

Effective Intentions  
*The Power of Conscious Will*

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## Introduction

Some recent scientific claims about human action have created quite a stir. Neuroscientist Benjamin Libet (1985, 2004) contends that the brain decides to initiate actions about a third of a second before the person becomes aware of the decision and that the remaining window of opportunity for free will to get involved is tiny—about 100 milliseconds. Psychologist Daniel Wegner (2002, 2004a, 2008) argues that intentions are not among the causes of corresponding actions. If Wegner is right, then if only beings whose intentions are sometimes among the causes of corresponding actions are capable of acting freely, even Libet’s tiny window of opportunity for free will is an illusion.

One of my aims in this book is to show that these striking claims and some related claims about free will, consciousness, and action-production are not warranted by the data. I also show that there is powerful empirical support for the thesis that some conscious intentions are among the causes of corresponding actions. Although I discuss the work of many scientists, my mentioning Libet and Wegner first is no accident. Azim Shariff and coauthors report that “almost all of the works involved in the recent deluge of anti-free will arguments have referenced” Libet’s work (Shariff, Schooler, and Vohs 2008, p. 186). And the passage I quoted from Pockett, Banks, and Gallagher (2006) in the Preface locates both Libet and Wegner at center stage in the controversy about human action explored in this book.

Scientific evidence is accessible to philosophers, and philosophical argumentation and analysis are accessible to scientists. Even so, some members of each group are dismissive of what the other group has to offer. After writing that “many of the world’s leading neuroscientists have not only accepted our findings and interpretations, but have even enthusiastically praised these achievements and their experimental ingenuity” and naming twenty such people, Libet adds: “It is interesting that most of the negative criticism of our findings and their implications have come from philosophers and others with no significant experience in experimental neuroscience of the brain” (2002, p. 292). Later in the article, he writes of one of his critics, “As a philosopher [Gilberto] Gomes exhibits characteristics often found in philosophers. He seems to think one can offer reinterpretations by making unsupported assumptions, offering speculative data that do not exist and constructing hypotheses that are not even testable” (p. 297). (Incidentally, several years ago, when I asked Gomes about his profession, he informed me that he worked in a psychology department.) This is not a one-way street. More than a few philosophers, after hearing a talk of mine on Libet’s or Wegner’s work, have suggested, on a priori grounds, that they could not have been right anyway. One moral of this book is that this dismissiveness is a mistake—on each side.

In this chapter, I sketch part of a conceptual framework in light of which data such as Libet’s and Wegner’s can be instructively interpreted and examined. Although this chapter is relatively short, some readers might find themselves wishing it were shorter. For now, I offer such readers two things. The first is a platitude: patience is a virtue. The second is a claim they can test as they read the discussion of empirical work in subsequent chapters: conceptual precision is a virtue, too. In sections 1 and 2, I distinguish among various kinds of intention and describe a way of understanding occurrent intentions that I have developed elsewhere

(Mele 1992). In section 3, drawing on Mele (2003, chap. 9), I provide some background on practical decision making. Section 4 is a preview of this book.

## 1. Occurrent and Standing Intentions

Psychologist Anthony Marcel writes, “Oddly, many psychologists seem to assume that intentions are by their nature conscious” (2003, p. 60). That assumption is the primary topic of chapter 2. A distinction between occurrent and standing intentions is relevant. In this section, I provide a sketch of the distinction and a sketch of an account of occurrent intentions.

I ask myself now, at noon on a Sunday, what I intend to do tomorrow. Reflection on this question may prompt me to form some new intentions, and it may prompt me to recall having formed intentions—that is, having *decided*—to do various things on Monday. (Like many philosophers, I take deciding to *A* to be an action—specifically, an action of forming an intention to *A*, as I explain in section 3.<sup>1</sup>) I recall that I decided on Friday to call my travel agent on Monday to book plane tickets for a trip to Corsica and that I decided to reserve a hotel room there once I ordered my tickets. I am now aware that I intend to do these things tomorrow.

