



## **Action, Knowledge, and Human Goodness: A Prolegomena to a Theory of Practical Wisdom**

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# Action, Practical Knowledge, and the Good

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## I. Introduction

Two well known and widely discussed tenets of Elizabeth Anscombe's *Intention* are first, that intentional actions *must* be known by the subjects performing them in a peculiarly immediate and non-evidential way, and second, that intentional actions are pursued by the subjects performing them "under the guise of the good."<sup>1</sup> Let us call these familiar claims the *knowledge* and the *goodness requirements* on intentional action explanation. Both requirements have come under heavy fire; many argue that not only is it possible to perform actions intentionally without knowing one is or without seeing one's performance as good (or both), but also that such failures are altogether common in the course of human life.<sup>2</sup> Even those who claim to follow the spirit (if not the letter) of Anscombean action theory typically hold to just one of these theses while explicitly rejecting the other, in order to preserve the truth of this supposedly unassailable pre-theoretical data.<sup>3</sup>

What few have noticed is that, for Anscombe anyway, the two requirements are not independently intelligible—they stand or fall together. This essay is an examination of the reasons why this should be so. In order to lay hold of these connections, however, we must first grasp Anscombe's account of intentional action. In this paper, I will argue that an intentional action is typically a material event in the world that is both brought about and metaphysically constituted through the agent's own practical self-knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase comes from David Velleman's influential essay critiquing the traditional connection between practical reasons and the good. See Velleman, "The Guise of the Good."

<sup>2</sup> Keith Donnellan and Donald Davidson were early detractors of the knowledge requirement, while Michael Stocker and Gary Watson were early detractors of the goodness requirement. See Davidson, "Intending"; Donnellan, "Knowing What I Am Doing"; Stocker, "Desiring the Bad"; Watson, "Free Agency."

<sup>3</sup> For example, Kieran Setiya, Michael Thompson, and David Velleman accept knowledge but not goodness, whereas Davidson accepts goodness without knowledge. See Davidson, "How Is Weakness of the Will Possible?"; Setiya, *Reasons Without Rationalism*; Thompson, *Life and Action*; Velleman, *Practical Reflection*; Velleman, "The Guise of the Good."

it. This knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of a means-end order of practical reasons, which can be represented in the form of a practical syllogism that shows how the action can be grasped as good in a specifically practical sense. The practical syllogism is best understood as the representation of a practical-inferential order of means to ends that constitutes the action itself as an event of a specific kind; this order shows the good of performing the action (represented as conclusion) by connecting it to the practical reasons (represented as premises) that serve to justify it. On the view presented here, knowing what one is doing just is knowing the supposed good of doing it, precisely because doing something intentionally just is to be engaged self-consciously engaged in the process of realizing a certain rational order in some determinate matter. It follows that knowledge of what one is doing is no different from the knowledge of the supposed good of doing it: they are one and the same practical self-knowledge.

The argument of this paper proceeds as follows. In section II, I discuss Anscombe's theory of intentional action descriptions and explain why she thinks they must be objects of a distinctively practical form of knowledge. In section III, I argue that the typical or paradigmatic example of an intentional action is an event whose part-whole structure is constituted by the agent's practical thought and reasoning. Finally, in section IV, I argue that this order can be formally displayed in the practical syllogism, which is a representation of the action as a valid practical argument, one whose premises show what good the performance of such an action realizes.

## **II. Intentional Descriptions, Practical Reasons, and the Knowledge Requirement**

Let us begin with a starting point that few will want to deny: For any intentional performance of an action, it is always the case there will be many true descriptions of what the person is doing, or what the person causes to happen that are not intentional descriptions. For instance, Jones walks into a room and flips a light switch. We can describe this simple performance under any number of true descriptions: Jones 'moves such-and-such particles about'; Jones 'moves such-and-such muscles'; Jones 'raises his arm'; Jones 'illuminates the room'; Jones 'casts a shadow on the wall'; Jones 'produces a clicking noise'; Jones 'wakes up and perturbs the unsuspecting dog'; Jones 'alerts a prowler to the presence of the owner of the house, dissuading him from breaking and entering'; and so on, ad infinitum. This fact about action descriptions raises an obvious

and important question: Which of these many true descriptions ought we to count as the intentional descriptions of what Jones does?

Anscombe is clear that intentional descriptions can be picked out from a third person perspective, since we can typically observe one another's intentions in acting and ask for clarifications when uncertain.<sup>4</sup> This commitment fits with her general project of anchoring an account of intention in our practice of asking for and providing practical reasons that both justify and explain what we are up to. Anscombe remarks at the outset of her inquiry that "what distinguishes intentional action from other kinds of human behavior" is that intentional actions are the ones "to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application," and that the relevant sense of the question is "that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting."<sup>5</sup>

We grasp the "special sense" of the question 'Why?' by looking at how we deploy it in practice, and what we find is that the intentional descriptions of what a man does are tied down to what he knows about his performance in a way that relates it to his practical thought and reasons. Thus it is within the context of investigating this practice of asking and answering the question 'Why?' that Anscombe first raises the issue of the *knowledge requirement*.

After she has introduced the connection between acting intentionally and acting for practical reasons, Anscombe notes that it is constitutive of the practice of asking for reasons that one must assume some intentional description of what a person is up to. Thus, if Smith asks Jones, 'Why are you 'waking up poor Fido'?' Smith is assuming that 'waking up Fido' is an intentional description of what Jones is doing. Of course, Jones can refuse the 'Why?' question under that description, which negates the assumption. The only point here is that the practice itself presupposes some pre-theoretical notion of intentional descriptions that might be accepted, rejected, or revised.

Posing the question under a certain description can reveal it to be unintentional when the agent refuses to give the question application under that description. For instance, suppose Jones is asked by Smith, "Why did you wake up poor Fido?" and he replies, "Did I? Poor guy, I didn't know he was in here!" The exchange is meant to

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<sup>4</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 7-9. If we could not do this easily, our practice of relying on witnesses in criminal court would not be intelligible.

<sup>5</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 9.

illustrate that Smith was mistaken to think that Jones had a reason to wake up the dog; it reveals that he had no idea he was doing anything under that description. Obviously if one has no idea he is doing something under a certain description, he can't be doing the thing so described for some reason.<sup>6</sup>

Now Anscombe takes it to be obvious that if you don't know you are waking up the dog by flipping the light switch then you can't be waking up the dog intentionally by flipping the switch. One lesson to be drawn here is that unintentional descriptions of action are often revealed solely from a third personal, observational perspective, and often describe aspects of the agent's performance of which he is totally unaware. If an agent discovers through some evidence that he did or is doing something, then he wasn't doing it intentionally.<sup>7</sup> So intentional descriptions must be known from the first person perspective, and this will be clear if the agent accepts and answers the 'Why?' question.

Another feature internal to our practice of asking and answering the 'Why?' question is that the intentional descriptions—both from the inquirer and the respondent—are typically “vague and indeterminate.”<sup>8</sup> For example, suppose that someone asks Jones, mid-stroll, “Why are you walking up Fifth Avenue?” and he replies, “I'm going to the Giant Eagle to buy some milk.” The answer reveals no details about specifics of the purchase itself, such as which bottle of milk among the many on the shelf he will buy, which cash register he will approach for payment, and so on. Although there will in fact be determinate and fine grained answers to all of these questions, they are plainly outside the scope of the question and the responses given. For Jones himself needn't have any of these details settled in advance, since it is likely that any bottle, any route, and any register will do. This shows that intentional descriptions pick out what is practically salient to the agent from a first person perspective. Whatever is not salient remains indeterminate, unspecified, and unknown. So we should not say that he intentionally took

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<sup>6</sup> By active reasons, I mean reasons that could be given in answer to the 'Why?' question and that explain the particular action. One could have general reasons to  $\phi$  without such reasons explaining any particular act of  $\phi$ -ing, here and now. Of course, one might come up with reasons for doing something, once one realizes that he is doing it. For example, suppose it is pointed out to me that I am, unawares, frowning at my students. And suppose that I think I have reasons to frown at them, once this has been pointed out to me. Anscombe calls such behavior voluntary but not intentional. For a further discussion of the difference, and the role that practical knowledge plays in each, see [citation removed for blind review].

