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ANSCOMBE ON PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

Anscombe's *Intention* is notorious for the claim that we have 'knowledge without observation' of our intentional actions.¹ Such knowledge is not perceptual or proprioceptive, nor is it knowledge by inference. Rather, it is 'knowledge in intention' of what one is doing or what one is going to do. Anscombe explains her view as follows:

[The topic] of an intention may be matter on which there is knowledge or opinion based on observation, inference, hearsay, superstition or anything that knowledge or opinion ever are based on; or again matter on which an opinion is held without any foundation at all. When knowledge or opinion are present concerning what is the case, and what can happen—say Z—if one does certain things, say ABC, then it is possible to have the intention of doing Z in doing ABC; and if the case is one of knowledge or if the opinion is correct, the doing or causing Z is an intentional action, and it is not by observation that one knows one is doing Z; or in so far as one is observing, inferring etc. that Z is actually taking place, one's knowledge is not the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions. (Anscombe 1963: 50)

Knowledge without observation of what one is doing may rest on empirical or other knowledge of the world. But it is not exhausted by this. When I have knowledge in intention that I am building a shed as I look for tools in the garage, my knowledge is not perceptual or inferential: it does not rest on sufficient prior evidence of either kind. Anscombe calls the knowledge contained in our

1. Anscombe 1963: §8.

intentions ‘practical knowledge’; and she thinks it is a condition of doing A intentionally that one have practical knowledge of doing A.

Neglected for many years, Anscombe’s principle is once again in vogue.² I am sympathetic to a version of it myself.³ But I do not think her position is well understood. In what follows, I hope to correct two misconceptions of practical knowledge, as Anscombe intends it. According to the first misconception, practical knowledge is always and essentially ‘the cause of what it understands’ (Anscombe 1963: 87). If you have practical knowledge of doing A, you are doing A because of that knowledge. According to the second, such knowledge is confined to the present progressive. Practical knowledge is always knowledge of what is happening now. In correcting these mistakes, we gain a more adequate picture of Anscombe’s approach.

I

To begin with, I do not doubt that, for Anscombe, practical knowledge is *sometimes* the cause of what it understands, or that such causality is important to its nature. What I deny is that this feature is definitive of practical knowledge, in her view. Opposing claims are often made. Thus Richard Moran writes: ‘Practical knowledge is said to be non-observational in that it is “the cause of what it understands”, rather than being derived from objects known’ (Moran 2004: 47). In a ‘Summary of Anscombe’s *Intention*’ that introduces a collection of essays on her work, Fred Stoutland reports Anscombe as asserting that ‘Practical knowledge is “the cause of what it understands”, unlike “speculative” knowledge, which “is derived from the objects known”’ (Stoutland 2011: 32). And John McDowell remarks, in passing, that bodily self-knowledge ‘is not “the cause of what it understands”, as Anscombe, following Aquinas, says practical knowledge is’ (McDowell 2011: 142).

But Anscombe never says this, at least not as a general claim about practical knowledge. What she does say is carefully qualified. Anscombe first contends that ‘there are many descriptions of happenings which are directly dependent on our possessing the *form* of description of intentional actions’ (Anscombe 1963: 84). She draws up a list of descriptions that meet this condition. In the

2. Among its most influential critics are Donald Davidson (1971: 50; 1978: 91–94) and Michael Bratman (1987). Recent Anscombeans include Candace Vogler (2002), Richard Moran (2004), and Michael Thompson (2008: Part Two; 2011).

3. See Part One of *Reasons without Rationalism* (Setiya 2007). In Setiya 2012 (this volume: Ch. 5), I defend the possibility of practical knowledge through its connection with knowing how.

right-hand column are descriptions of behaviour that ‘can only be voluntary or intentional’, such as paying, hiring, and marrying (Anscombe 1963: 85).⁴ In terminology she goes on to adopt, these are ‘*formally* descriptions of executed intentions’ (Anscombe 1963: 87).⁵ The descriptions in the left-hand column apply to goings-on that need not be intentional, such kicking, dropping, or switching, but according to Anscombe, our understanding of these descriptions turns on our grasp of what it is to act intentionally. Not all descriptions of intentional action belong on the list: some are independent of intention. Anscombe gives the example of ‘sliding on ice’, though even this appears in compound descriptions—‘I slid on the ice because I felt cheerful’, where this gives my reason for acting—that imply intentional action (Anscombe 1963: 85).

