

UNITED WISDOM

Intention, Attempt and Completed Action

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *Opportunity may never offer.*

Joseph Haven, *Mental Philosophy*, the discussion of executive volition, p.530. A separate brief sentence: a decision does not yet provide an occasion for execution. The RU fragment is our own translation. The historical context is not presented as a contemporary theory of behaviour.

What this article is about

We often describe an undertaking with one verb although the account contains different events. Intending to repair, attempting to repair, replacing a part and restoring proper operation are four statements with different grounds. Confusion becomes especially noticeable when the result is missing. One person says they did nothing; another treats the task as complete because they made an effort. Between these extremes there may be a definite action that happened without producing its intended outcome.

This article distinguishes intention, attempt, completed action and result through a fictional everyday example. A selected primary context from Joseph Haven supplies a historical question about executing a decision; Aristotle's distinction between choice and a desired end preserves another boundary. They form neither a single psychological model nor a way of assessing people by success. We want a precise account of what happened, what is unknown and which next question fits the facts.

I. Repairing or Working on a Repair

Imagine a fictional character, Pavel. His own cupboard door fails to remain closed: its catch sometimes releases. He decides to replace it on Saturday. He buys a seemingly suitable part, gets a screwdriver and photographs the existing fitting. Several actions are complete by this point. None yet supports saying the door is repaired. Preparation concerns the repair without constituting the state of the door for which the repair was undertaken.

The verb repair connects activity with a successful outcome. Working on a repair describes participation that may end differently. Everyday conversation need not constantly distinguish every nuance, but they matter when examining an unsuccessful undertaking. If Pavel says he repaired the cupboard, a neighbour may expect an operational door. If he says he removed the

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old catch, the expectation is much narrower. Precision concerns the grounds for another person's expectation, rather than literary neatness.

Now suppose Pavel undid two screws and fitted the new part. The door still fails to stay closed. His movements and replacement do not disappear because success is absent. Neither do they become a successful repair merely because they took time. Preserve both facts: a new catch was fitted; proper operation has not been restored. That allows the remaining difficulty to be investigated without exaggerating achievement or erasing participation that occurred.

Our example concerns a peaceful, reversible undertaking, rather than the safety of a complex device. It is not a repair instruction and does not assume Pavel should continue alone. He can stop and consult someone with relevant experience. What matters is that the next conversation differs according to what has already been done. Advice about buying a part is insufficient if it is installed; testing operation is insufficient if action still exists only in intention.

II. Intention Looks Forward

Pavel's intention has content and a temporal direction: replace the catch on Saturday so the door stays closed. It can be sincere and definite before an opportunity exists. Someone can choose an action in advance that later becomes unavailable through missing tools or changed circumstances. Failure to obtain the result therefore does not itself prove there was never an intention. Equally, a clear intention does not prove action began or will occur as imagined.

In III.2–3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle treats choice differently from simply wishing for a result. The distinction's limited relevance here is a question about chosen participation. Pavel can want an operational door while being unsure whether to replace the catch himself or request help. Until that question is settled, the desired picture cannot be described as definite execution. An ancient ethical classification does not thereby become a modern theory of repair behaviour.

A more definite intention may remain conditional: replace the part if the fittings match and the work is safe. A condition does not automatically weaken a decision. It identifies its object and limit. If another construction proves necessary, abandoning the replacement may fulfil the intention rather than contradict it. The original reason remains—restoring the door's operation—while the chosen method is revised after information that was previously unavailable.

An honest account of intention needs no detailed internal transcript. It should avoid presenting a later explanation as an earlier known decision. Perhaps Pavel remembers only a general wish and buying the part. The account's precision is then limited. He can acknowledge not remembering exactly when he selected replacement. This does not prevent discussion of

further action. It preserves the boundary between known content of the past decision and a present reconstruction of its meaning.

III. An Attempt Has an Object

An attempt can describe directed participation whose success remains open. Not everything near a task is an attempt to perform that particular task. Looking at the catch's packaging may be a compatibility check. Pressing the fitted part and closing the door is an attempt to obtain the desired hold. The difference concerns the action's object rather than the energy expended. One movement can serve different purposes, so its description requires context.

Suppose a screw will not turn and Pavel stops using the screwdriver after a brief trial. He attempted to undo the screw, but it remained in place. Describing an attempt does not covertly claim the part was removed. It says something else: a chosen method was applied to a definite object without its intended completion. This informs the next decision without establishing why the screw failed to turn or licensing guesses about damage or deficient skill.

