

STEERING CLEAR OF TROUBLE*

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I

Sometimes we do things with the aim of keeping ourselves from making bad choices later on. One way this happens is when we seek to avoid getting into situations where we think we are likely to choose badly. An example of this is given in the following exchange:

- (1) A: Why don't you come out to the bar with me tonight?
B: No thanks, I'm going to stay in—I think that I will end up drinking too much if I go out.

Engaging, as B does, in *strategic choice*—by which I mean: planning that aims to keep ourselves out of situations in which we think we are likely to choose unwisely—seems to be an important part of helping our lives to go well.¹

But strategic choice is puzzling, since it can be hard to understand the relationship between the 'predictive' thinking it presupposes and the deliberative activity of which it is a part (cf. Marušić 2015, pp. 131-132). This is because, on the one hand, in planning around our own tendencies we seem to regard ourselves from a standpoint that takes for granted facts about what we are likely or *prone* to do, at least if we are in certain situations, while on the other hand, in engaging in practical deliberation we seem to regard ourselves as *free* and responsible agents. How, though, are we able to think of ourselves in both of these ways at once? In what follows

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¹ My understanding of strategic choice has benefited from the discussion in Marušić 2015, 131-134.

I'll first spell this puzzle out in more detail, and then explain how I think we can resolve it.

II

As I have said, the puzzle that will be my focus here arises when we see strategic choice against the background of the very kind of self-understanding that it presupposes insofar as it a component of practical deliberation. To do this, it will help to consider a quite different kind of case:

- (2) A: Are you going to come with us to the game this weekend?
 B: No, I'm not—since C can't afford a ticket, and I already promised her that we would spend the weekend together.

How does B answer the question that A poses to him here—the question, that is, of whether or not he will come to the game? He does not seem to do this by considering evidence for and against saying that he'll go: for that would be to treat this matter as *settled* in a way that it surely is not. Even if B's usual tendency is never to miss a game, or always to spend his Saturdays at the office, the present occasion calls for evaluation on its own terms, in reference to the *reasons* in favor of going to the game or not. Unless someone or something is going to prevent B from going to the game or somehow guarantee that he is there, whether or not B goes to the game is a matter for him to decide, and so the only answer that A's question has is the answer that B himself gives it. And, further, the answer that B ultimately gives is not going to be based on observation or (theoretical) inference, though he will of course draw on observation and on theoretically inferred facts in deciding what the answer will be.²

In treating the question of whether he'll go to the game as one whose answer is not decided in advance of his own thinking about it, such that he can *give* this question an answer that it does not independently *have*, B understands himself as free and responsible in respect of the matter in question. B is free, insofar as the answer

² Here I am drawing on an account of practical reasoning that I have worked out in several other places, including Marušić and Schwenkler 2018, 2022; Schwenkler 2019, ch. 5; and Schwenkler 2021.

to this question is not determined in advance; and he is responsible, insofar as whatever B does will be in light of reasons that B himself could cite, and that he would take to count in favor of doing the thing in question.

This same kind of self-understanding is also on display in the exchange in (1), where B gives his reasons for deciding not to join A at the bar. Here, B treats the questions of *whether he will drink*, and *whether he will go to the bar with A*, as ones whose answers he is in a position to decide. Having committed himself to no longer drinking, B seeks to act in ways that accord with this end, and the choice to stay home from the bar is one of these—just as B might, having decided to go to a movie, go on to arrange for a ride:

- (3) A: Can I give you a ride to the movie tonight?
 B: Yes, since otherwise I will have no way to get there.

But this is where things get puzzling. In (3), B treats himself as free and responsible in respect of the decision to ride to the movie with A, but what I will call the ‘hinge’ of B’s decision—that is, the premise that *if I don’t get a ride, I won’t get to the movie*—concerns a fact that B is *not* in a position to decide, but rather a constraint or ‘fixed point’ that B’s deliberation takes for granted. The same is true of (2), where the “hinge” by which B reasons to the decision not to go to the game is the fact that C can’t go. This is what I meant when I said earlier that the reasoning that leads to a decision can “draw on observation and on theoretically inferred facts” even though the decision itself is neither an observational judgment nor a product of theoretical reasoning. Instead, B’s decision in (2) and (3) is reached against a background of certain facts that constrain what it is sensible for him to decide and how it is possible for him to go about achieving it.³

