

# The Content of Practical Knowledge

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## Abstract

This paper aims to give a charitable and comprehensible interpretation of the concept of practical knowledge in *Intention*, G. E. M. Anscombe's famous monograph. In particular, it focuses on her claim that practical knowledge is present even if the agent fails to execute his intention. I argue that (1) a rejection of this claim is unacceptable, and that (2) the content of practical knowledge should be formulated as "I am X-ing", with which this concept can be coherently interpreted.

## Keywords

Intentional action, *Intention*, Practical knowledge

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## Introduction

As is widely acknowledged, the concept of practical knowledge is a key to understanding Anscombe's *Intention*. However, this concept appears to be itself puzzling, not only because it falls under the concept of non-observational knowledge that is even harder to understand, but also

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because of Anscombe's seeming crazy claim that one's practical knowledge of his own intentional action "would have been the same" even if he fails to execute his intention and bring about any actual happening (Anscombe, 1957).<sup>1</sup>

One strategy towards this is to simply give up this claim to avoid such a kind of "empty" knowledge, and say practical knowledge is only achieved in cases in which the agent's intention gets executed successfully. But as a sympathetic reader of *Intention*, I suggest that we cannot do so, because otherwise it would be impossible for us to understand practical knowledge as "the cause of what it understands", which is crucial even to Anscombe's whole account of intentional actions. On the contrary, we have to see the subtlety in her claim first and thus be cautious to either accept or reject it. This requires some reasonable interpretation of the content of practical knowledge, about which Anscombe herself speaks vaguely.

This paper has two purposes, one negative and the other positive. The negative one is to show that the strategy mentioned above is actually unacceptable. And the positive one is to give a formulation of the content of practical knowledge and interpret Anscombe's claim coherently with this formulation. I begin by summarizing Anscombe's discussions on practical knowledge in *Intention* (section 1) and explain why it is vital for understanding her philosophy to keep practical knowledge the same in failed cases (section 2). In section 3, I will give my formulation of the content of practical knowledge, which is basically Thompsonian (2011), and that of theoretical<sup>2</sup> knowledge in turn. Then in section 4 and 5, I will explain away the seeming puzzle that practical and theoretical knowledge cannot share the same object with the former remaining and the latter disappearing in failed cases. Section 6 consists of responses to criticisms and includes a further clarification of some claims made in section 2. The final section is a summary.

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1 Citations of *Intention* will be abbreviated in the form "(section number, page number)" hereafter.

2 For Anscombe, the words "contemplative", "speculative" and "theoretical" are interchangeable when they are used as opposite to "practical". I will use "theoretical" throughout this paper.

## 1. Anscombe's Characterisation and the Difficulty

The term "practical knowledge" first appears in §32 in *Intention*:

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 the acting. (57)

Several characterisations of practical knowledge can be seen in this piece of text. First, it differs in kind from theoretical knowledge in the sense that the facts, or actions in this context, should be in accordance with practical knowledge, while the theoretical knowledge should be in accordance with the facts. This is also Anscombe's point when she quotes Theophrastus: "The mistake is not one of judgment but of performance." (ibid.)

Secondly, though practical knowledge is as stated different from theoretical knowledge, they share the same object. This point is specified in §29, after Anscombe makes a distinction between two kinds of knowledge, i.e. knowledge by observation and that without observation, and claims that knowledge about one's own intentional action, e.g. opening the window, belongs to the latter. She begins §29 by pointing out the difficulty in this account:

The difficulty however is this: What can opening the window be except making such-and-such movements with such-and-such a result? And in that case what can knowing one is opening the window be except knowing that that is taking place? Now if there are two ways of knowing here, one of which I call knowledge of one's intentional action and the other of which I call knowledge by observation of what takes place, then must there not be two objects of knowledge? How can one speak of two different knowledges of exactly the same thing? [H]ere the description, opening the window, is identical, whether it is

known by observation or by its being one's intentional action. (51)

And a solution to this problem is formulated as her famous slogan, "I *do* what *happens*." (52) That is to say, one's action, opening the window, is *identical* to what happens, that the window has been opened, provided that "the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing" (52–53). So the *theoretical* knowledge of what happens and the *practical* knowledge of one's own intentional action have exactly the same object, namely opening the window.