Is it possible for me to intend to do these things tomorrow without being aware that this is so? Consider my condition ten minutes before noon—ten minutes before I asked myself about my intentions for tomorrow. Might I have intended then to call my travel agent on Monday—or to fly to Corsica in a couple of months—even though I was not aware of that intention?

I told my father about my intention to fly to Corsica. A day later, he quite properly informed my sister that I intended to fly there without phoning me first to learn whether I was awake, conscious, thinking about Corsica, or anything of the

sort. He legitimately attributed the intention to me without supposing that I was conscious of the intention at the time of attribution. In fact, he might have believed that I was sound asleep: he knows my routine, and his conversation with my sister happened after midnight.

The intention my father attributed to me is what I call a *standing intention*, something I analyze elsewhere as a disposition of a certain kind to have corresponding *occurrent intentions* (Mele 2007). Because standing intentions are not at issue in this book, I spare readers the details of the analysis. Proponents of the view that “intentions are by their nature conscious” (if they understand this to entail that we have intentions only when we are conscious of them) may either contend that standing intentions are not actually intentions or assert that their view is about occurrent intentions only.

In Mele (2007), I propose that there are two ways for an intention to *A* to be an *occurrent intention* at a time. One way is for it to be “suitably at work at that time in producing relevant intentional actions or in producing items appropriate for the production of relevant intentional actions”; the other is, roughly, for it to be a conscious intention at that time, provided that the intention “is not wholly constituted by a disposition to have occurrent intentions to *A*” (p. 740). (One way for an intention to fly to Corsica, for example, to be at work is in initiating and sustaining information gathering and reasoning about how to fly there.) These two ways of being an occurrent intention are not mutually exclusive. The same intention may be occurrent in both ways at the same time. This thumbnail sketch of what it is for an intention to be an *occurrent intention* suffices for present purposes. (What it is for an occurrent intention to be an *intention* is discussed shortly.) Readers interested in details suppressed here should consult Mele (2007). On conscious intentions, see chapter 2.

Intentions are a topic of discussion in a variety of fields, including (but definitely not limited to) neuroscience,

philosophy, law, and several branches of psychology. It should not be assumed that the term “intention” is understood in the same way in all of these fields. Nor should it be assumed that there is a uniform understanding of the term within each field. Even so, conceptions of intention in different fields sometimes converge, as I am about to illustrate.

Here is a representative account of intention from the neuroscience literature:

Intention is an early plan for a movement. It specifies the goal of a movement and the type of movement. . . . We can have intentions without actually acting upon them. Moreover, a neural correlate of intention does not necessarily contain information about the details of a movement, for instance the joint angles, torques, and muscle activations required to make a movement. . . . Intentions are initially coded in visual coordinates in at least some of the cortical areas within the PPC [posterior parietal cortex]. This encoding is consistent with a more cognitive representation of intentions, specifying the goals of movements rather than the exact muscle activations required to execute the movement. (Andersen and Buneo 2002, p. 191)

This account is similar in some respects to my account of occurrent intentions as executive attitudes toward plans (Mele 1992). In the next several paragraphs, I provide a sketch of my account. What it is for an occurrent intention to be an *intention* is one thing, and what it is for it to be *occurrent* is another. In the remainder of this section, I focus on the former aspect of occurrent intentions.<sup>2</sup>

In my view, plans—which range from simple representations of prospective “basic” actions to complex strategies for achieving remote goals—constitute the representational content of occurrent intentions.<sup>3</sup> In the limiting case, the plan component of an intention has a single “node.” It is, for example, a prospective representation I have of raising my right index finger—or a prospective representation of taking a vacation in Lisbon next winter that includes nothing about

means to that end nor specific vacation activities. Often, intention-embedded plans are more complex. The intention to check her e-mail that Jan executed this evening incorporated a plan that included clicking on her e-mail icon, typing her password in a certain box, clicking on the OK button, and so on. An agent who successfully executes an occurrent intention is guided by the intention-embedded plan.<sup>4</sup>

