



Strategy, Intentionality and Success: Four Logics for Explaining Strategic Action

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Abstract

Strategic success is usually associated with having deliberate intentions, prior stated goals and a comprehensively formulated plan for effective execution. This way of thinking is driven by a means–ends logic and underpinned by the cognitivist assumption that conscious thought and consequential reasoning drive effective action: such privileging of thought over action is endemic in strategic theorizing. Our purpose in this paper is to demonstrate the plausibility of other, pre-cognitive logics of strategic action and ‘intention’ as alternative explanatory bases for strategic success. We identify three such logics and their associated forms of intentionality. A ‘logic of practices’ views collectively shared *habitus* rather than conscious cognition/deliberate intention as the basis of effective strategic action. A ‘logic of situation’ emphasizes how situational momentum, tendencies and affordances themselves contain pre-cognitive ‘in-tensional’ impulses that actively elicit appropriate strategic responses. Finally, a ‘logic of potential’ associated with what Friedrich Nietzsche termed ‘will to power’. It is with this fourth logic, we suggest, that strategic intention becomes most effective. In will to power, strategy entails the relentless expanding of degrees of freedom from environmental constraints without presuming cognitive separation from it.

Keywords

agency, future, intention, Nietzsche, strategic decision making, strategy as practice (SAP)

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Introduction: Strategy, Intentionality and Effective Action

Why do we seek recourse to the notion of prior intention to explain strategic success, if not because we believe an organization's survival and flourishing depends on it having first thought through what it wanted to achieve? There has been an abiding belief that, over and above the repetitive grind of day-to-day routines and 'mindless' practical coping actions taken 'on the hoof' by organizational members, an overarching purposefulness and intentionality is needed to actively direct collective efforts and to channel them more effectively towards pre-established, agreed and sought-after ends. Strategic success, as such, is intimately associated with having prior intention, careful planning and the reliance on an instrumental, means–ends logic of rationality in making decisions. Goal setting, consequential reasoning and systematic execution have become essential elements in business school strategy theorizing (March, 2003). Underpinning this mode of thought are cognitivist assumptions that conscious thought and deliberate intention necessarily precede, govern and drive strategic actions (Dreyfus, 1988, p. 99; March, 1972, p. 419); in short, successful organizational strategizing emerges from well-framed deliberate intentions and clear consequential reasoning (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015; Knight et al., 2018; Tsoukas, 2023).

Though still dominant, the identification of deliberate prior intention as a prerequisite for organizational success is not universally accepted. The idea that strategy can inadvertently and *unintentionally* emerge in practice as a 'pattern in a stream of decisions' instead of pre-existing as an intended pre-formulated plan, thanks to the seminal contributions of Mintzberg (1978) and Mintzberg and Waters (1985), has gained some traction, notably in strategy as practice (SAP) theory. Furthermore, there is suggestive evidence of a growing disillusionment with planning, and a strategic willingness to cede to a more open, contingent sense of the

future in which strategists are less concerned with projecting themselves into the future than with attending to how immediate events may, or may not, have strategic resonance (Wenzel et al., 2020). In the wake of this turn toward effects rather than causes, one where strategic actions are those deemed 'consequential for the strategic outcomes, directions, survival and competitive advantage of the firm' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007, p. 8), we might at least question the assumed need for prior strategic intention and the means–ends logic of rationality associated with it. After all, actions having consequences can be inadvertent, be loosely suggestive, or just the result of plain chance. The implication is that deliberate intention and a means–ends logic of action may not be the only way to account for strategic consequence and success (Chia, 2004; Chia & Holt, 2006, 2009; MacKay et al., 2021; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Tsoukas, 2010).

In summary, the field is becoming split between deliberate, individual decision making and non-deliberate, situational views of strategy, with intention being aligned to the former. In this paper we argue that a cognitive understanding of intention ignores the contextual, relational grounding upon which it inevitably rests. By understanding intention as the spur or *urge to act* we argue that the split in the field is not configured by the presence or absence of intention, but *by the location of intentional force*. For many it is firmly centred in conscious, choosing subjects whose actions follows a means–ends logic of consequence (classic cognitive theory); for others it is a looser, intersubjective alignment of habituated tendencies tithed to a logic of prevailing practices (practice theory); and for yet others, it concerns an innate responsiveness to the felt need for environmental alignment and tension reduction following a logic of situation (process theory). To these we add a fourth, where the urge to act emanates from the expressive struggle for experimentation, growth and self-overcoming; one Nietzsche called the 'will to power' and that we conceptualize here as the logic of potential.

As such, in what follows we delineate four logics of strategic action, each aligned to differing, nuanced conceptualizations of intentionality. In doing so, we preserve the intimacy between intentionality and strategy. This is important, because one of the persistent and compelling critiques of the non-deliberate or situational view of strategy is its presumed acceptance of passive, adaptive, weakened forms of agency. Without intentionality, so the critique goes, strategy becomes barely visible, it loses its heft. In our argument intentionality remains throughout, albeit in more nuanced, distributed forms. Indeed, we speculate that in the fourth logic of potential, intentionality intensifies, yielding organizational potential unavailable to those working to cognitivist models that confine strategic intention only to explicit forms of mental representation.

We first discuss the limits to the cognitivist, means–ends logic that continues as orthodoxy in strategy studies, before introducing what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) argued was the real source of coherence and consistency in organizational life: a ‘logic of practices’, a logic which, we argue, is attenuated by a ‘logic of situation’ (Jullien, 1999) as the generative basis for an absorbed and embedded emergent intentionality. Such a framing of effective action extends from a looser form of distributed cognition to a pre-cognitive and distributed understanding of agency and a revised and more nuanced understanding of intentionality. We discuss critically how these logics have been taken up in strategy theorizing, notably in SAP studies. We then pause to consider whether, in admitting context, we have weakened the viability and force of strategic practice to the point where it loses its distinct organizational role as the activity by which any organization assesses the form it has, the form it should be and the form it could become. It is here that we reach for Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept, the ‘will to power’. Instead of intentionality as a pre-existing individual attribute, we suggest it emerges ‘in-tensionally’ through the ongoing (eternally returning) struggle of an embodied, experimental and absorbed ‘will’ seeking appropriate forms of

environmental alignment and fit and hence tension reduction in order to bootstrap itself to higher levels of existence. This coupled with a singular curiosity for how this aligning and ‘fitting in’ might be otherwise. Both aspects: the struggle to attain environmental alignment or fit (from the logics of practices and situation) and the urge to re-evaluate, transform and self-overcome, go to make up what we conceptualize as the ‘logic of potential’. We conclude by arguing that besides a cognitive, ‘means–ends’ logic, it is vital to appreciate how these alternative logics of ‘practices’, ‘situation’ and finally ‘potential’ are always already at work in shaping intentionality and hence strategic outcomes.

Explaining Strategic Action: Cognitivism and the Means–Ends Logic of Rationality

In a provocative critique of the curriculum taught in business schools, James March (2003) lamented the thoughtless emphasis on a means–ends, instrumental-calculative mode of reasoning as the default basis for understanding what motivates human action. March (1972) had three decades earlier noted this cognitivist bias in the preferred ways we explain intelligent action, a bias that unequivocally elevates thought over action. The philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (1988) notes that this ‘cognitivist view of mind’ assumes that our ‘ability to deal with things intelligently is due to our capacity to think about them’ and that this entails the ‘faculty for internal “automatic” symbol manipulation’ (Dreyfus, 1988, p. 100). The result of adherence to this cognitivism is a sustained emphasis on thought over action and on the intellect over the senses as the basis of all intelligent behaviour. Cognitivism underpins the ‘consequentialist theology’ (March, 2003) widely taught in business schools whereby ‘action is seen as choice and choice is seen as driven by anticipations, incentives, and desires’ (p. 205). Implicit in this means–ends logic of rationality is the imperative that conscious thought and cognitive evaluation always

precedes intelligent action (Dreyfus, 1988). The received wisdom is that:

Human beings make choices. If done properly, choices are made by evaluating alternatives in terms of goals. . . The alternative that is most attractive in terms of the goals is chosen. . . Although actual choice may fall short. . . it is an attractive model of how choices should be made. (March, 1972, p. 418)

Built into this instrumental-calculative worldview is the cognitivist belief that we must always think and evaluate before we act, that cognition precedes action, and that theory precedes and guides practice. Allied to this emphasis on intentionality as a property of a thinking agent – a ‘representational intentionality’ (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 287) – is the mechanism of a means–ends logic of causality whereby the starting point is an imagined, desired situation projected onto the world as a goal to be pursued and realized through the execution of a planned and designed intervention (Jullien, 2004, p. 3). The overall aim is to achieve a ‘world-to-mind fit’; action is deemed successful insofar as the result ‘fits’ the agent’s prior conceived intention (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020, p. 125) and meets prespecified conditions of satisfaction (Dreyfus, 2000).