The descriptions in the right-hand column of Anscombe’s list are of interest to her because they obstruct a picture of intentional action on which being intentional is ‘a mere *extra* feature of events whose description would otherwise be the same’ (Anscombe 1963: 88). What she is opposing is a philosophical theory on which doing A intentionally is doing A in the presence of a feature that is not itself explained in terms of intentional action. It is this ‘extra property which a philosopher must try to describe’, perhaps by citing mental states of belief and desire, or intention, that cause the relevant action (Anscombe 1963: 84). This strategy falters with descriptions from the right-hand column. If ‘doing A’ is formally the description of an executed intention, it follows from the fact that one is doing A that one is doing A intentionally. There is no room for an extra feature in virtue of which one’s doing A is an intentional action.

Anscombe goes on to claim that ‘the failure to execute intentions is necessarily the rare exception’ in that it is necessarily rare ‘for a man’s performance

4. A qualification: Anscombe allows that some of the descriptions on the right-hand list are of things you could do in your sleep. My own view is that they are all things one can do unintentionally, though perhaps one must do so through other intentional actions. Since this essay is mainly exegetical, and since the point is not essential to Anscombe’s argument, I set these doubts aside.

5. Anscombe is not explicit about this. She finds it ‘evident enough’ that descriptions of action that imply intentionality are formally descriptions of executed intentions, but she does not speak to the converse claim (Anscombe 1963: 87). Still, the natural reading is the one in the text: a description that might apply to unintentional goings-on cannot be ‘formally the description of an executed intention’. The argument below requires this: it assumes that, where ‘doing A’ is formally the description of an executed intention, one could not be doing A in the absence of practical knowledge.

in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes' (Anscombe 1963: 87). She then writes:

If we put these considerations together, we can say that where (*a*) the description of an event is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention (*b*) the event is actually the execution of an intention (by our criteria) then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds: Practical knowledge is 'the cause of what it understands', unlike 'speculative' knowledge, which 'is derived from the objects known'. (Anscombe 1963: 87)

If practical knowledge were the cause of what it understands whenever one acts on one's intention, so that condition (*b*) is met, condition (*a*) would be redundant.⁶ But Anscombe includes it. The content of one's knowledge matters to its causality. It is only when one knows that one is doing A, and 'doing A' is formally the description of an executed intention, that practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands. It is the *formal* cause in that it forms the essence of its object. According to Anscombe, you cannot be paying, hiring, or marrying unless you are doing so intentionally. But in order to act intentionally, one must have practical knowledge of what one is doing. Thus, part of what is involved in an instance of paying, hiring, or marrying is the practical knowledge of its agent. Such knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for—in fact, it constitutes—the action it represents. Where the content of one's knowledge is not formally the description of an executed intention, this argument does not apply. The object of practical knowledge when I know that I am sliding on ice, or dropping the ball, is something that could happen without being the object of such knowledge, which is not its formal cause.⁷

Before I elaborate, let me pause to consider some objections. The first is that I have misread condition (*a*), which states only that the description of action is 'of a type to be' formally the description of an executed intention. It might be enough to satisfy this condition that S is doing A, where one *can* do A intentionally. But then we face a dilemma. If 'doing A' figures in the content of the executed intention, as I assume, condition (*a*) will be redundant. If it does not

6. I assume that the description cited in (*a*), the one of which you have practical knowledge, figures in the intention cited in (*b*). See the first objection below.

7. Some readers may resist the final sentence, claiming that the object of intention is always formally the description of an executed intention, even when it uses words, like 'sliding on ice', that could describe a non-intentional action. Their view is taken up in footnote 12.

figure in the content of that intention, Anscombe's argument is invalid. It does not follow from the fact that 'doing A' is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention and that this description applies to an action that is the execution of some *other* intention, that one has practical knowledge of doing A, or that if one does, it is the cause of what it understands. S could be typing intentionally and thereby making a noise, but not making a noise intentionally. Even if he knows that he is making a noise, and this counts as practical knowledge, how does it follow that this knowledge is the cause of his doing so?

