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**Research proposal**

**1a. Applicant**

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**1b. Title of research proposal**

Normativity in Action: A New Theory of Moral Responsibility

**1c. Summary of research proposal**

An important but neglected problem in the philosophy of action concerns the *normative nature* of intentional action. The hypothesis at issue is that knowingly ignoring a *bad* effect of one's actions implies that one brings it about intentionally. For example, a CEO who runs her business without any consideration for the foreseen and harmful effects on the environment harms it intentionally. Recent empirical research confirms that this is how we think about intentional action: experimental philosophers have made the striking discovery that people are more willing to say that someone brought about a side effect intentionally when they regard it as bad rather than good.

The hypothesis has never been developed into a full-blown theory of intentional action. The burgeoning research in experimental philosophy provides a new motivation for doing just this. The first part of the project is devoted to the development of a new theory of intentional action and moral responsibility. The central innovation is the idea that whether or not we do something intentionally depends not only on the significance we actually ascribe but also to the significance we *should* ascribe to the effects of our actions. The overall picture envisaged is that intentional action concerns reasons for *and against* action *including moral reasons*.

The theory will be applied to two topics in moral philosophy, one in meta-ethics and one in applied ethics. Both concern foreseen effects of actions that have moral significance. The application in meta-ethics is a matter of disentangling persisting riddles concerning the Principle of Double Effect, according to which it can be permissible to bring about an effect one foresees even though it is impermissible to intend to bring about that effect. The second application concerns global justice and the role that people in affluent countries play in causing poverty in underprivileged countries. Here the theory is used for examining the sustainability of the argument that we do so intentionally and can be blamed for doing so.

Keywords:

intentional action, moral responsibility, principle of double effect, global justice

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## 2. Description of the proposed research

### 2a. Research topic

#### State of the Art

The way we deliberate about our actions and what we know about their consequences when we perform them is of crucial importance for moral responsibility. We accept the absence of an intention to kill as a mitigating factor, and talk in such cases of involuntary manslaughter rather than murder. Similarly, though more controversially, many feel that a doctor who causes the death of a terminally ill patient by injecting a large dose of morphine acts impermissibly when he intends to bring about the patient's death. However, a doctor who intended to relieve the patient's pain with that same dose and merely foresaw the hastening of the patient's death acts permissibly, even though – as some will say – he did so intentionally. Arguably, the doctor deserves no blame in this second kind of case. This reveals that the notions of foresight, intention, and intentional action play a significant role in relation to the performance of actions with effects that are good or bad.

An important issue in the philosophy of action is whether the notion of intentional action is merely descriptive, or has itself a normative component (Mele and Sverdluk 1996, and Harman 1976, 2006). According to the latter position, whether or not an action is performed intentionally depends, inter alia, on whether one does it in the face of (what ought to be) a reason not to do it. Empirical findings in the new and rapidly growing field of experimental philosophy support the idea that the notion of intentional action is normatively laden (Knobe 2003, 2006, Nadelhoffer 2004, 2006). As it turns out, the answer people give to the question whether or not an action is performed intentionally depends on whether its moral worth is positive or negative, for instance, on whether it benefits or harms the environment. Thus far, however, this finding has not been developed into a systematic theory of the normative nature of intentional action. The goal of this project is to develop such a theory and to apply it to two pertinent topics in moral philosophy.

#### Key Objectives

The project has two key objectives:

1. Develop a theory of the normative nature of intentional action.
2. Use the theory in order to disentangle some pertinent problems in  
(a) meta-ethics and (b) applied ethics.

#### Part I: Normativity in Intentional Action

The hypothesis that intentional action has a normative component will be developed into a theory using both the theoretical arguments within the philosophy of action and the empirical findings of experimental philosophy as *conditions of adequacy*. In the experiments at issue people are asked questions about test cases concerning intentional action and moral responsibility. The answers reveal two asymmetries in our judgments about intentional action and moral responsibility. First, people are more inclined to ascribe blame to someone for (morally) bad effects than they are inclined to ascribe praise for (morally) good effects (*the Praise-Blame Asymmetry*). Second, people are more willing to say that a side effect was brought about intentionally when they regard that side effect as bad than when they regard it as good (*the Intentional Action Asymmetry*).

The literature on the Praise-Blame Asymmetry and the Intentional Action

Asymmetry is growing rapidly, as is the number of experiments that are conducted.<sup>1</sup> What is lacking, however, is an overall perspective on the results. The central claim that experimental philosophers have put forward is that the Praise-Blame Asymmetry explains the Intentional Action Asymmetry, which would entail that our judgments concerning praise and blame are in some sense prior to those concerning intentional action, rather than the other way around as conventional wisdom has it (Knobe 2003, 2006, Nadelhoffer 2004, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Only a sophisticated account of intentional action and moral responsibility will enable us to evaluate this claim properly. To develop such an account is the first goal of this project. This will be done by transforming the most advanced descriptive theories of intentional action into a normative theory, and by determining the consequences this has for responsibility assignments on the basis of cutting-edge theories of practical reasoning and moral responsibility (Bratman 1987 and 2007, Mele and Moser 1994, Scanlon 1998, Sie 2005, Velleman 2000, Wallace 1994).

