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HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER DEFENDING-OR-DEFEATING ANSCOMBE:

ANSCOMBIAN ACTION THEORY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LOGICALLY

COMPLEX ACTIONS

by

Andrew Flynn

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Philosophy

at

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

May 2013

ABSTRACT
HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER DEFENDING-OR-DEFEATING ANSCOMBE:
ANSCOMBIAN ACTION THEORY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF LOGICALLY
COMPLEX ACTIONS

by

Andrew Flynn

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 2013
Under the Supervision of Professor Luca Ferrero

This paper attempts to bridge the divide between action theorists who work in a conceptual

terrain shaped primarily by Donald Davidson and Michael Bratman and action theorists who

work in a conceptual terrain shaped primarily by G.E.M. Anscombe. In it, I consider a feature of

action that has only been discussed by the Anscombe camp: the means-end structure of actions

in their unfolding over time. Then, I draw out an implication of this feature: that actions can

involve structure which is *logically complex* (that is, can involve means taken to a logically complex

end). Next, I argue that numerous arguments made by philosophers in the Davidson-Bratman

camp involve the tacit assumption that this is false, considering four such arguments—by

Bratman, Kieran Setiya, Hugh McCann, and Richard Holton—in some detail. Given that

structure is a neutral desideratum that any theory of action should account for, I argue that this

assumption renders these arguments faulty and is evidence that these philosophers' inattention

to structure has radically circumscribed the conceptual space in which they operate. I conclude

with some lessons about the importance of future exchanges between these two camps of action

theorists.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

in my ability to answer them. When I write philosophy now, it's with Ted's questions ringing in my ears.

My teachers at Milwaukee have been amazing. Andrea Westlund listened very calmly to my incoherent ramblings about practical reason and helped me turn them into my first graduate papers. I am forever indebted to her for showing me how to be a moral philosopher. Julius Sensat and Bill Bristow convinced me that you haven't really gotten to the bottom of things in philosophy unless you've grappled with the Germans. Julius taught me that the payoff of slow, patient engagement with cryptic, old books is often very high. In a way that I have trouble articulating, Bill instilled in me a certain sensibility for which philosophical questions are actually important and which answers are worth taking seriously; in the end, I think, this is what really matters. Joshua Spencer kindled in me a secret passion for metaphysics and helped me aspire to new heights of clarity in argumentation. Stan Husi showed me how to handle the complexities of metaethics without losing the forest for the trees. It's been a good two years.

I have learned something important from every graduate student here, and the thank-yous could go on for many, many more pages. But I would be remiss if I did not specifically mention a few people. When I was new to Milwaukee, Cory Davia, Chris Mesaros, Maggie Mesaros, and Phil Mack showed me the ropes, both intellectually and socially. Talking philosophy with Cory during my first year in the program was key to my intellectual development. His encouragement gave me my first glimmer of hope that I might have some future in the moral philosophy business. Living with philosophers has been one my great joys. Much love goes, then, to the Ed's Arms Boys of past and present: Paul Blaschko, Mark Puestohl, and Mat Snow. I have probably learned more philosophy cleaning the kitchen than I have in seminars (and that's not a knock on seminars). I've had more

arguments about more philosophical topics with Mark Puesthol than anyone else, and an idea never enters my head unaccompanied by the desire to run it by him. His razor sharp intellect keeps my flights of fancy in check. I lack concepts to describe the things Mat Snow has taught me, but I know I want him on my team when things go south. In a special way, I need to thank Paul and Shayla Blaschko. Like many here, they are constant and wonderful conversation partners; Paul is closer to me in intellectual temperament than perhaps anyone I've met, and I can never wait to hear what he thinks about a new book—be it analytic epistemology or poetry. But, Paul and Shayla are also my extended family, and they always know when it's time to stop doing philosophy and start being human beings. If I've developed any concern for state of my soul – in Cavell's sense and others – it's their doing.

And finally, I am thankful to my parents, of course. They taught me to love the public library, paid for my education instead of things for themselves that they well deserved, and told me to major in whatever I wanted in college.

0. Introduction

Imagine the following, bizarre hypothetical: you wake up one morning and find to your horror that your friends are all engaged in the weirdest activities, activities you've never even heard of before. Paul is having-beer-or-wine-with-dinner like there's no tomorrow. Jack has started off on an epic session of buying-rice-milk-if-there's-no more-almond-milk-left-at-the-grocery-store. And, Heather is in the midst of finishing-that-novel-she-started-last-weekend-unless-something-more-interesting-catches-her-eye-in-the-bookstore. What to make of this strange state of affairs? Unfortunately, I'm not around to help you out yet—I'm off in my library carrel, defending-or-defeating-the-philosophy-of-G.E.M.-Anscombe. *Strange goings on!* – to quote Donald Davidson.

Quite so. In this paper, however, I want to defend the existence of such strange goings on. Or, more precisely, I want to argue that recent discussions of the imperfective aspect and the structure of action by philosophers drawing on Anscombe's work imply that such strange goings on exist. This is not, as it turns out, a trivial result. Philosophers of action divide, roughly, into two camps: those who work in conceptual terrain shaped primarily by Davidson and Michael Bratman (henceforth traditionalists) and those who work in conceptual terrain shaped primarily by Anscombe (henceforth Anscombians).[1] These

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[1] The works I am thinking of here are the essays collected in the first section of Donald Davidson's *Essays on Actions and Events* and Michael Bratman's *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*—as well as his subsequent amendments made to the basic theory presented in that book—which have had a pervasive effect on how action theory is practiced in contemporary philosophy. On the Ansombian side, the *locus classicus* is Anscombe's *Intention*, but two recent attempts to revive Anscombe's work seem especially important: *Reasonably Vicious* by Candace Vogler and *Life and Action* by Michael Thompson. This is not to say that these are the only significant fault lines in action theory. For instance, see Setiya 2010 for a discussion of the numerous views that one could take on the nature of intentions, which contrasts the predominant traditionalist view that intentions are mental states with the Anscombian claim that they are not, but also considers philosophers, like George Wilson, who dissent from the predominant view, but not on explicitly Anscombian grounds. (See Wilson 1989.) Also, there are heated debates within each roughly defined camp, although they will tend to be debates that accept as given certain controversial theses, and then proceed to debate the implications or nature of those theses. So, for example, traditionalists take it as given that intention is some sort of mental state, but have fierce debates about the nature of the rational norms that govern that

philosophers disagree about a whole host of issues—whether action explanation is a species of efficient causal explanation, whether intentions are mental states at all, whether self-knowledge is importantly connected with action—and the dialectic between the two camps is difficult to navigate, not insignificantly due to the fact that it is underdeveloped in the current literature. However, one subject that the Anscombians have focused on, but which has really not appeared on the radar of traditionalists, is the means-end structure of actions in their progressive unfolding over time.[2] In this paper, I hope to show that numerous arguments in the traditionalist literature, due to inattention to this feature of actions, tacitly assume that actions with what I will call a *logically complex* structure—that is, actions that involve means taken to logically complex ends—do not exist. This assumption leads these philosophers to adopt less plausible positive positions than they are in fact entitled to. I hope, then, that this paper shows that traditionalists ignore structure and aspect at their peril.