Can we say the same thing, though, about the hinge of B’s decision in (1), namely the premise that *if I go to the bar with A, I will drink too much while I’m there*? It seems that we cannot. For there is a powerful intuition that the truth of this conditional is, or at least has the potential to be, not a fixed point in B’s reasoning but rather a matter that B is in a position to decide. After all, the question of whether B will drink if he goes to the bar with A is one in respect

³ For further development of this point, in relation to Anscombe’s (1963) notion of non-observational knowledge, see Schwenkler 2019, ch. 6.5.

of which B is a free and responsible agent, since if B does go out and end up drinking it will be *because he chose* to do so, and it is not as if B is somehow “fated” to make this further choice as soon as he decides to go out. Because of this, while clearly A could not respond to what B says in (1) with something like the following:

- (4) A: But why don't you just come along and *not* have too much to drink?

—a remark which could only be callous, ignorant, or a terrible joke, it's nevertheless hard to say just *why* this should be. For unless this is a truly extraordinary case, it seems clear that B *could* very well come out to the bar and refrain from drinking while he's there—at least, nothing in the rationale that B has given for staying home need commit him to the assumption that he cannot do otherwise. Indeed, we could easily imagine B expressing a commitment to do quite a different kind of thing in a slightly different context, for example:

- (5) A: Are you really coming out to the bar tonight? I thought you had sworn off drinking.
 B: Well, it's very important to C that I be there for her right now. I understand how things have tended to go for me in the past, but this time I'll keep to drinking club sodas.

The exchange in (1) has B explaining his choice to stay home from the bar on the grounds that he predicts he would drink too much if he went there, while in (5) he seems to be saying exactly the opposite: that when he's at the bar on *this* occasion he won't drink after all. And that is puzzling. How can B say something in the second case that is so different from what he says in the first? What *does* B think, in the end, about what is likely to happen if he goes out to a bar with his friends?

The plot gets thicker. The exchanges in (1) and (5) both show B saying very different things about what will happen if, on some *particular* night, he goes out to a bar with his friends. Faced with this difference we might ask what is supposed to be special about the night described in (5), in contrast with the night in (1), such that B thinks he will refrain from drinking if he goes out on the one night but not if he goes out on the other. In addition, however, the conflict between what B says about these particular cases seems to be mirrored by an even more puzzling conflict *within* B's much more

general view of how he is likely to behave if he goes out. For example, we may find him saying:

- (6) B: I've given up drinking, and so I no longer go out to bars because I'm worried that I will drink too much if I do. Of course, if I do end up going to a bar on some occasion then while I'm there I will not drink.

There is something almost Moore-paradoxical about what B says here. In the first half of (6), B expresses a certain outlook on his future: that he tends to drink when he goes out to bars, which is why he's decided to stop going out. And in the second half B expresses an outlook that seems totally opposite to the first one: that if he does go into a bar, B will refrain from drinking while he's there. How is it possible for B to regard his own future in both of these different ways—not only on separate occasions as in (1) versus (5), but also all at once as in what he says in (6)?

III

The answer might seem simple. What I have alternately referred to as what B *says* or *predicts* that he will do, as how B *regards* his future or the kind of future-directed *outlook* he has, in fact comprises two quite different things. On the one hand there is what B *believes*, in light of what is shown by his past tendencies and present desires, that he will do if he goes out to a bar, namely have too much to drink; and on the other there is what B *intends* to do if he goes to a bar, namely to refrain from drinking while he's there. And what, it may be asked, is supposed to be puzzling about the fact that our intentions may diverge in this way from what we believe on the basis of evidence that we are likely to do?

