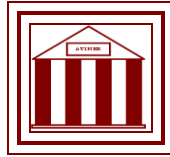


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**Semantic Intentionality and
Intending to Act**

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Semantic Intentionality and Intending to Act

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Abstract

The idea that the intentions involved in meaning and action are nominally designated alike as intentionalities suggests, but does not guarantee any special logical or conceptual connections between the intentionality of referential thoughts and thought-expressive speech acts with the intentionality of doing. The present essay asks whether there can some deeper systematic connection between semantic intentionality and intending to act. Four possibilities are considered by which meaning and action intentionalities might be related to be systematically investigated. Meaning-serving and action-serving intentionalities might exclude one another, partially overlap and partially fail to overlap with one another, or subsume one in the other in either of two inclusion relations. The theoretical separation of the two ostensible categories of intendings is criticized, as is their partial overlap, in light of the proposal that thinking and artistic and symbolic expression are activities that favor the inclusion of paradigm meaning-serving intentions as among a larger domain of action-serving intentions. The only remaining alternative is then briefly sketched, including action-serving intentions reductively in meaning-serving intentions, is defended as offering in an unexpected way the most cogent universal reductive ontology in which the intentionality of doing generally relates to the specific intentionality of referring in thought intrinsically to the objects of predications, and derivatively with respect to its artistic and symbolic expression in language, art, and artifacts.

Keywords:

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Intentionality of Thought and Action

There appears to be a difference between the intentionality of reference and the intentionality of action. When I *act*, I intend to do something, but in the process it seems at least superficially that I do not always refer to any intended object. If true, this apparent asymmetry minimally suggests that intending to do and intending to refer are so unrelated that an agent can do things without referring to any intended object of thought, even though, in an obvious sense, to refer to an intended object in thought or language is also to do something.

The disconnection between intentionality in reference and intentionality in action is sharply pronounced in John R. Searle's 1983 study, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. There Searle maintains that to speak univocally of referential intending and intending to act, as collecting under one terminology the intentionality of thought, expression, and action, is at most only a 'pun' or equivocation involving the same word with easily confused but conceptually radically discordant meanings. Searle writes:

...intending and intentions are just one form of Intentionality among others, they have no special status. The obvious pun on "Intentionality" and "intention" suggests that intentions in the ordinary sense have some special role in the theory of Intentionality; but on my account intending to do something is just one form of Intentionality along with belief, hope, fear, desire, and lots of others; and I do not mean to suggest that because, for example, beliefs are Intentional they somehow contain the notion of intention or they intend something or someone who has a belief must thereby intend to do something about it. In order to keep this distinction completely clear I will capitalize the technical sense of "Intentional" and "Intentionality". Intentionality is directedness; intending to do something is just one kind of Intentionality among others.¹

On Searle's view, it is as though we use the words 'intend', 'intending', 'intentionality' and cognates only through a series of unfortunate linguistic accidents in semantics, philosophy of mind, and action theory. The situation in these philosophical subdisciplines might be comparable then to the happenstances in the evolution of colloquial language by which we have come to use the same word 'times' for the mathematics of arithmetical multiplication and for moments of temporal succession. Thereafter, Searle adds on the same page: 'Related to the pun on "intentional" and "Intentional" are some other common confusions'.²

Such equivocations are rife in ordinary discourse, from which they also contaminate philosophical terminologies. They are taken over from these sources as are all technical nomenclatures, refined for more precise expression

¹Searle (1983), 3.

