Recent work by Joseph Raz (2005), Niko Kolodny (2008), and Sergio Tenenbaum (2014, 2018) suggests (even if not explicitly) that we can understand the rationality, or normative aspects, of intention without claiming that an intention is a mental state. In this paper, I suggest that we can understand the nature, or descriptive aspects, of intention without claiming that an intention is a mental state. At least, I argue that one central aspect—namely, its coordinating role—can be understood this way. Just as distinctive rational norms on intention are a myth, so is an inner state of intention that causally guides outward behaviour.

Let us start by observing some normative phenomena associated with intention. Normally, an agent is irrational if she intends to do A, believes that doing B is the only way to do A, but doesn’t intend to do B. Also normally, an agent is irrational if she intends to do A, intends to do B, but believes that doing B would prevent her from doing A. And normally, an agent is irrational if she intends to do A and, without reason, reconsiders whether she should do A.

One explanation of these normative phenomena goes like this. Intentions, *as such*, are subject to a set of rational requirements (Bratman 1999). If an agent violates these requirements, then she is irrational. And there is a requirement that corresponds to each of the above irrationalities. An agent must not intend to do A, believe that doing B is the only way to do A, but not intend to do B. She must not intend to do A, and intend to do B, while believing that doing B would prevent her from doing A. And she must not intend to do A and, without reason, reconsider whether she should do A. The irrationality does not arise from the reasons for action and belief that bear
on the agent but from having the intentions themselves, given the kind of thing an intention is.

This explanation is important because it functions as an argument for a certain theory of intention. According to this theory, an intention is a special state of mind individuated (partly) by the distinctive rational requirements it is subject to. It looks plausible that an intention is such a state of mind because assuming so gives us an explanation of the normative phenomena. Having an intention puts one in a state of mind that is subject to the relevant rational requirements. How else could you explain them?

Through a series of articles by Raz (2005), Kolodny (2008), and Tenenbaum (2014, 2018), an alternative explanation has become available. According to this explanation, there are no (or need not be) any special rational requirements that apply to intentions as such. Rather, the irrationality arises from the reasons for action and belief that bear on the agent.

Consider the irrationality of intending to do A, believing that doing B is the only way to do A, but not intending to do B. According to the alternative explanation, this is irrational because if there is decisive reason to do A, then there is decisive reason to intend to do A. So, an agent who is responsive to the reasons for action will form the intention to do A. Now, if there is also decisive reason to believe that doing B is the only way to do A, then there is decisive reason to do B. And if there is decisive reason to do B, then there is decisive reason to form the intention to do B. So, an agent who is responsive to the reasons for action and belief will not only form the intention to do A and the belief that doing B is the only way to do A but also the intention to do B. The agent is irrational because given that she is responding appropriately to the reasons in forming her initial intention and her belief, she is failing to respond appropriately to certain reasons for action—namely, the decisive reason to do B. Thus, her
irrationality derives not from special requirements on intention as such but from the reasons for action and belief in the present circumstances. (See Raz 2005)

Now consider the irrationality of intending to do A, intending to do B, but believing that doing B would prevent one from doing A. According to the alternative explanation, there are two possibilities. Let us suppose there is decisive reason to believe that doing B would prevent one from doing A. First, if there is more reason to do A than to do B and there is decisive reason to do A, then there is decisive reason to not intend to do B. This is because there is decisive reason to believe that merely having the intention to do B lowers the probability of doing A. Having that intention will just get in the way of doing what the agent has most reason to do. On this possibility, the agent is irrational because given that she is responding appropriately to the reasons in forming her intention to do A and her belief that doing B would prevent her from doing A, she is failing to respond appropriately to the reasons for action in maintaining her intention to do B.

On the second possibility, if there is equal reason to do A and to do B, then (all other courses of action being worse) there is decisive reason to not have both intentions. Each intention is getting in the way of the opposing action. There is decisive reason to give up one of the intentions. So, the agent is irrational because given that she is responding appropriately to the reasons in forming her belief that doing B would prevent her from doing A, she is failing to respond appropriately to the reasons for action in maintaining both intentions. In each possibility, the irrationality derives not from special requirements on intention as such but from the reasons for action and belief in the present circumstances. (See Kolodny 2008)