While it is correct that a distinction of this kind should be drawn, the present appeal to it is no help at all in resolving the puzzle that I have raised. What's true is this: B's prediction that he will drink too much if he joins his friends at a bar has a wholly different basis from his intention to refrain from drinking if he does go out to a bar with his friends. But this intention of B's is not a mere desire, hope, or idle wish, which is why B says in (5) that he *won't* have anything to drink while he's out, and in (6) that he *will* refrain from drinking if he does end up going to a bar, no less than in (3) that he won't get to the movie without a ride from A. The

fact that B's statements in (5) and (6) are expressions of intention, rather than of evidence-based beliefs, does not itself show that they cannot be exactly what they purport to be, namely *descriptions of what will happen*, on this occasion or in general, when B goes out to a bar.⁴

That B's statements in (5) and (6) *are* what they purport to be, namely descriptions of what B is or is not going to do, is made quite clear in other contexts—such as if B's reason for promising that he'll refrain from drinking is that A has asked if B will be the designated driver, A has to rebuke B for drinking when he said he wouldn't:

- (7) A: You must have had at least six or seven beers last night—hadn't you said you wouldn't be drinking?
 B: Oh, come on. That is only what I intended; I didn't really think I was going to pull it off!

B's response in (7) is no less stupid than A's was in (4). There is, in this case, a discrepancy between what B had said he was going to do, and what he then actually did. *What B said* was that he was not going to drink when he went out. That this statement was something other than an evidence-based prediction makes no difference at all to how we should evaluate its truth.

The same point stands out if we imagine A challenging B's statement in (5) by giving reason to predict that B won't do what he says:

- (8) A: Hold on—this is just what you said the last time C really wanted you to come out with her, and that night you ended up totally plastered.

If (8) stands in opposition to what B says in (5), this must be because B's original statement is a claim about what he is going to do,

⁴ Here I mean once again to be following the lead of Anscombe, who early in *Intention* defines the expression of intention as a species of prediction (1963, pp. 2-3) and then gives examples like the one in (7) to show the absurdity of denying this: 'If I say I am going for a walk, someone else may know that this is not going to happen. It would be absurd to say that *what* he knew was not going to happen was not the very same thing that I was saying *was* going to happen' (ibid., p. 92). As she puts it: 'In saying "I am going to", one really is saying that such-and-such is going to happen' (ibid., p. 93). I say more about Anscombe's analysis of the expression of intention in Schwenkler 2019, ch. 4.3 and 7.2; and Schwenkler forthcoming.

which A's statement then gives reason for thinking false. And this brings us back to our original puzzle. B can, of course, recognize the truth of what A says in (8). Further, there are contexts, such as those supplied in (1) and (6), in which B is prepared to treat just this kind of consideration as a reason in favor of staying home. Why, then, doesn't he do the same in the context of (5)? Is B simply inconsistent? Or is there rather, as it seems there should be, an account on which he comes out as entirely reasonable?

IV

Let us dig a little deeper into the response that I just considered and rejected. I agreed that we should draw a distinction between predictions and expressions of intention, and disagreed only with the implication that B's statement in (5) is something other than a description of what he is (really, in fact) going to do. G. E. M. Anscombe's *Intention* has a great example of a statement expressing an intention that can be misheard as a mere prediction:

If I say 'I am going to fail in this exam' and someone says 'Surely you aren't as bad at the subject as that', I may make my meaning clear by explaining that I was expressing an intention, not giving an estimate of my chances. (Anscombe 1963, pp. 1-2; punctuation modified)

In commenting on this passage previously I observed that the usual way to make clear that a statement of this kind is an expression of intention, rather than a prediction or 'estimate', is not by using those *words* but rather by filling in some more of the background, as for example in the following (compare Schwenkler 2019, pp. 4-5):

- (9) B: If I go out to the bar with you tonight, I'm going to have a lot to drink.
 A: But haven't you got this habit under control? The last few times we were out, you kept yourself to drinking club sodas.
 B: No, it's not that at all—I just think that, since it's my birthday, I should allow myself to let loose.

How does B's response in (9) serve to clarify that his original statement was an expression of intention, rather than a prediction as A seemed to assume? The answer is that it does this by clarifying the kind of *reasoning* that was the ground of B's claim about what he would do. In (9), A's response treats B's initial statement as similar to his statement in (1)—i.e., as a prediction based on the *evidence* of his past tendencies, which A tries to oppose by giving some evidence to the contrary. And B's reply to A shows that he was basing this statement, not on any such evidence, but rather on considerations that he takes to speak in favor of drinking: that is, on reasons for thinking that this is something he *should* go in for, perhaps in some “non-moral” sense of ‘should’. As such, in order to oppose B's statement directly what A needs to say is rather something like:

(10) A: Hold on, that's not right. Remember your promise to C that you would stay sober.

