

*Future Intentions, Plans, and the Problem of Buridan's Ass*

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**Introduction**

Suppose that:

1. an agent, *S*, is able to choose only one option, *x* or *y*;
2. *S* prefers neither *x* nor *y* in comparison to the other; and
3. *S* prefers having at least one of *x* or *y* to having none.<sup>1</sup>

Call this “the problem of Buridan’s Ass.” A theory of practical reasoning is supposed to tell us what to do. Which option, *x* or *y*, should *S* choose? Which theory of practical reasoning tells *S* to choose that option? While we are capable of overcoming the above situation, it seems that our choosing to act did not rely upon a theory of practical reasoning.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the puzzle above, I show how Davidson’s theory faces a pair of difficulties, which are the result of his overly weak conception of the role of intentions and plans in practical reasoning. On one hand, Davidson’s theory seems unable to accommodate the possibility

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<sup>1</sup>As the story usually goes, an ass stands equidistant between two equally appetising bales of hay. Unable to decide between them, the ass starves to death. For historical background, see Rescher (1969).

<sup>2</sup>The problem is not just theoretical; it’s practical. Later in the essay I provide a practical example of the problem of Buridan’s Ass. Our best theory of practical reasoning should give us a means of overcoming the issue; however, it is not so much our theory of practical reasoning that helps us address the issue. We just “pick” either *x* or *y* without having formed or maintained good reasons for doing so. This very short essay is a means of showing how our theories of practical reasoning may not help us in figuring out what to do—which happens to be the goal and aim of such theories.

of a future intention in the face of equally desirable future options, and, on the other hand, his theory cannot ensure that rational intentions are agglomerative. Upon further inspection, however, it appears that Davidson's theory is *not* an overly weak conception since he does seem to rule out the role of plans in practical reasoning. But even including plans in practical reasoning, as Bratman's theory of intention does, fails to solve the seemingly insoluble problem of equipollent preference.

## Davidson, All-Out Judgments, and the Problem of Buridan's Ass

The difficulty of the problem of Buridan's Ass is the result of Davidson's conception of what facts a theory of future intention must include. Davidson attempts to extend the materials present in his account of intentional action, i.e. appropriate belief/desire pair, to an account of future intention, but this is a thin conception of the role of intention in practical reasoning because a theory of future intention must explain why we bother to form them. Bratman believes forming future intentions is a part of larger plans whose role is to aid *coordination* of our activities over time. Future intentions require the formation of further intentions and constrain the formation of other intentions, and they play a crucial role in the "on-going creation and adjustment of our plans," which is exactly what Davidson neglects in his theory (Bratman 1999, 223).

On Davidson's view intentions are all things considered judgments, which means that intentions cannot be conduct-controlling pro-attitudes.<sup>3</sup> While it is possible to have two all-things considered judgments of the form "A is all things considered optimal" and "B is all-things considered optimal," it is impossible to have both of the following conduct-controlling pro-attitudes: "I will A (which means I cannot B)" and "I will B (which means I cannot A)." All-things considered judgments do not prevent a rational agent from holding two equally desirable intentions, which the conduct-controlling pro-attitudes apparently do prevent.

Bratman has used an example to exemplify the problem of Buridan's Ass for Davidson's theory. He supposes that an agent, *S*, may stop at one of two bookstores, but *S* cannot go to both. *S* finds both options equally attractive, and *S* judges all-out that any act of stopping at bookstore *A* would be just as desirable as any act of stopping at bookstore *B* (Bratman 1999, 219). Does it follow from Davidson's account that *S* has both intentions or that *S* has neither

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<sup>3</sup>All things considered judgements are merely *conduct-influencing pro-attitudes*. This type of pro-attitude merely influences the way one acts, but it does not control whether or not one will perform some action. See Bratman (1983, 273).

intention? This question, according to Bratman, shows how Davidson's discussion of all-out desirability judgment is unclear.

Davidson's account of an all-out desirability judgment in favour of *A*-ing is implicitly comparative. Comparisons may be either *weak* or *strong*. A *weak* comparison would see *A*-ing as "at least as desirable as its alternatives," while a *strong* comparison would see *A*-ing as "strictly more desirable than its alternatives" (Bratman 1999, 219). Which type of comparison does Davidson's theory require?

If Davidson's theory requires for future intentions the weaker type of comparison, then *S* both intends to go to bookstore *A* and intends to go to bookstore *B*. This seems wrong since *S* knows he cannot go to both stores. On Davidson's view, then, it seems that *S* can intend to *A* and intend to *B* without, at the same time, intending to both *A* and *B*. This, of course, violates a natural constraint on rational intentions. Rational intentions are *agglomerative* if an agent, at the same time, rationally intends to *A* and rationally intends to *B*, then it should be both possible and rational for the agent to intend *A and B*. Accordingly, Davidson's theory cannot require for future intentions the weaker type of comparison since intentions will not be *agglomerative*.

To require the stronger type of comparison on Davidson's theory of intention, *S* must hold a strong comparative evaluation in favour of *A*. Let's return to the bookstore example. *S* can decide which bookstore to go to, but continue to see each option as equally desirable. This decision, however, provides *S* with an intention that does not correspond to a strong comparative evaluation. For *S* to decide to go to bookstore *A* even though he does not judge all-out that so acting would be strictly speaking more desirable than going to bookstore *B*, the intention does not satisfy the demands of a strong comparative evaluation.

Maybe Bratman has overlooked a key element of Davidson's theory of intention. In particular, textual evidence from Davidson's article "Intending" (2001) shows that he leaves room for plans in future intentions. If Davidson's view of intention allows for plans in future intentions and, as Bratman has argued, such plans overcome the problem of equally desirable choices, then Davidson's view of intention overcomes the problem too.