<sup>7</sup> Of course, a man may discover that he is doing something unintentionally, and then choose to continue doing that thing intentionally for some reason. But then he will do it with the requisite knowledge.

<sup>8</sup> Anscombe, “The Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature,” 4. p. 4.

780 steps on his walk to the store, that he intentionally bought the carton of the milk that was third to the left, and so on. Although these descriptions of what he does are perfectly true, they fall outside the scope of the agent's *practical* knowledge of what he is doing, and thus cannot be intentional.

That the question and the answer presuppose a shared notion of practical salience makes clearer the connections between intentional descriptions and practical reasons. For one's answer to the 'Why?' question under some description has to reveal one's knowledge of one's practical reasons for acting under that description. To see why this is the case, imagine that someone excitedly knocks a cup off the table. Upon being asked "Why?" the response is simply, "I thought I saw a face in the window and it made me jump."<sup>9</sup> Anscombe insists that by giving such an answer the agent is denying that 'knocking the cup off the table' is a description that picks out an intentional performance (she calls it a "mental cause" to mark the difference). In this case, it is not that the agent doesn't know that he did that—he is perfectly well aware of what he does—but that he did not have the relevant sort of knowledge, the sort that is connected to his practical reasons. In this imagined case, the agent knows what caused him to knock the cup off the table; in fact, he knows this "mental cause" without observation or evidence, and yet this knowledge does not suffice to make his action intentional.<sup>10</sup>

Attention to Anscombe's discussion of our non-observational knowledge of mental causes ought to cast significant doubt upon the typical approach to understanding Anscombe's knowledge requirement. In the literature on this topic, we often find the knowledge requirement specified by reference to some cluster of special features or properties it supposedly possesses that makes it distinctive as a kind of knowledge. It is often argued, for instance, that what is distinctive about an agent's knowledge of his own action is that it must be "non-observational" or "non-inferential" (or both). This way of proceeding implies that we should start by taking for granted some common genus of knowledge, and then distinguish an agent's knowledge of his own action in terms of its distinguishing features or properties. On such a method, we will explain the knowledge

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<sup>9</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> In Anscombe's discussion of mental causes, it is clear that a mental cause picks out what produced the agent's behavior—what event brought about the effects under those descriptions. A mental cause is not a reason, Anscombe argues, because there is no connection to the agent's general conception of good or bad.

requirement just in case we explain how knowledge of action can be characterized in terms of these special characteristics.<sup>11</sup>

It turns out, however, that these special characteristics don't pick out any sort of knowledge that is distinctively *practical*, because they don't tie the knowledge to Anscombe's 'Why?' question in the right way. It is obvious, for instance, that the knowledge is not distinctive as a kind because it is non-observational. There are arguably many forms of knowledge that don't depend on observation (say, knowledge that the square root of 9 is 3) and have nothing to do with action, but even when we restrict it to the realm of human activity it still fails. For again, the agent's knowledge that he knocked the cup off the table because he saw a face in the window and it made him jump is knowledge of human behavior possessed without observation, and Anscombe is clear that it is not the relevant kind of knowledge at all.

Furthermore, we might notice that the standard list of such special features one finds in the literature is hardly exhaustive of the potential candidates one might have taken from Anscombe's discussion of the knowledge requirement. Other, less discussed aspects of the practical knowledge that Anscombe mentions include: (1) the fact that when the knowledge fails, the mistake is not one of judgment but performance;<sup>12</sup> (2) the contradiction of a statement of this knowledge is not a contrary statement of fact about the way the world is, but the doing of an action whose intention contradicts the intention specified in the statement;<sup>13</sup> (3) the knowledge is only comprehended to the extent that practical reasoning (or practical syllogism) is;<sup>14</sup> (4) its possession implies know-how or skill;<sup>15</sup> (5) the knowledge is productive of its own object, or "the cause of what it

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, Rosalind Hursthouse argues that practical knowledge is special in virtue of its being non-observational, whereas Kieran Setiya and Hanna Pickard argued that what's distinctive about it is that it is non-inferential. John Gibbons, meanwhile, argues that it is a matter of explaining first person access and authority. Velleman is interested in how all three of these features intersect in a single account. See Hursthouse, "Intention"; Setiya, "Practical Knowledge"; Pickard, "Knowledge of Action Without Observation"; Velleman, *Practical Reflection*; Gibbons, "Seeing What You Are Doing."

<sup>12</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–88.

understands”;<sup>16</sup> (6) any object of this knowledge is *formally* such as to be characterized as subject to the question ‘Why?’ and is related to a practically rational order.<sup>17</sup>

Needless to say, the usual approach of appealing to some set of privileged properties tends to generate theories of the knowledge requirement that cannot even begin to explain these other aspects of the sort of knowledge Anscombe appears to have in mind. Perhaps, then, what is missing from our understanding of the knowledge requirement is not some further, hitherto unnoticed property we might add to the established list, but an account of how the knowledge is a different mode of knowing altogether. Ideally, such an account would unify all the various aspects of the knowledge of action that Anscombe mentions, as well as shed light on why such knowledge is tied to practical thought and reasoning.

Such an account of *practical* knowledge would seem to be what Anscombe was after. Having just discussed the different sense of failure and contradiction that applies to the agent’s practical knowledge, Anscombe makes the following disquieting suggestion:

Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we found ourselves. For if there are two knowledges—one by observation, the other in intention—then it looks as if there must be two objects of knowledge; but if one says the objects are the same, one looks hopelessly for the different *mode of contemplative knowledge* in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of acting.<sup>18</sup>

Anscombe here suggests that we will make no progress in understanding the knowledge requirement so long as we remain beholden to the standard, contemplative framework of conceiving of knowledge. On the contemplative view, knowledge is fundamentally about grasping the facts or reality in the right way, and its measure is these facts, such that a mistake will be a mistake in judgment about them. But, as the preceding discussions in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 57.



*Intention* of the contrast between the man who is shopping for items on a list and the detective who follows him around making a record of what he does illustrates, a mistake in or failure of practical knowledge is not a mistake in the or failure of judgment at all; rather, we look to the agent's performance or execution to locate the error. Anscombe remarks that in cases of this kind of failure or error, "we do not say: what you said was a mistake, because it was supposed to describe what you did and did not describe it, but: What you did was a mistake, because it was not in accordance with what you said."<sup>19</sup> The clear suggestion here is that there are no independently describable facts about what the agent is doing that could serve as the measure of a claim to practical knowledge. We must look for a different framework for thinking about knowledge altogether.

All this is not to say that part of the story about the knowledge requirement is that the subject's knowledge of her own intentions in action is possessed without observation, inference or evidence, and that we do have first person authority over and privileged access to the intentional descriptions of our actions as opposed to the unintentional descriptions. Rather, it serves to make especially clear what is often left unexplained or simply taken for granted: the fact that the knowledge requirement is really a *practical knowledge requirement*, and that the practical mode of this knowledge is what really stands in need of explanation.