²Ibid.

in philosophy and other disciplines.¹ We must confront conceptually confused nomenclature that often constrains thought, even if we try to turn away from all those accidental equivocations in the evolution of natural language, and consider instead only an ideal language, such as Gottlob Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, in which these problems are avoided by syntax restrictions that prevent all terms in colloquial language from having both *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*, and preclude any term from equivocally having more than one *Sinn*, and, hence, from having more than one *Bedeutung*.²

Is the situation much the same with respect to the common word 'intention' as it is found in some everyday and some contemporary philosophical discourse? Are the words 'intend', 'intention', and 'intentionality' used equivocally in speaking of referential semantics and the metaphysics of action? Are the intentionality of reference and the intentionality of action, meaning-serving and action-serving, two distinct and philosophically unrelated things that historically just happen accidentally to have shared the same form of letters as their common name, but between which respective concepts there is no further interesting conceptual interconnection? Or is there some deeper linkage between the intentions of reference and the intentions of action, suggesting a more unified theory of the two phenomena? If so, then both of these applications of 'intention' together might be required in some sense of what is usually considered definitive of a rational responsible human thinker and agent. Does the intentionality of reference and action present us only with a pun, as Searle contends, a bald equivocation, or does the terminology reflect even in its ordinary language roots that conceptually these two categories are somehow inseparably joined?

Referring as Doing in Thought and Expression

There are four possibilities in a re-examination of the question as to whether or not there is anything in common between the intentionality of reference and the intentionality of action, with physical action or bodily activity in focus. We begin by distinguishing semantic and action theory intentionality hypothetically in these ways, allowing that in principle meaning-serving and action-serving senses of intentionality might be:

- (1) Totally distinct.
- (2) Partially distinct and partially overlapping.
- (3) Subsumption of the intentionality of reference by the intentionality of action.

¹Wittgenstein (1968), §109: 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language'

²Frege (1967), 1-82; especially Part I, Definition of the Symbols, Judgment, §§2-4, 11-14. See Frege (1970), 56-78.

- (4) Subsumption of the intentionality of action by the intentionality of reference.

We critically consider each of these four possibilities in turn, and in some instances under a variety of plausible branching interpretations.

Semantic-Action Intending Relation (1)

Possibility (1) seems to be the position that Searle endorses. It might seem eminently reasonable, particularly in the absence of a plausible theory relating the two types or applications of intentionality as more than equivocal talk about mutually exclusive concepts, extensionally to divide the intentionality of action from the intentionality of meaning without so much as a grudging partial overlap.

If we choose to do so, moreover, then we gain the further advantage of having distinct concepts of intentionality each tailored to its task of explaining the directedness of action to a purpose, end or goal, and the relation by which the mind refers to things as objects of predicative and inferential thought, and in a thought's artistic and symbolic expression and communication. The tradeoff of having distinct specific concepts of meaning-serving and action-serving intentionalities, the cost of maintaining such an opulent explanatory parallelism, is that we sacrifice the explanatory aesthetics, generality and elegance of a reductive theory that somehow satisfactorily relates meaning-serving and action-serving intentionality under a single concept of intentionality, of which an intelligent thinking subject and acting agent can have intentions that are relevant in different ways to the intendings involved respectively in meaning and action.

We can test some of these proposals by including nonhuman animals also in our deliberations. Even here, however, we need not regard what animals do as *actions* in the requisite sense, and we can accordingly understand animal movement as non-intentional or extra-intentional, without worrying whether nonhuman animals are capable of any sort of semantic intentionality, of referring to things in thought, assuming that they think, or have evolved some kind of proto-language or primitive entirely extra-linguistic but still symbolic mode of thinking, or even expressive communication.¹

If, however, contrary to Searle, in the human paradigm that for obviously and defeasibly justifiable reasons is taken as the benchmark for intentionality in both semantics and action theory, however these are logically or conceptually related, we can intend to refer. If referring is a special kind of doing, a unique category of mental or more overt physical action, then Searle cannot be right to draw a sharp distinction between the intentionality of meaning in particular and the intentionality of doing more generally. For I can try and fail to refer, just as I can try and fail to cross the street or tie my shoelaces. I may want to refer to the first Holy Roman Emperor by his historic personal name, but I cannot recall that it is Ludwig I, or I refer to someone else

¹Condillac (2001).