The paper will proceed as follows. In §1, I will introduce theses about aspect and the structure of actions commonly espoused by Anscombians. In §2, I will argue that these theses provide conceptual space for actions that have logically complex structures. In §3, I will offer a brief overview of the existing dialectic between traditionalists and Anscombians about structure and aspect. Then, I will consider four case studies to show that the traditionalist literature has operated in circumscribed conceptual space as a result of a failure

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mental state. See, for example, Ferrero 2012a and Bratman 2012a. Anscombians, on the other hand, take it as given that a certain type of robust self-knowledge that Anscombe called "practical knowledge" is importantly connected to intentional action, but debate the nature of that knowledge. See, for example, Thompson 2011, Haddock 2011, and McDowell 2011. Finally, these are only rough constellations of positions that happen to hang together in the current literature. Some philosophers have mixed and matched positions in interesting ways. Kieran Setiya and J. David Velleman, for instance, have attempted to accommodate Anscombe's points about the centrality of self-knowledge to action while maintaining that intention is a mental state. See Setiya 2007, Setiya 2008, Setiya 2009, Setiya 2011, and Velleman 1989.

[2] Michael Bratman might take issue with being labeled a paradigmatic traditionalist, because he denies that he is guilty of an "eye-blink-like," atomic view of action that Michael Thompson attributes to traditionalists. (See Bratman 2012b, pg. 8.) I think his denial is right; Bratman's work is attuned to the temporal dimensions of agency. But, as I will argue in §3.3, Bratman is not sufficiently attentive to the means-end structure of actions that Anscombians take to be revealed in the unfolding of those actions over time.

to appreciate the possibility that actions might have logically complex structures. First, I will show that a recent objection to the Anscombian position on prior intentions sketched by Kieran Setiya only makes sense on the assumption that actions cannot have logically complex structures. Second, I will demonstrate that a number of arguments made by Bratman, Hugh McCann, and Richard Holton urging either the acceptance of mental states weaker than intentions or the loosening of the rational norms governing intentions also tacitly assume that actions cannot have logically complex structures. In §4, I conclude with some brief observations about the importance of exchanges between traditionalists and Anscombians for future progress in action theory.

1. Aspect and Structure

1.1. Aspect

In recent attempts to highlight the importance of Anscombe's work, Anscombians have pointed to two features of intentional action that have gone missing from current discussions: aspect and structure.[3] Traditionalists, Anscombians complain, treat intentional actions as though they were essentially point-like, non-enduring primitives: the flipping of light-switches and the pulling of triggers.[4] But, nothing could be further from the truth. First, actions normally unfold over time, and so admit of what linguists refer to as aspectual distinctions. That is, they can either be completed or in progress towards completion.

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[3] Some philosophers make much of the distinction between intentional actions and "plain-old" actions. See Vogler 2009 and Ford 2011, referencing Velleman and Frankfurt, among others. This distinction, however, does not play a role in the argument of this paper.

[4] Referring to his own Anscombian theory of intentional action, Michael Thompson writes: "That such a position seems strange... is in part a consequence of received conceptions of intentional action itself, above all, of the tendency of students of practical philosophy to view individual human actions as discrete or atomic or pointlike or eye-blink-like units that might as well be instantaneous for all that it matters to the theory" (2008, 90-1). Candace Vogler concurs: "For all that...'intentional action' functions as a kind of unanalyzed primitive in contemporary work" (2001, 45). On the relevance of these complaints to Bratman's work, see footnote two.

Actions described in the past tense admit of both imperfective and perfective aspect: "I was walking to the beach" and "I walked to the beach," respectively. Actions described in the present tense only admit of imperfective aspect—"I am walking to the beach" – since if an action is currently taking place, it has not yet finished unfolding.[5]

1.2. Structure

Second, it looks like actions, considered in their unfolding in the imperfective aspect, have rich internal structures. Consider an instance of cake baking: this is not some unanalyzable, instantaneous occurrence. Rather, intentional actions are, the Anscombians point out,[6] means-end structured events, where the end is some state of affairs that an agent aims to produce and the means are other intentional actions that an agent performs in virtue of the fact that she takes them to be productive of that state of affairs.[7] So, an instance of cake baking involves, roughly, an agent's aiming to produce a cake, and then performing

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[5] The most important recent discussion of aspect is chapter eight of Thompson 2008. Thompson is drawing on chapter eight of Kenny 1963, Mourelatos 1978, Mourelatos 1993, Galton 1984, and chapter four of Vendler 1967. See also Frey 2012, pgs. 11-15 and Moran and Stone 2011, pgs. 47-55. Anscombe does not spend much time discussing aspect in *Intention*, although she makes remarks about the progressive nature of actions in §23, p. 39. And, as Thompson notes, Anscombe's writing offers a sharp contrast to Davidson's in the following respect: Anscombe's examples appear in the imperfective, whereas Davidson's appear in the perfective. (See Thompson 2011, 203-4.)

[6] I say "point out" rather than argue, because Anscombians have been responding to a lack of discussion of structure at all in the literature, rather than disputing some other account of structure on offer. For the most developed discussion of the means-end structure of actions, see chapter six of Vogler 2002, especially pgs. 127-35. See also Thompson 2008, pgs. 86, 93-4, and 106-12, and §§12, 22, 23, and 26 of Anscombe 2000. In addition, see Frey 2012, pgs. 15-27. Sergio Tenenbaum's "Policy as Action Model" is also quite similar to Anscombian accounts of the structure of actions; see Tenenbaum 2010 and Tenenbaum 2012. Also, Ferrero 2012b offers an interesting, roughly traditionalist discussion of closely related issues.

[7] This account of the structure of intentional actions raises some obvious worries about regress: if intentional actions are made up of intentional actions, then it looks like we've got intentional actions all the way down. Thompson, it seems, accepts as unproblematic the idea that intentional actions are gunky. (See Thompson 2008, pgs. 106-12.) Vogler admits that we may bottom out with some intentional actions that are in fact unanalyzable primitives, but points out that these are extremely marginal instances of action. (See Vogler 2002, pg. 257n18.) See also Millgram 2012 for discussion of the differences between Thompson and Vogler.

other intentional actions—breaking eggs, mixing batter, pre-heating the oven—in virtue of the fact that she takes them to be productive of a state of affairs in which a cake exists.[8]

      This account of structure makes sense of why instances of identical action types might nevertheless also be instances of different, larger action types unfolding. The smaller intentional actions are not made fully intelligible until they are placed within the means-end structure of the larger intentional action of which they are parts.[9] To use the Aristotelian slogan which Anscombians are fond of: the whole is prior to the parts.[10] A particular breaking of eggs is an instance of a cake being made, and another is an instance of an omelet being made, because in each case the agent is breaking eggs as means to a different end.[11]

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[8] Means and ends seem to be invoked as primitive notions in the recent Anscombian literature, but Anscombe seems to have understood the relation as I lay it out here: "That is to say: the future state of affairs mentioned must be such that we can understand the agent's thinking it will or may be brought about by the action about which he is being questioned" (2000, 35). The notion of an agent performing some action in virtue of taking it to be productive of some state of affairs invoked here is rough and intuitive, but I think that this is all that is needed for the purposes of my paper; again, to invoke Anscombe: "I shall not try to elaborate my vague and general formula, that we must have an idea how a state of affairs Q is a stage in proceedings in which action P is an earlier stage, if we are to be able to say that we do P so that Q. For of course it is not necessary to exercise these general notions in order to say 'I do P so that Q'. All that is necessary to understand is that to say, in one form or another: 'But Q won't happen, even if you do P', or 'but it will happen whether you do P or not' is, in some way, to contradict the intention" (2000, 36).

[9] I am framing the issue here slightly differently than it sometimes appears in the literature. I am talking *metaphysically*, as it were, about intentional actions that are parts of a larger intentional action in virtue of being means to some end that is definitive of that action. Anscombians—and Anscombe herself—frequently talk more *linguistically* about a series of nested descriptions under which an agent is acting. (See, for example, Thompson 2008 and Anscombe 1979.) I've decided to do this, because it seems to me that fully understanding what Anscombians mean when they talk about acting under a particular description or series of descriptions is tightly bound up with controversial and difficult theses about practical knowledge—theses about which many of the philosophers I will discuss in the second half of this essay are skeptical. For my purposes, I don't see that anything is lost by avoiding this question.