A final consideration we need to address is the object of this knowledge—that is, the question of what intentional descriptions are descriptions *of*. Anscombe's answer is controversial, to say the least. She argues that what is picked out by an intentional description is the agent's action itself—an observable, datable, material event in the world. Anscombe proposes the formula, "I do what happens" and declares with confidence that "when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening."<sup>20</sup>

Obviously our knowledge of other observable events, unlike an agent's knowledge of his own action, is manifestly mediated by sensory knowledge or evidence. Given this, how can one claim to know a certain range of *events in the world* in absence

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>20</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 52.

of any evidence from the world, evidence that would surely be observational, inferential, and in some important sense a matter of discovery? Perhaps we can acknowledge that a person can know what he intends or what he tries to do without evidence or observation; but, given that what actually happens in the world is up to forces outside of the human will, we may think a person can know what actually happens only “by observation to be the result” of what he can know without observation—the psychological antecedents of such events, say, his intentions, beliefs, pro-attitudes, or other mental states, dispositions, or events. Yet Anscombe rejects such an epistemically modest proposal as “a mad account.”<sup>21</sup>

It will come as no surprise that few have followed Anscombe’s account of the object of practical knowledge. Armed with common sense and a healthy awareness of our human limitations, the consensus view is that Anscombe is far too naïve about our epistemic capacities.<sup>22</sup> For it is simply a fact that we often fail to do what we intend to do, and if that is so, we clearly cannot know what we are doing simply by intending to do it. For finite and fallible agents such as ourselves, intending to do something and doing it are manifestly not the same thing. Let us call this objection to Anscombe’s account of the object of practical knowledge *the argument from practical fallibility*.<sup>23</sup>

I do not think we should be impressed by this argument, as it assumes precisely what Anscombe’s theory attempts to deny, namely that there is always a potential gap between an agent’s intending to  $\phi$  and her actual performance of  $\phi$ -ing. A successful epistemology of action, on this picture, would show how this gap could be successfully bridged; that is, it would show how the intentional description of the action can be seen to correspond to the description of the content of some candidate mental state, an intention (however construed) that “guides” and “causes” the action’s coming to be. Such an account assumes that a failure of practical knowledge is a failure of correspondence or a mismatch between two independently specifiable realities—mental states or propositional

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<sup>21</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*.

<sup>22</sup> Some recent exceptions to this general rule are Marcus, *Rational Causation*; Schwenkler, “Understanding ‘Practical Knowledge’”; Thompson, “Anscombe’s Intention and Practical Knowledge.”

<sup>23</sup> The argument has been forcefully pressed by Sarah K. Paul, “How We Know What We’re Doing.”

attitudes on the one side of a causal relation and physical events on the other.<sup>24</sup> But this in turn assumes that actions and reasons are metaphysically distinct existences that stand in a relation of cause to effect. On Anscombe's view, by contrast, an agent's intentions and her action are one, in the successful case at least, one and the same reality. What happens in the bad case is not we couldn't can't connect some identified effect—some action—to some relevant psychological causal antecedent, or that some mental event failed to bring about its effect, but rather, that the subject simply failed to realize her practical thought and will successfully through her performance. On this view, actions are not effects of separately identifiable prior causes but material processes or events that are that are constituted or specified into a kind by the agent's own practical thought, reason, and will. Thus a failure of practical knowledge (which certainly happens) is not a failure of correspondence between two separate realities but a failure of self-constitution. This is a failure of a distinctively practical sort.<sup>25</sup>

Thus the argument from practical fallibility is not simply an innocuous appeal to the fact that we are finite and fallible creatures. Anscombe obviously does not deny this. Rather, the argument rests upon an assumed framework of thinking about a person's knowledge of her own action that is theoretical, in that its measure is "derived from the object known,"<sup>26</sup> where this is picked out according to facts that are accessible independently of the agent's own awareness of them. On such a model, "the facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge."<sup>27</sup> We clearly need to break up such an "incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge", however, if we are to make any progress in our understanding of how the knowledge and the goodness requirements are mutually illuminating.

One final assumption of the prevailing causal framework is worth teasing out. The program gets off the ground only by assuming that we can pick out or fix certain action descriptions as intentional independently of an agent's reasons or intentions, and

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<sup>24</sup> For further discussion of this tendency in the literature, see Douglas Lavin, "Must There Be Basic Action?" For a discussion of the parallels between the argument from practical fallibility and the argument from illusion, see Christopher Frey and Jennifer A. Frey, "G.E.M. Anscombe on the Analogical Unity of Intention in Action and Perception."

<sup>25</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 57.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

then search for the reasons and intentions that caused such an event under the action descriptions that have been identified. This is the approach one finds in Donald Davidson, for instance, and many have followed him.<sup>28</sup> This is, of course, what we should expect from a theory that understands actions and reasons or intentions as separate (but causally related) realities. But notice that Anscombe's inquiry, by contrast, is into what could count as an intentional action description in the first place. The difference is not slight. Davidson takes the question of specification of action descriptions for granted, and is interested in the question of rationalization, of why the agent went in for that sort of thing.<sup>29</sup> Anscombe, by contrast, thinks that the question of rationalization and specification are one and the same. That is, she thinks that to know what one does intentionally is to grasp the practically rational unity of the act itself—the action's practical *form*, or what she calls “a form of description of events.” {need citation}

On this view, intentions and actions cannot be metaphysically distinct entities, because an intentional action is a material event whose specific nature as a kind of material process is constituted and specified by an order of practical reasons—a rational, inferentially structured order that, when made explicit, displays the good of the action's coming to be. Such an event could only come to be in the knowledge that it is so coming to be, because such an event is the realization of one's practical thought and will in some matter. The principle and source of such a material process or event is the agent's own capacities for practical reason and will, whose joint exercises both determines it into a kind and measures it as a good or bad instance of its kind. On this view, action is a kind of self-constitution: one determines oneself to act through the desire and practical judgment that one ought to do so.

### **III. Practical Knowledge and the Unity of Action**

One thing that is immediately striking about Anscombe's approach to the concept of intention is her focus on actions as opposed to inner psychological states. For instance, when Anscombe asks how we might know someone's intentions, she tells us we should first look at what the person actually did or is doing, for “the greater number of the things which you would straight off say a man did or was doing will be things he

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<sup>28</sup> See the first five essays in Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events*, 1–83.

<sup>29</sup> Davidson thinks that reasons allow us to “re-describe” actions, but he doesn't seem to think that reasons initially specify them into kinds.

intends.”<sup>30</sup> Anscombe further notes that it is essential to the concept of intention that answers to the ‘Why?’ question typically place what one is doing within the wider context of other things one is also doing. Thus, in the typical case of acting, what explains what someone is doing is the fact that it serves the realization of something else one is doing.<sup>31</sup> For instance, I am moving my fingers because I am typing out these letters on my keyboard; I am typing out these letters because I am writing a sentence; I am writing a sentence because I am making an argument; I am making an argument because I am writing a paper on action; and so on. So it is no surprise that the intelligibility of the question ‘Why?’ presupposes our grasp of what Michael Thompson has called “naïve rationalizations”: the doing of one thing on the grounds that it advances the doing of another thing.<sup>32</sup> It is typically the case that intentional descriptions of action are such as to be fitted into a practical-teleological nexus of means and ends—the stuff of Thompson’s naïve rationalizations—because actions are material processes with a part-whole structure, where its parts can be identified as means only in relation to the whole action they serve to realize.