A's statement in (10) gives B a reason to refrain from drinking, just as B's reply in (9) gave what he saw as a reason to do the opposite. It is by clarifying the kind of reasoning that stands in opposition to a statement about what one will do that one distinguishes this statement as either a prediction or an expression of intention.

Yet this notion of ‘opposition’ requires its own unpacking, since we saw in (8) above that it *is* possible to oppose a person's expression of their intention with a statement providing evidence that they will not do what they say. Here again is the exchange combining (5) and (8):

(5-8) A: Are you really coming out to the bar tonight? I thought you had sworn off drinking.
 B: Well, it's really important to C that I be there for her right now. I understand how things have tended to go for me in the past, but this time I'll keep to drinking club sodas.
 A: Hold on—this is just what you said the last time C really wanted you to come out with her, and that night you ended up plastered.

If the reason why A's statement in (9) fails to contradict what B says there is that B's original statement was an expression of intention while A's is a mere prediction, then why are things different in this case? The difference seems to be this: that in (9) there is no difficulty in thinking it *likely* that B will do what he says, once we

see that this is something he intends to do rather than something he merely predicts. By contrast, A's statement in (8) is a way of calling into question the likelihood that B will follow through on his intention, by providing evidence that he won't actually refrain from drinking while he's out with C. Nevertheless, it seems that there must be *some* way for B to respond to what A says in (8), lest he should have to retract what he says in (5) or to treat it as no more than a desire, hope, or wish. What B has said to A is this: that despite what he's done in the past, what he does tonight will be different. What *ground* can B have for saying this, given that as far as B's environment is concerned this night may be no different from any other?

V

A's statement in (8) challenges B's authority for saying, in (5), that he'll stick to club sodas when he's out tonight, on the grounds that he's said such things in the past and then failed to follow through on what he said. We need to understand what else there is for B to say in reply to A, other than simply insisting that this is what he'll do:

(11) B: Yes, I know. But tonight will be different.

At the very least, in order to take seriously what B says in (11) it seems A must assume that there's more to his thinking than this. But what is this "more," exactly? Does B need to have some special *evidence* for thinking he'll stay sober tonight? Or is something else required instead? What kind of thinking must A credit to B in order to take seriously what he says here, and so to trust that his statement that he'll refrain is not just stupid optimism, but something A should think is *true*? And, likewise, what kind of thinking must B credit to himself, as it were, in order for him to see this statement as one that he can make responsibly?

I wish to suggest that the answer turns on B's willingness to think *in advance* about the course that his night might take, in order thereby to say how he will act in the various specific situations he may find himself in. For example:

(12) A: Let's be serious. Last time you were out with C, having told me you were going to stick to club sodas, C ordered you a cocktail and then you decided that you might as well drink it, since it

would be a shame to offend C or have her money go to waste.

B: I know, I remember this, and that's why I'm going to tell C about my plan to keep from drinking tonight, so that she won't go ahead and order any drinks for me.

A: But what if she orders one anyway—either to goad you into drinking (you know how C is, after all), or because she just forgot what you said?

B: In that case I'm going to refuse the drink or give it quietly to someone else—and I know you'll be there to remind me of this promise and help me to carry it off tastefully.

The dialogue in (12) is a way of helping B to *plan* the course of his evening in much the same way that, in (1), B articulates the plan to keep from drinking by staying home from the bar. The difference here, however, is that the aim of B's planning is not only to *avoid* situations in which he predicts he might choose poorly (e.g., by keeping C from buying him a drink), but also to help himself choose *well* in those very situations (e.g., by refusing the drink politely if C buys him one after all). It is, I propose, only against the background of this kind of planning that a promise like the one B makes in (11) can be justified.

Why exactly is this? Well, imagine that B had responded to either of A's statements in (12) with something like the following instead:

(13) B: This is something I'll deal with if it happens, okay?

