ABSTRACT. In this paper an empirical theory about the nature of intention is sketched. After stressing the necessity of reckoning with intentions in philosophy of action a strategy for deciding empirically between competing theories of intention is exposed and applied for criticizing various philosophical theories of intention, among others that of Bratman. The hypothesis that intentions are optimality beliefs is defended on the basis of empirical decision theory. Present empirical decision theory however does not provide an empirically satisfying elaboration of the desirability concepts used in these optimality beliefs. Based on process theories of deliberation two hypotheses for filling this gap are developed.


In philosophy during roughly the last 15 years the desire-belief model of action (fostered e.g. by Davidson (1963, in particular pp. 3–12; 1978, p. 87), Goldman (1970, pp. 49–57, 72), Churchland (1970), Brandt (1979, pp. 47f, 64–66), Audi (1986, p. 98) and Lennon (1990, pp. 37–39)) has been heavily attacked, in particular because it tries to do without intentions, thus underrating their role which cannot be filled by sets of desire-belief pairs: Desire-belief pairs do not have the necessary resoluteness, the action chosen by them cannot be executed later on, they do not explain difficult decision processes etc.

During the same period a wealth of philosophical theories about what type of propositional attitudes intentions are has been developed. Some main answers to this question are: *Sui-generis theory:* Intentions are propositional attitudes in their own right, not reducible to other types of propositional attitudes (Bratman 1987, pp. 10, 20, 110; Donagan 1987, pp. 41, 81; Mele 1992, pp. 127, 162); they consist of cognitive and conative components (Brand 1984, pp. 47, 153, 239, 237, 240f, 266–268); *prevision theory:* intentions are – self-fulfilling – previsions of one’s own
actions (Harman 1976; Velleman 1989a, pp. 109, 109–142; 1989b). And some older theories of action may be interpreted as theories about the empirical nature of intention, too, e.g. models of practical inference (Aristotle, NE 1139a, 1147a, 1111b–1113b; von Wright 1963; 1971, pp. 96–107; 1972), psychological normativism, which holds that an action is caused by the belief that this action is socially required in the particular situation (Mead 1934, pp. 152–164; a partial psychological normativism is included in Habermas’ concepts of ‘communicative action’ and ‘normatively regulated action’, cf. Habermas 1975, pp. 280–282; Habermas 1981, pp. 127f, 132–134, 143, 148–151, 385–387, 412, 418), or models of needs, presuming that we act out of our strongest or most developed need (Maslow 1954, ch. 4–7; Kambartel 1974, pp. 62–65).

The present paper is a contribution to the discussion about the right theory of intention. Apart from criticizing some presently discussed theories of intention, it mainly has constructive aims: A strategy for empirically deciding between such theories will be sketched, and a new proposal for an empirical theory of intention will be elaborated and defended as meeting the criteria of that strategy. The theory proposed here is the optimality-belief theory.

2. A STRATEGY FOR EMPIRICALLY DETERMINING THE RIGHT THEORY OF INTENTION

The proliferation of theories of intention in philosophy was and is accompanied by a rather ramified and in part very sophisticated discussion about the validity of these theories. One particular but very fundamental problem of this discussion is that analytical and empirical questions are not clearly distinguished. We find arguments appealing to the common meaning of “intention” and the conceptually fixed function of intentions next to arguments about the biological or practical function, the predecessors, the accompanying mental states, possible or factual content etc. of intentions. And for many philosophical theories of intention it is not clear if they want to define ‘intention’ or if they want to make empirical hypotheses about the nature of intentions.

Following an idea of Myles Brand (Brand 1979; 1984, pp. 33, 35f), it is proposed that this problem can be solved by the following strategy. In a first step a clear definition of ‘intention’ is developed covering much of our intuitions about intentions and some empirical information about how intentions work but which is functional,