That actions typically do have such a part-whole structure is the upshot of Anscombe’s famous example of the man pumping water in §§23-26 of *Intention*. Here she invites us to imagine a man who is performing the following intentional actions:

- (1) moving his arm up and down in repetitive fashion (A-ing)
- (2) operating a pump that moves water into a cistern (B-ing)
- (3) replenishing the house water supply (C-ing)
- (4) poisoning the Nazis who inhabit the house (D-ing)

These actions are fitted into the structure of naïve rationalizations. We come to see that the pumper is A-ing for the sake of B-ing (or simply, is A-ing because he is B-ing), B-ing

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<sup>30</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Of course, this is not always the case. Anscombe admits that sometimes we act for no reason at all or for no further reasons (see in particular, §§17-18, and 20). But it is clear that these are secondary cases, only to be grasped in light of the primary or paradigmatic case in which actions are essentially future directed, or in progress towards a specified, not yet attained goal. For if people only did things for no reason, or had only present intentions, the concept of intention would be of little philosophical interest.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, *Life and Action*, chapter 2.

for the sake of C-ing (or simply, is B-ing because he is C-ing), and so on. These four intentional actions form a series of nested practical rationalizations, and so the ‘Why?’ question applies to each of them as we move up the series. For example:

“Why are you moving your arm?”

“In order to pump water into the cistern.”

“Why are you pumping water?”

“In order to replenish the house water supply.”

“Why are you replenishing the house supply?”

“In order to poison the Nazis who inhabit the house.”

Anscombe’s example is a nice illustration of the part-whole structure of action. It is essential to the structure that we be able to identify some end that brings a formal unity to the series of rationalizations; in this case, the end is the poisoning of the Nazis inside the house. Whatever one does for the sake of this end—moving an arm, operating a pump, and moving water through a pipe—will be a constitutive part of this act of poisoning. By a constitutive part, I mean a part whose identity *qua* part depends on its role in bringing about the whole action.<sup>33</sup> Because moving one’s arm up and down is a constitutive part of a poisoning, we can say that in moving an arm up and down, here and now, a poisoning is getting under way.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, all sorts of true descriptions of what the agent does will not count as parts of his action, precisely because they are not constitutive of his act of poisoning. For example, in the case of poisoning as described by Anscombe, we can also say that

Certain muscles, with Latin names which doctors know, are contracting and relaxing. Certain substances are getting generated in some nerve fibres—substances whose generation in the course of voluntary movement interests physiologists. The moving arm is casting a shadow on a rockery where at one place and from one position it produces a curious effect as if a face were looking

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<sup>33</sup> Give example of vital organs, see Frey.

<sup>34</sup> Of course, our ability to say this does not depend on facts about whether the poisoning is being carried out successfully. Suppose the Gestapo shows up and attempts to arrest the pumper. It will still be true to say that the ground of his arrest is the fact that he is presently engaged in an act of poisoning, even if all he managed to do was begin to move his arm. Moving one’s arm is not a criminal offense, only moving one’s arm as poisoning is.

out of the rockery. Further, the pump makes a series of clicking noises, which are in fact beating out a noticeable rhythm.

Now why isn't 'making a series of clicking noises' or 'contracting such and such muscles' an intentional description? Why is it left out of the A-D order Anscombe describes?

We begin to see our answer when we notice that the series of 'Why?' questions from A-D is the mirror image of a series of 'How?' questions from D-A. For instead of asking 'Why?' and inquiring into the agent's purpose for moving his arm up and down, we might just as easily inquire into the means by which he is realizing his ends. For example:

"How are you poisoning the Nazis?"

"By replenishing the house supply with poisoned water."

"How are you replenishing the house supply?"

"By pumping water from the cistern."

"How are you pumping water?"

"By operating the pump."

Unintentional descriptions do not correspond to the 'Why?' or 'How?' questions that relate to the agent's action, and so they are left out of the means-end order that defines the action *qua* intentional.

Note that the ability to pose the 'How?' question presupposes an answer to the 'Why?' question; for we cannot ask someone how he is realizing his end unless he already knows what his end is. The means are always only means in relation to ends, from which they get their intelligibility as means. Notice too that the pumper's ability to answer both questions—'Why?' and 'How?'—depends upon his prior ability to answer a 'What?' question: 'What are you up to, or what action is presently underway?'

Our questions reveal that an agent must know *what* he is up to intentionally—that is, the act type he is in the process of realizing, here and now, in this particular way—in order to know why what he's currently doing is a means to its achievement. Further, to know what he is up to just is to know the end for the sake of which all of his actions are

progressing. This knowledge of what he is up to is essential to his being up to it at all. For in absence of the agent's knowledge of the rational connections between his acts as progressing him towards a single, unifying end, there is no unified action that is underway at all. For it is the end for the sake of which what is done intentionally is done that make all of it an act of poisoning. Such a unity could not come from nature, since the connections that hold between the parts of the action are not natural and in the things themselves, but practical and supplied by practical reason and will.

This point about the end specifying the material process into a specific kind is not unique to the explanation of action. It is common to all processes in living things. Take the example of mitosis. Michael Thompson notices that this material process of the splitting up of chromosomal material can take place in different living things and thereby be different processes altogether. Of mitosis in an amoeba versus mitosis in a human being, he writes:

In the first case, an event of this type will of course be a phase in a process of reproduction—one of the forms of generation available to that kind of thing. But in the case of the human it will rather be a part of growth or self-maintenance; reproduction is another matter, and has another matter, among humans. The distinction between the two cases of mitosis is not discovered by a more careful scrutiny of the particular cells at issue [...]<sup>35</sup>

Thompson's point is that if we stay at the level of description of what we can observe presently changing in the matter, and do not take into account that for the sake of which these changing are occurring, then we will not know what *kind* of material process is underway. For what it means for these chromosomes to be splitting up in such-and-such ways, here and now, depends upon the end these movements serve. And so we need to look to the wider context of the life form, and determine the role that this vital process plays in its life cycle.

In a formally similar way, in order to know what kind of intentional action is happening, here and now, one must have knowledge of the end for the sake of which the present actions are taking place and come to be. In the case of both kinds of processes, the end both determines the action at the appropriate level of description and provides it with a measure of its success or failure. Therefore, in both cases we must look beyond

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<sup>35</sup> Thompson, *Life and Action*. p. 55.



the descriptions of what is happening in the present, and interpret the present in light of the future aims towards which the present gets its intelligibility. Insofar as the end serves as a principle that both defines and measures the present, we can follow Christine Korsgaard in thinking of the end as a kind of constitutive principle.<sup>36</sup>

Thinking of the end as a constitutive principle helps us to grasp the unity of intentional actions as a specific form of material (and yes, vital) process. But the notion of a constitutive principle alone is not sufficient, because it does not yet distinguish human actions from merely vital processes. In her discussion of practical knowledge, Anscombe points out that one and the same intentional action can be known in two fundamentally different ways: “in intention,” that is, through first personal, practical knowledge, or “by observation,” that is, through third personal, contemplative or observational knowledge.<sup>37</sup> In the case of a merely vital process, like mitosis, one must have third personal or speculative knowledge of the end—the sort of knowledge the naturalist possesses about the relevant facts of human and amoeba life. By contrast, no one needs to possess such knowledge in order for mitosis to be happening, because the unity of the parts and phases of mitosis is a natural unity, and so independent of anyone’s knowledge of it. But in intentional action the agent herself must possess knowledge “in intention” of her own action, or there is no unified action at all. The reason is that the unity of an action is not a natural but a practically rational unity. For that reason, no one can be moving his arm up and down as the first step in an *intentional* act of poisoning without knowing that in moving his arm up and down he is taking the first step in an act of poisoning. This suggests that the kind of constitutive principle at stake in the two different forms of vital process, and thus the kind of unity we find in each, while similar, is not identical. For only in the second case must the agent possess *self-consciousness* of the source of the principle itself. So only in the second case can we speak of self-constitution: of a process that comes to be because the agent herself determines it to come to be.