As with (11) above, unless it is simply an objection to A's unwelcome probing B's statement in (13) is simply no good. But the reason for this is not that B *cannot* do the kind of thing he says he will do, but rather that he is just too *likely* not to do this, given the way it would require him to work things out on the fly, and in the face of the very temptations he would be trying to resist. That is to say, B's past behavior suggests that if he is at the bar and C orders him a drink, then *unless* B has thought in advance about what to do, B is likely to be flustered and end up finding an excuse to go ahead and drink it. For this reason, the process of thinking in advance along the lines described in (12) is itself a *means* that B needs to take, so

far as he can, toward the end of refraining from drinking. It is a way for B to think clear-headedly about what to do in situations, of the sort described by A in (8) and (13), in which he is prone to drink.

But we need to be careful in describing what goes on in this kind of planning. On a first glance it may look as if the aim of this process of anticipating what might happen, and identifying what one will do if it does, is to provide *evidence* in support of thinking that one will act in a certain way. In the present case, this would mean seeing B as reasoning to the conclusion that he'll refrain from drinking partly by way of the premise that he'll refuse a drink if C offers one to him, with the latter premise treated as evidence in favor of the former. And one thing that makes this picture seem attractive is the way it takes seriously the fact that, as I emphasized earlier, statements like A's in (8) and (12) oppose a person's statement of what they will do precisely by providing evidence that they will not do this. Shouldn't we, therefore, treat the reasoning that attempts to rebut this opposition as a matter of providing evidence that stands against it?

The picture gets this much right: the point of A's statements in (8) and (12) is indeed to challenge a person's claim about what they are going to do, by providing evidence that some of what they think is false; and the purpose of the reasoning that B articulates in (12) is to shore up that thinking against such an evidence-driven challenge. But the idea that is a matter of providing further *evidence*, only now in support of the person's own judgment about what he or she will do, is simply mistaken, since as I emphasized in the first part of section II it is not in light of evidence that an person says what he or she will do, at least not where the person is free and responsible in respect of the matter in question. When B said, in (5), that he was going to stick to drinking club sodas, it was not on the basis of evidence that he was going to do this. Nor, by the same token, is what B says in (12) supposed to provide evidence in support of the same—since if it were, then these statements would have the same kind of force as if B had replied to (8) by saying, for example, that on many *other* occasions he had successfully stuck to club sodas. *That* would be (some) evidence in favor of thinking that B will stick to club sodas again tonight. But the thing that B says in (12) has clearly got a different force than this.

So how else does B's plan to ask C not to buy him any drinks, and to refuse a drink if she nevertheless buys him one, relate to his plan to refrain from drinking alcohol, if it's not supposed to serve

as evidence that he will follow through? The answer seems to be that it is *from* the plan (or decision) to refrain from drinking alcohol that B then goes on to plan (or decide) to do these further things to keep C from convincing him to have a drink, rather than the latter serving as a premise from which the former is derived. That is to say, while the force of A's challenges in (8) and in (12) is to provide reason for thinking that it is not likely that B will do what he says, the force of B's replies is rather to specify the *means* by which he is going to go about doing this. Put differently, the point is that from B's perspective A's challenges present him with a *practical* problem that he needs to address through practical reasoning—reasoning, that is, by which he identifies the means that he will take to achieve his ends.

Two more things are worth noting about this kind of advance planning. One is that there are obvious limits to how *detailed* it can be, and as a consequence there will always be *some* need for a person to decide “on the fly” what to do. (Thus, for example, in laying out his plan in (12) B probably does not need to specify *exactly* what he is going to say to C, especially in a context where A will be there to support him.) The other, which is more significant, is that there seem to be some limits in *which* possibilities a person has to consider, in order to count as having thought things through sufficiently in this way. To see this, imagine that the dialogue in (12) continues as follows:

- (14) A: Okay, but what are you going to do if D is there, and this triggers the memories of your failed romance and makes you want to drink away your sorrows?
 B: But D isn't going to come—she's with her sister in San Francisco.