## Part II: Intentional Action in Moral Philosophy

The second objective of this project is to use the analysis of the two asymmetries as fresh input for two pertinent problems in moral philosophy – one in meta-ethics and one in applied ethics. At the level of pure philosophical argumentation, contenders on both sides of these issues have reached a stalemate. Both applications concern the extent to which the absence of intention is a valid excuse for bringing about morally significant effects.

### The Principle of Double Effect

Within the context of meta-ethics the theory will be applied to a principle according to which it is sometimes permissible to bring about an effect one foresees in a situation in which it would not be permissible to intend that effect. This is known as the Principle of Double Effect (Anscombe 1982, Foot 1967, Kamm 2006, McIntyre 2001, Quinn 1989). As we saw above, a doctor might act permissibly when relieving the pain of a patient foreseeing that this will hasten his death even though it is not permissible to intend this. Many people are puzzled by this and have great doubts as to whether the principle is coherent. After all, foreseeing the effect and following through on the intended action seems to come close to intending to bring about that very effect. The theory will be used for defending the coherence of the psychology underlying the principle.

The core idea is to reformulate the principle in terms of bringing about an effect intentionally versus intending to bring it about. Following through on the idea that intentional action concerns reasons for *and against* action, this reformulation will then be used to argue that causing harm intentionally can be consistent with regarding the harmful effect as a moral reason *against* performing the relevant action. The theory will also be used for motivating the principle and explaining why the difference between an action that one intended and an action one (merely) performed intentionally is normatively significant.

### Global Justice

The second application concerns global justice, which is now fiercely debated across disciplines such as economics, political science, and philosophy (see, for instance, Sen's 1999 interdisciplinary work on the topic). Cosmopolitans argue that it is mistaken to regard our contributions towards, for instance, famine relief as a matter of charity. Instead, we have a duty to help the global poor (Singer 1972, 2002), or a duty not to harm them (Pogge 2002, 2005). The advantage of the latter position is that, if the argument can be made to work, people of basically all persuasions will have to accept it, as it relies only on the uncontroversial presupposition that we ought not to harm people.

<sup>1</sup> See [experimentalphilosophy.typepad.com/experimental\\_philosophy](http://experimentalphilosophy.typepad.com/experimental_philosophy). Doris and Stich (2005) discuss the relevance of empirical research to practical philosophy in general.

<sup>2</sup> See Adams and Steadman (2004a, 2004b) for criticisms.

The thesis that will be investigated in this project is the thesis that people in affluent countries intentionally and avoidably harm people suffering from poverty in other countries by coercively imposing a disadvantageous system of international institutions. As the arguments for this thesis are rather underdeveloped, the aim will be to fill in the gaps and thus to examine whether it can be sustained.

A proper assessment of this thesis requires distinguishing between different groups and policies. The groups include the governments of affluent states and their citizens, global institutions such as the WTO and the IMF, as well as the ruling elites of poor countries. Policies of interest encompass high import barriers on the part of rich countries, and support for undemocratic regimes that fail to protect the interests of their peoples. To the extent that the agents involved in such policies foresee the harm caused, the preceding suggests they harm the poor intentionally and can be blamed for doing so. Pogge's claim that the global economic order is imposed on the poor without their consent supports the idea that harm is caused intentionally, as coercion involves intentional action (Lamond 2000). It might be objected that the relevant agents do not intend to wrong people by structuring the world order the way they do, and that, hence, the charge of coercion is unjustified. The thesis that intentional action has a normative component suggests otherwise. A question that remains is what such a conclusion implies for those who did not foresee the harm, which may hold for many of the citizens of the states at issue. This will be addressed by employing insights from the literature on collective responsibility (French 1984, French and Wettstein 2006, May 1987).

## **2b. Approach and Innovations**

### **Methodology and Theory**

The main *methodological innovation* of this project is the use of experimental philosophy and psychology resolving an issue in the philosophy of action that has long appeared to be virtually intractable: the normative nature of intentional action. At the level of philosophical argumentation, the participants in the debate seem to have reached a *stalemate*. The thriving research in experimental philosophy provides concrete insights that carry with them a promise for making significant advances regarding these persistent difficulties. The main *substantive innovation* is the development of a *new theory* of intentional action on which it has a normative ingredient.

### **New Input for Otherwise Intractable Problems**

Over the past couple of decades the literature on the principle of double effect has become increasingly sophisticated both in terms of examples that have become progressively fanciful and in terms of theoretical insights that have become more and more subtle (see, for instance, Kamm 2000 on the principle of *triple effect*). The downside of this is that the debate is on the verge of turning into a *mere battle of intuitions*. A novel theory of intentional action based on experimental findings provides for a new avenue into these intricate issues, and a *unique vantage point* from which the enduring riddles discussed above can be disentangled. Insofar as global justice is concerned, the theory will serve to examine the sustainability of the excuse that poverty is an unintended effect of otherwise legitimate policies.

## **2c. Intended starting date**

The three-year project is expected to start on July 1, 2008.

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