Now, if the unity of an intentional action is a unity of practical reason and will, and if this unity must be known by the agent in order for it to be realized in some

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<sup>36</sup> Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, chapter two.

<sup>37</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*. §32, p. 57.

matter—i.e., in order for there to be an action at all—then we should expect an account of practical knowledge to be related to an account of practical reasoning. And this is precisely what we find in Anscombe’s text.<sup>38</sup>

In the next section, I will argue that the practical syllogism is a formal representation of the practically rational unity of action. The syllogism represents the action in the form of a practical argument that displays how the performance of the action (its conclusion) preserves the good articulated by its premises. The practical syllogism, then, is the place where the knowledge requirement and the goodness requirement meet and become mutually illuminating. For in knowing the rational order of the action in the form of a syllogism, one simultaneously knows the good the action realizes.

#### **IV. Practical Knowledge and the Practical Syllogism**

It may help to forestall objections and confusions by first saying what the practical syllogism is *not*. First, the practical syllogism is not a representation of some thought process that occurs prior to or during action. Anscombe is not suggesting that we “syllogize” or that the syllogism lays bare the mental activity that must accompany or precede any instance of intentional action.<sup>39</sup>

Second, the syllogism is not a moral argument whose purpose is to show how we ought to act. Anscombe has three points in mind when she claims that the syllogism is not a proof of the moral goodness of actions. First, she notes that intrinsically evil action, such as gunning down Jewish school children because it “befits a Nazi” in his final hours to advance the final solution, can easily be transposed into *valid* syllogisms.<sup>40</sup> Second, in

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<sup>38</sup> Though the passage is rarely remarked upon, Anscombe writes that “the notion of ‘practical knowledge’ can only be understood if we first understand ‘practical reasoning.’ ‘Practical reasoning’ or ‘practical syllogism’ which means the same thing, was one of Aristotle’s best discoveries. Anscombe, *Intention*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> “If Aristotle’s account [of the syllogism] were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd.” Anscombe, *Intention*, 80. For a discussion of the syllogism in Aristotle that fits nicely with Anscombe’s interpretation, see Fernandez, “Reasoning and the Unity of Aristotle’s Account of Animal Motion.”

<sup>40</sup> It is no accident that Anscombe always chooses vicious actions such as murder as her main examples in *Intention*. For she warns us that, “in the present state of philosophy, it seems necessary to choose an example which is not obscured by the fact that moral approbation on the part of the writer or reader is called into play; for such approbation is in fact irrelevant to the *logical features* of practical reasoning but if it is evoked, it may seem to play a significant part.” Anscombe, *Intention*, 72, emphasis added. Her suggestion here is that we are bound to be confused about the practical syllogism if we allow our moral commitments and intuitions to creep into our analysis, as these moral commitments can only be understood in terms of some robust conception of human goodness, a topic that transcends the practical-logical material that is her focus in *Intention*.

order to prove that an act is morally good or bad we need to appeal to material beyond the syllogism.<sup>41</sup> And third, a morally good or excellent human life is not achieved solely by calculating means to ends in an intelligent way, but crucially depends on the possession of right appetites (or moral virtues).<sup>42</sup>

Finally, the practical syllogism is not a demonstration or an account of “ordinary reasoning” that concludes with a true proposition about what to do. As an example of such ordinary reasoning, Anscombe provides the following:

Everyone with money ought to give a beggar who asks him  
This man asking for money is a beggar  
I have money  
So I ought to give this man some money.<sup>43</sup>

Although this argument is plainly about action, and its conclusion recommends an action, Anscombe denies that it is an example of practical reasoning. The trouble is that action enters into the reasoning only at the level of its content or topic. But if a subject matter were enough to delineate a different kind of reasoning altogether, then Anscombe retorts, “one might easily wonder why no one has ever pointed out the mince pie syllogism: the peculiarity of this would be that it was about mince pies.”<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, it seems plain that there is nothing one could add to the reasoning shown above that could make it practical—so as to conclude in an action.<sup>45</sup> One cannot, for instance, insert a practical premise, like ‘charity is a human good’ or ‘charity is necessary for human life.’ This only further compounds the problem of how such reasoning could lead to the performance of an action, because it invites us to add yet another obvious but unhelpful premise, such as “I am a human being” or “Humans ought to seek their good.”<sup>46</sup> Adding premises will not help us with our problem, because practical reasoning is not reasoning to the truth of a proposition at all, but reasoning to

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<sup>41</sup> Anscombe, “Practical Inference,” 147. In order to do proper moral analysis, Anscombe argues, we would have to establish that there is a final or ultimate end of action and practical reasoning. Such arguments will necessarily draw on materials that transcend the practical syllogism proper.

<sup>42</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> For further arguments to this same conclusion, see Anselm Müller, “How Theoretical is Practical Reason?” and Candace Vogler, chapter two.

<sup>46</sup> This is the practical analogue of the lesson in Carroll’s famous dialogue. See Carroll, “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles.”

the performance of an action. This is why it typically has “the form of a calculation what to do and its conclusion is “an action whose point is shewn [sic] by the premises, which are now, so to speak, on active service.”<sup>47</sup> Practical reasoning, according to Anscombe, is practical in virtue of its end, aim or goal: it is reasoning towards the realization of what one has decided one wants through the use of one’s powers. This difference in aim, end, or goal marks the division between the kinds of reasoning.

Since practical reasoning is a different kind of reasoning than its theoretical counterpart, precisely because it is essentially *aimed* at realizing the good through action rather than at the preserving the truth of propositions, there is also a formal distinction between practical and theoretical inference. Understanding the formal difference in the kind of inferences made can aid our understanding of Anscombe’s account of the practical syllogism. In a less well known paper, “Practical Inference,” Anscombe notes that inference is related to the concept of validity, and moreover that “the validity of an inference is supposed to be a certain formal character,” the appreciation of which is “connected with the evaluation of grounds *qua* grounds.”<sup>48</sup> If there is a unique form of practical inference, then its validity will have a different kind of ground from the validity of theoretical inference. And this is where the role of the good comes into the account of practical reasoning. Anscombe writes,

In the sphere of practical reasoning, *goodness of the end* has the same role as truth of the premises has in theoretical reasoning. This is the great Aristotelian parallel: if it is right, then the goodness of the end and of the action is as much of an extra, as external to the validity of the reasoning, as truth of the premises and of the conclusion is an extra, is external to the validity of theoretical reasoning. As external, but not *more* external. We know that the externality is not total. For truth is the object of belief, and truth-preservingness an essential associate of validity in theoretical reasoning. The parallel will hold for practical reasoning.<sup>49</sup>

The distinction is grounded in the difference between cognition and appetite, and in particular, the difference between their formal objects. Anscombe’s suggestion is that the good is the formal object of a power of will, just as truth is the formal object of a power

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<sup>47</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> Anscombe, “Practical Inference,” 113.

<sup>49</sup> Anscombe, “Practical Inference,” p. 146.

of judgment.<sup>50</sup> That is, just as we believe  $p$  insofar as we take  $p$  to be in some sense true, we want to  $\phi$  insofar as we take  $\phi$ -ing to be in some sense good.<sup>51</sup> The conceptual relation between wanting to  $\phi$  and the good grounds the claim that goodness preservation is the “essential associate” of validity in specifically practical reasoning, just as the conceptual relation between belief and taking  $p$  to be true grounds the claim that truth preservation is the “essential associate” of validity in theoretical reasoning.