The second objection is that I have ignored one of the considerations that Anscombe claims to 'put together': that the failure to execute intentions is necessarily rare. I think we can explain the point of this remark in a way that is consistent with my reading. In order for the content of my intention in acting to be something I know, it cannot be an accident that it is true. In other words, it cannot be an accident that I am acting as I intend. Anscombe is claiming that this condition, which is presupposed by the possibility of practical knowledge, can be met. Note that doing so does not commit her to a broader reliabilism about knowledge or to the idea of intention as an efficient cause of action.⁸ We can put the point in terms of 'safety': what is required for practical knowledge is that, when you think you are doing A because you are trying to, it cannot easily be the case that you are not doing A at all.

According to a third objection, the problem with the present reading is that it fails to explain what is distinctive of practical knowledge. On some conceptions of belief, part of what it is to believe that *p*, at least in the way characteristic of rational beings, is to know that one does.⁹ Such knowledge is necessary and sufficient for—in fact, it constitutes—belief. But it is not practical knowledge. Without endorsing this conception of belief, I want to concede the point. As I read Anscombe, practical knowledge is not always the cause of its object, and knowledge that is the formal cause of its object need not be practical. The practicality of practical knowledge lies elsewhere, in the contrast Anscombe draws between mistakes of judgement, characteristic of theoretical knowledge, and mistakes of performance, as when one fails to act as one intends but not because one has changed one's mind or has a false means–end belief.¹⁰ Practical thought sets a normative standard for what you do, an aim or target that guides your activity in doing it.

8. For a reliabilist reading of Anscombe that appeals to efficient causality, see Velleman 2007.

9. See Boyle 2011 on 'reflectivism' about self-knowledge.

10. Anscombe 1963: 56–57.

The upshot of these arguments is that Anscombe's view about the causality of practical knowledge is restricted to a special case: that in which the object of practical knowledge is formally the description of an executed intention. If we are convinced of this, I think we should be confused. How can practical knowledge be sometimes, but not always, the cause of what it understands? Isn't its causality essential to its nature? That readers do not expect the restriction is clear from the fact that they ignore it, as in the comments cited above. There is a genuine puzzle here, about scope and centrality of causation in practical knowledge. But the puzzle can be solved.

Before I describe the solution as I conceive it, I want to reject a misguided view. This view is inspired by Anscombe's remark that, where practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands, it is not merely 'observed to be a necessary condition of the production of various results' but that 'without it what happens does not come under the description—execution of intentions—whose characteristics we have been investigating' (Anscombe 1963: 87–88). This may suggest a simple view: practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands because it is the presence of practical knowledge that makes one's action intentional. But this cannot be right. To begin with, it does not explain why Anscombe is interested in the right-hand column of her list, in descriptions of action that are formally descriptions of executed intention. It is equally true of descriptions in the left-hand column, and of ones that are nowhere on the list, that the actions they describe count as intentional, when they do, in virtue of practical knowledge. It does not explain the role of condition (*a*) in the argument above. Nor does it rule out the philosophical theory on which doing A intentionally is doing A in the presence of an extra feature that is not itself explained in terms of intentional action. Practical knowledge of doing A presents itself as the extra feature in virtue of which one is doing A intentionally.

A better solution starts with the fact that, for Anscombe, practical knowledge that is not the cause of what it understands rests on knowledge that is. This comes out when we remind ourselves of the wider range of descriptions that are formally descriptions of executed intentions, noted in connection with 'sliding on ice'. There Anscombe contrasts the view that being intentional is an extra property with the view she defends, on which 'the term "intentional" has reference to a *form* of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question "Why?"' (Anscombe 1963: 84). We should turn then, to descriptions of this form: 'doing A in order to do B', 'doing A because *q*', 'doing A for its own sake, or for no particular reason'. Where these descriptions answer the question

‘Why?’ in the sense explained in the first part of the book, one that asks for an agent’s reason, they are formally descriptions of executed intentions. So they fall under condition (a). It thus transpires that the restriction in the argument admits not only the special verbs in the right-hand column of Anscombe’s list, but ‘a great many of our descriptions of events effected by human beings’ (Anscombe 1963: 87).