Finally consider the irrationality of intending to do A and, without reason, reconsiders whether one should do A. First, let's note that if there was decisive reason to do A at the conclusion of one's deliberation and there is no reason to believe that reconsidering one's conclusion would prevent one from doing A, then there is no reason
against reconsidering one’s conclusion (even if there is decisive reason to believe that the reasons haven’t changed). In this scenario, reconsidering doesn’t seem irrational. However, normally, there is decisive reason to believe that reconsidering an intention too much will prevent one from achieving what’s intended. Thus, if there was decisive reason to do A at the conclusion of one’s deliberation and there is decisive reason to believe that reconsidering one’s conclusion too much will prevent one from doing A, then there is decisive reason to not reconsider too much. One is irrational, in this scenario, because given that one is responding appropriately to the reasons in forming one’s intention to do A and the belief that reconsidering one’s conclusion too much will prevent one from doing A, one is failing to respond appropriately to the reasons for action in reconsidering one’s conclusion if one is disregarding how much is too much. Again, the irrationality derives not from special requirements on intention as such but from the reasons for action and belief in the present circumstances. (See Tenenbaum 2018)

Thus, this alternative explanation undermines three reasons for thinking that an intention is a special state of mind individuated (partly) by the distinctive rational requirements it is subject to. For many, at this point, this will not undermine the thought that an intention is a state of mind but merely the thought that such a state of mind is subject to and individuated by distinctive rational requirements. It is worth noting, however, that nothing in this alternative explanation suggests that intention is a mental state. We can explain the normative phenomena without assuming that intention is subject to and individuated by distinctive rational requirements and without assuming that intention is a mental state.

One might think that although the alternative explanation does not make reference to intentions as mental states, it does presuppose certain descriptive phenomena and we need to assume that intentions are mental states in order to explain that descriptive phenomena. In particular, the alternative explanation presupposes that having an
intention to do A makes it more likely that one will do A. And this seems to be based on the following descriptive phenomena about intention.

Normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to reason about how to do A than otherwise. Further, normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to avoid intending or doing conflicting actions than otherwise. And finally, normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to not deliberate about whether to do A than otherwise. Having an intention, in some way, makes it more likely that an agent will reason how, avoid conflicts, and close the question about whether to act.

Even if the alternative explanation of the normative phenomena doesn't presuppose these, they are, at least, independent reasons to believe that intention is a mental state. Or so one might think. Why? Because that explains these descriptive phenomena. An intention, the explanation goes, is a mental state that plays a certain causal role. Namely, it causes an agent to reason about how to execute it and avoid conflicts and close the question. This is the way that having an intention makes it more likely that an agent will reason how, avoid conflicts, and close the question. Intention as a mental state explains the descriptive phenomena. So we think it is a mental state.

But there is an alternative explanation of the descriptive phenomena. According to this explanation, intention is not a mental state but an action at a certain developmental stage. Roughly, intention is to action as tadpole is to frog. A tadpole is a frog at a certain stage of frog-development, and an intention is an action at a certain stage of action-development. What distinguishes a tadpole from the other stages of frog-development is the roles its parts play. A tadpole characteristically has a tail, for instance. Similarly, what distinguishes an intention from the other stages of action-development is the roles its parts play. The characteristic parts of an intention, I suggest, are (among others) reasoning how, avoiding conflicts, and closing the question.

More precisely, a token intention to do A is a token action of type A at a certain developmental stage—for instance and especially, the stage at which the token action is
presently composed of reasoning about how to do A or avoiding conflicts with the
doing of A and not deliberating about whether to do A. For example, if a token
bread-baking is presently composed of a dough-kneading (i.e., an agent is kneading
dough as a part of baking bread), her bread-baking is not an intention, strictly speak-
ing—that is, not a paradigmatic, future-directed intention. (Present-directed inten-
tions add a complication that we need not consider here.) This is because her bread-
baking is mature and not presently composed of the parts characteristic of the inten-
tion-stage of action-development. This is like how a particular adult frog is not a
tadpole because it is mature and not presently composed of parts characteristic of
the tadpole-stage of frog-development, such as gills and a tail. On the other hand, if a
token bread-baking is presently composed of, for instance, a reasoning about how to
bake bread (i.e., an agent is reasoning about how to bake bread as a part of being in
the process of baking bread), then it is an intention to bake bread. The agent’s inten-
tion to bake bread is not a state she is in but an action she is performing. This action,
however, is not a mature bread-baking or a doing of that action. Rather, it is a token
action of bread-baking at an immature developmental stage—an action the agent is
progressing by reasoning about how to bake bread.²

How does this explain the descriptive phenomena? Having an intention makes it
more likely that an agent will reason how, avoid conflicts, and close the question in
the same way that being a tadpole makes it more likely that a creature has a tail. The
intention is not bringing about the reasoning, etc., just as the tadpole is not bringing
about the tail. Having a tail is characteristic of being a tadpole but not of being a zy-
gote, so when a frog is a tadpole, it is more likely to have a tail than were it a zygote.
Similarly, reasoning how, avoiding conflicts, and closing the question are characteris-
tic of having an intention but not of having a mere want, so when an action is an in-
tention (i.e., when an agents intends), the action is more likely to have reasoning how
or avoiding conflicts and not deliberating as a present part than were it a want.
Consider the fact that, normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to reason about how to do A than otherwise. If she merely wants to do A, she may be somewhat likely to reason about how to do A. But if she has made up her mind to do A, she will, normally, be much more likely to reason about how to do A. This is not because making up her mind puts her in a state with greater causal influence. It is because if her action of type A is an intention, then it must presently be composed of some characteristic part of an intention. One such part is reasoning about how to do A. If her action of type A is not an intention, then it is not presently composed of some characteristic part of an intention and thus must not be composed of reasoning about how to do A. Therefore, if her action of type A is an intention, it is more likely that it is composed of reasoning about how to do A than otherwise. Her intention is not a state and is not influencing her to reason. That doesn’t even make sense. Reasoning about how to do A is a characteristic part of having an intention to do A.