This connection is further grounded in the starting points or the reasoning or forms of argument. While the first premise of a theoretical argument is a representation of the content of some possible belief or judgment, which, in conjunction with suitable premises yields a proposition as a conclusion that preserves the truth of the premises, the first premise of a practical argument is a representation of a possible object of will, which, in conjunction with premises stipulating the suitable means to attain it, yields an action that preserves the good of the premises by realizing it in action. In a practical syllogism the premises show what good the action (the conclusion) serves. And the construction of such an argument presupposes that there is some end (or good) that someone is striving to realize. And so the difference in these forms of inference and their associated forms of validity has ultimately to do with the different aims of the reasoning itself: theoretical reason aims to understand being or what is, and its measure is truth, whereas practical reason aims to realize what ought to be, and its measure is the good.

Having said what the syllogism is not, as well as making clear what marks the division between the kinds of reasoning in question, we are now in a position to say what the practical syllogism is, and how it relates to our account of practical knowledge. Anscombe tells us that the syllogism “describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions; the same order I arrived at in discussing what ‘the intentional

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<sup>50</sup> Anscombe also suggests this in *Intention*, where she writes that “The conceptual connexion between ‘wanting’ (in the sense which we have isolated, for of course we are not speaking of the ‘I want’ of a child who screams for something) and ‘good’ can be compared to the conceptual connexion between ‘judgment’ and ‘truth.’ Truth is the object of judgment, and good the object of wanting [...], p. 76. I want to distance the account Anscombe gives from a recent defense of “the old formula of the schools“ given by Sergio Tenenbaum. I think the latter account is different in important ways from what I am trying to defend here, especially in its emphasis on “evaluative judgment” rather than practical judgment. See Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good*.

<sup>51</sup> Of course this claim is controversial and many will deny it. I cannot take up a defense of the “guise of the good” thesis here. For some recent defenses of the view, see Vogler and Boyle and Lavin.

action' was [...] <sup>52</sup> This is the practical means-end (or A-D) order of action discussed in the previous section. If the series of 'Why?' questions is meant to help elicit this order, thereby eliciting the agent's practical reasons or grounds, the syllogism is meant to formalize it, thereby making it into a proper subject of rational analysis. Indeed the practically rational unity of the parts and phases of an intentional action—the means-end, A-D order—is what is represented in the practical syllogism: it is the order of action in the form of a practical argument, the conclusion of which is the realization of the good specified in the premises. As the conclusion of a practical argument, the action is intelligible in light of its premises, which "shew what good, what use, the action is."<sup>53</sup> Such an order, we have seen, can only come to be in the agent's knowledge that it is so coming to be. But now we are in a position to see how this knowledge relates to the good, and why practical reasoning is at the center of the account.

In order to make these connections more clear, let us turn back to Anscombe's original example to see how we can represent his action in the form of a practical argument. Anscombe tells us that what is represented in the first (or major) premise is the intended end the agent seeks to realize (poisoning the Nazis). The first premise, as we should expect given her remarks about the character of practical reasoning and inference, is a representation of an object of will, or a rational form of desire. Much of the sections dedicated to practical reasoning are taken up with characterizing this restricted sense of wanting, but for our purposes two hallmarks of it are especially salient: (1) its role as the starting point of practical reasoning and (2) its rational or intentional character, which can be explained by its relation to the 'Why?' question in the special sense that is the topic of *Intention*.

With respect to (1), Anscombe follows Aristotle in taking the starting point or principle (the *arche*) of any practical reasoning to be something wanted in a specifically rational sense, something that is always at a distance from the agent's present possession.<sup>54</sup> The point is straightforward: unless there is something an agent wants, and

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<sup>52</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> Anscombe, "Practical Inference," p. 114.

<sup>54</sup> This does not imply a merely Humean instrumentalism about practical reason, since Humean instrumentalism presupposes that the end is given by passion rather than rational judgment. See Vogler,

does not presently possess, there is nothing for practical reason to operate on, or no work for it to do. The intended end gives practical reason a job—a goal or aim to achieve. We have already seen that without such an aim, practical reasoning cannot be practical at all—i.e., it cannot issue in an action. What can be brought into a first premise of a syllogism, then, is no mere idle wish or hope but something the agent is “trying to get.” An intended end, then, has to be something the agent at least believes it is within her power to attain.<sup>55</sup> Finally, an object of will must be self-consciously known by the agent. One cannot be aimed at something in the sense of trying to get it without self-conscious knowledge that one is so aimed and trying to get it.

With respect to (2), Anscombe argues that an object of will is an object of desire that goes beyond reference to something as merely pleasant or habitually pursued. This is the reason that Aristotle puts ‘should’ in his first premises. But Anscombe notes that this is not the ‘should’ or ‘ought’ of morality, but the sort of should that relates to her special sense of the question ‘Why?’ She reminds us that ‘should’ “is a rather light word with unlimited contexts of application,” some of which she mentions:

That athletes should keep in training, pregnant women watch their weight, film stars their publicity, that one should brush one’s teeth, that one should (not) be fastidious about one’s pleasures, that one should (not) tell fastidious ‘necessary’ lies, that chairmen in discussions should tactfully suppress irrelevancies, that someone learning arithmetic should practice a certain neatness, that machinery needs lubrication, that meals ought to be punctual, that we should (not) see the methods of ‘Linguistic Analysis’ in Aristotle’s philosophy...<sup>56</sup>

Anscombe is keen to underscore the fact that Aristotle’s use of ‘should’ should not make us think of the practical syllogism as essentially ethical or moral in character, but for all that ‘should,’ though “light” is still normative, and we still need to ask why it makes an appearance at all. And this brings us back around to the connections between objects of

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*Reasonably Vicious.* It is also worth noting that one might want to maintain something that one presently possesses, but that implies that its permanent possession is in some sense at a distance.

<sup>55</sup> It seems to be a general constraint on an object of intention that one possesses the practical skills necessary to attain it. Thus it seems impossible for me to intend to write a letter to my mother in Spanish, since I lack the skill. At best I can intend to learn Spanish now, on the grounds that I would someday like to write to my Mother in the language of Borges. For an excellent defense of the claim that practical skill is necessary for intention, see Will Small, “Practical Knowledge and the Structure of Action.” As for circumstances, I cannot intend to get an A in a class where the available grades are Pass and Fail. In short, my intentions are accountable to reality in myriad ways, precisely because they are not mere hopes or wishful beliefs but, as Anscombe says, an orientation toward an action—trying to get.

<sup>56</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 64. See also discussion in Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

will and the good, and the connections between intentional descriptions and what Anscombe calls “desirability characterizations.” {citations}

Anscombe writes that “the question, ‘What do you want?’ in the context of action explanation is the question ‘With a view to what are you doing X, Y, and Z?’, which are what he is doing. That is to say, it is a form of our question ‘Why?’ but with a slightly altered appearance.”<sup>57</sup> And she thinks that we can ask the ‘Why?’ question with regard to the intended end that appears in the first premise of a practical syllogism, and that we should expect an answer that shows how the pursuit of that end is desirable from the agent’s first person practical perspective. That is, the response to the question will be given under a description that shows how the agent conceives of the end as “in some sense good,” where ‘good’ can be formally characterized as ‘useful’ (instrumentally good for the realization of some further end), ‘suitable’ (good in itself given the agent’s vision of the good human life in general), or ‘pleasant’ (as something the agent is aware of enjoying).<sup>58</sup> Without this relation to the good and the question ‘Why?’, Anscombe thinks that the idea of a specifically rational form of wanting fails to have any special sense.<sup>59</sup> Again, the agent’s ability to answer the ‘Why?’ question when queried of her intended end, displays her practical knowledge of that end under the relevant intentional descriptions.