Strategic theory adopts this form of reasoning as its own: cognitive manipulation, causal logic and conscious choice are necessary prerequisites for guiding effective organizational action. Fundamental to much of strategy theorizing is the underlying belief that action should be purposeful and goal driven (March, 1972, p. 419). Explicit, reasoned conditions of satisfaction (or goals) are a prerequisite to instrumental action which then takes its cue in moments of intentional decision making (Hendry, 2000). Strategists consciously evaluate alternatives using means–ends calculations and then act accordingly, reviewing and adjusting along the way, often by way of feedback loops. Salient recent examples come in Rindova and Courtney’s (2020) study of intentions, epistemologies and enactments in shaping and

adapting strategies, in Eklund and Mannor’s (2021) study of strategic attention, or in advocacy of business models allowing organizations to develop superior interdependencies (those that create a tight internal coherence, resilience good market fit, and so on) among activities (Furnari, 2015).

Such studies accept that reasoning is often bounded, that emotions, path-dependent thinking and group pressures all affect decision making, that moral hazards always pertain, notably in relation to the politics and power of vested interests (Davenport & Leitch, 2005; Kaplan, 2011; McNulty and Pettigrew, 1999), that discursive norms will often colour reasoning (Laine & Vaara, 2007), that strategists can display different subjectivities (Dameron & Torset’s, 2013), and that no matter how clear and cogent, strategy is always at risk of what Abdallah and Langley (2014) call a directional drift and even disillusionment. Nevertheless, what we puzzle over is how, despite their often sophisticated awareness of the contingent, socially constructed and bounded condition of strategic agency and decision making, they take a means–ends causal worldview as a priori and representational intentionality as the initiator of the causal chain of events. It seems that in the absence of means–ends, causal reasoning, strategy is not strategy.

It is a commonsense view; one Friedrich Nietzsche associates with a persisting belief in the idea of an intending subject:

That which gives the extraordinary firmness to our belief in causality is not the habit of seeing one occurrence following another but *our inability to interpret events otherwise than as events caused by intentions*. . . it is belief that *every event is a deed, that every deed presupposes a doer*. (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §550, our emphasis)

Strategy studies are predicated largely upon this unquestioned belief in the intending subject as a causal (imperfectly so) force held in a means–ends logic of rationality underpinned by cognitivism. Strategic actions and decisions may be

messy, opaque, ill-mannered, multiple, corralled by social and natural facts and deeply political, but they are still woven through with a red thread of intentional agency originating in a 'doer'.

Recently more nuanced variations of prior intentionality have emerged. Following Joas (2005), one such alternative advocates a 'softer' version of strategic intention; an intention that ostensibly emerges from the interaction between local coping responses and outcomes rather than existing prior to such interaction; intentions 'do not precede action but rather emerge in the action itself' hence 'the means–ends schema is replaced by the concept of "situation" as the primary basic category of action' (MacLean et al., 2015, p. 345). Picking up on emergent intentionality in relation to the development of strategically consequential routines, and following on from Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 967) who maintain that 'ends and means develop co-terminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing', Dittrich and Seidl (2018) concur, arguing that intentionality is 'constituted through action'. They enrich this claim by invoking John Dewey's distinction between immediate 'ends-in-view' which help anchor ongoing immediate action, and the more abstract idea of prior, stipulated 'goals', arguing that it is the former 'that actors have in view when they perform their actions' and which serve as 'directive stimuli to present choice' (Dewey, 1957, p. 211, in Dittrich & Seidl, 2018, p. 9).

The intentional 'doer' (or actor), however, remains. For example, Dittrich and Seidl (2018) write of 'actors foregrounding means, leading them to conceive of new ends-in-view' (p. 4) and of 'updating routine goals' (p. 5) thereby intimating cognitive intervention as crucial to the development of 'emergent intentionality'. Moreover, conscious choice is imputed in deciding on the adjustments to be made, a reckoning that becomes even more apparent when considering the pre-existing stipulations or external goals, like quality or efficiency, by which the continual negotiation of means–ends relations is warranted and explained. Even in an 'ends-in-view' approach, cognition and

conscious assessment are invariably involved in continuously updating goals. The 'ends-in-view' understanding of intentionality requires pre-specifiable 'conditions of satisfaction' (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 288) for the actions involved. Consequently, whether 'prior intention' or 'ends-in-view' are invoked, cognition and representational intentionality are assumed. Likewise, in the case of MacLean et al. (2015, p. 345), although they ostensibly eschew a 'means–ends schema', they nevertheless maintain that '[B]efore actors take action, they interpret the situation that they confront. This interpretation in turn provokes particular ways of dealing with the situation.' This emphasis on 'before' and 'after' shares John Searle's assumption that 'actions. . . are causal and intentional transactions between mind and world' (Searle, 1983, p. 130, implying that a mental force 'confronts' a world through representation, and is presupposed as somehow authoring action). Dreyfus (2000, p. 288) points out, in his critique of Searle's intentionality, that 'propositional representation' presumes the existence of a prespecified end. So, even in the case of emergent intentionality or intention in action, a 'representational intentionality' as opposed to an absorbed 'motor intentionality' (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 293) is being invoked: action must always be directed *towards* something pre-thought or pre-interpreted and hence it is ultimately cognition based (see Table 1). The sequence of intention, conception and execution associated with a means–ends logic remains fundamental in understanding the efficacy of action (Jullien, 2004). Cognitivism, whether in its classic version of an autonomous individual as intentional agent relying on symbolic representations and consequential reasoning to ensure a 'world-to-mind fit', or in its more subtle, emergent, enacted variations, is what accounts for the strategic consistency of actions.

Explaining Strategic Action: A Logic of Practices

In response to this prevailing or implied cognitivism, and to address the concerns associated

Table 1. A Means–ends Logic of Rationality.

Attribute	Implication
Platonic/Aristotelian <i>cognitivism</i> (Dreyfus, 1988; March, 1972): formal logic, reason and rationality provide the basis for understanding intelligent action	Thinking always precede action; theory drives practice
Primacy of discrete, autonomous individual; the <i>intentional agent</i> (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020)	Purposefulness and deliberate intention
<i>Representational intentionality</i> (Dreyfus, 2000) involving the pre-specification of conditions of satisfaction for actions taken	Goal setting, planning and systematic execution to achieve pre-specified outcome
'Consequentialist theology'; instrumental-calculative consequential reasoning (March, 2003)	Actions motivated by anticipations, incentives, desires
Desire to achieve a 'world-to-mind fit' (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020); projecting our idealized 'model' onto the world and forcibly making it fit our needs (Jullien, 2004)	Actions are deliberate transactions between 'mind and world' (Searle, 1983) guided by articulated imperatives, rules, routines and heuristics to make the world bend to our needs
Observed patterned consistency of action attributable to clearly specified goals, explicit choices made and expectations of outcomes (March, 1972; 2003)	Strict adherence to goals and planning imperatives in execution
Emergent intentionality, intention-in-action, ends-in-view (Dittrich & Seidl, 2018; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Joas, 2005; MacLean et al., 2015; Searle, 1983)	Interaction and feedback between situation and responsive action guided by ongoing cognitive assessment

with its dominance, we might ask whether 'strategic' action can occur without conscious intention and without it being driven by 'anticipations, incentives, and desires' (March, 1972, p. 419; 2003, p. 205)? Can and should the incipient cognitivism be done away with, or at least augmented? For March, from the perspective of human history, cognitivist assumptions of 'purpose, consistency, and rationality are relatively new' and the seemingly obvious description that strategic 'goals come first, and action comes later is frequently radically wrong' (March, 1972, p. 420). The supposition is that in allying itself to cognitivism and an associated means–end logic, strategy theory is limiting its own potential to reveal the true nature of intentionality and its relationship with strategy: it is voluntarily hobbling itself.