[10] See, for example, Thompson 2008, p. 112.

[11] The Anscombian account of structure should not be confused with an account of action individuation. Confusion might occur because Anscombe discusses action individuation in the context of means-end structure in §26 of *Intention*. In one of the only non-Anscombian discussions of these mereological issues related to action of which I am aware, Sara Rachel Chant's "Two Composition Questions in Action," the author, so far as I can tell, straightforwardly confuses the two issues. Chant chooses to focus on mereological issues related to collective instead of individual action, because she takes the question of composition in individual action to be identical with the question of action individuation, and she takes action individuation to have been worked to death in literature. (See Chant 2010, pgs. 28-30.) But, it seems to me that these questions are pretty clearly distinct: offering an account of why pulling a trigger is identical to assassinating President Lincoln is different than explaining why buying a gun and deciding the best time to strike—two clearly non-identical intentional actions—are both parts of plotting to assassinate President Lincoln.

2. Extending the Anscombian Theses

2.1. Logically Complex Structure

Once we have the picture of intentional action sketched in the previous section, the following point becomes important: an agent might set ends that are logically complex. That is, for instance, an agent might set the end of buying rice milk at the grocery store *if* there is no almond milk left. Or, an agent might set the end of having *either* beer *or* wine with dinner. These ends involve complex amalgamations of states of affairs.[12] In the first case, it seems that the agent is aiming at producing one state of affairs given certain conditions obtaining, or some other state of affairs otherwise. In the second case, the agent is aiming at producing either of two states of affairs. And, the agent can take means to such ends. Means to having beer or wine with dinner, for instance, will be intentional actions that are productive of *either* state of affairs obtaining—that is, *either* a state of affairs in which she's consumed a glass of wine with dinner *or* a state of affairs in which she's consumed a glass of beer with dinner— and performed in virtue of that fact. These will be intentional actions that are neutrally productive of these two states of affairs—actions, like driving to the liquor store, which would equally further the agent's progress towards both those states of affairs—or are productive of just having beer with dinner while not making it prohibitively costly to have wine with dinner, and vice versa. (For example, the action of pouring wine into a carafe is not directly productive of a state of affairs in which an agent has beer with dinner, but, given an agent's normal background considerations, pouring wine into a carafe would not make it prohibitively costly to have beer with dinner—the way, say, spending all of her money on wine would—and an agent who had set the end of having beer or wine with dinner might perform it in virtue of this fact.)

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[12] See Textor 2012 for an overview of states of affairs. I intend this paper to be neutral between substantive accounts of states of affairs.

When an agent is taking the means to such an end, what she is doing has the structure of a larger action unfolding, as per the Anscombian account. I will refer to such means-end structured events as having a logically complex structure, because they involve taking means to logically complex ends.[13] For the rest of the paper, I will also focus primarily on a specific type of logically complex structure—disjunctive structure—since this will be most important for my criticisms of the traditionalist literature, although it seems to me that what I say should generalize to other instances of logically complex structure.[14] To forestall any possible confusion, it is worth noting before I move on that these Anscombian points about aspect and structure are distinct from the now somewhat familiar Anscombian claim that there is no important distinction between intending and doing, although the points about aspect and structure might be used to motivate such a view. (See §§2.2 and 3.1.)

2.2. *Prima Facie* **Worry Addressed**

There is a *prima facie* worry about the claim that actions could have logically complex structures, generated by the examples that I have used. These examples, someone might object, obscure an intuitive distinction between preparatory steps taken in order to be able to perform some future action and actions themselves. When an agent is taking means to the disjunctive end of having wine or beer with dinner, she is not already performing some larger intentional action, but rather preparing to do one of two different intentional actions

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[13] Some philosophers refer to actions in their unfolding over time as "processes" rather than "events," or use the two terms seemingly interchangeably. See Thompson 2008 for interchangeable usage and Morelatos 1978 for processes. I use "event" exclusively simply for clarity, not to make any broader philosophical point.

[14] It seems that any expression of intention with a logically complex object that can be cashed out in terms of means taken in virtue of the fact that they would allow for some amalgamation of states of affairs to come about can be captured by my account. *Prima facie*, it seems like conditionals, negation, and conjunction should be similar to disjunction. Regardless, disjunction is so widespread, as this paper will show, that even if my account only captured actions with disjunctive structures, it would still be philosophically interesting.

in the future: have wine with dinner or have beer with dinner. And, when she has beer with dinner—if that's what happens—then she is no longer taking means to a disjunctive end.

However, I think that the Anscombian has a number of responses to this point. First, many of the Anscombians take it that one of the upshots of their account of the structure of actions is that there isn't a sharp or philosophically interesting distinction between means that count as preparatory steps taken towards future actions and means that are constitutive of those actions, such that when an agent is taking preparatory steps, a larger action is unfolding just as it is when the agent is taking constitutive steps.[15]

Second, we can put aside controversial Anscombian arguments about the relationship between preparatory and constitutive means, and point out that if actions have structure, there doesn't seem to be any principled reason to think that actions couldn't have disjunctive structure, and that an agent couldn't form a present-directed intention to carry out an action with a disjunctive structure *now*; we will see instances of what appear to be such actions in §§3.3-3.5.

Third and most importantly, not only is it possible for actions themselves to have disjunctive structures, but most—perhaps nearly *all*—ordinary instances of actions do have such structures. To see this, consider that over the course of an action's unfolding, an agent's end may become more specific.[16] Take an instance in which an agent takes the constitutive means of buying a bottle of wine. In the perfective, this will end up being an instance of

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[15] Some Anscombians think that all we have is a long chaining of means to an end, which we may divide up in various ways, calling some parts "preparing" or "intending" and calling other parts "acting." These distinctions are pragmatic, not metaphysical. As Anscombe points out, whether we say that we are going to ϕ or that we intend to ϕ, as opposed to saying that we are ϕ-ing, seems to depend on pragmatic concerns like our confidence in our success, not in anything about the underlying structure of what we are doing (2000, 39-40). This point is also particularly clear in Thompson 2008, pgs. 138-46. See also McDowell 2010, pg. 147 and Moran and Stone 2011, pg. 53.

[16] Those familiar with Bratman's work may see some similarity here with Bratman's notion of the partiality of plans. (See Bratman 1987, pgs. 28-30.) I will argue, however, in §3.3 that Bratman fails to appreciate that actions themselves may be less specific than they will eventually become in the perfective, in virtue of having disjunctive structure.

something more specific: buying a bottle of Pinot Noir, let's say. However, it need not be the case—nor would it usually be the case—that throughout the unfolding of the action, the agent was taking means to the end of buying a bottle of Pinot Noir. When the agent walked into the liquor store, she had only a more general end: to buy a bottle of wine. At some point, in order to complete this action, however, her end needed to become more specific. This seems like a pervasive phenomenon: over the course of an action, the state of affairs that one aims to produce becomes more and more specific.