by mistakenly using another individual's name. Or I may stammer and stutter, in the event, and do not succeed in completing the intended and desired semantic action at all, perhaps not even in thought. Nor should we assume that Searle would want to take issue with any of these commonplace observations.¹

The question is whether these shared characteristics, as kinds of intentionality or *Intentionality*, including properties and especially relations involving psychological occurrences, whether in action or semantic reference, reflect anything essential about the intentionality of reference and the intentionality of action. I think they do, whereas Searle tries to own the word '*Intentionality*' for semantic purposes, and otherwise considers philosophical discourse about meaning-serving and action-serving intentionality to be at best an amusing equivocation and otherwise at worst a potential source of philosophical confusion.

Searle nevertheless agrees that the two categories of intentionality are properties of thought, of psychological occurrences, although they need not be in any other sense cognitive for all that Searle argues. They could be abstract, logical, mathematical or metaphysical. Still, they are in all events conceptual, applying in the two cases to a thinker's psychology. That is already something more than mere random equivocation of the sort by which the same word '*bank*' is used to refer equivocally both to a financial institution and the edge of a body of water. We do not seem to be dealing with quite so rough a pun, even if Searle is right, but also admittedly with something less than straightforward logical or conceptual linkage. From the fact that action-serving and meaning-serving intentions are designated alike as involving intentionality, it does not follow that within the general concept of intentionality there is any deeper interrelation between action-serving and meaning-serving intentions. They can belong side by side as completely distinct instances of intentionality, psychological in the most general sense, without there existing any further connection between intentionality of thought in meaning and in actions and decisions to act. That, anyway, is how one might reasonably understand Searle in the pun passage from *Intentionality*.²

If we needed only an overlapping of the properties of the intentionality of reference and of action in order to evidence an overlapping of the intentionality of reference and of action themselves, then it should suffice merely to observe that both share in common being referred to by the same word '*intentionality*' or '*Intentionality*'. It is noteworthy in this regard that semantic philosophy has widely and emphatically recognized that a pure formalism in the theory of meaning cannot hope to attain adequate explication of a word's or sentence's meaning without either an integrated or superadded *pragmatics*, and even a contextualized pragmatics, by which the content as well as the form of

¹ Searle in the cluster description theory of reference in his early (1958) essay, is committed to the possibility that I can intend to refer to Aristotle by using the proper name '*Aristotle*', but fail to do so if I do not have available for explication at least one description that truly applies to the named object. See the essays collected by Tsohatzidis (2007).

² Searle (1983), Chapter 1, '*The Nature of Intentional States*', 1-36. For criticism, compare Rust (2009), 51-54; 66-73.

symbolic meaning can be represented, and formally extensionally indistinguishable ambiguities can be properly disambiguated. Later Wittgensteinians should join the chorus against Searle here, because in the posthumous publications, especially *The Blue Book* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein understands the naming of an individual significantly for present purposes as a rule-governed *move* in a *language game*, and hence as an action or something that we *do*.¹

We name and use names as tools for a variety of things we do in a greater context of doings. These doings can fit together in complex ways with more encompassing scopes and in means-ends relations, as when we mix pigments in order to paint, and as potentially part of yet another action to which the action of mixing pigments may be further subordinate. The same insight is enshrined in the semantic discussion and even in the title of J.L. Austin's (1962) posthumously published 1955 William James lectures on *How to Do Things With Words*.² We *do* something, accomplish some part of our business in the world, when we name things or learn their pre-existent names, and use the names we devise or acquire in intending to refer to exactly these things and communicate our thoughts about them with other intelligent language users for a variety of cooperative and competitive purposes. When we use propositions in their logical interrelations to construct and critically evaluate theories, to understand the state of things, and make action plans for future decision-making and execution. Intending is doing, on such a conception, whether it is referring, itself an action, or doing something else, engaging in more overt physical action that is itself also at least partly semantic, or otherwise entirely extra-semantic.