To unhobble itself, we might contemplate the possibility that it is often action itself that first triggers our attention and that this is then subsequently followed by the need for explanation and causal attribution. In many instances of everyday life, it is often unguided, experimental action that reveals the 'latent' potential

in circumstances and by so doing forces us to create fresh 'images that break new ground' (Cooper, 1976, p. 1002) since we so 'abhor a void'. Conceptual effort often follows unmediated action. For March (1972) and Cooper (1976), any action that is preceded or directed by conscious thought is an exceptional phenomenon emerging from a far more pervasive and ontologically prior condition of being thrown into an already existing, intricate nexus of relations sedimented as tradition, norms, habits and circumstance. In the main, absorbed coping responses take place spontaneously in situ, relying on practice-acquired dispositions and a finely-honed, embodied attunement to situational solicitations to shape its form. It is this kind of absorbed in situ action that is found, for example, in Burke and Woolf's (2020) ethnographic study of the de novo development and skilful use of strategy tools (actionable forms of knowledge) finding unscripted, ambiguous and unpredicted uses that could in no way be anticipated. Similarly, Hadjimichael and Tsoukas (2023) find actions with strategic con-

sequences arising from habituated and yet caring improvisational skill.

It is the unmediated, creative coping act then that sets in train the emergence of conditions of satisfaction that can subsequently be construed as goals, a process that Mintzberg and Waters (1985) made much of when they too suggested that strategic decisions emerged from historically sedimented milieux of embodied and memorized habits and routines that typically pass without notice. Without this situational soil, so to speak, the intentional force of a decision would wither as surely as a seedling without nutrients or light.

In strategy theorizing, this equivalence between act and thought has been the subject of sustained attention in the SAP field. Yet as Jarzabkowski et al. (2021) concede, even here the emphasis has often remained on those aspects of practice explicitly identified as having strategic consequences. Though much has been done to acknowledge and reveal the situated, social and material milieu in which strategy is formed, SAP studies often frame their analyses on the assumption that strategy involves the connection of articulated intentions to envisaged consequences, and hence a means–ends consequentialist logic remains by implication. Speculating on how to loosen or lose this framing, Jarzabkowski et al., (2021) call for more studies of vaguely consequential actions whose strategic effects are hazy, hesitant and partial, or of those actions that are so mundane that there is no apparent strategic consequence but which nevertheless, because of rich ethnographic study, can retrospectively be identified as such (Jarzabkowski et al., 2015). By so doing, they are acknowledging William James' (1909/1996, p. 277) suggestion that research might lie flat in the 'belly of experience, in the very thick of its sand and gravel' and to adopt a 'worm's eye' to see the fine detail of unfolding events and to be alerted to the propensity and momentum of things, those 'unowned' (Rescher, 1996, p. 42) happenings regularly occurring in the mundane.

This turn of emphasis emerges from a growing awareness that strategy is woven into and

emerges from a nexus of practices within which the agentic subject is not an autonomous individual but just one of many 'causal' forces – a 'knot in the middle of a fishing net' (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020, p. 123) – and hence is, itself, as much an effect as an instigator of processes. Nayak et al. (2020), for example, make a strong case for understanding such absorbed local sensitivity to minute differences and socially transmitted coping capabilities as the non-cognitive micro-foundations of strategic capabilities. Likewise, MacKay et al. (2021, p. 1354) show how Ikea's strategy emerged from the deeper socio-cultural sensibilities and practices of Småland, with its egalitarian, hard-working and resourceful peasant culture.

Essentially, this 'decentering' of agency and hence of intention forms the thrust of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977/2002) outline of a 'logic of practice' whose explanatory frame has been seminal in inspiring the 'practice turn' in social theory (Schatzki, 2001) and that has since been incorporated variously into the SAP literature (Chia, 2004; Nicolini, 2012; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). In *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu points out that there is 'a reason immanent in practices themselves, whose "origins" lie neither in the "decisions" of reason. . . nor in the determinations of mechanisms external to and superior to agents' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 50). Neither an individual agent's deliberate intention nor some external superstructure standing over the actor is adequate in explaining the observed consistency of response taken in any situation. Rather, practices themselves have an internal 'logic which is not that of the logician' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 86). Practices are supra-individual in that they contain a logical responsiveness of their own guiding each coping act so that individuals themselves are only 'a more or less integrated sub pattern of (such) social practices' (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 96). Consequently, it is practices that 'do' us rather than us doing practices. Practices are 'pre-reflective rather than conscious. . . durable though adaptive, reproductive though generative and inventive, and . . . transposable to others' (Swartz, 1997, p. 101). They imply an

‘absorbed intentionality’ that pre-exists ‘representational intentionality’ (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 61) and they provide the non-cognitive micro foundations for the development of strategic capabilities (Nayak et al., 2020).

The reality is that much of our understanding of the world is ‘pre-ontological’; we ‘dwell in the equipment, practices and concerns’ often without ‘noticing them or trying to spell them out’ (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 90). As such, our everyday responses are not driven so much by cognitively represented principles, rules, values, beliefs, or even heuristics, but simply by embodied and internalized coping skills and habituated practices. Dreyfus (1991) draws on Bourdieu’s (1977/2002; 1990) work on the logic of practice in social life, to show how internalized predispositions acquired through the unconscious transmission of social practices can well account for skilled consistency in responses that may retrospectively be considered ‘strategic’ even if there are no explicit strategic plans or intentions (Nayak et al., 2020).

Bourdieu (1977/2002; 1990) identifies *habitus* as that generative predisposition able to orchestrate actions to achieve a satisfactory and appropriate outcome without any reliance on deliberate intention. For Bourdieu, *habitus* well explains the series of ‘moves’ that are ‘organized as strategies without being the product of a strategic intention’ (Bourdieu, 1977/2002, p. 73). *Habitus* contains a strategy-generating impulse even though it does not consciously aim ‘at ends or an expressed mastery of . . . operations’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). *Habitus* helps account for how a predictable, patterned consistency of actions can emerge inadvertently without recourse to cognitivism, intentionality, or a means–ends logic of rationality. Applied to strategy, we might invoke Dreyfus’s distinction between *purposive* and *purposeful*; activity ‘can be purposive without the actor having a purpose in mind’ (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 93). Practical intelligence, generic capabilities and even skills development do not require the prior presence of directing images (Cooper, 1976); there may be a ‘detectable *purposiveness* in our

actions’ even though there is no evidence of a consciously formulated ‘*purposeful* plan of action’ (Chia & Holt, 2009, p. 109, emphasis original). In purposive coping the actor is ‘solicited by the situation to perform a series of movements that feel(s) appropriate without the agent needing in any way to anticipate what would count as success’ (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 294). Appropriateness of response, not the material consequence of it (March, 2003, p. 206), guides purposive action. This distinction provides a compelling answer to the puzzle posed by Jarzabkowski et al., (2021) ‘It’s practice. but is it strategy?’ The answer is emphatically a ‘yes’. Strategy is immanent and contained in shared habituated practices. It is ‘strategy-in-practices’ (Chia & MacKay, 2023; MacKay et al., 2021).

Being ‘in practices’, what is being (strategically) achieved in such absorbed ongoing coping is not ‘success’ understood in means–ends terms, whether pre-specified or otherwise, but rather a reduction in the ‘sense of deviation from a satisfactory gestalt’; ongoing adjustments to achieve a ‘fit’ happens ‘without the agent knowing what that satisfactory gestalt will be like in advance of achieving it’ (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 293). Here, as Dreyfus (2002, p. 367) remarks, ‘intelligent behaviour, learning, and skilful action, can be described and explained without recourse to mind or brain representations’. Eschewing the cognitivist imperative, he draws on Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) concept of the ‘intentional arc’ to show how, in practice and without deliberate intention, an agent’s body, in states of absorbed coping, responds to circumstances by skilfully adjusting itself. For Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus, this kind of absorbed, intelligent coping, called ‘motor intentionality’, is more basic than the ‘representational intentionality’ (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 287) associated with cognitivism and the means–ends logic of rationality. In motor intentionality, ‘as the active body acquires skills, those skills are “stored”, not as representations in the mind, but as dispositions to respond to the solicitations of situations in the world’ (Dreyfus, 2002, p. 367) and this is how satisfactory

Table 2. A Logic of Practices.

