove the table we are either left with nothing (since the conditions of satisfaction that – because this is a presentation - conflate with the specific psychological mode are no longer present) or we are left with the *memory* of the table. Only in relation to this *memory* of the table can be said that we have a distinctive “experience of seeing” detachable from the actual presentation of the object. It is, so to speak, the assumption of a *common denominator* or of a tension between the actual experience of seeing the table and the memory of seeing the table that allows us to presume the existence of a distinctive experience separate from both. And if we accept the need for something akin to Kant’s “unity of transcendental apperception”, we would also acknowledge that every perceptual experience is linked with the memory of other experiences: it is this linkage that would allow us to take this experience of seeing as being *mine*. That is why we cannot talk about an abstract or *pure* experience of seeing.

If we accept this, and we accept the parallel drawn by Searle, it seems that we cannot also talk about an “experience of acting” or of an intention in action *except* in conjunction of the experience of an actual bodily movement and the prior intention with which that bodily movement was performed. That is, if we subtract the fact that the arm went up we are left with the assumption of a *common denominator* between the prior intention and that bodily movement. But Searle doesn’t seem to have given us sufficient reasons to attribute this common denominator a distinctive logical status.

It seems that we can have two ways of reading the formula “Intention in action”. We can read it either as referring to a distinctive Intentional event – which is Searle’s conception – or, literally, as intentions *in action*, i.e., as intentions *qua* actions, which could also mean actions *qua* intentions. Perceived in this latter fashion, they don’t help us much in a better understanding of the connection between intentions and actions, namely, by stating the specific feature responsible for the intention’s executive capability (which is, after all, Searle’s main project (cf. 1983: 81)). But they may be able to better remind us of the nature of our quest, namely, the search for the conditions that make the conceptual partial overlapping of our notions of *action* and *intention* possible.

There seems to exist yet another related problem regarding what happens when we don’t have a prior intention to begin with. When I stroll around the house while obsessed with a philosophical problem, what *keeps together* my wandering about and my so-called “intentions in action” if we don’t have a prior intention that would act as a “focal point” to which this connection would be pointed to? Also, it seems that intentions in action can be infinitely divided into more and more minute “intentions in action” and so we could have an infinite number of answers to the question “What are you doing *now*?”: “I’m walking around the room.”, “I’m putting one foot in front of the

other.” “I’m distributing my weight alternatively from one foot to the other.” etc. This constitute part of the explanation for Searle’s introduction of a difference between the prior intention’s *representation* of its conditions of satisfaction and the intention in action’s *presentation* of its conditions of satisfaction. If all these subsidiary actions were actively present in the Intentional content, that would mean that the agent had the real intention of doing all of them, which would be absurd and make the stipulation of its conditions of satisfaction a hugely complicated task:

“... there will be a large number of subsidiary acts that are not represented by the prior intention but are presented by the intentions in action: I intentionally start the engine, shift gears, pass slow-moving vans (...) and so on with dozens of subsidiary acts that are performed intentionally but need not have been represented by my prior intention.” (1983: 93, n.10)

But this only seems to transpose the difficulty to the level of intentions in action. And although “Searle does not commit himself to the implausible view that there is a distinct intention in action for each subsidiary intentional action (e.g., for each step I take in walking to work)”<sup>22</sup> the question still remains. If I have the complex intention in action of shifting gear, that automatically entails a whole range of other subsidiary actions: I have to press the clutch, my arm reaches the handle “in a certain way and at a certain speed, etc” (1983: 93). So, in a way, every intention in action requires for its being a *presentation* of conditions of satisfaction (e.g. that I am actually having the experience of changing gear) that it also be a *representation* of a whole sub-set of other intentions in action. Searle’s oscillation between his usage of the plural “intentions in action” and the singular “intention in action” or even “complex intention in action” (cf. 1983: 98) seems to complicate the issue. How far then can we really go in this division of intentions in action? How can we discriminate the entire range of its *components*? And what holds them together if we cannot talk here of “prior intentions” or of a real