Although the contents of intentions are plans, I follow the standard practice of using expressions such as “Jan’s intention to check her e-mail now” and “Ken intends to bowl tonight.” It should not be inferred from such expressions that the agent’s intention-embedded plan has a single node—for example, checking e-mail now or bowling tonight. Often, expressions of an agent’s desires and intentions do not identify the full content of the attitude and are not meant to. Jan says, without intending to mislead, “Ken wants to bowl tonight” (or “Ken intends to bowl tonight”), knowing full well that what he wants (or intends) is to bowl with her at MegaLanes tonight for \$20 a game until the place closes, as is their normal practice.

I reported that occurrent intentions, in my view, are *executive* attitudes toward plans. According to a popular view of occurrent representational attitudes—for example, Ann’s occurrent desire to *A*, Bob’s occurrent belief that *p*, Cathy’s occurrent desire that *p*, Don’s occurrent intention to *A*—one can distinguish between an attitude’s representational *content* and its psychological *orientation* (Searle 1983).<sup>5</sup> Orientations include (but are not limited to) believing, desiring, and intending. On my view, the executive dimension of occurrent intentions is intrinsic to the attitudinal orientation *intending*. We can have a variety of attitudes toward plans: for example, we might admire plan *x*, be disgusted by plan *y*, and desire to execute plan *z*. To have the intending attitude toward a plan is to be settled (but not necessarily irrevocably) on executing it.<sup>6</sup> The intending and desiring attitudes toward plans differ in that the former

alone entails this settledness. The distinctive practical nature of occurrent intentions to *A* distinguishes them from occurrent desires to *A*. A function of occurrent desires to *A*, as I understand them, is to help produce occurrent intentions to *A* (Mele 1992, chaps. 8 and 10); occurrent intentions are functionally more closely connected to intentional actions than are corresponding desires.

Most people recognize that intending to *A* differs from wanting or desiring to *A*. For example, you may occurrently want to eat a late snack (the cake is very tempting) while also occurrently wanting to refrain from eating it (you are concerned about your weight); but occurrently intending to eat a snack while occurrently intending to refrain from eating it (if this is possible) is a sign of a serious disorder. (Try to imagine that you intend to eat a snack now while also intending not to eat it now. What would you do? Would you reach for the snack with one hand and grab the reaching hand with your other hand?<sup>7</sup>) Similarly, this morning, you might want to meet a friend at noon for lunch, want to meet another friend at noon at a lecture, and be unsettled about what to do. At this point, you want to do each of these things and lack an intention about which of them to do. Making up your mind—that is, deciding—what to do would make sense. Again, as I understand deciding, to decide to *A* is to perform an action of forming an intention to *A* (Mele 2003, chap. 9).

Someone who desires to *A* (or to execute a certain plan for *A*-ing)—even someone who desires this more strongly than he desires not to *A* (or not to execute that plan)—may still be deliberating about whether to *A* (or about whether to execute the plan). In many such cases, at least, the agent is not settled on *A*-ing (or not settled on executing the plan).<sup>8</sup> Pat wants more strongly to respond in kind to a recent insult than to refrain from doing so, but owing to moral qualms, she is deliberating about whether to do so. She is unsettled about whether to retaliate despite the relative strength

of her desires (see Mele 1992, chap. 9). Her unsettledness helps explain why she is deliberating about whether to retaliate.