Attribute	Implication
Action is unthinkingly shaped/guided by social-cultural practices containing a <i>habitus</i> or <i>modus operandi</i> (Bourdieu, 1990)	Practices have their own internal 'logic' which is not that of the logician; they do not respond to a 'means–ends' logic
Individuals are themselves a 'knot' in a network of practice relations (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020)	Intentions are felt 'in-tensions'; pre-cognitive and distributed through relationships
Coping action is embodied, embedded absorbed and purposive (Dreyfus, 1991)	Actions directed towards achieving <i>appropriate fit/alignment</i> and <i>tension reduction</i> not pre-specified 'ends' or conditions of success
Habituated <i>purposive</i> responsiveness that may entail avoidance or a 'moving away from' rather than 'moving towards' (Jullien, 1999)	Open-endedness of response implies outcome cannot be pre-defined in means–ends terms
Practices are 'pre-ontological'; we dwell in them (Dreyfus, 1991)	Practices 'do' us rather than us 'doing' practices; we are our practices
<i>Motor intentionality</i> : direct embodied responsiveness to achieve 'maximal grip' on the world (Dreyfus, 2000; 2002; Merleau-Ponty, 1962)	Skilful creation of an 'intentional arc' to realize a 'satisfactory gestalt'
<i>Habitus</i> contain 'strategies without being the product of a strategic intention' (Bourdieu, 1977/2002).	It helps account for predictable, patterned consistency of actions without 'an expressed mastery of operations' (Bourdieu, 1990)

outcomes are realized non-deliberately through this internalized responsiveness rather than deliberate and prior intention. Cognitive representation and conscious intention are therefore not assumed in 'embedded, absorbed and embodied' coping nor do they presume the primacy of 'individual, agential, and rational, human beings' (Gehrman & Schwenkler, 2020, p. 123).

The agent 'is solicited by the situation to perform a series of movements that feel appropriate' (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 294) in terms of fit and alignment, without knowing in advance what 'success' means as, for example, in Kornberger's (2017) argument that effective strategic action emerges from successfully acknowledging and coping with prevailing practices of valuation. This distinction between two kinds of satisfaction, *appropriate fit/alignment* and *success*, is crucial in distinguishing absorbed coping actions from any form of cognitive intentionality. In the former case, notwithstanding the inability to know in advance any satisfactory end state, what does transpire from appropriate coping actions are discernible 'conditions of

improvement' involving 'lowered tensions' and the realizing of a satisfactory 'equilibrium' between agent and circumstance (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 296). No pre-specifiable 'conditions of satisfaction' (Dreyfus, 2000, p. 288) are presumed in this form of absorbed coping; intention is simply a function of reducing that which is ostensibly 'in-tension'!

In effect, as Dreyfus (2000, p. 302) points out, in absorbed coping the subject is 'invited' to enact a series of movements in response to the 'solicitations of the environment in which the agent is inextricably embedded'. It is the 'calling' of practices that elicits our appropriate response and instead of 'ends', whether these are general or more immediately pragmatic, it is the absorbing and dispersal of 'tension' that confers coherence and consistency to action (see Table 2). There is a direct responsiveness whereby 'one's activity is completely geared into the demands of the situation' (Dreyfus, 2014, p. 81). Indeed, as Gehrman and Schwenkler (2020, p. 126) put it, 'it is almost as if the world causes me to act by eliciting response, than for attributing causality to me'.

Dreyfus (2014, p. 241) describes the condition as maximizing grip:

. . .finite, involved, embodied coping beings are constantly ‘motivated’ to move to achieve the best possible grip on the world. Merleau-Ponty is clear that, for this movement toward maximal grip to take place, one does not need a representation of a goal. Rather, acting is experienced as a steady flow of skillful activity in response to one’s sense of the situation. . .When one senses a deviation from the optimal body-environment gestalt one’s activity tends to take one closer to an optimal body-environment relationship that relieves the ‘tension’.

What prompts responsive action, therefore, is not ‘goals’ but *tension reduction*. From this embodied and embedded ‘logic of practices’, intentional action is more about appropriate action directed towards dispersing tension and establishing fit, alignment and hence equilibrium with the circumstances encountered. This is because agents themselves are simply regarded as integrated/integrative sub-patterns, knots in a network of practices. They regularly act purposively in situ guided by *habitus* rather than cognitive representations. A ‘motor intentionality’ directs such embodied responsiveness, gives it patterned consistency in order to achieve ‘maximal grip’ on the world and thus to attain a ‘satisfactory gestalt’.

Explaining Strategic Action: A Logic of Situation

Prompted by this acknowledgement of the strategic force immanent in *habitus* and hence purposive action, we are now in a better position to contemplate a wider ‘spectrum of intentionality’ (Feldman, 2016, p. 16) including that intentionality may be an emergent phenomenon arising from absorbed coping. Though many SAP studies still invoke a language of ends or goals, their contextual breadth begins to bring the ubiquitous intention–consequence couplet into question. In SAP (and also among proponents of emergent intentionality) there is an interest in situational sensitivity, and in proposing a ‘logic of situation’ we reach further still into context. Rather than situate intention in

practices alone, a situational logic gets through and behind the teleofactive structures and actions of practices, mundane or otherwise. To situate intention in social practices is not the whole story. Recalling Nietzsche (1888/1968, §689), who suggested ‘in postulating an agent which produces the action, we have merely hypothesized the action all over again’, we might ask the same question of practices. Is practice its own context, or is there something wider that might relate to a logic of ‘situation’?

A similar question is being asked in current cognitivist thinking. The mental, removed, means–end computational idea of cognition presented in our first logic gives way to situationally sensitive versions of embodied, emplaced, extended and enacted cognition (Chemero 2011). Here cognition is an interacting merger of mental impulses and bodily movements, and embodiment that is, in turn, embedded in material and social structures Yamauchi & Hiramoto (2020). Dreyfus, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, is one such advocate of a more sophisticated idea of cognition, which has the consciousness of mind and mental experience inextricably bound to this broader scaffolding. So much so that consciousness is nothing without bodily interactions (it is enacted) and so, potentially, extending the mind across multiple bodies and settings (as when, for example, technology begins to structure how bodies interact – scrolling on screens, say – which in turn invokes what Hayles (2017, p. 10) calls non-conscious cognition. Clark (2008, p. 217) likens this to a blooming of cognition, pushing it outwards into practices. Hayles and Clark still see cognition as primary, however, assigning the mind the function of a controller of, technologically mediated action, forming an extended set of relations between nature and culture, forever capable of responding to and driving new actions in the environment. The objects are prostheses, and structures offering new relational possibilities. Thought, in other words, is extended into hardware and code, which supersedes the brain, artificially enhancing it to solve ever-growing problems.

Yet in some non-western ways of thinking, the intentional direction is reversed. Rather than

a controlling mind, it is posited that situations themselves contain propensities, urgencies and imperatives that impel action. For example, in his study of Chinese *habitus* in *The Propensity of Things*, the sinologist Francois Jullien (1999, p. 14) suggests that what is often overlooked in the West is the existence of ‘an inherent potentiality at work in configurations’ of situations. Within situations, the organizing impulse spontaneously emerges from what Tsing, quoting a Japanese scientist studying the matsutake mushrooms, called ‘unintentional cultivation’. Though humans cannot grow the matsutake, the mushroom is more likely to appear in places (unintentionally) disturbed by human activity. ‘Indeed,’ continues Tsing (2015, p. 154):

one could say that pines, matsutake, and humans all cultivate each other unintentionally. They make each other’s world-making projects possible. This idiom has allowed me to consider how landscapes more generally are products of unintentional design, that is, the overlapping world making activities of many agents, human and not human. The design is clear in the landscape’s ecosystem. But none of the agents have planned this effect. Humans join others in making landscapes of unintentional design.

Every situation/set of circumstance offers genuine latent potential in the form of ‘a particular deployment or arrangement of things to be relied on and worked to one’s advantage’ (Jullien, 1999, p. 15). But the ‘*propensity* emanating from that particular configuration of reality’ (p. 15) must first be recognized as offering such possibilities because it lies beyond explicit practices. In other words, unfolding situations themselves contain internal momentum, urgencies and tendencies that, if carefully discerned and appropriately followed, can be effectively channelled to advantage. It is this awareness that situations themselves are not passive, that they contain ‘unowned’ forces of change (Rescher, 1996, p. 42) that must be acknowledged, that leads to an oriental reticence for acting prematurely; often mistakenly construed as an undesirable passivity or inaction. In the oriental predisposition, timing and

timeliness of intervention are critical considerations. Again, there are hints of this acknowledgement in strategy theorizing, for example in Joas’s (2005, p. 60) insistence, echoed by MacLean et al. (2015), that the ‘situation is *constitutive* of action’. Yet the resonance of this insight remains underexplored, not least because it imperils the centrality of human agency.