However, the problem arises from her controversial example of a man writing "I am a fool" on a blackboard:

Orders, however, can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed. That intention for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so that the words did not appear. And my knowledge would have been the same even if this had happened. If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens, how can it be knowledge of what does happen? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case! On the other hand Theophrastus' remark holds good: 'the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment'. (§45, 82)

This seems really mysterious. If my intention fails to get executed and nothing happens, what would be the object of my knowledge? But Anscombe insists that it is not at all a kind of "empty" knowledge, and quotes Theophrastus trying to convince her readers but offers no further explanation, which makes it even harder to understand.

I argue that Anscombe is not making a careless mistake here. Rather, she does have a point when making this remark, for it is in fact necessary for her to keep the same practical knowledge even in failed cases.

## **2. Practical Knowledge in Failed Cases**

The reason why practical knowledge must remain lies in our first characterisation of practical knowledge, namely its being prior to reality. In this section, I will take a closer look at this characterisation, and show that it would conflict deeply with Anscombe's text if we simply give up the thesis that the agent had

practical knowledge in failed cases.

### 2.1 Priority

In what sense is practical knowledge prior? A hint can be found in 48, which says "it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention" (87), as well as a more detailed remark:

'Intentional action' always presupposes what might be called 'knowing one's way about' the matters described in the description under which an action can be called intentional, and this knowledge is exercised in the action and is practical knowledge. (89)

That the agents' practical knowledge gives the descriptions implies that there would be no such descriptions of his action if the agent lacked practical knowledge. To see how this is related to our thesis, we should make sense of this "no such descriptions" first. Of course it does not mean that the descriptions are not part of our language, but means something closer to the absence of the connection between certain descriptions and "the matters", or "what is going on".

Consider Anscombe's pumping man example. The man's action has (at least) four descriptions "under which [it] can be called intentional"—moving his arm up and down (*A*), pumping (*B*), replenishing the water supply (*C*) and poisoning the inhabitants (*D*)—because to these her "Why?" question has application. And according to her discussion in §26, a series *A–B–C–D* can be formed where the action under the former description is being done with that under the latter as intention. I suggest that "no such descriptions" means that there is no well-formed series of the agent's action where the descriptions in question can find its place. And if that happens, there would be a gap between the descriptions and the goings on, which satisfies the interpretation in the previous paragraph.

Let me give an instance: There would be "no such descriptions" if the question "Why?" is simply refused application, i. e. actions under those descriptions are not done intentionally. Thus if the pumping man is, while doing his work, *unintentionally* clicking out the drumbeat of the song "Walking on the Moon" (*E*), then there will be no description *E* of his action, so he does not possess practical knowledge of an action under description *E* because *E* does not appear in any series of *his* action. This fulfils the condition of "no such

descriptions" trivially.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course, still other causes of the nonexistence of certain descriptions. One of those, of course, would be that the agent makes a practical mistake, which is related to Anscombe's discussion on practical reasoning. I will come back to this in 6.1.

As can be seen, it turns out to be a requisite that practical knowledge remains even if the agent's intention fails to get executed. To see this, suppose the opposite in the writing man example. If the man lacked practical knowledge of his writing "I am a fool" when the chalk marks fail to appear, there would be no such description "writing 'I am a fool'" for his possible-but-not-actual action, which means the description cannot be found in any of his series. Hence, the proposition "The man fails in writing 'I am a fool'" would be quite bizarre because there was no description "writing 'I am a fool'" at all so that it would make no sense to talk about *his* action under that description either. But everyone would say that this proposition is true. Therefore, our supposition must be false.

Compare, if the formulation is not clear enough, this case and the trivial case above. Suppose the pumping man is *unintentionally* doing *E* and the rhythm gradually goes wrong. Still, the sentence "The man fails in clicking out the drumbeat of 'Walking on the Moon'" would be strange for doing *E* is not his intentional action at all. Similarly, one does not *fail in making oneself sleep* when one is reading this paper (I hope).

I conclude that since practical knowledge is in this sense prior to intentional actions, it must remain in failed cases, otherwise there would be no action (*under that description*) that the agent fails to do. The strategy that practical knowledge is only achieved in successful cases is thus unacceptable.