On a standard view of desire, the psychological features of occurrent desires to *A* in virtue of which they contribute to intentional *A*-ings are their content and their strength. On my view of the contribution of occurrent *intentions* to *A* to intentional *A*-ings, the settledness feature of intentions is crucial, and it is not capturable in terms of desire strength (and content) nor in terms of this plus belief (Mele 1992, pp. 76–77 and chap. 9). Occurrent intentions to *A*, as I understand them, essentially encompass motivation to *A* but without being reducible to a combination of desire and belief (Mele 1992, chap. 8). Part of what it is to be *settled* on *A*-ing is to have a motivation-encompassing attitude toward *A*-ing; lacking such an attitude, one lacks an element of a psychological commitment to *A*-ing that is intrinsic to being settled on *A*-ing and therefore to having an occurrent intention to *A*.

Many occurrent intentions come to be without being formed in acts of deciding. For example, “When I intentionally unlocked my office door this morning, I intended to unlock it. But since I am in the habit of unlocking my door in the morning and conditions . . . were normal, nothing called for a *decision* to unlock it” (Mele 1992, p. 231). If I had heard a fight in my office, I might have paused to consider whether to unlock the door or walk away, and I might have decided to unlock it. But given the routine nature of my conduct, there is no need to posit an action of intention formation in this case. My occurrent intention to unlock the door may have been acquired without having been actively formed. If, as I believe, all decisions about what to do are prompted partly by uncertainty about what to do (Mele 2003, chap. 9), in situations in which there is no such uncertainty, no decisions will be made. This is not to say that in such situations, no intentions will be acquired.

The sketch of a view of occurrent intentions that I have offered is background for much of this book. Readers interested in the details of a conceptual analysis of occurrent intentions or an account of their persistence may wish to consult Mele (2007). The sketch just offered suffices for present purposes. In the scientific work on intentions with which I am primarily concerned in this book, the focus is on occurrent intentions, not standing ones. Henceforth, when I use “intention” I mean “occurrent intention,” unless I indicate otherwise.

I close this section with a comment on my action-variable *A* that is aimed at forestalling confusion. How readers interpret the variable should depend on their preferred theory of action individuation. Donald Davidson writes: “I flip the switch, turn on the light, and illuminate the room. Unbeknownst to me I also alert a prowler to the fact that I am home” (1980, p. 4). How many actions does the agent, Don, perform? Davidson’s *coarse-grained* answer is one action “of which four descriptions have been given” (p. 4). A *fine-grained* alternative treats *A* and *B* as different actions if, in performing them, the agent exemplifies different act-properties (Goldman 1970). On this view, Don performs at least four actions because the act-properties at issue are distinct. An agent may exemplify any of these act-properties without exemplifying any of the others. (One may even turn on a light in a room without illuminating the room: the light may be painted black.) *Componential* views represent Don’s illuminating the room as an action having various components, including his moving his arm (an action), his flipping the switch (an action), and the light going on (Ginet 1990). Where proponents of the coarse-grained and fine-grained theories find, respectively, a single action under different descriptions and a collection of intimately related actions, advocates of the various componential views locate a “larger” action having “smaller” actions among its parts. Readers should understand the variable *A*

as a variable for actions themselves (construed componentially or otherwise) or actions under descriptions, depending on their preferred theory of action-individuation. The same goes for the expressions that take the place of *A* in concrete examples.

## 2. Proximal and Distal Intentions and Intentional Action

Some of our intentions are for the nonimmediate future, and others are not. I might have an intention on Thursday to pick up Angela at the airport on Saturday, and I might have an intention now to phone Nick now. The former intention is aimed at action two days in the future. The latter intention is about what to do now. I call intentions of these kinds, respectively, *distal* and *proximal* intentions (Mele 1992, pp. 143–44, 158). Proximal intentions also include intentions to continue doing something that one is doing and intentions to start *A*-ing (e.g., start running a mile) straightaway.

Some intentions have both proximal and distal aspects. For example, Al may have an intention to run a mile without stopping, beginning now. (He estimates that the deed will take six minutes.) I call such an intention a *mixed* intention. An intention of this kind specifies something to be done now and something to be done later. Just as there is no precise point of demarcation between men who count as bald and men who do not, there is no precise point of demarcation between intentions that count as proximal and intentions that count as mixed.