Jullien (2004) notes that, in contrast to Western thought, Chinese philosophy openly acknowledges how forces shaping outcomes originate not so much from human initiative or design but from the natural disposition of things themselves; a logic of *shi* – or what we call ‘logic of situation’. The logic of situation contains embedded imperatives that cannot be ignored when seeking satisfactory outcomes. This logic disturbs the ‘relational category between discrete things such as means to ends, or . . . of cause to effect’ (Jullien, 1999, p. 17). Awareness of such situational propensities and the affordances and possibilities they proffer is what led the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu to proclaim strategic efficacy in even mundane acts, such as Cook Ting’s account of rendering oxen:

What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. . . now – now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So, I never touch the smallest ligaments or tendons, much less a joint. . . there are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room – more than enough for the blade to play about it. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it came from the grindstone. (Chuang Tzu, 1968, pp. 50–51)

Instead of thinking about cutting oxen with a knife in instrumental means–ends terms comes an attentiveness to immediate occurrence in which forms and object are understood not as

separate things, but as modulations organizing one another and compelling fit or alignment. They can only be discerned in practice as ‘this’ or ‘that’ by abstract moves in language that frame, and so limit, their nature; in being made present as techniques, roles, goals and so on they are also receding.

Hence, following Jullien, we notice how potential order and organization exist prior even to practice, notably through a heightened ecological attunement to the internal ‘logic of a situation’. This logic is apprehended when an entitative epistemology of things yields to a relational epistemology. A chair, for example, invites the human by emulating its form, beckoning the body with the prospect of rest, yet also the promise of alternate combinations, eliciting inventiveness through reciprocal but unspoken exchange (Cooper, 2014, p. 596).

The ecological psychologist J. J. Gibson calls these detectable situational reciprocities ‘affordances’. Affordances are the milieu of action possibilities an environment or situation proffers or furnishes for an active, immersed organism (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). They are properties of things or situations taken in relation to immediate needs: a fruit says, “Eat me”, water says “Drink me”, a handle says “grasp me” (Koffka, 1935, p. 7). There is a ‘demand character’ or an ‘invitation character’ (Kurt Lewin, in Brown, 1929) about the extant environment or situation which is experienced, acknowledged and expressed through practices, but which cannot be reduced to it. This is because affordances are not universal; what affords relief of hunger for a bird will not afford relief for a human. Water affords drinking but does not afford respiration. Its surface affords support to some small insects, but not to humans. So, affordances are a specific combination of properties of a situation taken in relation to the needs, abilities and detection capabilities of a subject. This ability to detect the range and mutability of affordances is predicated upon the subject’s active perceptual learning not just of practices demands, but the situational possibilities and limits.

It is commonly believed that we learn to perceive. Gibson and Gibson (1955), however, insist that we rather perceive to learn! For them, perception is not about conceptually ‘enriching previously meagre sensations’ (Gibson & Gibson, 1955, p. 34). Rather, it is a refining process of ‘differentiating previously vague impressions’; using the senses rather than the intellect (it is more semiotic than semantic). Detection of such finely nuanced differences involves the capacity for close reading the ‘signs’ of nature and registering those ‘higher order invariants’ (Charles, 2017, p. 203) existing in natural patterns of formation that can offer useful footholds or anchoring points for effective intervening action.

The detected higher-order invariants serve to guide action along the grain of ‘least resistance’ thereby enabling conservation of energy and economy of effort in realizing a desired outcome, as exemplified by Cook Ting. In this way, through economizing effort, the human species has been able to strategically bootstrap itself into higher levels of existence and to expand its degrees of freedom which always remain distributed within environmental constraints (Sahlins & Service, 1988). What we call ‘skill’ then entails both the practised capacity to deploy established practices effectively coupled with the necessary perceptual sensitivity for detecting nuanced differences among situations and to then intervene in a timely and proportionate way to generate the desired effect with the minimum expenditure of energy incurred (see Table 3 below).

Given its emphasis on environments of felt materiality, the logic of situation does not end with this feeling of order. What is also felt is what Henri Bergson (1911/1998) in *Creative Evolution* suggested was the innate evolutionary strivings of a species to overcome the constraints of its natural environment and thus to increase its degrees of freedom through attaining a higher level of integration and greater all-round adaptability (Sahlins & Service, 1988, p. 23). Rather than deliberate intentionality, strategy emerges as an external manifestation of an inner impulse or life force; an *elan vital*

Table 3. A Logic of Situation.

Attribute	Implication
Every situational configuration describes momentum and internal tendencies that 'solicit' response from an agent immersed in it (Jullien, 1999); a potential 'calling' us to act accordingly	An 'education of attention' and sensitive attunement to momentum and tendencies needed
Acknowledgement of primary 'unowned' change forces (Rescher, 1996); a logic of 'shi' always at work (Jullien, 1999) containing its own action imperatives	Patience, a biding of one's time, a disciplined attentiveness to when to make a move
Situational propensities create 'affordances'. These are action possibilities an environment or situation proffers to an active organism immersed in it (Gibson, 1979, p. 127)	They are properties of situations taken in relation to immediate attributes, capabilities, needs; they 'invite' a response (Kurt Lewin, in Brown, 1929)
<i>Elan vital</i> : the primitive impulse to survive or grow in situation-specific circumstances to achieve 'snuggle fit' and to expand degrees of freedom (Bergson, 1911/1998)	Through humility. . .insinuating, bending and obeying the situational forces impinging on it and 'consenting' to conform to their demands
Thermodynamic achievement; an inventive passage from lower to higher accumulation and concentration of energy (Sahlins & Service, 1988)	Possibility and potential have biological origins

(Bergson, 1911/1998) that passes like a current from one individual of a species to another in each moment-to-moment instance of creative adaptation. Overcoming the resistance of inert matter is the main strategic preoccupation of all of evolutionary life and it can only succeed 'by dint of humility, by making itself very small and very insinuating, bending to physical and chemical forces, consenting even to go a part of the way with them' (Bergson, 1911/1998, p. 98) in order to draw it 'little by little' into its own ambit. *To overcome, one must first learn to succumb.*

Bergson's 'drawing in' is in no way the simple 'realization of a plan' since a plan 'is represented. . .before its realization' (Bergson, 1911/1998, p. 103). Rather, evolutionary overcoming is 'creation unceasingly renewed, it creates as it goes on. . .its future overflows its present' (p. 103). *Elan vital* manifests itself in the form of a milieu of inventive yet immersive responses initiated continually by individuals who, in negotiating environmental constraints by accumulating and concentrating energy, might also advance limited forms of autonomy

(Sahlins & Service, 1988, pp. 21–22). *Elan vital* touches on a 'thermodynamic achievement' that lies beyond, or behind, the realization of distinction within any one human practice. It evokes a generic capacity for effectively harnessing available energy from the environment and then using this to build and maintain sensitive and complex structures whose variety enhances and refines appropriate coping responses.

From this 'logic of situation', every situational configuration is permeated by 'unowned' forces of change eliciting appropriate and timely response. Economy of effort is key to the detection of situational tendencies. Disciplined attentiveness is required to identify 'affordances' so that evolutionary life forces can capitalize on the possibilities proffered to expand degrees of freedom from within environmental constraints.

Explaining Strategic Action: A Logic of Potential

To recap, our narrative has argued that any understanding of intentionality cannot be solely

assigned to means–ends reasoning. Indeed, to do so is to subsume inquiry with a philosophical prejudice for an internal, originating mind set askance from the world ‘out there’. By introducing the purposiveness of action predicated upon a logic of practice, and *elan vital* emerging from a logic of situation, we have begun to extend the conceptualization of intentionality in strategy studies. It is no longer a debate between advocates of intended and unintended consequences, but of apprehending and unpicking the very nature of intentionality itself.

In suggesting how intentionality is understood through these two alternative logics, however, we are exposed to the criticism that in admitting the force of context (first as practices, then as wider environmental situation) we dilute the agency in strategy, if by strategy we mean the deliberate and considered struggle to create good organizational forms. If intention is subservient to, and emerges from, context, then strategy risks becoming little more than operational adaptation. The room for discretion, distinction and decision become confined to the adoption of crafty tactics or mimetic nous. Yet if strategy is the organized pursuit of influencing events to bring about a better state of affairs, then we are dealing with the future, not the present environment. The future, as Shackle reminded us, does not exist, it is radically open, and while it is simplistic to reduce it to a vacuum abhorred by rational human agency, there is surely room for subjective nudging, for individual expression, for the pursuit of imagined alternatives (Wenzel et al., 2020).

