

## INTERPRETING ANSCOMBE'S INTENTION §32FF

ANNE NEWSTEAD

UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

**ABSTRACT:** G. E. M. Anscombe's view that agents know what they are doing "without observation" has been met with skepticism and the charge of confusion and falsehood. Simultaneously, some commentators think that Anscombe has captured an important truth about the first-personal character of an agent's awareness of her actions. This paper attempts an explanation and vindication of Anscombe's view. The key to the vindication lies in focusing on the role of practical knowledge in an agent's knowledge of her actions. Few commentators, with the exception of Moran (2004) and Hursthouse (2000), have gotten the emphasis right. The key to a proper interpretation of Anscombe's views is to explain her claims within the context of her teleological theory of action. The result is a theory of intentional action that makes self-knowledge of one's own actions the norm.

### I. INTRODUCTION

In her monograph, *Intention*, G. E. M. Anscombe claimed that agents know what they are doing "without observation or inference." Since then, the topic of first-person knowledge of action has generated huge interest, but also great puzzlement.<sup>1</sup> How can agents know what they are doing without looking to see if their intentions have been successfully fulfilled in action? After all, the power to carry out some actions is not up to the agent alone, but requires the world's cooperation too. What is the source for such knowledge, if it is not observation? Many contemporary philosophers of mind and action—notably Velleman (1989) and Moran (2001)—have recently taken Anscombe's writings on these topics very seriously as something of an antidote to a mistaken Cartesian model of self-knowledge.

Following Charles Taylor's terminology, let us call the special knowledge that each agent is said to have of her own action '*agent's knowledge*.' This possessive phrase is meant to mark out the fact that an agent has a qualitatively distinct kind of knowledge of her *own* action. Knowledge of one's own action is a kind of self-knowledge but is distinguished from other kinds of self-knowledge (as classically conceived) in not being entirely mental. That is, typically knowledge of one's action is knowledge of a change in the world and not merely knowledge of an "inner" mental event. Agent's knowledge thus promises to serve as a way of locating one's self (as agent) in the world in complete repudiation of Cartesian dualism.<sup>2</sup>

Anscombe's own term for agent's knowledge is 'practical knowledge.' However, it is a substantial claim that agent's knowledge is a form of practical knowledge. It is this claim that Anscombe argues for, in a roundabout way, in the second half of *Intention* from §32 onwards. At *Intention* §32, she accuses modern philosophy of having an inadequate account of knowledge of action because of its wholesale adoption of the "contemplative model of knowledge," on which "the facts, reality, are prior and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge." On the dominant rival causal theory of agent's knowledge, agent's knowledge turns out to be merely another species of knowledge explained in terms of efficient causes. The practicality of such efficient causal knowledge derives only from its subject-matter, actions. By contrast, on Anscombe's account agent's knowledge is practical insofar as it shapes the very identity of actions themselves as a formal cause: *qua* practical knowledge it is "the cause of what it understands" rather than "derived from the objects known."<sup>3</sup> Anscombe therefore suggests that agent's knowledge has both a different *direction of fit* and *direction of causation* from ordinary contemplative (or speculative) knowledge, which includes observational knowledge.

Many philosophers think Anscombe's claims about agent's knowledge are wrong. First, they think that *all* kinds of knowledge have just one direction of fit: the piece of knowledge is true just in case the world is as represented by that knowledge. Second, they think that some form of perception, though not necessarily inferential and indirect, is involved in all empirical knowledge. Insofar as agent's knowledge is empirical, it will be perceptual, and hence not really 'known without observation' as Anscombe claims. In this essay, I will not defend Anscombe's claims about agent's knowledge having a direction of fit opposite to that of contemplative knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I will mount an interpretation and defence of Anscombe's infamous claim that agents know what they are doing intentionally "without observation." Let's refer to this claim henceforth simply as 'Anscombe's claim.' I argue that Anscombe's claim is often rejected because it is misinterpreted and misunderstood. The misinterpretation involves attempting to situate Anscombe's claim against the background of the now dominant causal theory of action, a theory that Anscombe rejected in both *Intention* and a later paper, "Causation of Action" (1983). Moreover, it must be remembered that Anscombe's views were shaped

before Donald Davidson's rebuttal of the widely held view that reasons cannot be causes.<sup>5</sup> Properly situated and interpreted within the context of (a) a teleological approach to action, and (b) an account of practical reasoning, Anscombe's claim has plausibility and explanatory power.