In several places, Bratman implies that Davidson has placed restrictions on what may reasonably be considered in the formation of an intention (Bratman 1999, 217-219, 222-224). Davidson, however, never places such a restriction on his theory. An all-out judgment should take account of *all* an agent's relevant beliefs and desires. Davidson writes:

A present intention with respect to the future is in itself like an interim report; given what I now know and believe, here is my judgment of what kind of action is desirable. ... My intention is based on my present view of the situation; there is no reason in general why I should act as I now intend if my present view turns out to be wrong. (Davidson 2001, 100)

A rational judgment, then, will enlist all of the agent's relevant desires. Some of these relevant desires may be plans that an agent formulates in an intention. Bratman is wrong to restrict what Davidson can and cannot include in forming an intention. Davidson's theory, thus, considers the role of plans in practical reasoning even though he does not explicitly set out a theory of intention based on planning. What remains is whether taking account of the role of plans in practical reasoning can solve the problem of Buridan's Ass.

## Bratman, Planning, and Buridan's Ass

Bratman claims that plans and planning in a theory of intention avoids the problem of Buridan's Ass. On Bratman's view of reason, *S* may choose either option, bookstore *A* or bookstore *B*. *S*, then, can form the intention to go to bookstore *A* even though *S* does not see going to bookstore *A* as more desirable than going to bookstore *B*. Once *S* has formed the intention to go to bookstore *A*, *S* will, other things being equal, actually go to bookstore *A*, since intentions are *conduct-controlling pro-attitudes*. Conduct-controlling pro-attitudes are different from desires because they include plans that do not merely influence an agent's conduct, but control it (*cf.* Bratman 1983, 273).

Let's not get ahead of ourselves here since plans may not solve the problem. *S* may settle in advance to go to bookstore *A*, and actually go to bookstore *A* later, but since *S* judges any act of going to bookstore *A* is just as desirable as any act of going to bookstore *B* it seems just as likely that *S* should have decided to go to bookstore *B*. The plan may control *S*'s conduct, but that does not rule out that *S* may deviate from the plan, either willingly or unwillingly. In fact, some of the best laid plans require modification after they have begun to be executed. Perhaps on the way to bookstore *A* *S* learns that it is closed.

Despite what Bratman has argued, no plan seems to get around the question: *how can one rationally choose between two equally desirable options?* If we "settle in advance on one of several options judged equally desirable," such a decision does not seem to show *why* we believe the chosen option is the correct option (Bratman 1999, 224). *Just deciding* on one or the other option does not necessarily overcome the problem of showing that the option decided upon is the most desirable option. The importance of co-ordinating roles of future intentions and plans in practical reasoning *circumvents* the problem of Buridan's Ass, rather than actually offering an answer to it. Even accounting for the role of intentions using the notion of planning as Bratman's theory does fails to escape the problem of Buridan's Ass.

Let's use a modified example to show how Bratman's planning theory of intention is deficient. Suppose Colleen wants a 20-oz. Pepsi-Cola and she believes that going to Balboni's package store will enable her to purchase a Pepsi, thus satisfying her thirst. At Balboni's, there

are usually two rows of 20-oz. Pepsi-Cola bottles in the refrigerator. Colleen knows this, she knows that she can only choose one of the 20-oz. Pepsi-Cola bottles, and she knows any of the 20-oz. Pepsi-Colas will quench her thirst. Colleen can intend to purchase the Pepsi in the left row (“PL”) or she may intend to purchase the Pepsi in the right row (“PR”). Intending to purchase PL is at least as desirable as intending to purchase PR; however, since Colleen knows it is not possible to purchase both PL and PR, she cannot intend to purchase both.

Even though plans are supposed to avoid deliberation at the time of action and aid in the coordination of our activities over time, Colleen’s dilemma demonstrates that such a theory of intention does not avoid deliberation at the time of action or aid in the coordination of our activities over time. According to Bratman’s theory of intention, reason says Colleen can choose either option, PL or PR, even though Colleen does not see purchasing PL as any more desirable than purchasing PR, or vice versa. Once Colleen has formed the intention to purchase PL, Colleen ought to purchase PL since intentions are conduct-controlling pro-attitudes. So Bratman has resolved the problem of Buridan’s Ass.

If Colleen enters Balboni’s and finds that there are three rows of Pepsis, then the question is whether the intention she had formed before entering the store involved the *left-most* row of Pepsis. Because she had planned for only two rows there is a question whether the *left* row would include the *left-most* row given that there are three rows. Her plan did not involve the left-most row. Thus, at least according to the original plan, Colleen’s intention has been undermined.

Bratman says that Colleen may abandon her original plan and formulate a new one. If a plan can be abandoned at the time of action, the plan has no purpose. If Colleen can abandon a plan at the time of action, then it seems useless for her to formulate the plan in the first place. This type of problem renders Bratman’s theory inoperable in these types of cases. To carry out Bratman’s theory, either Colleen would have to randomly choose a Pepsi at the time of action or Colleen would have to form an intention so specific that she would be hard-pressed to find a situation in which she could execute the action.

## Conclusion

An adequate resolution of the problem of Buridan’s Ass may require synthesising Bratman and Davidson’s theories of intention. Davidson’s theory of future intention faces a pair of difficulties: he is unable to accommodate the possibility of a future intention in the face of equally desirable future options and cannot ensure that rational intentions are agglomerative. Moreover, including plans in practical reasoning, such as Bratman’s theory of intention does, still fails to solve the seemingly insoluble problem of equipollent preference. Perhaps by

distinguishing between general and specific intentions, the agent may form future intentions without worrying that such intentions will be rendered inoperable at the time of action, even if they encounter a situation like Colleen, but that is work for future research.<sup>4</sup>

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