At least some intentions of all three kinds—distal, proximal, and mixed—are occurrent intentions. If my forming an intention on Thursday to pick up Angela at the airport on Sunday prompted me to make a note about that in my calendar, it was an occurrent intention at that time. Also, at any time at which I was conscious of that intention, it was

an occurrent intention. If my acquiring a proximal intention to phone Nick issued straightaway in my dialing his number, that intention was an occurrent intention at that time. Similarly, if Al's acquiring the mixed intention I mentioned issued straightaway in his starting to run a mile, it was an occurrent intention at that time.

There are many competing philosophical views about the exact relation between items like intentions and brain states. A hypothesis that I explore in chapter 5 is intended to cohere with a wide variety of physicalistic views of this relation. It reads as follows:

*H.* Whenever human beings perform an overt intentional action, at least one of the following plays a causal role in its production: some intention of theirs; the acquisition or persistence of some intention of theirs; the physical correlate of one or more of the preceding items.

Two terminological points are in order. First, the *physical correlate* relation, as I understand it, is *not* a causal relation.<sup>9</sup> There are other options, including the identity relation and various kinds of supervenience.<sup>10</sup> I am open minded (at least about this). Second, by *overt* action, I mean action that essentially involves peripheral bodily motion. Raising my hand essentially involves my hand rising, a peripheral bodily motion. When I calculate the gratuity on a dinner bill, I do it entirely in my head. In the United States, if nothing extraordinary has happened, I intentionally multiply the bill by 0.15. I do so independently of any peripheral bodily motion. My last calculation of a gratuity was *not* an overt action. Probably, the same will be true of my next one.

Some examples of relevant causal roles will prove useful. It may be that the acquisition of a proximal intention to answer a ringing phone (or the physical correlate of that event) directly or indirectly initiates motor commands that result in the agent's reaching toward the phone. The persistence

of the intention (or the physical correlate of its persisting) may causally sustain the reaching. And the intention (or its physical correlate) may figure in the guidance of the motions of the arm and hand toward the phone. To save space, I often suppress parenthetical clauses about physical correlates; readers should supply them. Another space-saving measure I occasionally employ is to use “intentions (or their physical correlates)” —or simply “intentions”—as shorthand for the long disjunction in *H*.

There is considerable controversy in the philosophy of action about the exact meaning of “intentional” (and, accordingly, “intentionally”). Suppose that a novice darts player luckily succeeds in his first attempt to hit a bull’s-eye. (He tries to repeat the feat another eighty times and fails.) Philosophers disagree about whether his hitting the bull’s-eye counts as an intentional action.<sup>11</sup> But they agree that he intentionally threw the dart, intentionally threw it toward the dart board, and so on. Philosophers also disagree about what is done intentionally in scenarios featuring anticipated side effects (Bratman 1987; Harman 1976; Mele and Sverdlik 1996). Does a sniper who knows he will alert enemy soldiers to his presence when he fires at their leader but wishes he had a silencer on his rifle intentionally alert them to his presence? Or does he alert them knowingly but not intentionally? However these questions are answered, all parties can agree that the sniper does something intentionally: for example, he intentionally pulls the trigger. For proponents and opponents of *H*, what is important is that the player and the sniper performed *some* overt intentional action at the time. They can be noncommittal about whether the player’s hitting the bull’s-eye and the sniper’s alerting the enemy are or are not intentional actions. (If the player’s intention to throw the dart in the direction of the bull’s-eye and the sniper’s intention to fire at the enemy leader are among the causes of these intentional actions, they are also among the causes of the player’s hitting the bull’s-eye and the sniper’s alerting

the enemy whether or not the latter two actions count as intentional. In cases of these kinds, arguments for and against *H* can focus on actions that are uncontroversially intentional.)