The structure of this essay is as follows. Section II examines two attempts to make sense of Anscombe's view of agent's knowledge as "non-observational" from within the perspective of a broadly causal approach to action and knowledge. Such interpretations employ a "contemplative model of knowledge" on which knowledge is "derived from the objects known" in roughly efficient causal fashion. It is argued that both of these interpretations—by Pickard (2004) and Peacocke (2003)—though interesting theories in their own right, do not work as interpretations of Anscombe's theory of agent's knowledge. Section III develops and defends a new interpretation of Anscombe's theory that builds on the exegesis in Moran (2004).

## II. CAUSAL MODELS OF KNOWLEDGE OF ACTION

Two of the best recent discussions of Anscombe's theory of agent's knowledge from the standpoint of epistemology and philosophy of mind are by Pickard (2004) and Peacocke (2003).<sup>6</sup> Both authors work within the broadly causal approach to action and knowledge, and both concentrate on explaining an agent's knowledge of her on going, current action. Both concentrate on simple bodily actions, as suggested by Anscombe's early examples of "knowledge without observation" in terms of knowing the position of one's limbs. One model—"the body sense model" proposed in Pickard (2004)—suggests that proprioception, or body sense, is responsible for an agent's special knowledge of her own basic actions. Another model—the "reliabilist/entitlement model" in Peacocke (2001)—explains an agent's entitlement to claim knowledge of her action by exploiting the regular link between intentions to  $\phi$  and actions to  $\phi$  on a causal model of action. Neither model entirely saves Anscombe's theory of agent's knowledge. In Pickard's case, the spontaneous, anticipatory character of agent's knowledge is sacrificed in order to treat agent's knowledge as perceptual knowledge. In Peacocke's case, the character of agent's knowledge is perhaps preserved, but its object is changed. Anscombe sought to explain, among other things, an agent's knowledge of the form "I am going to buy apples tomorrow," whereas Peacocke's account best explains an agent's knowledge of "I am reaching with my arm for that apple." Be that as it may, Peacocke's view does capture a reliabilist aspect of Anscombe's theory of action.

But the reliabilism as a semantic view (about the reliability of agents' own interpretations of their behavior) sits awkwardly with the causal approach to action and knowledge of action.<sup>7</sup> In light of the failure of the interpretations by Pickard and Peacocke, the appropriate conclusion is that Anscombe's claim is not plausibly interpreted as a claim about actions as construed on the causal theory of action.

## A. THE BODY SENSE MODEL

Pickard (2004) proposes that the sense in which agents know what they are doing without observation is that they know it on the basis of “body sense”—the experience each one of us has of our own bodies and voluntary movements of our limbs “from the inside.”<sup>8</sup> Such experience does indeed, when veridical, provide us with immediate, non-inferential knowledge of the configuration of our limbs and their movements. Furthermore, such knowledge of what one is doing is not observational, since it is not inferred from more basic beliefs about one’s sensations. Finally, such knowledge is definitely privileged, depending on access to sensations only available to the agent. However, ultimately such knowledge is a species of perceptual knowledge. That is, it is a species of “speculative knowledge” [elsewhere Anscombe says “contemplative knowledge”], which Anscombe (following Aquinas) says is “derived from the objects known” in contrast to “practical knowledge” which is “the cause of what it understands” (Anscombe 2001 [1957], 87). In Pickard’s view, Anscombe is mistaken to think that knowledge of actions is not also “derived from the objects known.” All knowledge requires true beliefs, which must track how the world is. The practical knowledge Anscombe attributes to agents does not track anything in the world: it appears to create or foresee actions that take place in the world in the future. It can thus appear miraculous.<sup>9</sup>

Pickard, then, is setting out to concentrate on a range of cases that are not Anscombe’s main focus. However, her view does imply the falsehood of Anscombe’s. Pickard claims that it is a *datum* that our knowledge of our actions keeps near perfect time with our performance of them. I will argue on behalf of Anscombe that the datum is mistaken. I will then show why knowledge based on body sense does not qualify as practical knowledge.