Nor is this simply an increase in the range of cases in which practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands. Descriptions that answer the question ‘Why?’ are not just some among many; they are the descriptions in virtue of which what we are doing is intentional at all. For Anscombe, whenever I act intentionally, I have practical knowledge of what I am doing, described in this way. By the argument above, such knowledge is the cause of what it understands. It is necessary and sufficient for—in fact, it constitutes—the action it represents: doing A in order to do B, because *q*, or for no particular reason.

When these descriptions apply to me, being intentional is not an extra feature of what I am doing: that I am acting intentionally follows from the description, which is formally the description of an executed intention. Things may seem different when we shift from descriptions that answer the question ‘Why?’ to ones that are silent on this, like ‘dropping the ball’ or ‘sliding on ice’. Where ‘doing A’ is not in the right-hand column of Anscombe’s list, might doing A intentionally consist in doing A in the presence of an extra feature, not explained in terms of intentional action? Anscombe notes the temptation to say yes: being intentional ‘can seem a mere *extra* feature of events whose description would otherwise be the same [...] if we concentrate on small sections of action and slips which can occur in them’ (Anscombe 1963: 88). But the temptation is one we should resist. According to Anscombe, intentional actions are those ‘to which the question “Why?” is given application’ (Anscombe 1963: 9). To be doing A intentionally is to be doing A in order to do B, because *q*, or for no particular reason. Nor do these explanations cite an extra feature distinct from intentional action, a mental state that explains what I am doing. For the state in question would be a state of practical knowledge whose content is formally the description of an executed intention—that I am doing A in order to do B, because *q*, or for no particular reason—and such knowledge is not distinct from the action it represents.¹¹

11. For a related argument, see Ford 2011: 99–104. In order to resist this line, one must deny that the mental state in virtue of which one’s doing A counts as intentional is cognition of what one is doing, or that its content invokes the concept of intentional action or those involved in

Anscombe is not explicit about the special role of descriptions that explain one's action, at least not in the passage that gives condition (a). But context helps. In the previous section, she emphasized that such descriptions are formally descriptions of executed intentions: 'Thus we can speak of the form of description "intentional actions", and of the descriptions which can occur *in* this form, as when the description 'sliding on ice' appears in a sentence that gives my reason for doing so (Anscombe 1963: 85).¹² And right after the argument I have been discussing, she notes that practical knowledge is the exercise of knowledge how.

In the case of practical knowledge, the exercise of [this] capacity is nothing but the doing or supervising of the operations of which a man has practical knowledge; but this is not *just* the coming about of certain effects, like my recitation of the alphabet or of bits of it, for what he effects is formally characterized as subject to our question 'Why?' (Anscombe 1963: 88)

When one has practical knowledge, what one knows in the first instance is a description of what one is doing that answers the question 'Why?' and is formally the description of an executed intention. This knowledge manifests knowledge how, as when I know that I am doing A by doing B in order to do C. This knowledge is the formal cause of what it understands. At the same time, I know that I am doing A, and this too is practical knowledge, even if 'doing A' is not formally the description of an executed intention, and so not

answering the question 'Why?' For versions of the second approach, see Velleman 1989; Setiya 2007: Part One.