I close this section with a motivational observation. The idea that intentions or their physical correlates play a causal role in the production of overt intentional actions is far from being a philosopher's pipe dream. As evidence for this assertion, I offer the following from the *Annual Review of Neuroscience*:

We describe a potential medical application that utilizes the finding that the PPC [posterior parietal cortex] encodes movement intentions. The intention-related activity in the PPC can, in principle, be used to operate a neural prosthesis for paralyzed patients. Such a neural prosthesis would consist of recording the activity of PPC neurons, interpreting the movement intentions of the subject with computer algorithms, and using these predictions of the subject's intentions to operate external devices such as a robot limb or a computer. (Andersen and Buneo 2002, p. 190)

The idea of a cortical prosthetic is to record...intentions to move, interpret the intentions using real-time decode algorithms running on computers, and then convert these decoded intentions to control signals that can operate external devices [including] stimulators imbedded in the patient's muscles that would allow the patient to move his/her own body, a robot limb, or a computer interface for communication. (Andersen and Buneo 2002, p. 213)

### 3. Decisions

Deciding to do something—practical deciding—must be distinguished from deciding that something is the case (for example, that a friend is likely to quit his job). In this section, I sketch an account of practical deciding defended in Mele

(2003, chap. 9). (Henceforth, I refer to practical decisions simply as decisions.)

As I mentioned in section 1, as I conceive of deciding to *A*, it is an action of forming an intention to *A*. On the conception that I favor, deciding is more specifically a *momentary* action of this kind (Mele 2003, chap. 9). Deliberating or reasoning about what to do definitely is not a momentary action, but it must be distinguished from an act of deciding that is based on deliberation. In my view, the momentary action of intention formation in which deciding to *A* consists is more fully an action of executive assent to a pertinent first-person plan of action (p. 210). In deciding to act, one forms an intention to act, and in so doing one brings it about that one has an intention that incorporates the plan to which one assents. The intention arises *in* the momentary intention-forming action, not after it.

My notion of executive assent is straightforward.<sup>12</sup> If you tell me that Mike is an excellent basketball player and I express complete agreement, I thereby assent to your claim. This is overt *cognitive* assent. If you propose that we watch Mike play tonight at the arena and I express complete acceptance of your proposal, I thereby assent to your proposal. This is overt *executive* assent: I have agreed to join you in executing your proposal for joint action. Now, perhaps my overt act of assenting to your proposal was a matter of giving voice to a nonactionally acquired intention to join you in watching Mike play. For example, on hearing your proposal, I might not have been at all uncertain about what to do; straightaway, I nonactionally acquired an intention to join you, and I voiced that intention in an overt act of assenting to your proposal. Or I might have weighed the pros and cons, judged that it would be best to join you, and, on the basis of that judgment, nonactionally acquired an intention to join you. However, there is also a distinctly different possibility. Perhaps, because I already had plans and because your offer was attractive, I was uncertain about what to do. Perhaps,

on reflection, I judged that I could revise my plans without much inconvenience but was still uncertain about what to do, because my prior plans were attractive as well. And perhaps I performed a mental action of assenting to your proposal and then expressed that inner assent to you. In performing that mental action, if that is what occurred, I *decided* to join you: my mentally assenting to your proposal was an act of intention formation, an act of settling on joining you to watch Mike play tonight.

In Mele (2003), I reported on some of my common experiences of decision making (p. 202) and attempted to ascertain whether these experiences might be veridical. In the following three paragraphs, I reproduce my mundane examples.

Sometimes I find myself with an odd hour or less at the office between scheduled tasks or at the end of the day. Typically, I briefly reflect on what to do then. I find that I do not try to ascertain what it would be *best* to do at those times: this is fortunate, because settling that issue might take more time than it is worth. Rather, I look at a list of small tasks that need to be performed sooner or later—reply to an e-mail message, write a letter of recommendation, and the like—and decide which one to do. So, at least, it seems to me. Sometimes I have the experience not only of settling on a specific task or two but also, in the case of two or more tasks, of settling on a particular order of execution.