Let us return to our example to show how such knowledge of the end must be practical knowledge. Suppose that we ask our pumper why he wants to kill the inhabitants of the house. It is clear from the text that he does not simply find himself wanting to kill (it’s not a mysterious itch he needs to scratch) nor does he have a history of finding murder a pleasant thing to do; rather, he has determined himself to kill these party chiefs on grounds he can make intelligible to others who want to know. We are told that he knows the people inside are in the business of exterminating the Jews and instigating a world war and that he has calculated that “if these people are destroyed

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<sup>57</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> For an excellent discussion of this threefold characterization of the good, see Candace Vogler, chapter two.

<sup>59</sup> Of course, some reductive causal accounts of action are willing to give up any notion of practical intelligibility in their account. For a particularly instructive example of this admission, see Kieran Setiya, *Reasons Without Rationalism*, chapter 3. [check citation]



some good men will get into power and govern well, or even institute the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and secure a good life for all the people.”<sup>60</sup>

The man’s ability to give such responses to the ‘Why?’ question demonstrates that he can connect his intention to the other ends that constitute his life, which itself is a thing in progress. His ability to do this, in turn, demonstrates that he operates under some general conception of how he ought to live, in virtue of which his tendency or striving for this particular end, here and now, and the efforts he is taking to realize it concretely, can be made practically intelligible to others.

In general we expect that a sane, human adult can see how what he does connects with his further ends and his general conception of how he ought to get on in life. Insofar as this is not the case—i.e., insofar as he is unable to do this—we have grounds to suspect that the act may not be fully intentional or voluntary, and we may have to look into mitigating factors (such as the presence of a psychological disorder that interfere with or handicaps his capacity to reason practically) that might lessen the agent’s authorship of and responsibility for his action. In the typical case, however, an agent knows his end qua end—he recognizes how it is justified in a practical way by its role in service to his other ends, which are ordered in accordance with his general conception of how to live (or what is the same thing in the practical context of action explanation, some conception of the good). To be an object of will or rational desire is for an action to be grasped by the agent performing it in its inferential relations to the wider context of his representation is essential to it being an object of will, or specifically rational form of desire. It is also a productive representation, because it is the starting point of the reasoning that leads to the performance of the action represented by the conclusion of the syllogism; without such a starting point, practical reasoning has no work to do.

The representation of the means in subsequent premises is also essentially practical. To see this point, suppose that one intends to roast a pig for dinner. One way to realize that end is to burn down the house. It is doubtful, however, that anyone who is not already hellbent on the destruction of his property would choose such a means to such an end. This shows that means are chosen under what we might call suitability constraints—constraints that come from the connections between this particular choice,

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<sup>60</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, §23, p. 37.

the goal in question, and the facts about the life that is in progress and the particular circumstances one finds oneself in. Thus even the choice of means is essentially practical, because it too is made with an implicit reach ahead to the wider context of one's practical knowledge of how one's life ought to be progressing.

Now, the conclusion of the syllogism is “an action whose point is shewn by the premises, which are now, so to speak, on active service.”<sup>61</sup> In fact, the conclusion, the performance, is the realization or execution of the order of intention specified in the premises. We may, for that reason, call it the order of execution. It is the very same rational A-D order, with the difference that, as the scholastic dictum says, “what is first in the order of intention is last in the order of execution.”<sup>62</sup> That is, what is stated first in the syllogism (the end or the good wanted) is the very last thing to be attained by the agent (and will only be attained if she succeeds in executing her will). Now, both orders—intention (A-D) and execution (D-A) take the form of Aristotelian necessities; they represent their elements as good insofar as they are necessary to the attainment of one's ends. For this reason, the question ‘Why?’ in the special sense applies to any part of phase of these orders.

It should be clear by now that there could be no explanation of how such a rational, means-end order undertaken for the sake of some good could be realized in matter in absence of the agent's practical knowledge of it. For such an order or unity could only be supplied by the self-conscious operations of practical reason and will. And intentional descriptions are those that fit into such an order and can be arranged into an appropriate syllogism. Therefore, in knowing what one is doing, one knows what one has determined oneself to do (to realize an end or good through this specific means), and in so knowing produces this order through the use of one's own powers. Acting intentionally, then, as an exercise of this kind of practical self-knowledge, is a kind of self-constitution: it is to be the self-conscious source or principle of one's own movements.

We can now connect this practical self-knowledge of action with Anscombe's thoughts about “the great Aristotelian parallel” in practical reasoning. The action or

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<sup>61</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 60.

<sup>62</sup> One finds essentially the same thought in Aristotle. See *De Anima*, III 433a, where he writes, “that which is last in the process of [practical] thinking is the beginning of the action.”

performance, represented as a conclusion of the syllogism, is a preservation of the goodness of a particular end sought (first premise) through some particular means (second premise). In concluding or acting, one realizes this practically rational order through the use of one's agential powers other than will and practical reason, such as the powers of perception and locomotion. The syllogism will be practically valid if its conclusion really is the execution or realization of the practically rational order specified in the premises, and if what is so specified meets some determinate measure of correct calculation; that is, if the particular end wanted really can in fact be achieved through the specifically determined means, and if the agent does not fail to execute her intention so conceived. If all this is so, then the goodness articulated in the premises is preserved in the intentional performance. It is therefore no mere idle wish or vain hope but a form of "trying to get" some attainable end, which further presupposes that there are requirements and circumstances that factor into whether something can be an object of intention and represented in the first premise of a syllogism.<sup>63</sup>

This shows that the conclusion of the syllogism is a kind of "making true" of the intentional order—making true in a way that preserves the goodness of the end intended in the first premise and preserved through the second premise specifying the means. This is a notion of a specifically practical form of truth, which is a necessary concomitant to an account of practical knowledge. In the case of a valid practical syllogism, what is made true is that "what happens" comes under the intentional descriptions specified in the premises. This is "the truth one produces in acting" or "truth in agreement with desire." If the truth is *practical*, then it must be related to the order of execution—to making true or realizing the good articulated in the order of intention. Such an account of truth would fit Anscombe's schema of practical error as a mistake not in judgment but in the performance.

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<sup>63</sup> It seems to be a general constraint on an object of intention that one possesses the practical skills necessary to attain it. Thus it seems impossible for me to intend to write a letter to my mother in Spanish, since I lack the skill. At best I can intend to learn Spanish now, on the grounds that I would someday like to write to my Mother in the language of Borges. For an excellent defense of the claim that practical skill is necessary for intention, see Will Small, "Practical Knowledge and the Structure of Action." As for circumstances, I cannot intend to get an A in a class where the available grades are Pass and Fail. In short, my intentions are accountable to reality in myriad ways, precisely because they are not mere hopes or wishful beliefs but, as Anscombe says, an orientation toward an action—trying to get.

But just as validity is not the final analysis of an argument (a good argument must also be sound), so truth in agreement with desire is not sufficient for practical truth to the fullest degree (this would be truth in agreement with right desire, or the realization of intentional descriptions that are not merely a correct means to one's end, but moreover that the end being sought is truly good). And so truth here is said relative not only to the content of descriptions and their form, but also the level of generality of description. The descriptions may be false once we go up to a higher level of practical generality. For instance, it may be practically true that I am 'poisoning some Nazis' but false that I am, in this very same act of poisoning, also 'bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth' (it will be practically false if murder does not in fact serve that end, a question that could only be settled by an inquiry into a substantive account of goodness, which lies outside the domain of action theory proper). Furthermore, I may not be making true the most general description of human action: 'living well' or 'living a good human life.' Of course it will be practically false if murder is never a part of a good human life (a question that is off stage for now). This suggests that what can be said to be practically true is relative to intensional contexts, such that it makes sense to think of the possession of practical truth as something that comes in degrees. Full practical truth, on such a picture, is possessed only by the practically wise who are living well in all that they do. But to speak of practical wisdom and living well presupposes a measure of right calculation, which on the view being defended here, would have to take the form of a final or ultimate end towards which all other ends get their practical intelligibility. That there is such an end is strongly implied by the connections between the reasonableness of the first and second premise and one's general conception of how one's life is progressing on the whole. But the defense of the necessity of such an end is outside the scope of this paper.