In wrestling with this criticism, we revert to Nietzsche for whom understanding intentionality as a life force required the admission of, but not submission to, both habituated tradition and environmental forces (Nietzsche, 1887/2001, §112; Poellner, 2013, pp. 678–679). Nietzsche’s way through was to propose ‘will’. He begins by acknowledging that by proposing the will he is at risk of reverting to the representations of, and belief in, an inner mind directing itself toward an outer world, a representation that work in acknowledging the force of both practice and environment has done much to dispel.

These representations are seductive, they are a deception to which we are all phenomenally prone, including Nietzsche himself as he admits. Our experience of an inner voice and our sense of isolation has us posit a behind-the-scenes, unifying intelligence (the interpreter behind the interpretations) through whose freedom (whether cast through reason or belief) the aporia of experience can be resolved, or absolved, but only by turning one’s back on the world and looking inwards. Based on this ordinary experience, Nietzsche identifies a common impulse to invoke an inner mind as a cause of outer events. So engrained has this mentalism become that humans have introduced cause into the world as a generality. It is not just humans that cause things to occur, but that all occurrence is caused. It is a bewitching move that has concealed what is a far more complex, ecologically rich experiential condition than causal reasoning can ever allow for (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §477).

To dispel its influence, Nietzsche’s own trick was to loosen the phenomenological hold of an inner mind in favour of an evaluating will. As Poellner (2013, p. 684) elaborates, in part this evaluating will is equivalent to what we have already spoken of as *elan vital*: its evaluative distinction emerges, first, from a situational awareness of a world that Nietzsche (1888/1968, §1067) likens to: ‘a monster of energy, without beginning, without end: a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself’. The will senses the world as it is, indifferent to, yet available for human evaluation, as it too, in its bodily ways, is energy that transforms itself.

Second comes the disciplined capacity to remember, recall and learn from the successive attempts at attunement. This learning is not limited to acquiring skills in situational engagement (which is where Dreyfus might take us, i.e. we become better at surviving in our immediate environment, we flourish as embedded experts), but extends to a willingness to continually transform, or overcome, the comforts we feel we have attained. No truth, no routine, no

value, no relational sensitivity is good enough to survive their successive applications in a world of accident and fearful chance. The will-ingness begins in nihilism, a critical awareness not only that truth and belief emerge from a felt need for a narrow, abbreviated world, but that these certainties are nothing more than the local efforts of those who have unlearned modesty and who commit to *the* interpretation rather than accepting the multiplicity of all things, including the multiplicity of the subject, whether human or organizational (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §5, §27).

Yet it does not end with nihilism. Rather, the will reorients itself towards what is untimely and untried: in other words, it originates. Nietzsche admitted his concept of will was conceived under the genealogical influence of Immanuel Kant. Under the influence of Kantian philosophy, the intentional force of transforming will has lain with the process of critique. By critique Kant meant the distancing move that characterizes the development of enlarged, consistent and unprejudiced thinking that emerges from examining an existing situation from the imagined perspective of others (Scherer & Neesham, 2022). In the context of strategy, for example, critique would require strategists to examine how they might view their firm were they looking from the perspective of another firm, or from the perspective of a smaller organizational form like a team, or a larger one, such as a market regulator, all the while imagining how they might act differently. In the wake of this thoughtful, imaginative effort, an organization becomes sufficiently individuated and distinct to claim that its life is somehow subject to its own direction (Brandom, 1994).

For Kant, not only is action predicated on and warranted by an idea (otherwise it is just base instinct or intuition), but the idea, if it is good, tends toward having a universal normative force. We act reasonably (and critically) when the answer to the question ‘What should I do?’ is determined by considering ‘What should anyone do?’ (Lingis, 1998, p. 211). It is at this juncture that Nietzsche takes issue with Kant. Nietzsche’s

(1887/2014, §18) will to power keeps the spirit of critique but drops the use of generalizing yardsticks, such as the moral principles by which critical subjects become hostile towards themselves, notably their ‘animal’ body, emotion and desire. These yardsticks stiffen the human person into a frigid ideal. Rather than considering ‘What should. . .’, the will is provoked into asking, ‘What can. . .’. In the provocation ‘What is possible here?’ ‘will to power’ is beginning from the ground up, and working its way instinctually into distinction through a sustained effort of continually willing itself anew to transgress. There is no sense of prior goal, or mental representation of an ideal state, or of vision. Instead comes the struggle to experience yet more by refusing to be satisfied by attainments, and being willing to start out again. It is the combination of these two aspects – nihilism and thinking oneself anew – that Nietzsche (1888/1968, §518; §689) designates: ‘will to power’.

In refusing itself the comforts of a grounding, the will also refuses a ground to the objects upon which its force has effects, indeed neither subject nor object have distinction other than that which is being continually evaluated in their relating; what was once regarded as a fixed being is now a force of becoming (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §552). The subject does not, then, meet objects of the world as though in confrontation, or assertion, but in terms of potential, its own included. The only goal is the discovery and realization of its potential for self-transformation, an experience which, if pursued, pulls others in by dint of animated exemplification. This is what Bergson (1911/1998), alluded to when he insisted that by ‘consenting. . .to go a part of the way’, the will draws others ‘little by little’ to itself. A will that assumes itself to be fixed, and its role to be the preservation of its unity (expending energy to resist outside incursion) is a skewed or false form of willing. False willing is predicated on a sense of doubt that is mollified by assuming the world to be nothing more than a calculable coherence of forces over which a reasoning will can effect a directed influence whose

measurement (as performance) can secure the affirmation of others. In strategic terms, false willing is an expression of command and control warranted by logics of efficiency and effectiveness. It is a negative power that is adapted to, and derived, from organizational entities that presume themselves in competition for the control of assets with which to protect their presumed unity as subjects free to choose (i.e. freed, because removed, from nature).

Against this, suggests Golomb (2013, pp. 537–539), Nietzsche proposes an affirmative, curious, experimenting will that creates and gives over from itself to others, without any expectation of recompense, and free from the anxiety of wanting to preserve a fixed identity. Rather than submit to the need to subsume life under the regularity of categories, it is a will that allows the different voices in, that copes with the clamour, that ‘stays with the trouble’ (to invoke Donna Haraway’s (2016) pithy phrase). The trouble is that where provocation and creativity are found, it is where an experimenting, affirmative will holds itself (but not others) under a form of felt command directed from and to itself. The command it issues is ‘I can’: that is, if it is to will experience, rather than be its subject, it calls itself out of the flow of situational affordances to attend to the quality of its own situational skill and attempts at finding grip and fit; its *elan vital* itself becomes an object of curiosity and hence of potential because in the very act of attending to how it finds grip it considers the contrary. This consideration of the contrary has no yardstick, it only has itself. As Nietzsche (1888/1968, §471) observes: ‘An instrument cannot criticize its own suitability: the intellect cannot determine its own limitations, nor can it determine whether it is well-constituted or ill-constituted.’ But it can think and act differently, it can take life on, rather than just grow (becoming a bigger version of itself). It is a maturity that arises from the embodied struggle to overcome the state in which it finds itself. Though in language the will carries a pronoun, ‘it’ is nothing distinct from this struggle, there is no entity called the will, which then acts, there is just willing:

My proposition is: that the will of psychology hitherto is an unjustified generalization, that this will does not exist at all that instead of grasping the idea of the development of one definite will into many forms, one has eliminated the character of the will by subtracting from it its content, its ‘whither?’ (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §692)

The question mark expresses its power: the will affirms itself through its curiosity in becoming more, touching more, being alongside more, than it currently is. Power is experienced by discovering new places of operation, rather than asserting itself through an already calculated set of positions by which to set itself against others which it regards as occupational rivals. The affirmative will in which Nietzsche is intensely interested is more evanescent than it is persistent. In being alive it is, ipso facto, a thing that doesn’t realize or survive as a fixed state. It lives within the event of its own affirmative expression to becoming. The will cannot even be treated as one might treat a genetic trait such as eye colour. To the extent that it lives, and lives actively, the affirmative will to power speaks of fragilities, it morphs, disintegrates and reassembles as it works its way into the possibilities to which it is exposed:

Life is not adaptation of internal to external conditions, but the will to power, which, proceeding from these internal conditions, subjects more and more of the ‘external’ world to its control and incorporates it into itself. (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §681)

The incorporation changes its nature, ‘it’ is always becoming something else, this is its power, over itself, to start anew.