## 2.2 "The Cause of What it Understands"

Further, rejecting such a strategy is also required for understanding Anscombe's obscure remark that practical knowledge is "the cause of what it understands" (§48, 87). Here "the cause" is commonly construed as the *formal* cause of an intentional action. As Schwenkler (2015) puts it:

[A]t the core of Anscombe's account of action is the idea that practical

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3 The following example of Anscombe's own can also be seen as an instance of such a trivial fulfilment: "By the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions I mean the knowledge that one denies having if when asked e.g. 'Why are you ringing that bell?' one replies 'Good heavens! I didn't know I was ringing it!'" (§28, 50–51)

thought is not an efficient cause that sets the visible parts of our body into motion, but the formal principle that unifies an action, or that in virtue of which certain physical happenings are constituted as parts of a person's intentional activity. (p. 6)

This interpretation is supported by textual evidence. First, Anscombe's *A–D* series establishes a means-end chain that "unifies an action". That is, on the one hand, the "Why?" question can be asked in one direction, and a proper answer to it gives a further intention, or an end, of the action under question. On the other hand, the "How?" question is applicable in the other direction, an answer to which gives a means (§26, 46-47). Secondly, when she talks about practical reasoning, which she thinks necessary for understanding the concept of practical knowledge, her arguments suggest that practical reasoning mostly involves "a calculation of means to ends" (§38, 73),<sup>4</sup> and practical knowledge seems to be required in this process.

Now it is better to take a closer look at the concept of practical knowledge. Since Anscombe's conception of intentional action can be read as "a unity of means and ends" (Schwenkler, p. 6), practical knowledge is such that if an agent possesses it, the calculative structure of his action can be made explicit through practical reasoning, which "proceeds from a general action-type to a particular bodily movement by identifying means to a given end" (p. 5) and reveals the order of his action.<sup>5</sup> Roughly speaking, practical knowledge can be read as the agent's capacity to form a series of descriptions of his action. In this sense, it provides the form of, thus is the formal cause of, an intentional action.

If practical knowledge works as a "binder" that unifies different descriptions of an action by the means-end relation between them, then this would be another piece of evidence that it should remain in failed cases. Possessing practical knowledge in this sense is connected to the agent's reason for acting, which is also prior to the action for it provides a proper answer to the

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4 An exception discussed by Anscombe is where the answer to the "What for?" question is "I just did, for no particular reason". But it has been shown in her text that it is okay for her (and me). See §38, 73, and also §21, 34.

5 Notice that this formulation (a) entails that practical knowledge can only be possessed by the agent himself, because the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, and (b) does not require practical reasoning to be an actual mental process, but only that "it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions" (§42, 80).

"Why?" question by which the action can be called intentional. Even in failed cases, the agent is still able to give answers to the "Why?" questions though some of those, i. e. his expressions of intention, are (theoretically) false. This shows he still has practical knowledge because otherwise a proper answer to the "Why?" question would be impossible.<sup>6</sup>

However, there still seems to be a puzzle if we consider the other characterisation of practical knowledge: its sharing the same object with theoretical knowledge. If practical knowledge is prior to the action while theoretical knowledge is "derived from the objects known" (48, 87), and moreover if the former remains in failed cases while the latter does not, then how can they have exactly the same object?

### 3. The Content of Practical Knowledge

To solve the puzzle, let me first give my proposal on the content of these two kinds of knowledge. The term "content" is introduced to refer to the proposition that is known, which is different from the term "object", as I will discuss in section 5.

The content of Anscombe's practical knowledge, as far as I am concerned, consists of the progressive form of the action under a description in the first person. More specifically, it can be formulated as:

I am X-ing.

For example, the writing man practically knows that *he is writing "I am a fool"*.

This idea partly comes from Thompson (2011), who claims that "[t]he content of Anscombe's practical knowledge is progressive, imperfective, in medias res" (p. 209). So before I go on to argue for my formulation, I would like to clarify in this section in what aspects I follow him.

I use the progressive form in the same sense as Thompson does. A verb phrase in the progressive form is imperfective. That is, unlike the perfective form, it does not imply that the corresponding intentional action is completed. To use Thompson's own example, saying "I am crossing the road" does not mean I

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6 This is also related to what I will discuss in 6.1.



crossed the road, because there is a possibility of H-bomb going off so that I never make it to the other side of the road (p. 205). As Anscombe suggests, knowledge of this is non-observational.