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<sup>22</sup> Mele, 1992: 183

representation of conditions of satisfaction? The *pure* experience of acting? Is it sufficient then to say that its conditions of satisfaction lie in the basic fact that I'm having the "experience of acting", that I am having *this* immediate experience, that is completely irrepresentable due to the inextricable connection between the psychological mode and its Intentional content (because in a way the psychological mode and its conditions of satisfaction are the *same*, i.e., there is no discontinuity, in the perspective of the agent, between his experience of his moving the arm and the fact that the arm is moving; he could not substitute that experience for a similar one)? But wouldn't the acknowledgement of a sub-set of "intentions in action" jeopardize this notion of a pure experience of acting? How deeply submerged *in action* can an intention really be, and still continue to be an Intentional state (i.e., a set with two distinct components: conditions of satisfaction in a specific psychological mode)?<sup>23</sup>

#### **4. Final Summary**

In this paper I have tried to point out some difficulties concerning Searle's admission of intention in action as a distinct, self-subsistent, Intentional state. More specifically, I've argued that intentions in action lack some of the most important features that are usually associated with the overall concept of "intention". First of all, intentions in action seem to lack the "deliberative stage" commonly attributed to intentions. They are so deeply knotted with actual action that they cannot be traced to

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<sup>23</sup> Mele prefers to identify intentions in action with "a species of trying" (1992: 183). Why are all my driving movements intentional? "They are intentional because [I am] successfully trying to [make these movements], because [I am] making an effective effort, however minimal that effort may be, to [make these movements]" (Mele, 1992: 183). But trying because of what? Because of the prior intention to drive to the mall. And this is just another way of stating the pervasiveness of the prior intention, which "may continue to play a causal role in [my driving] even after the action begins – a role that may involve motivation and guidance" (Mele, 1992: 184). However, this idea of a series of encapsulated "tryings" taking place within the fulfillment of the conditions of satisfaction of a prior intention only seems to give the problem another name.

any episode of deliberation or planning. Secondly, it is difficult to understand what is meant with the notion that people “never gave a thought” when acting according to intentions in action and the attached idea of a “pure act” is also hard to fully grasp. It seems more plausible to admit that intentions in action can only occur within the context of fulfilling another overarching Intentional state, e.g., an overarching prior intention. The moment we become aware of the “presentation” of an intention in action it changes its character as “pure acting”. Thirdly, the distinction between intentions in action and prior intentions raises an important set of chronological questions. For instance, how much time do we need in order to form a prior intention? How can we establish the boundary that separates a planning of an action – however brief that planning may be – from the impulsiveness that characterizes intentions in action?, or when does impulsiveness *stop* and planning *begins*? Fourthly, by their being presentations of their conditions of satisfaction, intentions in action constitute themselves as “non-modifiable” intentions. But the notion of something like a “non-modifiable intention” seems to be quite different from the concept of what constitutes a real intention. Fifthly, the question “What are you doing now?” which is used as a criterion for the acknowledgement of intentions in action tends to be interpreted as “What were you doing just now?”. Thus, it seems we cannot refer to intentions in action as *pure presentations* of their conditions of satisfaction but only as *representations in retrospect* of conditions of satisfaction. Sixthly, and following Searle’s analogy between perception and action, we require the assumption of a common denominator between the memory of an object and the actual experience of seeing the object in order to infer the existence of a “distinctive” experience of seeing, just like we require the assumption of a common denominator between a prior intention and a bodily movement in order to infer the existence of a “distinctive” intention in action. In both cases, we require both memories and prior

intentions in order to obtain the concepts of “experience of seeing” and “experience of acting”, which constitutes a problem if we want to attribute to the latter an independent status. Finally, every intention requires in order to be a representation of conditions of satisfaction that it also must be a *representation* of a sub-set of other intentions in action, which goes against Searle’s description of intentions in action as pure presentations of conditions of satisfaction.