It is not the realization of goals or objectives, but the feeling of them being formed and formed anew, that is encapsulated in the will to power, and what we call the ‘logic of potential’. Will becomes a desire for growth, not in terms of material size and possession – but as an encounter with, and overcoming of, what thwarts a living capacity for transformation (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §663). For the will: ‘the sole reality is the desire to become stronger by

Table 4. A Logic of Potential.

Attribute	Implication
Situations elicit certain adaptive responses, but are also encountered as indifferent, cold	Sensitive attunement is tempered by sense of self-reliance
The will impels itself into an open future, inquiring into potential rather than seeking certainty	Intentionality has no direction, it is topological, not metrical
False will – preserving unity by competing for and acquiring assets that confirm a pre-given idea – yields to affirmative will – pursuing multiplicity by acquiring things that encourage re-valuation	Strategy concerns itself with holding the organization open rather than making it clearly distinct. Strategy is experienced in transforming rather than preserving
Intention is an experimental force, an impulse to become ‘more than’ rather than complete	Growth is experiential rather than measured, it is plotted in remembered and retold stories rather than on graphs
Control is realized through multiple affinities rather than definitive overview	Strategy is suggestive, humble and thereby pursues a sense of the whole, the general, from below

every centre of force – not self-preservation, but rather appropriation, the desire to become master, to become more, to become stronger’ (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §689). Setting aside the gendered translation here, the ‘mastery’ is over oneself as a being able to transform, it derives from itself, but it is not a separation. The will to become more remains dependent on the objects and events of being of which it is an expressive aspect (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §558; Poellner, 2013, pp. 691–692), and which it takes into itself and to which it gives itself by way of a reengagement with the ‘humus of uncomposed matter’ (Cooper, 2006, p. 60) that serves as the originating basis for human cultivation, production and achievement. If strategy is about the setting of a trajectory, a direction, then under the aegis of will to power, it is an outwards movement, an ‘away from’ what is already familiar (see Table 4). It feels akin to what the poet T. S. Eliot (1965, p. 201) called a condition of neither gain nor loss but of trying: ‘In order to arrive at what you do not know/ You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance/ In order to possess what you do not possess/ You must go by the way of dispossession.’

In starting anew from within the situations in which we find ourselves ‘we are’, suggests Nietzsche (1886/2011, §453), ‘living either a preliminary or a posterior existence, depending on taste and talent, and it is best in this

interregnum to be to every possible extent our own *reges* and to found little experimental nations. We are experiments: let us also want to be such.’ In German the world ‘experiment’ (*Versuche*) hints at both attempt and struggle, a trying of one’s hand at something, a continual proving of one’s character, not as in confirmation of its goodness (always a relative value conforming what has past) but as in a settling into the expansiveness of continual re-valuing.

Discussion: What Next for Strategy?

In delineating four logics of strategic action we admit each has a place in practice. What we urge, however, is for those strategy theorists, tied to a means–ends logic to admit the force of both practice and situation, and even to further admit a fourth. It is under the aegis of Nietzsche’s will to power that strategy becomes a hinging force whose intentional nature has a dual aspect, first as a situational struggle of strategists to allow an organization to grip and fit or align with its environment, and second, to generate an ability to historicize, learn from and transform itself by being elsewhere.

The first aspect requires strategists to acquire an epistemic respect for an organization’s ongoing situational dependency. In apprehending its relational condition, and in becoming aware of

the pre-perceptual, pre-conscious aspects of purposive order, strategists come to foster what Weick and Putnam (2006) call mindfulness. This means attending assiduously and critically to the patterning in the rise and fall of present events. It means developing a meta-awareness of how representational frameworks – the plans, targets, milestones, investment projections, organograms and visions that are prone to evoking the past or future as imagined scenes that warrant the setting of current direction – organize but also limit understanding. These diagrammatic aspects of strategic action, so prevalent under the first logic, confine transient experience along the trajectory of tidy directions, whereas more mindful aspects reorient the grammar of strategy towards its being an ongoing struggle to accomplish, of successive forms of relating. It means deferring to and trusting acquired expertise. Rather than decomposing situations into carefully defined elements which can be rationally re-composed, this expertise is manifest in intuitive improvisation and practical judgement (Dreyfus, 2014; Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2023), and as such remains alive to the warning signs in small discrepancies and to the temporary nature of success. As Weick and Putnam (2006, p. 284) conclude, in giving detailed, refined and patient attention to present events, strategy would ‘reflect an indirect grasp of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness’.

Such a view disturbs what hitherto has been the concern in strategy studies: the intentional coupling of organizational control and performative distinction. Control emerges from design: defining, aligning and pursuing the goals and objectives by which an organization presented itself to itself (commitment) and others (reputation) as both viable and valuable. Recent studies attest to the strategic difficulty of (re)balancing organizational processes, accepting, for example, the dynamic nature of the multiple, contradictory interests strategists must acknowledge and balance (Luger et al., 2018; Smith & Besharov, 2019). The upshot are more open forms of strategy whose looseness and flexibility allows for a more attuned

integration of organizational units, and of the organization within its environment (Hautz et al., 2017). Further still, some are starting to question the strategic pursuit of control (Cunha & Putnam, 2019), initiating calls for further work on the fragile and temporary nature of performative claims and the way intentions almost inevitably drift away from goals because of collaboration and coordination problems (Weiser & Laamanen, 2022).

The first aspect of will to power – the mindfulness required to admit and work through the logic of situation – is a succinct way of framing the trajectory of such studies. There is a humility in such situational intelligence, one that downplays the attribution of success to individual genius, and which, instead, appreciates the affordances offered by wider environments of which any organization is an active, animated part (Chia & Holt, 2009; Cooper, 2014). The will to power, then, exhibits a kind of diminuendo of presence through which comes a quiet but persistent presence. As Lynch (2020, pp. 146–147) suggests, the discipline of an acquired, learned humility carries with it a sense of conviction that, in turn, becomes curiosity. To acknowledge organizational limits means putting oneself in closer proximity to otherness, to what one is not, to what lies beyond, all of which touches on the second aspect of will to power, the critical capacity to think of oneself anew.

If the first aspect of will to power requires an enacted, embodied and extended intentionality, the second aspect fragments this in the form of conscious critique. Becoming conscious of the struggle to apprehend the already existing tendencies arising from within situations (intentionality is relational) means encountering the potential for re-evaluation: can it be done differently? When thought through this ‘will to power’ strategy becomes the practice of an organization affirming itself as a structure whose only source of unity comes in the conscious development of questioning the commitments and entitlements by which it habitually acts. The spur for such questioning is feeling of the future that is radically open. The typical

sense of a strategic future, however, is one of continuation. The routines, protocols and values of what's gone before constitute established habits, narratives and lines of reasoning that become projections that continue to define the possibilities for organizational success, even if 'real' events indicate contrarywise (Myllykoski & Rantakari, 2022) and despite the deadening performative pressure these forms of fixed goal setting can impose on organizational members (Bromley & Meyer, 2021). If strategy works to an intentional structure that extends the past into the future, the possibilities for transforming are already pre-figured because, irrespective of the 'content', the goals, visions and objectives that pepper strategy talk remain fixed in their consequential and measurable quality (for example, the pre-existing goals that Dittrich and Seidl (2018) identify as framing the interactive, evolving 'ends-in-view'). And it is only through their measured (represented) quantity that change – more productive efficiency, greater extractive power, faster distribution, quicker to market, more resolute decision making and so on – is registered. In holding the confines of organizational life to the procedural impress of the logic of means–end reasoning, strategy relates to the future as a place of human dominion.

This is especially the case when strategic ambition is intensified by what Leonardi and Treem (2020), suggest is the hyper-visibility of performativity made possible through forms of digital control and surveillance systems. Digitized decision-making systems can process requisite information in real time, assessing its cogency and playing out differing scenarios consequent on following one or other choice of action (Beyes et al., 2022). As Power (2022) argues, the pervasiveness of this strategic automation de- and then re-materializes human 'will' in architectures of code. The world is complex, but so are the electronic computers. Indeed, they are so 'smart' they do not need human intervention, they can act alone, far more quickly and with a greater sensitivity and temperance than ever could a management team,

policy unit or military command unit high on risk, low on sleep and suffused in competitive red mist. Under the impress of technology intentionality is suffused by technologies of calculation (Alaimo & Kallinikos, 2021).