Sometimes I tried is used too broadly: someone only considered an undertaking or waited for an unspecified convenient moment. The reverse also happens: participation is invisible because the necessary work involved remembering, reading or checking a decision. A rule requiring visible movement therefore does not fit. Ask which activity someone calls an attempt and how it was directed towards the task. Missing external results do not themselves permit us to deny unobserved participation.

Our scene offers a specific answer: Pavel applied the screwdriver to the screw to remove it, without obtaining an observable turn. This can be described without promising to repeat until victorious. Attempting creates no duty to continue with an unsuitable method. If a damage risk appears or Pavel chooses to stop, past participation remains. Stopping adds a new decision about the future, considered separately from whether the earlier trial occurred.

IV. Historical Executive Volition

In *Mental Philosophy*, Haven distinguishes motive, choice and executive volition. In the selected context he emphasizes that an opportunity may not arise after a decision. He subsequently separates volition's completeness from effort's success. This is a nineteenth-century psychological position. Its language of soul, bodily mechanism and appeals to consciousness is not adopted as an established contemporary explanation. We use only the distinction between questions the author does not treat as identical. Primary context, pp.530–531.

An excessive conclusion is tempting: if success is not identical to volition, perhaps external events do not matter. Neither our scene nor the limited distinction requires that conclusion.

Pavel wanted a door that stayed closed; its operation remains significant for the goal. At the same time, we need not treat every action as nonexistent because it still releases. Completed participation and achieved results can matter alongside each other rather than cancelling each other out.

Nor should historical executive volition be equated with a contemporary attempt in every usage. Haven describes a particular moment in his system, while ordinary speech may call a prolonged sequence an attempt. We do not claim Pavel passed through necessary internal stages in a prescribed order. The primary text shows that decision, execution and success were distinguished within a particular historical position. It is not an observation of our fictional character.

The borrowing therefore remains limited. It asks us not to omit execution between a decision and an outcome. Which actions were undertaken? Which ended under a definite description? What else is required for the reported result? These questions have different answers even when compressed into doing something. The historical support assigns no measure of merit, calculates no responsibility and explains no unknown impediment. It keeps space for several definite facts in the account.

V. Action Ends Under a Description

Pavel removed the old catch but did not repair the door. The sentence shows how completion depends on the action named. Removing a part can finish while the repair remains unfinished. This relativity need not mean arbitrariness: the old catch is either absent from its fitting or still present. The description has a testable object, narrower than the overall project. A completed stage can thereby be recognized without promising the entire task is complete.

Another example is a message to someone with relevant experience. Pavel composed it, sent it and received no reply. Writing, sending and arranging assistance are different actions. The first two may have occurred; the third has not yet occurred. No reply makes neither sending nonexistent nor silence agreement. Calling the whole sequence seeking help and then treating help as secured imports another person's participation where facts are currently missing.

When refining descriptions, avoid choosing the narrowest verb solely to feel successful. Pavel did turn the screwdriver, but if he promised to replace the catch, reporting that movement does not answer the listener's entire question. An honest account can include both scales: what finished and what remained promised. A narrow action need not establish a broad commitment's fulfilment. Otherwise a useful distinction becomes a verbal device for closing something still open for someone else.

The reverse mistake recognizes only the broadest outcome. While the cupboard is not operational, apparently there is no check, removal or request for assistance. This deprives the

next participant of information. They must repeat completed work or assume things that never happened. Precision preserves specific completions within their content. These may be insufficient for the goal while sufficient to change a particular situation that subsequent participation needs to consider.

VI. A Result Needs a Separate Check

In shared work, a completion boundary can be agreed in advance. One participant removes a part, another selects a replacement and a third tests operation. Finishing one's share then differs from finishing the whole task while retaining significance of its own. Pavel should report the fact on which the next participant can begin. If transfer conditions were not agreed, they can be clarified now, preserving the difference between action already performed and a new agreement about further participation.

After fitting the new catch, Pavel closes the door. It holds once but releases again on the next opening. What result occurred? If the task was to test one closure, the first trial supplied a positive observation. If it was to restore reliable operation, one observation is insufficient. We need not invent a mandatory number of tests. That would depend on an actual device and its requirements, which this article does not specify. Simply avoid silently expanding one trial's meaning.

Success under a narrower condition can be real and limited. Pavel fitted a part whose holes matched. This does not establish that the part solves the original problem. Perhaps the catch is irrelevant; perhaps information about the door's alignment is needed. Neither possibility is declared the cause. They identify the uncertainty remaining after a completed action. The next check should address that uncertainty rather than reconfirm the already known installation.