Observational knowledge is always theoretical, but the inverse does not hold. In other words, non-observational knowledge may be theoretical as well. Within the domain of knowledge about oneself, that practical knowledge is a subclass of non-observational knowledge (§8, 14) never entails that theoretical knowledge belongs to the observational. Rather, if these two distinctions, theoretical/practical and observational/non-observational, are each exhaustive, then what is entailed by some baby logic is that observational knowledge is a subset of theoretical knowledge, rather than the converse. This makes room for the possibility of non-observational theoretical knowledge about oneself.

With these considerations, what I want to suggest is that when the agent is in the process of acting, he can possess a piece of theoretical knowledge of his action that has verbally the same content with the corresponding practical knowledge. Namely

I am X-ing.

Here the agent's theoretical knowledge may or may not be observational.<sup>7</sup> In either case, there would be no direct contradiction to its being theoretical.

Thompson does not talk about the content of theoretical knowledge. But I believe that there is no conflict between us in spirit because, on the one hand, he only says that the content of practical knowledge is in the progressive form, but does not say that of theoretical knowledge must be perfective; on the other, he emphasises that an agent's intentional action is "perceptible and watchable by others" (p. 201), and the instances he gives, e.g. "he is setting up a camera, she is crossing a road" (p. 206), are also in the progressive form, which indicates that progressive propositions can be known theoretically.

In sum, both theoretical and practical knowledge of the agent has verbally the same content "I am X-ing". My arguments for this account come later. But before we go there, let me point out that it is at least implicit in *Intention* as well. For example:

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7 It is sometimes hard to distinguish between non-observational and observational knowledge, especially with respect to knowledge of own intentional action. But I plan not to discuss it further since my topic here is not non-observational knowledge.

Thus in any operation we really can speak of two knowledges 欵 ? -the account that one could give of *what one was doing*, without adverting to observation; and the account of exactly *what is happening* at a given moment (say) to the material one is working on. The one is practical, the other speculative. (48, 88-89; my italics)

Notice that (a) "what one was doing" and "what is happening", are both in the progressive form, and (b) Anscombe merely says that practical knowledge is non-observational, but says nothing about theoretical knowledge.

Besides, there is a relatively minor difference between my account and Thompson's. He holds a strong view that "there is practical knowledge only when the thing is precisely NOT done, not PAST" (p. 209). But according to my reading, Anscombe's view is not that strong. She could agree that an agent practically knows that he was X-ing yesterday if he was X-ing yesterday, and likewise possesses practical knowledge after the action is done. Whether it is the case or not, it does not matter much in this paper because I will restrict my discussion to practical knowledge in acting, which is always present.<sup>8</sup>

With these clarifications, let us look at the failed cases, where the difference between two kinds of knowledge is most typical: Theoretical knowledge disappears, but practical knowledge remains.

#### **4. Practical Mistake versus Theoretical Mistake**

The difference between theoretical and practical mistakes is shown in Anscombe's analogy between orders and expressions of intention in §31-§32. She begins by asking what "the contradictory of a description of one's own intentional action" (§31, 54-55) is, and invites us to consider an analogous case of following an order:

A certain soldier was court-martialled (or something of the sort) for insubordinate behaviour. He had, it seems, been 'abusive' at his medical examination. The examining doctor had told him to clench his teeth; whereupon he took them out, handed them to the doctor and said 'You clench them'.

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<sup>8</sup> And I think this is also what Anscombe does: she mainly cares about intention in acting, which is present as well.

She then points out that

Now the statement: 'The water is running out of a pipe round the corner' stands in the same relation to the statement 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' as does 'My teeth are false' to the order 'Clench your teeth' (ibid., 55)

These two statements, "The water is running out of a pipe round the corner" and "my teeth are false" are similar because they both indicate a mistake in *language*. In the soldier case, "there is no possibility of the order being executed, no such thing as obeying it nor as disobeying it" (Wiseman, 2016, p. 164) because the man has no teeth at all. In this sense, we can call it an unsound order and blame the order-giver. That is, it is the doctor who should apologize for giving an inexecutable order and retract it, but not the soldier for not having real teeth. The pumping man case is analogous in the sense that the agent can be considered as both the order-giver and order-follower (p. 167).<sup>9</sup> So similarly, the expression of intention is at fault because the man who forms the intention is wrong about the *facts* so that there is no possibility of his intention being executed. Therefore, here the mistake is of the *judgement*<sup>10</sup> instead of *performance*, hence such kind of mistake is *theoretical*.

