DELIBERATIVE INTENTIONS AND WILLINGNESS TO ACT: A REPLY TO PROFESSOR MELE

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Alfred Mele's "Against a Belief/Desire Analysis of Intention" is a plausible challenge to the account which I proposed in "Intending" (Journal of Philosophy LXX, 1973) and later developed and defended in other papers. I accept many of his points, but do not think he shows that intending cannot be explicated as a special combination of wants and beliefs. I shall state the core of his case, critically assess it, and conclude with some general points about intending.

Mele imagines a man, Ron, who wants, preponderantly, to humiliate Don and believes he will do so. On plausible assumptions (which Mele quite reasonably does not take time to make explicit), Ron satisfies my conditions for intending to humiliate Don. But suppose Ron believes he will do so only because he realizes the strength of his tendency, in cases like this, to carry out such a want; he disapproves of his humiliating Don and in fact plans to do all he can to avoid this. Here is Mele's main argument to show that Ron does not intend to humiliate Don: "Ron is not, at t, settled upon humiliating Don at the party: indeed, he plans to make a herculean effort to bring it about that he does not...But, surely, part of what it is to intend...to A...is to be settled...upon A-ing..." (p. 240) Let us examine this argument.

There is an ambiguity in the statement of the main premise. To be settled upon A-ing may be, roughly, (a) to be in a fairly stable, preponderant motivational state which (i) favors A-ing and (ii) is based on considering the matter, e.g. on thinking about the prospect of A-ing; or it may be, roughly, (b) to be simply in such a state meeting condition (i). (a) is characteristic of having settled a question what to do, (b) of simply being set to do something. Mele's argument is successful only on the first, natural reading, yet the main premise is plausible only on the weaker reading. For intending surely does not require considering the matter of A-ing in the way appropriate to the usual sense of 'being settled upon'. Take a case in which one suddenly swerves to avoid a dog. One intends to swerve, yet is not settled upon doing so. Nor is habit or
“reflex” required for my point: I can, while mainly occupied in dinner conversation, form the intention to take a nice apple from a bowl before me and just do so. As I reach for it, I intend to take it; but it would be a mistake to say that I am settled upon taking it (or on trying to). Indeed, if on a diet, I might not be in any settled condition and might back off at the last moment. There are unstable and irresolute intentions. Mele is conceiving intending as arising from something like assessing options. He says, e.g., “The formation or acquisition of an intention to A settles a first-person practical issue...” (p. 241, my italics). But not all intentions so arise; quite apart from any issue or any considering of a prospect, we may simply form an intention to A when doing it appeals to us.

What Mele says may well hold for what we might call deliberative intentions. But intending need not arise from a deliberative response to a practical problem, or even from weaker cases of considering options in a way which warrants saying that, in having an intention to A, the agent is settled upon A-ing. My account is designed for intending in general, however spontaneous or habitual its genesis. The settledness condition would make it too narrow.

There is one other interesting argument Mele offers: “An agent who is settled upon A-ing is at least willing to A. But an agent who is preponderantly motivated to A may not be willing to A” (p. 240). I believe there is another ambiguity, or at least a needed distinction: it is between (1) willingness to A as an attitude of approval toward one’s A-ing and (2) such willingness as a disposition of the will. Intending may well imply the latter, but it does not imply the former. Indeed, even deliberative intending may not imply the former, since one may (as in certain cases of incontinence) disapprove even of carrying out an intention one forms on the basis of reflection about one’s options.

I conclude with three quite general points and a comment on the breadth of the notion of intending. First, deliberative intending is an important category, and Mele’s ideas about being settled upon an action suggest a way into studying it and distinguishing it from close cousins, such as merely reflective intentions. Second, there is more than one notion of willingness, and we can understand both intending and, I think, moral responsibility, better in the light of an account of these notions. Third, I grant that Ron’s intention to humiliate Don is odd, and it is a challenge to explain why. These important sources of the oddity are these. (i) His belief that he will do the deed has an inductive, indeed a statistical, basis, whereas normally intending is characterized by a different kind of basis of the belief that one will A, such that the belief is not grounded in a process of inference. (ii) Related to this, Ron