Pickard declares that it is a datum that our “knowledge of action keeps near perfect time with the actions themselves” (Pickard 2004, 224). Intuitively, the view is appealing, because one can wonder how someone can know what she is doing before one actually does it. Nonetheless, for some intentional actions, as Anscombe claimed, we have *anticipatory, spontaneous knowledge* of what we are going to do.

Now the body sense model cannot explain knowledge of actions under future progressive descriptions (e.g., knowing “I am going to X”): it would repudiate the possibility of such knowledge. If an action has not yet been performed, then there is no feedback on which to base knowledge of the action. Yet we clearly sometimes do have such anticipatory knowledge. Consider the case of a teacher who plans what to write on the board.<sup>10</sup> She knows *what she is going to do* before she does it. Her knowledge anticipates the action. It’s true that the action could fail to succeed, but in such a case, we simply say that she was mistaken in claiming knowledge of the action in the first place. But she was not mistaken about what it was that she was going to do (even if she did not do it). Now if it were the case that she learned what she was doing only by body sense, then she would not actually know what she was going to write before she started writing it. But it seems that

the teacher does know, in virtue of having planned what to write. This, at least, is Anscombe's view.

A defender of the body sense model might object that the fact (if it is a fact) that we can anticipate *what we are going to do* is no objection to the claim that we know *what we are doing* based on feedback (and therefore slightly after we have started to act.). A defender of Anscombe must insist that in some cases we have a knowledge of *what we are doing* that arrives on the scene somewhat before or at latest simultaneously with our performance of an action. This contemporaneous knowledge of action could not be explained by the body sense model given its reliance on feedback for knowledge of action. The effect of relying on proprioception and kinaesthetic feedback for knowledge of what one is doing is to introduce a time delay between action and knowledge of action. It typically takes some 20–50 ms before such feedback reaches the agent's brain. But in cases like the example above our impression is that an agent knows what she is doing even before she receives the feedback. Since feedback comes after an action is initiated, it comes too late to provide such knowledge of what one is doing.

Of course one could question the assumption that an agent really does know what she is doing before she receives feedback. Perhaps the claim that agents do have such exact anticipatory knowledge is a myth of folk psychology. Libet's controversial experiments could be used to argue that agents are wrong about the timing of their actions and conscious intentions to move.<sup>11</sup> But even if exact knowledge of what one is doing is available only retrospectively, this kind of objection misses the point of Anscombe's theory of agents' knowledge. The anticipatory knowledge of action that agents are said to have is not the sort of thing that could be provided by muscle feedback: it is knowledge of a broader, more conceptual sort.

Feedback may yield knowledge of one's action under a fine-grained description. Agents, however, know what they are doing under very broad descriptions without relying on feedback. If one examines Anscombe's original theory in *Intention*, it is clear that she claims that agents know of their actions non-observationally under very broad descriptions. Moreover, Anscombe points out that agents sometimes know what they are doing *only* under broad descriptions, not narrow ones.<sup>12</sup> For example, one knows that one is raising one's arm, but not which muscles are contracting while one is raising the arm. Broad descriptions describe actions as taking place beyond the agent's body, while narrow descriptions immediately involve the agent's body. (This distinction is meant to replace and clarify the classic distinction between instrumental and basic actions.) These broad descriptions are teleologically basic (rather than causally basic) in the sense that the agent knows her general purpose (what she is trying to bring about) without knowing exactly how she is accomplishing it.<sup>13</sup> I think that this aspect of practical knowledge—its *broadness*—is something that is best explained on the teleological model described in section III.

As we have seen, the body sense model does not successfully explain those cases where agents seem to have an anticipatory knowledge of their actions. Such

anticipatory knowledge is clearly integral to Anscombe's account, which at one point speaks of an agent's practical knowledge of what she is doing as "the cause of what it understands." It may be possible to offer some other naturalistic explanation of anticipatory knowledge, perhaps by invoking an internal feed forward model of action monitoring.<sup>14</sup> But such an account, like the body sense account, would still not explain how agents know what they are doing under broad, teleologically basic descriptions. The explanatory aims of naturalistic accounts and Anscombe's account are quite different.