Having this in mind, recall our writing man example. If the words do not appear on the blackboard, the expression "I am writing 'I am a fool'" is wrong theoretically because the agent makes a mistake about the fact (e.g. that the chalk is fake or something of the sort).<sup>11</sup> So he lacks *theoretical* knowledge because it is by definition derived from facts. However, whether he lacks *practical* knowledge is still unclear since we have not yet known whether there was a practical mistake.

What could be counted as practically wrong then? Here comes the other part of Anscombe's analogy:

But is there not possible another case in which a man is simply not doing

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9 This can be seen more clearly in shopping man example in §32: The difference between an expression of intention and an order is just about who makes the shopping list.

10 Think about Anscombe's criterion by which "commands and expressions of intention will also be predictions" in §1 if the reader thinks it is unsatisfactory to call orders and expressions of intention "judgements".

11 By the way, here "I am writing 'I am a fool'" is more like a prediction that shares the same linguistic form with the expression of intention in the sense that Anscombe talks about at the beginning of §2.

what he says? As when I say to myself 'Now I press Button A'—pressing Button B—a thing which can certainly happen. This I will call the direct falsification of what I say. And here, to use Theophrastus' expression again, the mistake is not one of judgment but of performance. That is, 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.

She then compares it with the case of obeying an order:

It is precisely analogous to obeying an order wrong—and we ought to be struck by the fact that there is such a thing, and that it is not the same as ignoring, disregarding, or disobeying an order. If the order is given 'Left turn!' and the man turns right, there can be clear signs that this was not an act of disobedience. But there is a discrepancy between the language and that of which the language is a description. But the discrepancy does not impute a fault to the language—but to the event. (§32, 57)

This kind of mistake "excludes the first kind" (Wiseman, p. 165). That it is possible to execute the order or intention presupposes there is no error in the order or expression of intention. So if there is a mistake, the responsibility lies solely in the performer. With regard to Anscombe's example, if the agent mistakenly presses Button B, or if the order-follower mistakenly turns right (notice it is not a case of deliberate disobedience), then they make *practical* mistakes and lack *practical* knowledge.

This criterion of distinguishing between theoretical and practical knowledge is commonly known in terms of "direction of fit": The former has a mind-to-world direction of fit, which means theoretical knowledge should be in accordance with facts, while the latter a world-to-mind one. This criterion has little to do with the other distinction that is mentioned, namely the observational/non-observational one. As I have argued, we cannot tell them apart simply by whether or not they are achieved by observation, since theoretical knowledge is not necessarily observational. Instead, the criterion I propose is how we assess the truth value of their contents. If it is assessed by whether it is in accordance with the fact, then knowledge of it is theoretical. Else, the knowledge is practical. To take Wiseman's example, our knowledge of our limb position "is speculative, though non-observational, because it is knowledge 'which must be judged as such by being in accordance with the facts!'" (p. 173)

To be brief, the whole analogy can be shown in the table below (with the particular examples changed a bit):

	“Clench your teeth!” (Order)	“I am pressing Button A.” (Expression of Intention)
Theoretical Mistake	“My teeth are false.”	“There is something wrong with Button A.”
Practical Mistake	Mistakenly loosening the teeth	Mistakenly pressing Button B

Notice that making theoretical and practical mistakes are not mutually exclusive. For example, in the button pressing case, there is also a theoretical error because what should have happened, i.e. Button A's being pressed, is not brought about. So the agent does not know theoretically he is pressing Button A either. But such a mistake is not what Anscombe has in mind when she quotes "The mistake is not one of judgment but of performance". What her "one of judgement" refers to is analogous to the order-giver's mistake, but what I mentioned is not: The former arises from facts *before* the action, while the latter from *after*. Thus, Theophrastus' remark still holds.

Anyway, what is important here is that our writing man still possesses practical knowledge. If nothing in the *outside* world goes wrong, what he is doing matches what is happening. As a contrast, the button-pressing man's mistake arises *from within*, which means his practical reasoning contains an error, so that his bodily movement (towards Button B) is not identical with pressing Button A even if nothing outside goes wrong.