The point of B's response in (14) is to say that the possibility A has described is not one that he needs to consider in his planning, since he has reason to think it won't transpire. We might put this by saying that the situation in which D shows up is *deliberatively irrelevant*: not because it's impossible for it to materialize, but because B has sufficient reason to think it won't. (For A to insist that D nevertheless *might* show up, and so that B needs to think through what he'll do if she does, would be like insisting that B might be a brain in a vat.) This reveals how advance planning of the kind displayed in (12) does not have to consider absolutely every possibility, but only

those that meet some standard of relevance, in order to count as sufficiently comprehensive (where the standard for what counts as relevant is likely to vary with the stakes of the situation, among other things).

VI

I began this paper by asking why, given that B can think of himself as able to refrain from drinking in the context of what he says in (5), he thinks of himself in such a different way in what he says to A in (1). In (1), B seems to reason as if his tendency to drink in bars is a “fixed point” that shows he should avoid going out, whereas in (5) he treats that same tendency as one in respect of which he is free and responsible. Our questions were: what does B think, in the end, about what is likely to happen if he goes into a bar? And what kind of sense can we make of this seeming inconsistency in the things that B says he will do?

Let’s take the second question first. The answer we can now give is that when a claim that’s treated as a fixed point in one’s reasoning has to do with a matter in respect of which one is free and responsible, there’s always the possibility of subsequently calling this claim into question. But this calling into question can’t be done willy-nilly, as suggested in stubborn replies like (11) and (13). Instead, the insistence that we see in a statement like B’s in (5)—that what one is going to do on *this* occasion will be different from what the evidence suggests—necessarily leaves a person vulnerable to further probing of the kind displayed in (8) and (12). The reason for this is that a person’s justification for thinking that they are going to do something always depends on their having identified, or being able to identify “on the fly” as needed, the *means* by which they are going to get this done. Sometimes this is straightforward, because there is no question at all of one’s knowing how to do the thing in question, and of being able to carry it off. But the cases that have been our focus here are ones where this condition is not met.

Put differently, what makes the context of what B says in (5) different from the context of what he says in (1) is simply that B’s remark in (5) presupposes that he has thought, or is prepared to think, in advance about what he’ll do if he goes out to a bar on this occasion. By contrast, what keeps B at home in the context of (1) is not the idea that his going to a bar will simply lead inevitably, or even with some high likelihood, to his drinking to excess when he’s

there, but rather the recognition that he doesn't have a *plan* for refraining from drinking if he goes out on this occasion, nor does he trust his ability to work out such a plan on the fly. (Alternatively, of course, B might have at least the outline of a plan but think that it wouldn't be worth carrying out—that he would rather stay home, relax, and watch Netflix than go out to a bar, keep up his guard, and be the only one at the table drinking club sodas.) B is, again, always in a position to try to change this situation, by doing the work now of planning out what he will do. But in declining to go out with A on the occasion discussed in (1), B is declining to carry out this kind of planning, either because it's too difficult or—more likely—because there just isn't a good enough reason to go in for it on this occasion.

Next, to the question of *what B thinks*, in the end, about what he'll do if he goes into a bar, the answer is that he thinks it depends. B thinks, for one thing, that if he simply goes into a bar on a whim or for any old reason, and trusts himself to make good choices on the fly, then the choices he makes are likely to be bad ones, and so it's likely that he'll end up having too much to drink. He also thinks, for another, that if he *does* have good reason to go out to a bar then he'll be able to think through the various ways that things might go, and then to govern himself in accordance with the plan he develops. There is not, of course, anything remotely inconsistent in thinking both of these things at once. And they are just the kind of things that someone like B, given his knowledge of his habits and his intention not to let himself succumb to them, is going to need to say.

The same analysis holds for the seemingly Moorean conjunction in (6), where B describes himself *at once* both as prone to drink if he goes to a bar, and as resolved to do otherwise if he does go. If (6) is to express a serious and well-considered policy, then in the second part of what he says B has to mean not that if he goes to a bar he will *simply* refrain from drinking, where this means working out on the fly what to do in the face of temptations as they arise, but rather that in going out he will govern his choices according to a *plan* that anticipates, as far as he can, the occasions on which he'll be tempted to give in, and identifies, in the necessary degree of detail, what he'll do when those situations arise. It's only in this way that B can achieve what his situation demands of him: a clear-eyed resolution that anticipates how he is sometimes prone to choose badly, and prepares him to do what is needed in order to choose well when he must.

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