But, when the agent would explain what she was doing by reference to a more general end, rarely would it be the case that she was just taking means without regard to which different states of affairs falling under that general end she might produce. Rather, in most cases, the agent will be taking means in virtue of the fact that they would allow a long disjunctive list of states of affairs to obtain; she will avoid taking means that would make any of those states of affairs prohibitively costly. So, in a wine case, an agent would generally be taking means to a long disjunctive list of states of affairs: having bought a bottle of Pinot Noir, having bought a bottle of Pinot Grigio, having bought a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, etc. In browsing around the store she is taking means that would enable her to buy any of a number of different bottles of wine, and she isn't doing anything that would make actualizing any of those states of affairs prohibitively costly—say spending all of her available time in the white wine section of the store.[17]

Many similar examples could be offered: it seems like almost any action that is structurally similar to the case of buying wine—an action in which the agent sets a general end, but needs at some point to choose to actualize some more specific state of affairs—is

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[17] Most agents would not self-consciously reflect about taking means to an explicitly thought out disjunctive list of states of affairs. But, the fact that an agent does not explicitly think about the structure of the action she is performing undermines the claim that the action has that structure only given implausible intellectualist assumptions that ignore the roles that habit and skill play in action. See Thompson 2008, pgs. 108-9.

going to have a disjunctive structure. The disjunctive nature of such cases is masked, however, because the agent would normally explain what she is doing by reference to a more general end, rather than listing the long disjunction of states of affairs she is aiming at. While someone who was taking means to having wine or beer with dinner might express her intention with the sorts of phrases alluded to in the introduction of this paper—"I'm having wine or beer with dinner!"—which make the disjunctive nature of the action apparent, this is not always the case. The agent taking means to buying a bottle of Pinot Noir, *or* buying a bottle of Pinot Grigio, *or...*, etc., will probably explain what she is doing by saying, "I'm buying a bottle of wine." However, what she is doing is disjunctive in exactly the same sense as discussed above: she is taking means in virtue of the fact that they will allow her to realize *either* state of affairs A *or* state of affairs B *or* state of affairs C, etc. In §§3.3-3.5, I will discuss actions that have stark and apparent disjunctive structure, but this does not make them different in kind from actions like buying a bottle of wine. Disjunctive structure is pervasive.[18]

Finally, for the sake of clarity, I should note that I am assuming here what I think is intuitive but which is not discussed anywhere in the literature on structure that I am aware of: what an action counts as an instance of at any point in time is fixed by the state of affairs that is realized or that the agent is in the progress towards. So, when an agent intentionally realizes a state of affairs in which a cake is baked, this is a completed instance of cake baking.

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[18] This phenomenon *might* not be as widespread if there is an important distinction between aiming to produce one state of affairs out of a disjunctive list of states of affairs and aiming to make determinate some now merely determinable state of affairs. I write here as if there is no such important distinction; I don't think much hinges on this. The examples in the rest of this paper are all disjunctive in the relevant sense. But, one might think that one could be aiming to make determinate a merely determinable state of affairs without thereby aiming at anything as specific as realizing *either* state of affairs A *or* state of affairs B *or* state of affairs C, etc. Also, this will certainly hinge on one's views about states of affairs. As Joshua Spencer has pointed out to me, one might have a coarse-grained view of states of affairs akin to David Lewis's view of propositions. On a view of this sort, in which states of affairs are uniquely associated with sets of possible worlds, a determinable state of affairs would not be distinct from a long disjunctive list of states of affairs.

And when an agent is in progress towards producing either a state of affairs in which she's had wine or a state of affairs in which she's had beer, she's having wine or beer. Whether or not we note this disjunction in the verb phrase or come up with a broader category to encompass it seems to be an issue of pragmatics.

3. Importance of Logically Complex Structure

3.1. Overview

To this point, I have argued that on the Anscombian account of structure, actions may have logically complex, specifically disjunctive, structures, and that many ordinary actions in fact exhibit such structures. This is an interesting result in itself, since disjunctive structure has not been discussed in the literature.[19] However, in the rest of the paper, I want to make a much stronger claim about disjunctive structure: there is good evidence that traditionalists have been working in circumscribed conceptual space as a result of their failure to appreciate the structure of actions that appears in the imperfective aspect. I will show that numerous arguments made by traditionalists are, in light of Anscombian points about structure, seriously flawed, and it seems likely these flaws stem from a failure to pay attention to the structure revealed in the imperfective aspect.

As of this writing, traditionalists have not really engaged with Anscombian work on structure. As I noted earlier, Anscombians have pointed out that traditionalist work fails to pay much, if any, attention to the means-end structure that appears when actions are considered in the imperfective aspect. But, the importance of this oversight has not been made particularly clear. Traditionalists, it seems, have collectively shrugged. Surely, that the traditionalists have tended not to discuss structure and have tended to discuss actions only in

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[19] See Ferrero 2010, pgs. 1-2, which notes that it is generally assumed that actions are not themselves "disjunctive."

the perfective aspect may merely be benign omissions; it is not clear that these facts

undermine their arguments. There have been some attempts to show that close attention to

aspect lends support to specific, controversial Anscombian positions, most notably Michael

Thompson's argument that intentions are not mental states.[20] But, traditionalists have not

found these arguments convincing.[21] Traditionalists might admit, then, that the Anscombians

are right about structure—they've pointed to a *neutral desideratum* that any theory of action

should be able to account for—and right in claiming that traditionalist work has not paid

explicit attention to such structure, but still ask, "So what?"

  The rest of this paper answers that question. I will remain agnostic as to whether

close consideration paid to aspect and structure lends support to any of the controversial

Anscombian positions that pit them in opposition to the traditionalists. I will, however,

consider a number of argumentative moves made by traditionalists, and argue that in light of

the Anscombian account of structure and the conceptual space it provides for actions with

logically complex structures, these moves are implausible and unmotivated. Further, I will

argue that in each case the argumentative moves in question *are* plausible and motivated,

however, given the implicit assumption that actions, in their progress towards completion,

only involve means taken simply to produce the state of affairs that is eventually realized in

the perfective—the state of affairs the agent counts as having intentionally produced when

the action is completed—and not means taken to a disjunctive or otherwise logically

complex list of states of affairs. (That is, for instance, in the case of an action which in the

perfective is an instance of "buying a bottle of Pinot Noir," where the agent has intentionally

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[20] See Thompson 2008, pgs. 120-48. I take it that at least some Anscombians think that intentions, construed as isolatable mental states, cannot account for structure. Traditionalists who engage with Anscombians have disagreed and the dialectic is not far advanced. See Candace Vogler 2009, a recording available on the internet, especially the Q&A discussion between Vogler, Setiya, Agnes Callard, and Jennifer Hornsby. Also, see Ford 2011.
[21] See Setiya 2010 and Speaks 2009.

produced a state of affairs in which a bottle of Pinot Noir is bought, that action in its

unfolding only ever involved means taken simply to produce a state of affairs in which she'd

bought a bottle of Pinot Noir, and not some logically complex end, like buying a bottle of

Pinot Noir, *or* Pinot Grigio, *or*....) Indeed, in each case I think that it is very hard to motivate

the philosopher's argumentative move *unless* this is assumed, strongly suggesting the

traditionalists are tacitly relying on this assumption.[22] (Henceforth, I will call this *the*

problematic assumption.) This assumption is false given that actions can have logically complex

structures, but it would be an easy assumption to make if one primarily thought about

actions in the perfective aspect. Since structure does not appear in the perfective aspect and

since we almost never talk about completed actions in logically complex terms, one might

easily assume that at every point in the action's progression towards completion, the agent

performing it was always aiming to produce just the state of affairs that is ultimately

produced. Not only do the traditionalist's arguments fail, then, but they probably fail due to

reliance on an assumption that is held only because of an inattention to aspect and structure.