We have in any case by now reached the point where we have cast sufficient doubt on the truth and perhaps even the cogency of Searle's charge that we merely pun when we try to relate the intentionality of meaning and the intentionality of action as anything more than mutually exclusive in an extensionally equivocal historically accidental. There is something more interesting going on in the intentionality of referring and the intention to act, given that referring is a kind of mental or expressive act, than a regrettable terminological coincidence. A correct comprehensive philosophy of mind and language needs to disambiguate and somehow relate meaning-serving and action-serving intentionality, if it is going to make worthwhile progress either in semantic philosophy or action theory.³

Semantic-Action Intending Relation (2)

Choice (2) seems to offer a sensible compromise between (1) and some of the objections that have been raised against it. Perhaps some though not all semantic intentionality is also actional (praxeological) or action-serving. Arguably, some but not all semantic occurrences involve actions.

¹Austin (1975).

²Austin (1975).

³Searle (1983), Chapter 3, 'Intention and Action', 79-111.

If I am totally immobile, not doing anything that would obviously constitute action, I might still be daydreaming, and in my thoughts thinking about and hence intending the Eiffel Tower, *intending* the structure without *intending to do* anything physical involving the Eiffel Tower, as I might if I alternatively intend to climb it or paint it or blow it up or use it as a philosophical illustration. Whereas some semantic intendings might also be action-serving or doings in the ordinary sense, it is not clear that all are, which intuition suggests support for at least part of their partial overlap. The second aspect of partial overlap here might then be carried by such examples as those in which actions are generally intentional (unsurprisingly) in the action-serving sense, but not generally intentional in the semantic or meaning-serving sense.

We might find this in cases where we act intentionally (to speak redundantly for emphasis, on the assumption that all action worthy of the name is intentional in the action-serving sense), but where reference or semantic relation is not conspicuously indispensably involved. For example, I intend to tie my shoelaces, and I do so, but without entertaining any thoughts that intend any objects. I do not, at least on some occasions, think about my shoes or their laces or the fact that they stand in need of being retied, or any other intended object or state of affairs. Rather, in the relevant situation, I notice at some pre-reflective and therefore presumably pre-linguistic, and hence pre-semantic level that my laces need to be retied, so that without another thought I simply act by tying them, as though by a reflex action, performing the necessary motions spontaneously without any evident referential intermediation. I may even be surprised to discover during or after the process that I have been tying or have just tied my shoes. If these examples are convincing, as they should be only for anyone with similar experiences, then, although some action-serving intentionality is also meaning-serving, not all meaning-serving intentionality is action-serving. The question is naturally whether in fact the examples do in fact show what they have been interpreted as showing. There is an argument, accordingly, for the alternative interpretation of the relation between meaning-serving and action-serving intentions in option (2). The question is whether it is decisive, or susceptible of being overturned and preliminary judgments in favor of (2) reversed.

It might be objected that the examples do not go deep enough or take into account all crucially relevant nuances of intentionality, action, meaning and reference, to get to the bottom of the question as to how action-serving and meaning-serving intentionality can be understood as related, if at all. An argument to be made against (2) in this regard could take one or both parts of the partial overlap of action-serving and meaning-serving intentionality under criticism. We consider these in the same order of exposition as above.

Against (2A): Action need not be physical or involve bodily motion in the ordinary sense, but should be understood generally to include mental or psychological acts. If I am daydreaming about the Eiffel Tower while remaining virtually immobile on my sofa, then I am certainly engaged in meaning-serving intentionality insofar as my thought is about something, and in particular insofar as I am thinking about the Eiffel Tower. We can safely

ignore the fact that idle thoughts are typically accompanied, if not also caused or occasioned by, supervenient upon, or even ontically reducible to, electrochemical brain events, many if not all of which are presumably not under my conscious, deliberate action-serving *or* meaning-serving intentional control.