I have an e-mail system that plays a few musical notes when a message arrives. Occasionally, when I hear the notes, I pause briefly to consider whether to stop what I am doing and check the message. Sometimes I have the experience of deciding to check it or the experience of deciding not to check it. Sometimes I do not even consider checking the new message.

In situations of both of the kinds under consideration (the odd hour and incoming e-mail), I sometimes have the experience of having an urge to do one thing but deciding

to do another instead. For example, when I hear that a new e-mail message has arrived, I may have an urge to check it straightaway but decide to finish what I am doing first. (When I am grading tests, these urges tend to be particularly strong.) When I am looking at my list of small tasks at the beginning of an odd hour, I may feel more inclined to perform one of the more pleasant tasks on my list but opt for a less pleasant one that is more pressing.

In this book, I leave it open whether all decisions are conscious decisions—that is, whether some momentary actions of executive assent to a first person plan of action are not consciously performed. If some of the experiences that I have just reported are not misleading, at least *some* decisions are conscious decisions. Attention to a recent argument that there are no conscious decisions may prove instructive.

Peter Carruthers seeks to defend Wegner's thesis that "conscious will is an illusion" (Carruthers 2007, p. 211). Carruthers contends that although some events of a certain kind "are conscious (such as mental rehearsal of the sentence 'I shall do Q'), and do play a causal role in the production of appropriate behavior, it isn't the right *sort* of causal role to constitute the event in question as an intention" (p. 212). He argues that conscious events cause actions only in a less direct way than the way in which proximal intentions and decisions are supposed to and that conscious intentions and decisions are therefore not part of the action-producing process. (In his view, their being part of this process requires their playing the relatively direct causal role they are supposed to play.) Carruthers writes: "only if I want to do what I have decided and *believe* that by saying to myself, 'I shall do Q' I *have* decided, does the action get settled upon" (p. 211). The "want" that he means to identify here is "a standing desire to do the things that I decide to do" (p. 208). He contends that "the inner verbalization isn't itself an intention to do Q, although it may play a causal role in the production of that action somewhat similar to that of an intention"

(p. 211). The alleged causal route here includes the desire and belief Carruthers specifies.

Carruthers believes that mental rehearsals of such sentences as “I shall do Q” are conscious. So, in principle, he should be willing to grant that in some cases, executive assent to a first-person plan of action is *conscious* executive assent. (On what grounds could one plausibly hold that although we sometimes consciously rehearse sentences, we never consciously engage in executive assent to a first-person plan of action?) Such assenting is an instance of consciously deciding to *A*, as I understand deciding. Now, some decisions are proximal decisions—momentary mental actions of proximal intention formation. On my view of proximal intentions, in ordinary circumstances, a direct effect of the intention’s being formed or acquired (or of the physical correlate of that event) is the sending of appropriate motor signals (Adams and Mele 1992): the causal path from a proximal decision to *A*—conscious or otherwise—to a corresponding action definitely does not include the activation of a standing desire to do whatever one has decided nor a belief of the kind Carruthers identifies. Instead, in my view, the event of proximally deciding to *A* (or the physical correlate of that event) issues in a corresponding action in the relatively direct way Carruthers claims this is supposed to happen. Seemingly, Carruthers simply did not look hard enough for a conscious event that may plausibly be identified with, for example, my last proximal decision to check my e-mail and play the sort of role that proximal decisions are supposed to play. If he had looked harder, he would have found it difficult to claim that “only if I want to do what I have decided and *believe* that by saying to myself, ‘I shall do Q’ I *have* decided, does the action get settled upon” (2007, p. 211). Nothing recommends the judgment that actions can “get settled upon” only in this roundabout way, and that judgment plays a major role in Carruthers’s argument that there are no conscious decisions.