Even if the reader is not convinced by these diagnostic inferences, though, I hope that it will

be clear that in light of the Anscombian account of structure, numerous traditionalist

arguments are insufficient. Anscombian complaints do have some bite, then, on the

traditionalists' own terms, and so traditionalists cannot shrug off structure. I will now

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[22] There is conceptual space for a related, weaker assumption: although the state of affairs that an agent aims to produce may grow more specific over time, an agent must always be taking means simply to produce a single state of affairs, not to produce any of a number of states of affairs. In each case discussed, these assumptions have the same result. Each case involves an agent taking means to two distinct states of affairs that don't, in the example provided by the philosopher, grow in specificity over time. The philosophers might, as I suggest, be assuming that actions can only be made up of means taken simply to produce the state of affairs that ends up obtaining when the action is completed. Or, they might be assuming that actions can only be made up of means taken simply to produce a single state of affairs, and that although that state of affairs might in principle become more specific over time, the only candidate for that single state of affairs in the cases in question is the state of affairs that ends up being realized when the action is completed. I discuss the first assumption for the sake of simplicity, but if you think it is more charitable to hold the second assumption, any of the arguments could easily be run using it. This appears to exhaust the conceptual space for denying that actions have logically complex structure.

demonstrate this by considering arguments by Kieran Setiya, Michael Bratman, Hugh McCann, and Richard Holton in turn.

3.2. Kieran Setiya's Objection

First, I want to consider an objection to the Anscombian account of prior intention that has recently been sketched by Kieran Setiya.[23] Traditionalists and Anscombians disagree about how to unify the guises of intention. This problem, a statement of which opens Anscombe's *Intention*, starts from the observation that we talk about intention in three ways. First, we express prior intentions for future actions. ("I intend to go to the store tomorrow.") Second, we discuss intentional actions. ("I'm intentionally taking a walk.") Third, we offer intentions with which our actions are done. ("I'm taking a walk with the intention of going to the store.") Anscombe thinks that *intention* is plainly not equivocal, and so we've got a puzzle: what unites these three disparate uses?[24] There has been broad agreement amongst action theorists about the importance of this puzzle, although the dominant way of attempting an answer, the one favored by traditionalists, is not the one that Anscombe seems to have favored. Traditionalists have taken prior intention to be a mental state and attempted to make sense of how this mental state is connected to intentional action and intention-with-which. Anscombe scarcely discusses prior intention in *Intention*, but Anscombians have essentially wanted to reverse the traditionalist procedure and analyze

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[23] It would not be fair to characterize Setiya as a paradigmatic traditionalist, although he is not a paradigmatic Anscombian either; he has a foot in each camp. (See footnote one.) Nevertheless, the argument I discuss here is faulty given the Anscombian account of structure.

[24] See Anscombe 2000, pgs. 1-2.

prior intention in terms of being, in some sense, already embarked upon the early stages of

intentional action itself.[25]

This is a novel strategy which challenges a mode of proceeding that has essentially

been orthodoxy in action theory since Davidson's later work.[26] But, in contrast to the

traditionalist view, its details have not been worked out and it has lots of potential problems.

Kieran Setiya states one of them as follows:

> It is a problem for the theory of intending as being embarked on intentional
> action that these objects can be logically complex. I intend not to be hit by a
> car as I walk home. I intend to drink wine or beer with dinner. I intend to
> read a book tonight if there's nothing on the radio. In none of these cases
> can we say, without contrivance or difficulty, what action I am now on the
> way to performing. Until it is supplied with an account of these cases…the
> theory of intending as being embarked on intentional action remains
> incomplete. (Setiya 2010)

When an agent forms a prior intention with—to continue this essay's example—a

disjunctive object, the normal purpose of forming such an intention, on any account of what

prior intentions are, is to keep the agent's options open for the time being. Normally an

agent will form the prior intention to have wine or beer with dinner when she wants to keep

open the option of having either wine or beer with dinner and plan the rest of her activities

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[25] See Setiya 2010 for a detailed taxonomy of solutions to this problem. I think that some Anscombians would be unhappy with Setiya's way of framing the issue. As Moran and Stone explain, it is not just that Anscombe opposed the particular way of connecting the three notions that became orthodox in action theory. Rather, Anscombe was opposed to what they call "connective strategies" in general, strategies which take there to be three guises that need connecting. Anscombe thought that all of our expressions of intention were ways of picking out different instances of a single underlying form. "Anscombe's aim is to exhibit the unity of intention directly," they write, "by subsuming the three divisions under a single form" (44). (See also Vogler 2009.) However, I don't think that much hangs on this; the response that I give to Setiya's worry is to argue that prior intentions can have disjunctive structure, just as actions can. Whether we conceive of the Anscombian position as holding that prior intention involves already being embarked upon action, as Setiya explains it, or as holding that that prior intention is structurally of a piece with action, which seems closer to the way that Moran and Stone put things, does not affect whether its structure can be disjunctive.
[26] See "Intending" in Davidson 1980.

accordingly.[27] This will require her to take means to the end of *either* having wine or having beer with dinner, performing intentional actions in virtue of the fact that they are neutrally productive of either a state of affairs in which she has beer or a state of affairs in which she has wine, or productive of just one of those states of affairs but without making the other prohibitively costly. But, as I've already discussed at length in this essay, this is just to be, on the Anscombian account of structure, performing an action that has a disjunctive structure.

Of course, if the Anscombians are right and prior intentions involve being already embarked upon intentional actions, then the agent is performing an action that will eventually be, in the perfective, an instance of having beer with dinner, if that's what happens. But, that doesn't mean that the action, throughout its unfolding, involves only means taken to the end of having beer with dinner, as the earlier discussion of structure showed. And, although it is true that at the point in time at which the agent is carrying out an action with disjunctive structure, it is not determinate whether the action that is unfolding will—in the perfective—be an instance of having wine or an instance of having beer, this is also true, as I showed in §2.2, when an agent is taking the constitutive means of many actions. If it is supposed to be problematic that an agent can be embarked upon an action when it is not yet determinate what that action will be an instance of in the perfective, then everyone—traditionalists, Anscombians, and anyone in between—is in deep trouble, because paradigmatic cases of action have this feature. (We might also turn the tables on Setiya, and wonder how he can account for the intentions with logically complex objects of the sort that he finds unproblematic unless he accepts that actions can have the logically complex sort of structure that the Anscombian account makes room for. If agents cannot take means in

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[27] See Ferrero 2010 for an illuminating account of disjunctive intentions that is basically traditionalist, presenting the issues in a more or less Bratmanian framework. Ferrero is also skeptical of partial attitudes like those introduced by Bratman and Holton, but for different reasons. (See especially pgs. 23-38.)

virtue of the fact that they are productive of either of two different states of affairs coming about—an action with logically complex structure on the Anscombian account—then what work is there for intentions with disjunctive objects to do?)

While the Anscombian may encounter some problems in denying that prior intentions are mental states, Setiya's problem is not one of them. So why does Setiya think that it is hard to make sense of what the agent is doing without "difficulty" or "contrivance"? It is very hard to motivate his worry, unless one assumes that actions can only ever be made up of means taken simply to produce the state of affairs that the agent has intentionally produced when the action is completed. But, with this assumption in place, Setiya's worry suddenly becomes very pressing. In this case, it can't be that the agent is already embarked upon having beer with dinner, if that's what happens, because she is not taking means simply to produce a state of affairs in which she's consumed a glass of beer. Yet, that is what ends up happening, so for the Anscombian account of prior intention to work, it looks like that is the end the agent needs to be taking the means to. Perhaps, one might want to claim that an agent was already embarked upon *both* having beer and having wine with dinner, but only completed one. But, this seems wildly implausible: it fails to capture the exclusivity of the disjunction and seems to entail that there is a failed or abandoned attempt at having wine with dinner where there appears to be none. So what is the agent supposed to be embarked upon?

Given the Anscombian account of structure, however, the problematic assumption is false. Setiya's objection either ignores the possibility that actions may be logically complex in their unfolding, or begs the question against the Anscombian by assuming that actions cannot be logically complex in their unfolding.

3.3. Michael Bratman's Weaker Mental State

Next, let's consider an argument by Michael Bratman.[28] Bratman offers the

following thought experiment: an ambidextrous video game player is playing two of the

same video game machines, one with each hand. The game involves shooting at a target.