Against (2B): We must seriously inquire in this connection whether we can act, physically or mentally, but especially physically, insofar as these categories are justifiably distinguished, without reference, without thinking, and, more pertinently in the immediate context, without any meaning-serving intention. We encounter most frontally in this regard the difficult and philosophically momentous question as to whether we can ever engage in action-serving intentionality *without* engaging of necessity as well in meaning-serving intentionality. Can the two be logically or conceptually separated as the argument in support of option (2B) seems to require?

We may try to flesh out the example more fully to further clarify what is entailed. If I tie my shoelaces as an *action*, then, on the usual analytic expectation, I must *intend* to do so. Otherwise we usually do not call the motions an action. This much is granted, although we also need to ask whether or not such action-serving intentionality can exist or fulfill its role in the explanation of action as an intentional phenomenon without at some level also being meaning-serving in its intentionality. If I intend to tie my shoelaces, however rapid or subconscious the intention, implicit or explicit among my acts of consciousness, then my action-serving intention must also ineluctably constitute a specific meaning-serving intention.

I *mean* to *do* something specific, at least in the example under consideration. And that is not offered as a pun, but in the literal sense of the word. It is to say that my intending thought, whatever its status and circumstances in my cognitive economy, must *refer*, contrary to the superficial gloss given for (2B), specifically to my shoelaces, my shoes, and the state of affairs in which my untied shoelaces are untied or become tied from a state of being untied. Perhaps I am motivated to tie my shoes by the projection in thought of a plausible but as-yet nonexistent state of affairs which I act in order to prevent, imagining my tripping dangerously over the loose strings to risk injury. I do not need to rehearse the corresponding expressive words and phrases consciously in thought in order to have these thoughts, which I reconstruct imaginatively now at my leisure. I do not need to do so in order to refer in fast-moving thought to the intended objects that would be intended in the meaning-serving sense were I explicitly to run through these terms and sentences tacitly in my mind, as though mentally narrating to myself what I action-serving intend to do in preparing to tie my shoelaces.

Semantic-Action Intending Relation (3)

This brings us to alternatives (3) and (4), not precluding the possibility of returning to (1) or (2) if (3) and (4) should turn out to be even more problematic or philosophically unpalatable. Option (3) makes all meaning-serving intentionality a proper subset of action-serving intentionality. A worthy

consideration in support of this model is that an extended speech act theory, wherein reference in the symbolic expression of thought in language, and in the making and use of graphic signs, artwork and artifacts most generally, is action or actional. The intentionality of speech *acts* is distinctively action-serving, with referring and other rightly so-called speech acts being sheltered under the general category as a special kind of action, of something that we do in and with language.

It seems reasonable to suppose that there are referential and extra-referential actions, but that as actions their meaning-serving intentionality is one and all more fundamentally reducibly action-serving. With a pragmatics of meaning built into the concept of meaning-serving intentionality as a branch of action-serving intentionality, model (3) seems powerfully if not yet decisively preferable at least to alternatives (1) and (2). If referring is something we do, even if only as a mental act or action, and if there are actions that do not require, imply or presuppose any meaning-serving intentionality, then model (3) seems properly suited to account in particular for the meaning-serving intentionality of thought and its expression as an instance, special kind or subcategory, of action-serving intentionality for one unique (independently) semantically (as others are morally, aesthetically, economically, etc.) valued kind of action.

The trouble with proposal (3), despite its virtues, is that it makes meaning-serving intentionality subordinate to action-serving intentionality, with the following implication. If I intend to refer to something as a mental act of intending, effectively intending to do something, even if not performing an intended physical action, the question remains of exactly what it is that I intend to do, of the exact *intended object* of my action-serving intention. If I think or say that the action-serving intention is to tie my shoelaces, that I tie them, or bring it about that they are tied from a previous state of being untied, then I will have identified the intended object of my action semantically as the meaning-serving intended object of my thought or expression of a decision or action-serving intention to tie my shoelaces. This is precisely what happens whenever I am called upon to articulate or justify rationally what it is I am trying or may have tried to do. It is a question I can intelligibly answer only by applying the meaning-serving intentionality of my reflecting on the intended object of my action, of what it is that I want or wanted to do.