The future to which Nietzsche dedicates will to power – the future that is no longer a dominion, but an open field – means encountering obstacles as invitations to commence anew. Even when flush with success, critique means searching out the limits of this success, looking for the imperfections and imagining how things might be done differently. To revalue aims and attainments and so expose life to the future, this is the objective of will to power. For example, successfully claiming to be a transparent business is no longer a threshold state of compliance or certified praiseworthiness, but a continual commitment to experimenting with the idea of transparency, which can extend from regulatory diligence and open accountancy and audit practice to being transparent with one's failures, or with the contradictions between the multiple values espoused by different personnel. The same with claims to sustainability: what matters is the conscious commitment to revealing different perspectives, not the realization of an already known, measured (and thereby limited) state of affairs. Nothing can be fully transparent or exist without having an adverse impact on some aspect of the environment (Meltzer, 2017). Vetting suppliers, innovating with new materials or ownership models, reducing packaging, encouraging reuse, balancing social against environmental sustainability, the list of obstacles is endless, and yet these then become the spur for affirming oneself anew, through experiment. In both strategic cases – transparency and sustainability – obstacles are welcome, they are invitations lining the path to affirmative feeling of power.

In summary (Table 5), we have argued that the 'practice turn' in social theory has profound ramifications for strategy theory in that it decentres and fragments the construct of identifiable causal agents and their owned 'intentions'. As such, it provides a fresh opportunity to

Table 5. The Four Logics of Strategic Action.

	Means-ends logic	Logic of practice	Logic of situation	Logic of potential
Background of intentions	Primacy of inner, autonomous, intentional mind; every event attributable to cognition, processing and rational choice (bounded or otherwise)	Primacy of practices: <i>intentions</i> embodied, enacted and extended. Non-deliberate, <i>purposive action</i> guided through bundles of practices (Dreyfus, 2002; Schatzki et al 2001)	Primacy of ongoing 'unowned' situational forces (Rescher, 1996) inducing need to reach the 'propensity of things' eliciting acts working through us (Jullien, 1999, p. 54)	Primacy of the subject in willed experimental action to renew itself and transgress its achievements (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §485, §490–491, §695.)
Quality of intentions	<i>Representational intentionality</i> : involving mental states guiding actions to fulfil individual intentions, including 'intention-in-action' (Searle, 1983)	<i>Motor intentionality</i> : direct, embodied responsiveness to practice structures entails attaining 'maximal grip' on the world to achieve 'satisfactory gestalt' (Dreyfus, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1962)	<i>Elan vital</i> : the primitive impulse to survive or grow in embedded circumstances: action geared to tension-reducing 'smuggle fit' and minimal energy wastage (Jullien, 1999)	Felt <i>intentionality</i> : super-abundant, affective force of generative change, striving to become more than (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §687, §689)
Objective	<i>Goal setting, planning & design</i> precedes execution to realize desired outcomes/success; diluting variations e.g. 'ends-in-view' and 'goal-seeking' (March, 1972)	<i>Absorbed coping</i> to achieve 'maximal grip' on the world and to thereby realize appropriate 'fit/alignment' and 'satisfactory gestalt' (Dreyfus, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1962)	<i>Discriminative attunement</i> (Dreyfus, 2002) to unfolding affordance (Gibson, 1979), expand degrees of freedom through adaptation (Sahlins & Service, 1988)	<i>Elides total/final views</i> . A 'fascination of the opposing point of view: refusal to be deprived of the stimulus of the enigmatic'. Transvaluation. (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §470 §688)
Qualities of Expertise	Calculative logic of logicians, thorough, coherent ends-in-view iteratively linked to means, warranted by clear criteria of success	Acquired <i>habitus</i> and <i>modus operandi</i> to guide absorbed coping; actions are habituated responses. Criteria implied, good outcome is improvement of condition, not success	Sensual situational sensitivity, minimal effort; active non-action through letting be, patience, timeliness, alive to fine differences	Instilling self-direction through disciplined accumulation of constant, countless interpretations (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §480–481 §484)
Action	Actions as deliberate transactions between 'mind' and 'world' to achieve world-to-mind fit	Actions as non-deliberate interactions to realize appropriate body-to-world fit	Actions as non-deliberate imbrication of <i>affordances</i> to attain higher integration and efficacious adaptability	Actions incorporate or overspill obstacles: generative stimulus of opposition (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §695)
Norms	Generic explicitly articulated imperatives, rules, routines & heuristics	Internalized dispositions containing <i>modus operandi</i>	Perceptual <i>detection</i> of differences making a difference (Bateson, 1972)	Transvaluing values, future dependent (Nietzsche 1888/1968, §692, §972, §1007)
The shape strategy takes	Strategy as oversight and control of events through planned imposition and impact of an ideal/aspiration	Strategy as coherence through skilled, effective and habituated practical coping	Strategy as timely letting happen of situational unfolding; invisible	Strategy as taking new perspectives by asking how, in each instance, an 'illusion of being' takes hold (Nietzsche, 1888/1968, §708)

rethink the variety of sources shaping strategic outcomes that the means–ends approach (column 1) overlooks. Decentring draws attention to the broader influence of shared historical and socio-cultural practices on thought, action and feelings (column 2). So much so that we query if ‘intention’ and indeed the action are readily attributable to individual agents, or to the wider practice milieu. The complementary logic of situation (column 3) that we introduce extends the distribution of agency and intentionality by acknowledging the ‘unowned’ nature and often meagre event-happenings outwith agentic influence that nevertheless can influence strategic outcomes and contribute to strategic success. Finally, the logic of potential (column 4) recovers a construct of distinctive, willed in a lived, life force to become ‘more than’, expressed in the embodied, enacted and extended meta-question ‘What, here, is it possible to consider otherwise?’

Conclusion

Rather than assume strategic intentionality (or strategic practice animated by intention), we have, following Nietzsche, sought to explain it. We have argued that the prevailing conceptualization of intention as a future-oriented, subjective force originating in a mind capable of detaching itself from its embodied surroundings and then acting upon the world to reach explicit goals is deeply problematic. This is because of two related conditions. First, it assumes the strategist as an originating point who authors, and so authorizes, legitimate action within one or more organizational settings. Yet the multiplicity of organizational life cannot happen at the behest of such decision events. Exceptions, accidents, chance events, surprises pockmark everyday organizational life, and no matter how comprehensive its reach any strategic design is always being overwhelmed by occurrence. Moreover, formal, rationalized strategic design often barely reaches into everyday action, which has its own purposive integrity, its own pre-cognitive coherence, its own aboriginal muchness, its own ungoverned array of force, and yet it is

from this condition, ecologically speaking, that strategic action and practice emerge.

Second, even where sequences of entailment of action following decision are observable, these ascriptions are inherently reversible: life might be understood backwards, but is lived forwards, making the attribution of who caused what nothing more than a retrospective designation of relative positions, descriptions that are relatively easy to reassign. Did, for example, the dynamic capability create profitability, or was it the accidental discovery of a new technology, or the clumsiness of a ‘competitor’, or a combination, and which then came first, and why does it help to isolate a cause given that social, cultural and commercial occurrence never repeats itself? All manner of relations might be made explicit in representations, but as both Cooper and Nietzsche suggest, nothing about the nature of the will is being explained here. Rather it is a descriptive exercise of relative positioning and influence that assigns efficacious force to one or other unit in the sequence.

We have then responded to each of these two conditions. In responding to the first, we have argued that intention – or will – can only emerge from within milieux of action and feeling that are empirically and phenomenologically immediate, and biologically and conventionally sedimented, which range from the small to the immense, which are open and which are multiple. Any understanding of will has to begin from within the already existing purposive texture of the *habitus* and the development of an *elan vital*: a mindful attunement toward environmental affordances.

In response to the second condition, we propose a framing of the intentional subject based on Nietzsche’s will to power. This reorientation offers an intriguing alternative way of articulating a form of strategic engagement that does not presume itself to be at all a controlling, dominant or directing force, nor one that explicitly delineates a consequential effect to which others must be made abeyant. Rather, the sense of intentionality is characterized by the will experiencing the power of giving itself over to dynamic potential. While this giving over might

begin through the *elan vital* of situational attunement, it extends to an experimental struggle of the will to designate its own character by engaging in critique. As the will disciplines itself into an attentive humility, listening in rather than just absorbing environmental events, it develops a sense of conviction through which it persists by accepting that the demands of any situation are its own demands through which it might transform itself. The strength of intention emerges from experiencing this potential as well as the accomplishment that comes from realizing adequate fit.


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