But, the video game machines are hooked up such that, if she hits either target—target A or

target B—both machines will shut down. The most effective means of hitting one of the

targets, though, is shooting at target A and shooting at target B, so this is what the video

game player does, knowing that she can only hit one. And, when she does hit target A, she

counts as hitting target A intentionally.[29]

Bratman takes this to be a counterexample to a common assumption about the

relationship between intentions and intentional actions, the "Simple View." The Simple

View holds that whenever an agent φs intentionally, she has the intention to φ. In Bratman's

video game example, the agent hits target A intentionally, so if the Simple View is correct,

then the agent has the intention to hit target A, and this explains her shooting at target A.

But, the agent is behaving identically with respect to the end of hitting target B—that is, she

is shooting at target B with as much effort and skill as she is shooting at target A—so if her

shooting at target A is explained by her intention to hit target A, it seems like her shooting at

target B should be explained by an intention to hit target B. If the Simple View is correct,

then, in the video game example the agent has the intention to hit target A and the intention

to hit target B.[30]

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[28] See Bratman 1987, pgs. 111-27.
[29] This final assumption, that when the agent hits target A, she counts as having done so intentionally, is widely
accepted. See Setiya 2010. However, I think the Anscombians would reject it, since they tie intentional action
so closely to self-knowledge, and since at no point in the unfolding of the action does the agent know
anything as specific as that she is hitting target A. See Thompson 2011. For my purposes, this is a side issue.
[30] See Bratman 1987, pgs. 113-16.

Since the agent knows that it is impossible to hit both targets, however, this conclusion violates the principle of strong consistency, that an agent's intentions should be synchronically consistent with all of her beliefs. (I.e. it should be possible for the agent's plans to be successfully carried out if all of her beliefs are true.) And since the principle of strong consistency is required for intentions to serve as the planning states Bratman thinks that they are, he takes this to be a very bad conclusion. In the face of this argument, Bratman urges us to give up the Simple View.

Bratman holds that there is a mental state bound by weaker norms, endeavoring, that makes sense of the rationality of the video game example. Endeavoring is a guiding desire that is not governed by the norm of strong consistency. So, in cases like the video game example, the agent hits target A intentionally, but, contrary to the Simple View, she never intended to hit target A. She endeavored to hit target A and endeavored to hit target B.[31]

Bratman's primary rationale for positing this new mental state seems to be the need to make sense of cases that are structurally identical to the video game example.[32] However, in light of the Anscombian account of structure, the video game example seems to be an example of an action with disjunctive structure. The video game example seems structurally identical to having wine or beer with dinner, where the agent did things that were productive of having wine—pouring wine in a carafe—and things that were productive of having beer—putting beer in the fridge—but in virtue of the fact that they were productive of either state of affairs. Here, the agent has the end of *either* hitting target A or hitting target B, and

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[31] See chapter nine of Bratman 1987.

[32] Bratman is actually interested in developing a larger account of the relation between intentions and intentional actions called the Single Phenomenon View, in which endeavorings play a crucial role, which he develops across chapters eight and nine of Bratman 1987. However, the attraction of the Single Phenomenon View is largely that it can make sense of cases that are structurally similar to the video game example. See Bratman 1987, pg. 137. Of course, even if Bratman has not sufficiently motivated the introduction of endeavorings, there might still be a role for endeavorings in the psychic economies of less than full-fledged planning agents. See Luca Ferrero 2010, pgs. 35-7.

she takes the means to this end; she shoots as hard as she can with each joystick in virtue of

the fact that these actions are productive of either a state of affairs in which target A is hit or

a state of affairs in which target B is hit.[33] But, if the agent is performing an action with

disjunctive structure, it doesn't look like we need endeavorings at all. Since present-directed

intentions have presently unfolding actions as objects, all we need is a present-directed

intention to perform an action with disjunctive structure.[34]

    Why, then, does Bratman think that he needs an additional mental state to make

sense of the video game example? The move seems unmotivated, given the Anscombian

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[33] The details of this case might give one pause. It might seem that the agent was performing some intentional actions in virtue of the fact that they were productive simply of hitting target A and some intentional actions in virtue of the fact that they were productive simply of hitting target B. The agent isn't performing any actions that are neutrally productive of either state of affairs coming about, and her shooting with joystick A doesn't seem to be sensitive to her continuing to be able to shoot with joystick B, and vice versa. But, I think we can chalk this up to the quirky nature of the thought experiment: if an agent's end is to either hit target A or hit target B and she wants to achieve this goal the most efficient way possible, the situation dictates that the agent behave just as she would if she were in the process of hitting both targets, because there are no available means that are neutrally productive of either state of affairs and nothing that the agent could do with one joystick affects what she does with the other joystick. And since the world ultimately determines which disjunct is realized—not the agent in some future phase of the action, as in the cases I've discussed so far— and the agent doesn't care which disjunct is realized, she need not be careful not to let one of the two targets be hit until some future point in time is reached. Thus, the agent's behavior looks to an observer deceptively like the behavior of someone who is in the process of hitting target A and hitting target B. But consider the following counterfactual: halfway through the game, the agent notices that one of the joysticks is non-responsive, and concludes that contrary to initial assessments, the most effective way of hitting either of the targets would be to start taking means simply to hitting target A, so she stops shooting with joystick B instead of trying to fix it. If, as Bratman thinks, this agent was taking means independently to hit target A and to hit target B, explained by parallel mental states, then what explains why the agent stops taking the means to hit target B? The only answer that Bratman has, I think, is to acknowledge that the agent was not taking means simply to hitting target B in the first place, but to hitting either of the two targets, which is just to say the agent was carrying out an action with disjunctive structure.

[34] At least Bratman talks as though the object of a present-directed intention is an agent's presently unfolding action. See chapter eight in Bratman 1987, where he generally talks about intentions to hit target A, where hitting target A is the action which the agent is currently carrying out. But, in general, what the object of an intention is supposed to be is not made explicitly clear in most of the writers that I will consider. Philosophers frequently use the common infinitival construction—X intends to φ—which suggests that a present-directed intention has a presently unfolding action as its object, but without ever making their commitments explicit. In a forthcoming paper arguing that actions are *not* the objects of intentions, Luca Ferrero notes that this is a common assumption and that philosophers are often less than careful when discussing the objects of executive attitudes. See Ferrero 2012b, pg. 6. For the ease of exposition in this paper, I will assume that all of the philosophers I discuss hold that the object of a present-directed intention is a presently unfolding action. I don't think that assuming this begs any questions, though, because it seems to me that regardless of what we take the object of the intention to be, it must be able to account for the intentionality of the action that is currently unfolding, and on the Anscombian account of structure, currently unfolding actions may have disjunctive structures.

account of structure. It does seem quite plausible, however, if Bratman holds the assumption

that actions can only involve means taken simply to produce the state of affairs that the

agent counts as having produced intentionally when the action is completed. If the agent's

eventual hitting of target A can, in its unfolding over time, only involve means taken to

hitting target A, the only plausible candidates for these means in this case are the agent's

shooting with joystick A. But, if these actions are explained by one mental state, then it looks

like we are going to need two different mental states, for the reason expressed in Bratman's

argument above: the agent is also performing means that are productive of a state of affairs

in which target B is hit, and these call for the same sort of explanation. The mental state

cannot be an intention, however, since this would violate strong consistency. To solve this

problem, we could posit another mental state, the rationality of which is not governed by

strong consistency, which is what Bratman does.