The asymmetry suggests that action-serving intentionality is logically or conceptually dependent on meaning-serving intentionality, and not the other way around. What I intend to do is given by the object of my intending thought when I decide to perform a certain action, even if that action is a speech act or referential effort with a distinctively semantic dimension. My decision is a thought. It is the decision to do something. Its action-serving intended object is referentially determined by the decision's meaning-serving intending of exactly that object. Every action, we are supposing, is intentional in the sense of stemming from a decision to act, where the object of the action is the semantically intended object of the thought. It is in this same way that reasoning and rational discourse have at least an opportunity of linking into the

sphere of human action and its consequences, introducing meaning-serving considerations into deliberations about a specific course of action.

Semantic-Action Intending Relation (4)

The preferred model described in the criticism of (3) is the final choice (4). Action-serving intentionality must single out an intended object of action. It must refer in particular to a concurrently nonexistent state of affairs as its objective, that the action, if it succeeds, is intended to bring about or try to bring about. Actions are not muscle reactions, but intended channelings of energy of one sort or another, mental or perceptibly physical, in an intended direction and toward the accomplishment of a particular intended aim, goal, target or purpose. Actions are the result of decisions to act or of act-directing thought of some sort, and these thoughts, linguistic or otherwise, involved in actions of all kinds, must also depend on meaning-serving intentions. Decisions of whatever form must be about whatever state of affairs is decided upon as the object for an action to try bringing about, and this is unmistakably a matter of meaning-serving intentionality, of the meaning of a decision to act, by which an action-serving intentionality is mobilized.

Nor is the predominance of meaning-serving intentionality over action-serving intentionality subverted by the reflection that referring is also a (mental) action or (mental) doing. Assuming that all action is intentional, and that referring is a mental and artistic or symbolic linguistic action, its metaphysical action-serving intended object once again is precisely the semantic meaning-serving intended object of the decision to refer, and of the meaning-serving intention to refer to exactly that intended object. What the intended object of an act of referring or other speech act is can only be answered by the *semantic* intended object of the referring event, irrespective of the fact that all referring is also an action.

REDUCTIVE MODEL (4) SCHEMA:

ACTION-TO-MEANING-SERVING INTENTIONALITY

Action-Serving Intention

(Decision to Act)

↓ directly Meaning-Serving intends

(Nonexistent) State of Affairs

(Objective) as Direct Intended Object

of the Decision to Act

The relation diagrammed holds when a decision to act action-intends the decision's meaning-intended object. On the proposed preferred model (4), relating action-serving and meaning-serving intentionality, a decision action-intends only via the mediation of the semantic meaning-serving intentionality of those thoughts in which decisions to act are made. Model (4), as such, best fits the facts even when meaning-serving intentionality is 'reduced' to the action-serving intentionality of the undoubtedly mental and sometimes verbal behavioral action of referring in thought and its artistic and symbolic expression.

Unified Ontology of Action-Serving and Meaning-Serving Intentionalities

The reduction of action-serving to meaning-serving intentionalities recommended as model (4) by virtue of its advantages over the other exclusive and exhaustive alternatives and by the economical picture it offers of how these types of intending are related to one another, despite superficial appearances of conceptual disconnection. Nor should we fail to explain the fact that any action can be understood as a physical expression of thought, as much as its artistic or symbolic linguistic formulation. In deciding to act, the decision arrived at and all the thought process leading to it has a semantic meaning-serving intentionality that locks the resolved-upon action onto a particular intended object, the nonexistent state of affairs that the physical action is intended to realize. Referring and engaging in other speech acts are also actions, doings. However, their action-serving intentionalities are subordinate in every case to a predominant meaning-serving intentionality, so that it is not accidental, purely equivocal, or punning, as Searle advises, to speak in these situations of the meaning-serving intention of what it is we mean to do when we arrive at an appropriate action-serving intention.¹

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