The reverse situation is possible too: the desired state appears without the expected personal participation. While Pavel was away, another willing participant adjusted the door. The cupboard now works, but its operation does not show Pavel repaired it himself. Achieved outcome and action's authorship separate again. An article on causes and authors will examine this more closely. Here its boundary suffices: success is not a complete account of who did what.

Checking a result also differs from guaranteeing the future. Even here, present closure does not describe every subsequent use. Pavel can honestly report that the door held during a particular check today while leaving a stronger claim open. The limitation does not make the result useless. It identifies the observation supporting his statement. If safety or an important agreement depends on something, the relevant field determines the required check rather than a philosophical wish for an attractive ending.

VII. Failure Does Not Select an Explanation

The door fails to hold, but no single cause follows. An unsuitable part, incorrect fitting, a different underlying problem and insufficient checking are distinct suppositions. Choosing between them requires information unavailable from the outcome alone. Nor does that outcome establish Pavel's concealed unwillingness or general lack of ability. We can know about a particular unsuccessful attempt while knowing nothing about broader claims that readily attach themselves to it in conversation.

This does not prohibit assessing the quality of work performed. An established fact can be named. For instance, inspection reveals Pavel did not secure the second screw. That differs from assuming he is always inattentive. It supplies a corrective object without explaining why the screw was missed. The error's cause may or may not become clear. Describing the known while preserving the unknown is more precise than quickly connecting a result with someone's entire character.

Pavel may also mistakenly treat a missing result as absent participation: I did not even try. Recording the method applied restores an actual attempt to the account. It does not justify a claim that nothing more is needed. If the door remains an important task, a next step must be chosen. Recognizing effort and recognizing an unfinished goal are compatible. They answer different questions; neither should remove the other without grounds.

In conversation, clarify the other person's question. They may care about using the cupboard rather than the intensity of effort. Pavel can describe his attempt, but should separately report that operation remains unrestored. This respects the result's significance for the listener. If assistance is needed, a precise list of actions is more useful than a general claim of difficulty. It guarantees no solution, but reduces uncertainty about the situation in which further participation begins.

VIII. Stopping and Revision Preserve the Past

After several trials Pavel postpones the repair. He lacks the right part and time to understand the construction. Stopping means ending particular participation now. It does not turn removal of the catch or a sent message into events that never occurred. Past actions remain in the situation, including their consequences. If the cupboard is disassembled, that condition matters. A new decision about the future does not itself restore the original state or complete the earlier project.

Revision differs from continuing the same attempt. Pavel may decide to request help instead of undertaking replacement himself. The method and distribution of participation then change. This need be described neither as the original plan's secret victory nor as total surrender. A

retained reason permits another path if that path is available and agreed. If the goal itself no longer matters, that is a different revision, which can also be named without forcing it into an earlier promise.

Agreements require separate attention. If Pavel promised to free the cupboard for shared work, stopping may leave others with an unresolved question. An accurate personal account does not replace notification and discussion of new conditions. It makes discussion specific: what finished, what does not work, what assistance is needed and what cannot yet be promised. Participants may disagree with an assessment. Correct verbs cannot eliminate disagreement and should not conceal it.

In a safe task, the possibility of stopping protects decision-making without automatically cancelling every consequence. Under threat, coercion or danger, safety and appropriate support take priority. Philosophical examination does not determine professional or legal duties. Our conclusion is narrower: stopping now and acting earlier belong to different moments. They can be described together while preserving the difference between what happened and what someone now intends to do or refrain from doing.

IX. An Account After Action Changes Perspective

Before beginning, Pavel looked towards an operational door. After failure, he sees a known sequence of actions. Reading the past solely through today's outcome makes everything appear directed towards a predetermined failure. That knowledge was unavailable during choice. Perhaps the part looked suitable from the available signs. This does not prove the choice correct. It requires separating earlier grounds from later knowledge. Assessment has content when we know which information was available then.

The reverse reconstruction is possible too: success makes every earlier step appear necessary and correctly chosen. Yet the result may have depended on additional help or an incidentally suitable condition. Our example supplies no data to establish such a sequence. It shows the limit of an account organized around a single ending. The outcome does not explain every step's role. Some may have been useful and others unnecessary; investigate separately if that question matters for subsequent participation.

A useful note preserves several moments without becoming a cumbersome report. What was intended before beginning? Which attempt occurred? Which action completed? What was observed afterwards? What has been decided now? Each question can receive a brief answer or acknowledgment of uncertainty. We need not reconstruct Pavel's entire inner world. A single word complete should not swallow distinct facts; a single word failed should not erase what occurred under a narrower description.