Carruthers has failed to close the door on the possibility of conscious decisions. In chapter 2, I sketch a model of conscious deciding. In chapter 7, I review powerful evidence that conscious decisions play a role in the production of some corresponding intentional actions.

I argued for the existence of decisions as I conceive of them in Mele (2003, chap. 9). My strategy included cataloging ways in which intentions seemingly are nonactionally acquired—some of which have been mentioned here—and ascertaining what conceptual space might remain for momentary actions of intention formation. It also included a discussion of the phenomenology of decision making and an attempt to disarm what seem to be the main problems for the thesis that we make decisions. I have decided not to repeat the effort here. Interested readers will find chapter 9 of Mele (2003) a relatively easy read.

#### 4. Preview

I close this chapter with a brief preview of this book. Chapter 2 is guided by two questions: Must proximal intentions be “conscious”? Why do scientists disagree about this? Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are critiques of some influential defenses by scientists of such bold claims as the following: your brain routinely decides what you will do before you become aware of its decision; there is only a 100-millisecond window of opportunity for free will; intentions and their physical correlates play no role in producing corresponding actions; and free will is an illusion. Chapter 6 examines the accuracy of subjects’ reports about when they first became aware of proximal decisions or intentions in laboratory settings and develops some implications of warranted skepticism about the accuracy of these reports. Chapter 7 examines evidence of the effectiveness of conscious intentions and decisions of a certain kind. Chapter 8 wraps things up with a discussion of

imaginary scientific findings that would warrant bold claims such as Libet's and Wegner's about free will, intentions, and decisions.

#### NOTES

1. I defend this position in Mele (2003, chap. 9). Also see Frankfurt (1988, pp. 174–76), McCann (1986, pp. 254–55), Pink (1996, p. 3), and Searle (2001, p. 94).

2. Parts of the remainder of this section derive from Mele (2003, pp. 17, 27–28).

3. Roughly speaking, *basic* actions differ from nonbasic actions in not being performed by way of performing another action.

4. The guidance depends on the agent's monitoring progress toward his or her goal. The information (or misinformation) that Jan has entered her password, for example, figures in the etiology of her continued execution of her plan. On guidance, see Mele (2003, pp. 55–62).

5. Occurrent and standing desires may be distinguished from one another in a way that parallels the distinction I drew between occurrent and standing intentions. The same is true of occurrent and standing beliefs. See Mele (2007).

6. In the case of an intention for a not-doing (e.g., an intention not to vote tomorrow), the agent may instead be settled on not violating the simple plan embedded in it—the plan not to vote. On not-doings and attitudes toward them, see Mele 2003, pp. 146–54.

7. People who suffer from anarchic hand syndrome sometimes display behavior of this kind (Marchetti and Della Salla 1998). Sean Spence and Chris Frith suggest that these people “have conscious ‘intentions to act’ [that] are thwarted by... ‘intentions’ to which the patient does not experience conscious access” (1999, p. 24).

8. A critic may claim that in all cases of this kind the agent is settled on a course of action without realizing it and

is deliberating only because he does not realize what he is settled on doing. For argumentation to the contrary, see Mele (1992, chap. 9).

9. I steer clear of the expression “neural correlate” because it is used in various distinct senses in the literature. “Physical correlate” is, I hope, a relatively innocuous technical term.

10. On supervenience, see Kim (2003).

11. Although Christopher Peacocke asserts that it is “undisputed” that an agent who makes a successful attempt “to hit a croquet ball through a distant hoop” intentionally hits the ball through the hoop (1985, p. 69), Brian O’Shaughnessy maintains that a novice who similarly succeeds in hitting the bull’s-eye on a dart board does not intentionally hit the bull’s-eye (1980, vol. 2, p. 325; also see Harman 1986, p. 92).

12. In the remainder of this paragraph, I borrow from Mele (2003, p. 210).