The way Bratman initially sets up both the Simple View and the video game example

further suggests that he holds the problematic assumption. Given the Anscombian view of

structure, the Simple View, as Bratman states it, is crucially ambiguous. When an agent

successfully ϕs intentionally, ϕ stands for a completed instance of an action in the perfective

aspect. But, when an agent has a present-directed intention to ϕ, ϕ stands for an action that

is currently unfolding in the imperfective aspect. On the Anscombian account of structure,

the action that is currently unfolding might not only involve means taken simply to produce

the state of affairs that is realized when the action is completed. Given that an intention has

a presently unfolding action as its object, it looks like there are two different matches

between intention and action that might obtain. An agent's intention might have as its object

an action with a certain type of structure, and it might match the action that is currently

unfolding in virtue of the fact that the action currently unfolding has the same type of

structure. Or, an agent's intention might have as its object an action with a structure that involves means taken simply to hitting target A, and it might match—in some sense—the action in the perfective in virtue of the fact that an action with a structure that involves means taken simply to hitting target A is currently unfolding and target A is eventually hit. Which match is required by the Simple View? Bratman doesn't say. However, the need to make this distinction would not arise if one assumed that actions in their unfolding could only involve means taken simply to produce the state of affairs which is realized when the action is completed.

Further, on neither reading of the Simple View offered in the previous paragraph does the video game example show that the Simple View is false in virtue of violating strong consistency, unless the Simple View is supplemented with the problematic assumption. On the first reading, the video game example does not show that the Simple View is false at all. The video game example shows that there are some actions in which the agent was never taking means simply to the end of hitting target A, but this doesn't mean that, throughout the unfolding of the action, the agent didn't have an intention to be carrying out an action with the structure of the action that she was in fact at that time carrying out. All that is shown is that there are actions which have disjunctive structures throughout the entirety of their unfolding in the progressive. On the second reading, the video game example *does* show that the Simple View is false, because the video game example shows that there are actions that have disjunctive structures at every point in their unfolding. But, on this reading the Simple View is false not because it dictates that an agent has intentions that violate strong

consistency, but because some actions don't have the sort of structure that the Simple View requires.[35]

Given the assumption that, in its unfolding over time, the intentional action of hitting target A can only involve means taken simply to the end of hitting target A, however, the Simple View requires that the agent have a present-directed intention to carry out an action with that structure. But, given considerations of symmetry that Bratman cites—that the agent is behaving identically with respect to the goal of hitting target B—it looks like we should also attribute to the agent a present-directed intention to carry out an action whose structure involves means taken simply to the end of hitting target B. Since the agent knows that she cannot successfully complete both of these actions, the Simple View requires conflicting intentions.

Finally, it is worth noting that Bratman's discussion of why the video game example counts as an instance of hitting target A intentionally seems oblivious to the possibility that an action might not only be made up of means taken simply to produce the state of affairs that is intentionally realized. Bratman juxtaposes an agent's behavior being guided specifically by target A in the video game example with an example in which an agent's behavior is guided by a combination of two targets that are too close to distinguish, without seeming to realize that the agent's behavior being guided specifically by target A is consistent

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[35] One might think that the end that the agent is taking the means to at the moment at which an action is completed fixes the correct description of the state of affairs that the agent counts as having intentionally produced, and so in the video game example, the agent has only intentionally realized a state of affairs in which either target A or B is hit. I think Anscombians think this; see Thompson 2011. If this were the case, the video game example would not be a counterexample to the assumption I'm discussing. But, some of Bratman's key reasons for thinking that the video game example is an instance of hitting target A intentionally—e.g. that observational knowledge of target A being hit causes the agent to stop acting—are independent of considerations of what means the agent was taking at the moment at which the action was completed (117-19). So, if he were to recognize disjunctive structure, I think he would conclude that the video game example is an instance of hitting target A intentionally with entirely disjunctive structure.

both with instances in which agents are simply taking the means to hit target A and instances in which they are trying to hit either target A or B.[36]

In summary, it looks like Bratman's argument requires the problematic assumption in order to be plausible. Given the Anscombian account of structure, however, the problematic assumption is false.

3.4. Hugh McCann's Softening of Rational Requirements

Hugh McCann offers a defense of the Simple View against Bratman's argument. McCann argues that the norm of strong consistency governing the rationality of intentions is potentially defeasible and that there is no better evidence for thinking that there are in fact exceptions to this norm than the video game example itself; the example shows that it is sometimes rational to form inconsistent intentions.[37] So, Bratman's introduction of endeavorings is insufficiently motivated, because one need not posit endeavorings if it is acceptable to form inconsistent intentions.

But, the specific details of McCann's critique are not important here. What is important is that even though he avoids Bratman's bloated mental ontology, he still agrees with Bratman that the Simple View requires that in the video game example the agent have inconsistent intentions, for the reasons of symmetry that Bratman cites. However, as I argued in the previous section, the Simple View only requires that an agent have conflicting intentions given the problematic assumption. McCann's loosening of the rational requirements on intentions is only required, then, if one assumes that actions in their unfolding can only involve means taken simply to produce the state of affairs which the agent ultimately counts as having produced intentionally.

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[36] See Bratman 1987, pgs. 117-19.
[37] See McCann 1998.

One might worry that the problems Bratman is concerned with are simply being pushed back a step: if an agent can form the intention to carry out an action which currently has disjunctive structure, it looks like she can form an intention to perform an action with a disjunctive structure of the sort that consistency norms on intention were supposed to rule out as irrational. But, as both McCann and Luca Ferrero have pointed out, the intuition behind consistency norms is tied to self-defeat: it is irrational for an agent to set out on mutually incompatible projects, because her efforts will be frustrated.[38] This point should carry over to the structure of actions. It is usually self-defeating to take the means to either of two different states of affairs all the way up to the point at which it would be impossible not to realize one of the states of affairs, and so agents who intend to perform actions with disjunctive structures past a certain point are irrational in virtue of pursuing a self-defeating course of action. But, there is nothing in itself irrational about taking means in virtue of the fact that they are productive of either of two state of affairs, and in the video game example, it is rational to perform an action with disjunctive structure throughout, since it is not self-defeating.

3.5. Richard Holton's Partial Intentions

Finally, a related oversight occurs in an argument Richard Holton makes for the introduction of partial intentions.[39] Holton motivates his move with the following scenario: you want to remove a tree that has fallen down and is currently blocking your driveway, trapping your car. You conclude that there are four plausible ways to move the tree: lever it with a crowbar, cut it into pieces with a chainsaw, tie a rope to it and pull it with your car, or pay a bunch of money to the local tree company to move it for you. You start acting on all

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[38] See McCann 1998, pgs. 196-99 and Ferrero 2010, pgs. 12-21.
[39] See chapter two of Holton 2009.

of these possibilities: you'd prefer not to have to pay, but you call the tree company and make an appointment just in case. Then, since you aren't sure that you will succeed at any of the three ways of removing the tree, you gather up your chainsaw, some rope, and a crowbar and head to the tree.

What intention do you have in this case? Holton wants to use this case to motivate the introduction of *partial intention*, a practical attitude that is supposed to be analogous to the widely accepted partial belief. In this scenario, Holton thinks that you have an all-out intention—that is, a plain old intention: the planning attitude we are familiar with from Bratman's work and the subsequent traditionalist literature—to remove the tree. But, in addition, you have four partial intentions: to lever it with a crowbar, to cut it into pieces with a chainsaw, to tie a rope to it and pull it with your car, and to have the tree company move it.[40] Holton defines partial intention as follows:

> An intention is partial iff it is designed to achieve a given end E and it is accompanied by one or more alternative intentions also designed to achieve E. If an intention is not partial it is all-out. (36)

That is, like endeavorings, partial intentions are what are present when agents are aiming at co-impossible ends. The relationship of partial intentions to principles of consistency is a bit more complicated than in Bratman's case, and Holton's dialectic is more complex: he is not as interested in the Simple View as he is in the puzzling fact that it seems like agents might have practical attitudes that are to some extent partial—attitudes that aim at some goal and explain behavior towards that goal, even though an agent is not so sure that she will actually reach the goal, and has thus formed contingency plans. Though questions of partiality are interesting and the Anscombian ought to grapple with them, I want to table these concerns here, and focus on Holton's reasons for thinking that partial intentions are

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[40] Holton 2009, pgs. 34-7.

necessary. Like the video game case, Holton's example seems to be an action with disjunctive structure. Why not think that in this situation, the agent has an all-out intention to perform an action with disjunctive structure that involves taking the means to *either* levering the tree with a crowbar, *or* cutting it into pieces with a chainsaw, *or*... etc.?