12. On an alternative reading, descriptions like 'sliding on ice' can occur in the form 'intentional action' even in sentences that do not give one's reason. The idea is that such descriptions have two uses, or two meanings, one of which is formally the description of an executed intention, the other of which is not. Analogy: 'stone' can be used as a count noun or a mass noun. In the first use, it stands for a kind of thing, of which we ask, 'How many?' In the second use, it stands for a kind of stuff, of which we ask, 'How much?' Likewise, verbs can be 'intentional' or not. In the first use, they stand for intentional actions, subject to Anscombe's sense of the question 'Why?' In the second use, they do not. (This analogy is developed in Ford 2015.) When it gives the content of my intention, on the present view, 'sliding on ice' has intentional meaning, and so falls under condition (a), even when it appears by itself. The problem for this view is to make sense of the argument from (a) and (b) above. If the description cited in (a) figures in the intention cited in (b), condition (a) is once again redundant. It adds nothing. If the description is not the same, the problem of redundancy afflicts condition (b): that practical knowledge of this description is the formal cause of its object is entailed by condition (a) or not at all. That one executes some other intention is irrelevant.

the cause of its object. The practicality of practical knowledge belongs not to its content, but its source.

II

Readers have been perplexed by the epistemology of practical knowledge, knowledge of action that is not acquired by observation or inference but transcends one's prior evidence. It was the idea of such knowledge that H. P. Grice once stigmatized as 'licensed wishful thinking' and that is criticized by Rae Langton for making intention a species of faith.¹³ How can I learn about events in the world unless I have adequate grounds on which to conclude that they are taking place?

In recent years, however, a number of philosophers have claimed that the problem is overdrawn, and that it fades or disappears when we discern the proper object of practical knowledge. According to Stoutland, in the summary cited above, 'that of which an agent has practical knowledge is what he is presently doing' (Stoutland 2011: 30). Sebastian Rödl agrees: 'practical knowledge, in *Intention*, is knowledge of what one is doing' (Rödl 2011: 212).¹⁴ And in the most elaborate development of this line, Michael Thompson contends that, by contrast with Davidson's focus on completed deeds, 'Anscombe's illustrations [of intentional action] are unrelentingly present, and for this reason always imperfective in character': the content of 'practical knowledge is progressive, imperfective, in medias res' (Thompson 2011: 205, 209). On this account, what I know when I have practical knowledge is that I am *doing* A, not that I have done it or that I will eventually succeed. I know that I am in progress, but progress can be interrupted, frustrated, or come to a permanent end. As Kevin Falvey notes, it is normally sufficient to count as doing something that I have started and intend to go on, regardless of what I am up to right now; and even quite dramatic mistakes in performance need not undermine my judgement of what I am doing, as when I count as walking home despite a wrong turn that has me going the opposite way.¹⁵ Finally, there is the use of the progressive 'in anticipation', as when I say that I am visiting the zoo next week, before I have taken any overt steps.¹⁶ Once we recognize the

13. Grice 1971: 268; Langton 2004.

14. Rödl shares, too, the first misconception: 'Anscombe emphasizes the practical character of practical knowledge, its causality in respect of its object' (Rödl 2011: 212).

15. Falvey 2000: 25–26, 28–29.

16. See Anscombe 1963: 39–40; Falvey 2000: 26; Thompson 2008: 140–141.

logical weakness of the progressive, in each of these dimensions, we may find it easier to accept that there is knowledge without observation of what one is doing—of the present progressive, if not of perfective facts.

The problem is that this restriction on the scope of practical knowledge conflicts with both the letter and the spirit of Anscombe's *Intention*. As to the letter, Anscombe does not doubt the possibility of practical foreknowledge. One of the very first questions in her book is how to distinguish expressions of intention from predictions of the future. In both cases, 'a man says something with one inflection of the verb in his sentence; later that same thing, only with a changed inflection of the verb, can be called true (or false) in face of what has happened later' (Anscombe 1963: 2). It might be argued, in response—as it is by Thompson—that knowledge in prospective intention falls short of the fact that I will ϕ , extending only to the fact that I am *going* to ϕ , in a sense that shares with its counterpart in the past tense a tolerance of failure ('He was going to build a shed but he never did').¹⁷ Yet Anscombe seems to reject this view: 'If I say I am going for a walk, someone else may know that this is not going to happen. It would be absurd to say that *what* he knew what not going to happen was not the very same thing that I was saying *was* going to happen' (Anscombe 1963: 92).¹⁸