This may seem to suggest that we should formulate the content of practical knowledge as a conditional for there is a possibility of an error from outside. That is:

If my intention is getting executed, then I am X-ing.

But if our progressive form is used in Thompsonian sense, it is needless to add this antecedent. The progressive form does not itself imply completeness of an action. As Anscombe herself says, "Now when I said what I wrote, ought I to have said: this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed; instead of simply: this is what I am writing?" (§45, 82) An if-clause makes sense only in propositions like "If A's intention got executed, then A X-ed", but those in the perfective form have already been excluded from current discussion. So we are back to the formulation in section 3, namely:

I am X-ing.

## 5. The Object of Practical Knowledge

Now let us return to the question raised at the end of section 2: How can the agent's practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge share the same object, namely the action of his X-ing? The problem again comes from the failed cases: If the agent fails to cause any results in the world, then what is to be known?

Answer: the *formal* part of the possible action. Motivated by Anscombe's idea that practical knowledge is the formal cause of an action, I suggest that an action consists of a material part and a formal part, so that what happens in the material world is not all for an action. Precisely, practical knowledge *provides* the formal roughly speaking, the description of an action in the agent's answer to the "Why?" question. And theoretical knowledge *derives from* the material part, namely what happens. (Notice there is an asymmetry.)

In successful cases, the possible action is also actual, so both the formal part and material part exist, and the thesis "I do what happens" holds. The object of the agent's both two knowledges is this action. Precisely, he knows theoretically the material part of it, and practically the formal part. On the other hand, in failed cases, what the agent has knowledge of is the possible-but-not-actual action. Since nothing actually happens, he lacks theoretical knowledge for the material part is not actualized. But his practical knowledge remains because the formal part is prior to the result. Therefore, though there is a difference between successful and failed cases, in either case respectively the object of theoretical and practical knowledge is the same. Thus, we can "speak of two knowledges *of exactly the same thing*" (§29, 51, my italics).

Now we can understand why Anscombe says "the essential thing he does is done without eyes" in the example of a man writing with a pen (29, 53). The formal part of an action is essential because only if the agent has practical knowledge, the action is possible. The material part cannot exist without the formal part, otherwise it would be some sort of *mere happening*, not an action.

The reason why people tend to think there is a problem, I guess, is that they confuse the object with the content of knowledge. The former is an event, possible or actual, under a description, e.g. opening the window, and the latter a proposition. Let me try to reconstruct the argument of those who believe Anscombe says what should be the same is the content rather than the object of two knowledges, using the example of opening the window. First in successful

cases:

1. I practically know that I am opening the window.
2. I theoretically know that the window is being opened.
3. That I am opening the window is identical to that the window is being opened. (under the supposition that the agent succeeds)
4. The content of my two knowledges is the same. (from 1–3)

So far so good. But what about failed cases?

5. The content of my practical knowledge is true (as my practical knowledge remains the same).
6. What should have been the content of my theoretical knowledge is false.
7. The content of my two knowledges is not the same. (from 5–6)

Then comes the alleged puzzle. But it is a mistake to think that the object and the content are necessarily the same thing. For example, if I know that Jimmy Page is one of the best guitarists alive, the content of my knowledge is the proposition "Jimmy Page is one of the best guitarists alive". But the object, on the other hand, could be Jimmy Page the man, which in other words means that I have knowledge *of* Jimmy Page the man. The same for knowledge of intentional actions—The different contents of two knowledges does not imply that their objects also differ from each other. As far as I am concerned, only by this can we interpret Anscombe coherently.

An interesting thing is that the formulation of the content of two knowledges appears to be the same as well, and maybe this is what is misleading. However, despite the verbal sameness, the content of theoretical knowledge and that of practical knowledge have different emphases. The former focuses on the material part of the action, and the latter on the formal part. That is to say, the sentence "I am X-ing" uttered by the agent, when understood theoretically, is true if and only if it is in accordance with the fact, while is true when understood practically if and only if the agent is not making a practical mistake in the sense that I have talked about in section 4.