Holton considers the possibility that a single present-directed intention—what he calls a disjunctive intention—might be able to explain what the agent is doing, but rejects this option. It will be useful to quote his reasons for doing so in full:

> Of course we could say that [you have a disjunctive intention]; but to say that would be to lose explanatory force. For we need to break compound intentions down into their elements if we are to understand quite what explains what. Consider a parallel example with ordinary all-out intentions. Here presumably conjunction is permissible: if I intend to hear a concert and intend to buy some whisky, then I intend to hear a concert and buy some whisky. But we would not want to be constrained to use only the conjunctive sentence. It is my intention to hear the concert that explains why I buy a ticket; it is my intention to buy some whiskey that explains why I divert to the off-license. It is only if we break down the intention into consistent atoms that these explanations become available. The same is true when we try to give all-out disjunctive surrogates for partial intentions. It is my partial intention to get the tree company to move the tree that causes me to phone them; if we are limited just to all-out disjunctive intentions, we can give no explanation of this. (38)

Holton's reasoning in this paragraph is fairly opaque, but it amounts, I think, to something like the following:

1) An agent's ϕ-ing is explained just in case an agent has an intention the object of which is only that action: ϕ-ing.
2) Intentions with logically complex objects have more than one action as their object.
3) Therefore intentions with logically complex objects do not explain an agent's ϕ-ing.[41]

I am not exactly sure why Holton thinks that the first premise is true. The paragraph quoted above seems to involve the assertion of the premise coupled with elaboration that is

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[41] Holton's language suggests he might think that the object of an intention is not an action, but a state of affairs. But, see footnote thirty-four.

supposed to appeal to the reader's intuitions: when an agent buys a bottle of whisky, this action is explained by an intention that has just that action as its object. But, these intuitions seem to be heavily dependent on the fact that Holton draws no explicit connections between the two actions in this paragraph. If carrying out the action of buying a bottle of whiskey *and* carrying out the action of going to a concert required that you make sure you budget enough time on the way to the concert to be able to stop for whiskey, it becomes less clear that an intention that has two actions as its objects has no explanatory power.[42] The intention to both buy a bottle of whiskey and attend a concert seems to explain why the agent stopped at the particular time she did, etc., which the mere intention to buy a bottle of whiskey does not.[43]

Regardless, I think that we can grant premise one to Holton for the sake of argument. Premise two is another story. This claim seems to be supported in the paragraph above with appeal to the intuition that when an agent would express the intention to ϕ and ψ, ϕ-ing and ψ-ing are two different actions, and the agent is not expressing the intention to do something over and above those two actions. But, while this is good evidence that in the particular example, when the agent would express a conjunctive intention, the object of that intention was two actions, rather than a single, conjunctive action, it is not clear why this is good evidence for the general claim that when an agent would express a present-directed intention with a logically complex object, the object involves multiple actions, rather than a

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[42] Perhaps Holton has some notion of necessitation in mind in the background: an intention explains some action just in case it necessitates that action. But—*this line of thought goes*—a disjunctive intention would necessitate neither of its disjuncts, and therefore could not be explanatory. But, this seems broadly implausible: the intention to go to the store necessitates neither putting my right shoe on first nor putting my left shoe on first, but it seems like it explains whichever happens. Thanks to Joshua Spencer for suggesting this reading of Holton.

[43] Luca Ferrero suggests a similar, related argument in Ferrero 2010, pgs. 27-30.

single action with logically complex structure. Surely, this requires additional evidence, and Holton has failed to make his case that partial intentions are necessary.

However, Holton's argument seems plausible if he intends the example in the quoted paragraph not as a case from which to generalize about all logically complex intentions, but rather as an appeal to his readers' intuitions in favor of the problematic assumption we've been discussing. The conjunctive intention doesn't simply happen to have multiple actions as objects in this case, but it *must*, since all actions are like those in the example: involving only means taken to the state of affairs that is eventually realized. The intentions that have these sorts of actions as their sole objects always have logically simple form; the intention to buy a bottle of whisky has as its sole object an action involving means taken simply to produce a state of affairs in which a bottle of whisky is purchased. So not only the conjunctive intention, but all logically complex intentions, must have multiple actions as their objects. They therefore lack explanatory power. However, if the Anscombian account of structure is correct, Holton's intuition pump is faulty. Actions can have logically complex structure, and logically complex intentions have an explanatory role to play.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that on an Anscombian account of structure, actions may have logically complex structures, and then I surveyed four different arguments made by traditionalists that only work if we assume this to be false, an assumption these philosophers likely make for lack of considering means-end structure at all. These are only the most apparent examples: arguments made by major action theorists that focus on instances of action where, due to special circumstances, the disjunctive structure becomes much more apparent than it otherwise would be. But, I suspect that this assumption infects other

arguments in ways that are not as readily apparent. In fact, given that traditionalists frequently talk about present-directed intentions to ϕ, where ϕ-ing is what the action will be an instance of in the perfective, even though the action may, at the present moment, not involve means taken to an end that is that specific yet, I suspect that similar problems may arise in many discussions of present-directed intentions.

And, there is a deeper problem here: action theorists are usually unclear about what they take to be the object of intention. In this paper, I assumed for ease of exposition that the philosophers I was discussing all thought that the object of a present-directed intention was a presently unfolding action. But none of these philosophers is particularly clear on this point, relying on the reader to grasp intuitively what is going on when they say that some agent "intends to ϕ." This suggests that the object of the intention is some action, but it is never specified whether the action is supposed to be an action described in the perfective or imperfective aspect. Even worse, some action theorists shift from talking about intentions to ϕ to talking about intentions for certain goals or ends, which makes it sound like the object of an intention is supposed to be a state of affairs, not an action.[44] This lack of clarity is generally problematic, but especially so if actions can have structure that unfolds in the imperfective. If action theorists think that intentions have presently unfolding actions as their objects, their arguments fail for the reasons cataloged in this paper. If they think that intentions have completed actions as their objects, they are in dire straights, because this simply begs the question against the Anscombian; if the Anscombians are right, then two identical completed actions—two instances of cake bakings—might have different structures in their unfolding over time, and it is hard to see how intentions with identical objects could account for this. And if they think that intentions have states of affairs as their objects, it

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[44] See footnote thirty-four.

seems clear that for the same reason an agent can take the means to producing either of two states of affairs, an intention might take as its object either of two states of affairs. In the current literature, though, it is not even clear how the issue needs to be resolved. Getting clear on structure requires getting clear on the object of intention.

I hope, then, that this paper has shown this much: no action theorist can ignore structure. The current dearth of interactions between traditionalists and Anscombians is somewhat understandable. Although they work on and disagree about many of the same issues, these camps work from some very different basic assumptions, and so many arguments by thinkers in one camp may seem to be missing the point to philosophers in the other camp. And so, perhaps many traditionalists take there to be little reason to engage with the Anscombians. However, as this paper has discussed, structure is—at least *prima facie*—a neutral desideratum for which all theories of action should account. If I am right, traditionalists need either to reject the Anscombian account of structure or—what I think is much more likely—seriously reconsider a number of their arguments.

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