## **V. Practical Knowledge and Practical Wisdom**

We have now arrived at an account of Anscombe's practical knowledge requirement that is essentially related to the good. Such an account held out the promise of unifying all the features of such knowledge that Anscombe mentions in *Intention*. As a reminder, here is the list of such features:

- (1) When the knowledge fails, the mistake is not one of *judgment* but of performance

- (2) The contradiction of a statement of this knowledge is not a contrary statement of fact about the way the world is, but the doing of an action whose intention contradicts the intention specified in the statement.
- (3) The knowledge is only comprehended to the extent that practical reasoning is
- (4) Its possession implies know-how or skill
- (5) The knowledge is productive of its own object, or “the cause of what it understands.”
- (6) Any object of this knowledge is *formally* such as to be characterized as subject to the question ‘Why?’ and is related to a practically rational order.

Now we are finally in a position to make the relevant connections between the items on this list. Let us start with (3). According to my interpretation of *Intention*, an action is typically a material event that is both brought about and constituted by an agent’s practical self-knowledge of it. On this view, we cannot take an action for granted as some effect we can specify independently of the agent’s practical reasons and then search for the psychological antecedents that rationalized and caused it in the right sort of way. Such a view, call it the standard causal view, leaves the action itself un-theorized (it simply takes it for granted that an action can be an independently specified event that stands on one side of a distinctive causal relation, whose antecedents can explain such an event in a way that “rationalizes” it). On Anscombe’s account, by contrast, an action is no mere effect or part of a chain of effects with special causes; rather an action is an essentially intentional event whose coming to be depends essentially upon the agent’s practical knowledge that it is so coming to be. And what the agent knows is the intentional, means-end order that she is in the process of realizing in some matter: she knows the end she is trying to realize and the means through which she is realizing it, and to know this is the same as knowing what the good or the point of realizing it is. And so (6) is true: an intentional action, or an object of practical knowledge, is *formally characterized* as subject to Anscombe’s ‘Why?’ question, whose application displays the so-called “A-D order”—that is, the practically rational, means-end order that constitutes the action itself into a kind. Intentional descriptions will all be such as potentially to be brought under this general form, and so as to be related to a potential practical syllogism that shows the good or the point of the performance.

Because an intentional action is an essentially intentional and practically rational event that can only come to be in the agent’s self-knowledge that it is so coming to be, this knowledge is productive of its own object, or is “the cause of what it understands.” (5) Again, this is related to practical reasoning (3) and its inherent teleological order

towards acting or realizing some good—practical reasoning is practical in virtue of its end or goal, and the ultimate end or goal of practical reasoning is to realize a good human life or to live well. In acting, the agent executes or realizes the intentional order that she settles upon through practical thought and will—an intentional order that is the mirror image of the order of execution she is carrying out (these two orders are reflected in the syllogism as premises and conclusion). Acting, then, can be understood as the conclusion of practical reasoning, as its implementation, realization, or execution in some matter. Here we have the idea of the agent herself as a kind of cause, not understood solely in terms of efficient causality, but in terms of the agent moving herself through the exercise of reason and will towards the realization of her own good. I suggest that we think of this kind of causality in terms of “self-constitution.” What is essential to this account of self-constitution is that the agent relates her particular movement to more general conceptions of how the movement fits within the progress of her life on the whole—the realization of her general conception of how to live or happiness.

On such a picture of action as self-constitution through practical self-knowledge, the agent must realize her ends through some rationally specified means. But the specification of the means is still an essentially practical affair. That is, it is constrained by one’s other ends and one’s practical capacities or skills. (4) Practical reasoning (3) can only get going in the first place if one is trying to get something, if there is something that a person already intends. But we cannot intend things that we lack the skill to bring about—this is a constraint on this form of wanting. And so this kind of self-constitution, of making things happen in the knowledge that one is making them happen because one has decided to make these things happen, depends on know-how or skill.

Of course, this practical self-knowledge is not infallible. We can fail to do what we intend, we can fail to realize our practical reason and will successfully (1 and 2) In this case our claims to knowledge are falsified. But here we again have to articulate a distinctively practical kind of failure. This may happen in at least two ways: (1) the agent herself fails or (2) the agent is prevented from realizing her intention by someone who is trying to contradict her practical reason/will.

The first kind of failure is what Anscombe calls “a mistake in the performance.” Here the error is not in the judgment that corresponds to either a means or an end. It is a

mistake of self-constitution, of failing to do what you set yourself to do. We may say, given the account, that it is a failure to “make true” the intentional descriptions of the process that is underway, of what is happening. This is a distinctively practical kind of truth, “the truth one produces in acting according to choice and decision.”

The second kind of failure involves what Anscombe calls a “practical contradiction.” A practical contradiction, as Anscombe says in her discussion, is the performance of an action that whose point is to prevent the opposing intention from being realized. Such a contradiction takes it that it would not be good for the action to be realized, and proceeds to undertake it in order to frustrate or prevent this from happening. The agent intends to stop someone else from “making true” some intentional descriptions of what is happening, in the belief that doing this is “practically necessary” the means to some end that it grasped as good from that agent’s point of view.

By way of conclusion, I would like to note how this account of practical self-knowledge is situated within a larger project of advancing a broadly Aristotelian account of virtue. According to the Aristotelian perspective, human beings are living creatures who strive to realize their own good, like all other living things. We can think of *form* in Aristotle’s philosophy in terms of a constitutive principle: it’s a principle that both defines and measures the activity of the living thing in question. So, what defines the movements of a plant as “budding out” as opposed to “wilting” or “taking in nutrients” is by way of reference to form, and what determines whether that process is being carried out successfully or poorly is similarly determined. On Anscombe’s account of action, form functions in a similar way. That is, we can understand self-knowledge of one’s general conception of human form (of living well or happiness) as a constitutive principle of action explanation, since it too ultimately defines and measure human actions *as* human actions. This principle self-consciously structures one’s life into something that is practically intelligible—i.e., something whose parts and phases are subject to a special sense of the question ‘Why?’ in Anscombe’s sense.

Ultimately, on my view, practical knowledge of actions is the basis for understanding practical wisdom, or the sort of disposition to knowledge that the virtuous person possesses. On the traditional view of practical wisdom, it is the virtue that perfects the practical intellect, which is the intellectual capacity to determine the

appropriate means to one's desired ends. The ends provide the measure of correct calculation. On the account I've articulated here, we can see why it would be true, as the Aristotelian tradition maintains, that practical wisdom depends on moral virtue (and vice versa). For practical reasoning presupposes that the agent is already directed towards some ends, and whether one is directed towards good ends depends upon having perfected appetites (or moral virtue).

It is also part of the Aristotelian picture that the most general ends or goods of human life are not chosen by reason, but are given to us by our common human nature. But given that the starting point of practical reasoning is always a *rational* form of desire, these ends ought to be understood in terms of universal principles of reason, which is exactly how the Aristotelian tradition defines them. The account of action given by Anscombe in *Intention*, at least as I've articulated it here, gives us a foundation for developing such an account of practical reason and virtue that is grounded in human nature. Such an account would understand practical wisdom as a perfection of our capacity for practical self-knowledge, a capacity that is exercised any time a human being acts in the way characteristic of a man.



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