## 6. Responses to Criticisms

This section is in two parts. In 6.1, I will come back to the remaining problems in section 2 and discuss a possible objection that an agent is still capable of

answering the "Why?" question even he makes a practical mistake. In 6.2, I will consider some general criticisms to the Thompsonian reading of practical knowledge.

### 6.1 An Answer to the "Why?" Question?

In section 2, I have made some claims but left them unclarified somehow. One is that there would be cases of "no such descriptions" besides the trivial case. The other is that a proper answer to the "Why?" question about his action would be impossible if the agent lacks practical knowledge. These two claims are related since an instance of the former claim can be also regarded as one of the latter.

#### 6.1.1 The Objection

What I want to discuss in this subsection is the following objection to these claims. Recall our examples of the button-pressing man (a case of practical mistake) and the pumping man (a case of theoretical mistake). One might argue that in both cases the agents are able to answer the "Why?" question even if they fail. For example:

**Case 1** —Why are you pressing Button A?

—To turn on the light.

**Case 2** —Why are you replenishing the water supply?

—To polish them off.

Factually, the button-pressing man mistakenly presses Button B, and the pumping man does not get the water into the water supply for there is a hole in the pipe. However, it seems both agents successfully answer the "Why?" questions on their unactualized actions because both *believe* that their intentions get well executed. If this makes sense, then both of my claims are under threat.

For the sake of self-rescue, I want to argue that what is analogous to Case 2 is not Case 1, but the following:

**Case 1\*** —Why are you pressing *Button B*?

—Oh, I was not aware I was doing that!

The agent could answer like this, or even "I should have pressed Button A!" This is because Anscombe emphasises that he is "*simply* not doing what he says" (§32, 57). As I read it, this suggests that the agent's series is well-formed even when he does wrongly. In other words, the man knows that in order to, say, turn on the light, he should press Button A rather than B, but he *simply* does wrongly when he acts. This means the question has no application in the required sense



(§6, 11). What is more, the description "pressing Button B" should not be in the agent's series.

Having established the self-consistency of Case 1\*, the next and more severe question would be why it is this rather than Case 1 that is analogous to Case 2. After all, nothing prevents us observers from asking why he was pressing *Button A*. A response to this requires a clarification of my second claim. Let me put it more carefully: If the agent lacks practical knowledge, it would be impossible for him to give a proper answer to the "Why?" question about *the conclusion of his practical reasoning*—i.e. what I call "his action" above.

Here an elaboration on practical reasoning is required.

### 6.1.2 Practical Reasoning in Intention

I plan not to give a fully detailed discussion on Anscombe's concept of practical reasoning. Rather, I would like to just mention several points that are helpful for supporting my point. And here are some minimal quotations:

Here [in practical reasoning] the conclusion is an action whose point is shewn by the premises, which are now, so to speak, on active service. (§33, 60)

Any premise, if it really works as a first premise in a bit of 'practical reasoning', contains a description of something wanted; but with the intermediary premises, the question 'What do you want that for?' arises—until at last we reach the desirability characterisation (§38, 73)

The mark of practical reasoning is that the thing wanted is at a distance from the immediate action, and the immediate action is calculated as the way of getting or doing or securing the thing wanted. (§41, 79)

In short, the first piece of quotation says that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, and the next two are about the premises, suggesting that the first premise contains the description of the thing wanted, and the second contains a calculation of means to the end, which is the wanted thing in the first premise.

Now apply this to our agent. What is the practical reasoning behind his action? There is no controversy in the premises. The thing wanted is surely the action described as "turning on the light". And as I have suggested, despite his mistake, the agent's series is still well-formed, which means his calculation—pressing Button A is a way to turn on the light—contains no error.

But just because of his mistake, the conclusion of his reasoning, the action, is not pressing Button A but pressing Button B. My point is that we can treat

this as a given, since Anscombe in her example explicitly says that the man *is* pressing Button B.

One might argue that we cannot take that for granted for we observers cannot know exactly that he is pressing Button B. But this is okay, because all that matters is that he *is not pressing Button A*. Suppose Button A is at the left of the agent and Button B at the right, and consider the following case:

**Case 1\*\*** —Why are you moving your arms towards the right?

—Oh, I was not aware I was doing that!