Now consider the fact that, normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to avoid intending or doing conflicting actions than otherwise. If she merely wants to do A, she may have passing thoughts to avoid intending or doing conflicting actions. But if she has made up her mind to do A, then she is much more likely to avoid intending or doing conflicting actions. This is not because making up her mind puts her in a state with greater causal influence. It is because if her action of type A is an intention, then it must presently be composed of some characteristic part of an intention. One such part is avoiding actions that will conflict with progressing an action of type A. If her action of type A is not an intention, then it is not presently composed of some characteristic part of an intention and thus must not be composed of avoiding actions that will conflict with progressing an action of type A. Therefore, if her action of type A is an intention, it is more likely that it is composed of avoiding intending or doing conflicting actions than otherwise. Her intention is not a state and is not influencing her to avoid conflicts. That doesn’t even make
sense. Avoiding actions that will conflict with progressing an action of type A is a characteristic part of having an intention to do A.

Finally consider the fact that, normally, if an agent intends to do A, she is more likely to not deliberate about whether to do A than otherwise. If she wants to do A, she is likely to deliberate about whether to do A. But if she has made up her mind to do A, then she is much less likely to do so. She is more likely to consider the question about whether to do A closed. This is not because making up her mind puts her in a state that causally influences her not to deliberate. It is because if her action of type A is an intention, then it must not be presently composed of deliberating about whether to do A. If her action of type A is not an intention, then it may be presently composed of such deliberating. Therefore, if her action of type A is an intention, it is more likely that it is not composed of deliberating about whether to do A than otherwise—in fact, it is certainly not. Her intention is not a state and is not influencing her to not deliberate. That doesn’t even make sense. Not deliberating about whether to do A is a characteristic part of having an intention to do A.

In short, having an intention makes it more likely that an agent will reason how, avoid conflicts, and close the question not by causally influencing those actions but by being characteristically composed of those actions.

This undermines the thought that the descriptive phenomena are reasons to believe that an intention is a mental state. And it undermines the thought that the alternative explanation of the normative phenomena must presuppose that an intention is a mental state. Therefore, we can explain some of the most compelling descriptive and normative phenomena about intention without positing that an intention is a mental state. An intention is an action at certain developmental stage. A state of intending is a myth.
REFERENCES


1 See Russell 2018a and Russell 2018b for further explanation and defence.

2 This does not mean that every mature action or (i.e.) doing must have developed from an intention, just as every mature frog must have developed from a tadpole. It is a contingent fact about our world that mature frogs develop from tadpoles. That is, it is logically possible for a mature frog to spring forth, fully formed, from Zeus’s head. Similarly, it is logically possible for a doing to spring forth, fully formed, from an agent. Unlike frogs, it is a fact about our world that doings often spring forth in just this way. But also often, doings develop from intentions.

Further, saying that an intention is an action at a certain, immature developmental stage does not mean that an intention is an action at a temporally earlier stage of action-development, just as a tadpole is a frog at a temporally earlier stage of frog-development. Again, it is a contingent fact about our world that a tadpole occurs temporally earlier than a mature frog. That is, it is logically possible for a particular frog to transform in and out of the various stages of frog-development in any temporal order. Similarly, it is logically possible for a particular action to transform in and out of the various stages of action-development in any temporal order. Unlike frogs, it is a fact about our world that particular actions often transform in just this way. But also often, intentions occur temporally earlier than doings.

Development is about maturation, not temporal order or mere progress. Maturation is a kind of ratcheting: conditions are put in place in order to make possible further progress. In our world, frog maturation has a linear temporal order and involves smooth, steady progress. Not so for actions. In baking bread, I can buy yeast on Monday, buy flour on Tuesday, use the flour for something else on Wednesday, then, on Thursday, register for a baking class, take the class on Friday, buy flour again of Saturday, fail at everything on Sunday, do it all over again the next week, and finally succeed—all while performing other actions in between. An intention is an action such that it is presently composed of (among others) reasoning how or avoiding conflicts and not deliberating. Completing these parts matures the action, putting in place conditions that make possible further progress.