Such an account can help transfer the task. The next participant receives neither a promise to solve everything nor an impression of considerable work, but the thing's state and known actions. This is not a universal efficiency technique. In our fictional scene it identifies the point of accurate communication: relating words to available grounds. If two sentences suffice for transfer, a detailed record is not obligatory. Philosophical distinctions should clarify an undertaking rather than create another duty around it.

X. Four Questions Instead of One Outcome

Intention, attempt, action and result can be four questions rather than an immutable staircase. What did someone plan to achieve? Towards what was actual participation directed? What ended under a particular description? Which resulting state was checked? Some answers coincide; others remain open. A complex undertaking may involve repeated attempts, renewed preparation and changed goals. Our map explains no hidden mechanism. It preserves distinctions between statements requiring different grounds.

In the historical context read, Haven separates decision from executive volition and does not simply equate volition with effort's success. Aristotle's distinction helps separate a desired end from chosen participation. Their assumptions differ. We derive no contemporary general theory and adopt no contested historical descriptions of coercion or bodily execution. The cupboard scene offers only a limited possibility for more precise descriptions of completion, without claiming agreement throughout philosophical history.

Pavel can now say: I wanted to restore operation, replaced the part, checked closure and did not obtain the required reliable result. This does not solve the technical problem. It identifies the next conversation's object. He can investigate an unknown, request help, change the method or postpone with attention to consequences. No option is required merely to confirm an active personal identity. A subsequent decision has its own reason and conditions, still to be named and checked.

The central point is not replacing failure with more pleasant words. An unsuccessful result remains unsuccessful relative to the stated goal. It ceases, however, to be the account's only fact. An attempt remains an attempt, a completed action retains its object and an unknown receives no fabricated explanation. Someone can thereby answer for actual participation without promising complete power over results. Another person receives information on which their own next decision can actually rest.

What this means in practice

Choose one small, safe past undertaking you voluntarily wish to consider. Prefer a simple task without threats, serious harm or a need to determine legal responsibility. Record four brief answers: what you intended, which attempt you made, what you completed and which result you observed. Leave unanswered questions open. Do not fill them with a character judgment or an assumed motive belonging to someone else.

Check the verbs. Writing a message, sending it and arranging something are distinct completions. Installing a part differs from restoring operation. Clarify only the distinction that matters for this case. Avoid dividing every movement merely to produce a detailed record. The exercise keeps one broad assessment from concealing useful information and one narrow success from being reported as the entire promised result.

If another step remains, name it as a separate present decision. This could be a check, clarification, a request for help or stopping. The exercise guarantees no success and requires no repetition. Stop if recording increases pressure; use appropriate support where safety or professional examination is needed. The limited result is a more precise account of one undertaking, rather than a conclusion about someone's will, ability or worth.

Key quotation

> *not on the success of the exertion*

Joseph Haven, *Mental Philosophy*, pp.530–531, the paragraph following the account of executive volition. The RU text gives our own translation of a fragment distinguishing what volition's completeness depends on. Its negative relation is retained; it does not make outcomes irrelevant to goals or other people.

Connections between traditions

Aristotle III.2–3 distinguishes a desired end from chosen participation within an ethics of action. Haven's selected discussion supplies a historical account of motives, choice and executive volition. Their questions can be compared while preserving differences in objects and assumptions. We adopt neither the language of soul and mechanism as contemporary physiology nor old coercion examples as rules for assessing present consent.

Pavel and the door are an authored fictional scene. Unlike the article on moving from intention to beginning, this article chiefly considers the status of participation already attempted or completed relative to results. Causes and authors remain a separate question too: an achieved state does not itself say who did what.

Sources

1. Joseph Haven, *Mental Philosophy: Including the Intellect, Sensibilities, and Will*,1881 edition, discussion of will, selected context pp.521–531, especially530–531. Project Gutenberg45041. Selected primary paragraphs actually read, rather than the entire book; both brief quotations are Haven's own prose.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III.2–3, translated by W.D.Ross. Internet Classics Archive. Selected sections read; only the limited distinction between an end and choice is used. Specific versions retain territorial and editorial rights limits; worldwide freedom is not asserted.

Tags

intention, attempt, action, result, completion, execution, choice, end, Joseph Haven, Aristotle, philosophy of action, history of psychology, description, verification, uncertainty, error, assistance, agreement, revision, stopping, participation, responsibility, conditions, voluntariness, everyday scene, task transfer, limits of knowledge, United Wisdom

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