We can notice that the agent's answer would be the same if the observer's "Why?" question is about the action under the description "pressing Button B" (as in Case 1\*) or more previous ones (as in Case 1\*\*). So it does not matter exactly under what description the agent's action is.

On the contrary, in the case of theoretical mistake, the pumping can answer all "Why?" questions about the conclusions of his practical reasoning, i.e. doing *A, B* and *C* in the *A–B–C–D* series. The mistake is in his expression of intention rather than his performance.

### 6.1.3 The Price

One may notice that not all mistake in practical reasoning corresponds to a practical mistake. Specifically, it corresponds to a practical mistake only if the syllogism is not valid, i.e. the conclusion's point is not shown by the premises.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, mistakes in the premises, especially errors in the calculation, correspond to theoretical mistakes. The pumping man can be said to calculate wrongly for pumping is not a correct way to replenish the water supply because of the hole in the pipe, but this mistake is a theoretical one.

The price for accepting this is that practical mistake turns out to be rather trivial: it is mostly resulted from mere incaution. What's more, cases of practical mistake are much rarer than cases of theoretical ones, hence seems to lack importance. On these I altogether agree. But even so, there is little counterintuitiveness because practical knowledge is fundamental to actions done with reason, as I have argued. It is natural that practical mistake is rare since we rarely act reasonlessly.

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12 Contrary to theoretical syllogism, where lacking validity means that there exists a case where the premises are true while the conclusion is false, true premises do not *necessitate* the action in valid practical reasoning. So I use the "point is not shown" formulation instead to avoid dispute on this and to adapt to Anscombe's own wording.

## 6.2 Defending the Thompsonian Reading

Because my account partly relies on a Thompsonian reading of Anscombe's practical knowledge since my formulation of practical knowledge is the same as his, I may have an obligation to deal with some of the main objections listed in Schwenkler's paper against the reading that the content of practical knowledge should be in the progressive form. I will argue that whether or not these criticisms do harm to Thompson's approach, they do not to mine anyway.

First, there seems to be textual evidence that Anscombe herself stands against this reading:

For example, in the case described above [i.e. the pumping man example in §32] she says that if the water is not going through the pipe then the man's claim that he is replenishing the water supply "is not true" (*Intention*, 56); and when she first introduces the idea of a "mistake of performance" in discussing the expression of intention, it is to explain how "there are other ways of saying what is not true, besides lying and being mistaken" (*ibid.*, 4; emphasis added). (Schwenkler, p. 21)

As I have pointed out, treating the first case as a counterexample is based on a misunderstanding that is rooted in the verbally same formulation of the content of theoretical and practical knowledge. I have already argued in section 4 that this is in fact an instance of theoretical mistake because the proposition is not in accordance with the facts. As to the second case, the proposition is a practical one, but I do not see any problem here for being practically untrue is possible once we make the distinction between two kinds of failed cases: one involves a theoretical mistake, the other a practical one. So his emphasis on the phrase, "saying what is not true", seems to be no point.

The second objection is that practical knowledge remaining in failed cases seems to be in conflict with Anscombe's view that "there is point in speaking of knowledge only where a contrast exists between 'he knows' and 'he (merely) thinks he knows'" (§8, 14), because there is no possibility of being wrong, as in the case of feeling pain (Schwenkler, p. 22). However as I have shown above, the possibility does exist. In the latter case, the agent thinks he knows that he is X-ing, which means that he thinks his practical reasoning is sound. But he actually does not know for there is an error in his calculation of means to the end. Therefore, practical knowledge differs from "knowledge" of one's own pain or mental states (except those Freudian cases), and thus not merely the

knowledge of one's own intention, or say end, as some people may think.

## 7. Summary

To sum up, the conclusions of this paper are roughly the following:

1. The content of Anscombe's practical knowledge is in the progressive form and first person, which is verbally the same as that of the agent's theoretical knowledge. But the two formulations have different emphases, the practical on the formal part of the action, and the theoretical on the material.

2. Theoretical mistake arises from the facts, which belongs to the material part, while practical mistake arises from the formal part, i. e. from the agent's practical reasoning. The agent lacks practical knowledge if his practical reasoning lacks validity.

3. There is a distinction between the content and the object of knowledge. Two kinds of knowledge can have different contents but the same object. So even in failed cases, the object of theoretical and practical knowledge remains the same.

## References

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