Anscombe is equally unfazed by the transition from present progressive to perfective past. In section 25 of *Intention*, she shifts without comment from the question 'Why are you moving your arm up and down?' ('To operate the pump') to the question, 'Why did you replenish the water-supply with poisoned water?' Her topic, the expression of practical knowledge, survives intact. Presumably, retention of this knowledge rests on memory, but there is no hint of a dependence on anything else. When all goes well, I have practical knowledge of the perfective fact that I replenished the water by using the pump. Likewise, in one of her most explicit discussions of practical knowledge, Anscombe gives an example designed precisely to frustrate a progressive reading: 'Now I press button A' (Anscombe 1963: 57). The case is one of mistaken performance: I mean to press A but end up pressing B. In order for there to be a mistake, it is crucial that I am not merely in the process of moving my finger towards B rather than A, but that I have pressed the wrong one. Only at this point can we say that my deed is in error: the mistake in performance that

17. Thompson 2008: 142–145.

18. See also Moran 2004: 146 on 'the ordinary knowledge I may have that I will do something in the future because this is one of the options that is open to me and I have made up my mind to do it'.

Anscombe intends. At no point does Anscombe suggest that, when I press the right button, practical knowledge falls short of what I have done. Finally, in her climactic treatment of practical knowledge, Anscombe begins with 'knowledge of what is done', including knowledge of a house that has been built and of what I have written on the blackboard, treating these as paradigms, not exceptions (Anscombe 1963: 82). Nor does this mark a shift or adjustment on her part. In an earlier passage she gives the example of writing with my eyes closed: 'it is clear that my capacity to say what is written is not derived from any observation' (Anscombe 1963: 53). I know what has been written, not just what I was writing.

Here we can draw a connection with the argument of section I. For knowledge of the perfective is another case, different from those discussed above, in which practical knowledge is not the cause of its object. If Anscombe is right, we can have practical knowledge of what we are going to do and of what we have done. But practical foreknowledge is not required for intentional action at future times. It does not follow from the fact that I will do A intentionally that I know that I will do it; such knowledge is not the formal cause of doing A. Nor it is a condition of having done A intentionally that one know that one did. Notoriously, I may kill you by poisoning your breakfast and die before the poison works.¹⁹ I have killed you intentionally, though I never learn that you are dead. When you know that you have replenished the water-supply, or pressed button B, what makes your knowledge practical is not its content, or its causality, but its source: it derives from the exercise of knowledge how.

As to the spirit of Anscombe's book, she confesses that, in past reflection on its topics, she 'came out with the formula: I *do* what *happens*'. (Anscombe 1963: 52). The point of the formula is to protest the mistake of 'push[ing] what is known by being the content of intention back and back', ever inwards, further from what happens in the world (Anscombe 1963: 53). As an example of this mistake she gives the 'false avenue of escape' on which 'I really "do" in the intentional sense whatever I think I am doing'—an extreme interpretation of the weakness of the progressive (Anscombe 1963: 52). On the contrary, when someone purports to say what he is doing, 'what he says [. . .] may be untrue because, unknown to [him], something is not the case which would have to be the case in order for his statement to be true; as when, unknown to the man pumping [water], there was a hole in the pipe around the corner' (Anscombe 1963: 56).

19. Thomson 1971; Anscombe takes up related issues in *Intention* (Anscombe 1963: 41).

In general, Anscombe resists the view that, since there are two ways of knowing one's actions—practical and theoretical—there are two objects known. But the restriction of practical knowledge to the progressive is a version of this idea: what happens is an object of theoretical knowledge; what I know without observation is what I am doing. As she asks, rhetorically, '[in] the face of this, how can I say: I *do* what *happens*?' (Anscombe 1963: 53). On this account, what I do—the action as object of practical knowledge—is what is happening, not what happens, perfectly, in the world.

For Anscombe, there is no such limitation: we have practical knowledge not only of what we are doing, but of what we will do in the future, and of what we have done so far. Such knowledge is the cause of what it understands when, and only when, its content is formally the description of an executed intention. This condition is met in the basic case of practical knowledge, an exercise of knowledge how that answers the question 'Why?' It need not be met by the knowledge contained in this, or by the traces left behind.²⁰

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