## B. RELIABILISM AND ENTITLEMENT

Some version of *reliabilism* promises to be an important ingredient in Anscombe's defense of agent's knowledge. Anscombe believes in the existence of a reliable connection between an agent's belief that she is  $\phi$ -ing and an agent's action of  $\phi$ -ing. However, as we shall see, Anscombe's reliabilist commitments differ from what we find in reliabilist contemporary epistemology.

Suppose, for example, one adopts a causal intentionalist theory of action, on which what makes an action of  $\phi$ ing intentional is that it is caused, in the right way, by an intention to  $\phi$ .<sup>15</sup> If we adopt the causal theory of action and a reliabilist theory of knowledge, it becomes a simple matter to explain agents' knowledge. An agent's knowledge that she is going to  $\phi$  can be explained by her meeting the following conditions:

- (Ri) The agent has an intention to  $\phi$  in context C.
- (Rii) Whenever the agent has a  $\phi$ -type intention in a C-type context, that intention reliably causes, in the absence of intervening circumstances, the agent to perform a  $\phi$ -type action.

We can add an internalist condition, so that it is the agent's awareness of her intention that gives her reason to believe that she is going to  $\phi$ :

- (Riii) The agent is aware of having an intention to  $\phi$  and of being in context C.

It is desirable to add this internalist condition, since practical knowledge seems to be a first-personal form of knowledge. When all these conditions are met, a reliabilist should say that the agent can know she is going to  $\phi$ .

Some philosophers may object that this account does not tell us what an intention is, or why it is legitimate to assume in (Rii) that there is a reliable link between an intention to  $\phi$  and the action of  $\phi$ -ing in some suitably restricted range of contexts. The link presumably holds because, on this style of account, to intend to  $\phi$  just is to be in a mental state whose causal role is to bring about the action of  $\phi$ -ing if unimpeded. Though this account of intention appears to make the bond between intending and acting too strong, the account can allow some slack in the form of circumstantial and contextual factors. Thus, for example, intending to raise one's arm does *normally* cause an action of arm raising. But the intention can fail to

eventuate in the intended action in certain circumstances, such as those where the motor neurons are severed.

The reliabilist account, couched as it is in terms of an efficient causal theory of action, is foreign to Anscombe's approach. But a reliabilist suggestion can be taken up without appeal to efficient causes. Here, though we ought to distinguish between *reliabilism as a theory of knowledge* and *reliabilism as a semantic view* about the reliable fit between an agent's interpretation of her actions and the truth conditions of that interpretation.<sup>16</sup> According to Anscombe, there is not just a reliable, but a *logical and constitutive* link between having a basic intention to  $\phi$  and performing the action of  $\phi$ -ing. That is, it is not just that intending to  $\phi$  does regularly give rise to  $\phi$ -ing. Rather, were this relation not the case, we should not identify the intention in question in that way at all. Anscombe writes:

What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. Further, it is the agents' knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention. (Anscombe 2001 [1957], 87)

An important point made in this passage is a point that we are now inclined to recognise as a Davidsonian point about the unintelligibility of massive errors (in this case massive errors in interpreting what we are doing). Our identification of our actions as intentional under some description depends on there being a reliable link between intending and doing. In the absence of such a reliable link between the intention to  $\phi$  and the action of  $\phi$ -ing, we would cease to be able to identify actions as intentional under that description ( $\phi$ ) at all.

The idea of a constitutive link between intending and acting is not something that will be accepted by all theorists. It does depend on a certain Anscombean approach to intention, on which intentions are attributed to agents primarily by interpreting their behaviour as rational. Theorists who impose relatively weak requirements on intention—such as those who think that intending to  $\phi$  simply requires a belief in the possibility that one can  $\phi$ —would not be in a position to claim a constitutive link between intending and acting. It may be objected, then, that Anscombeans owe an account of intention such that the constitutive link between intending and doing obtains. Yet it is precisely contrary to Anscombe's account to supply a reduction of intention to some other constellation of mental states and to see intention as something in abstraction from intentional action. Anscombe's point is that intentions are *embodied* in actions. It makes no sense to ask what intentions are in abstraction from the actions they inform. As Hursthouse comments,

When I first read *Intention* as a student it seemed misnamed, since, I thought, it gave an account of intentional action all right, but left me still wondering what an intention was. It was only with years of rereading that I came to see that one beauty of the account was that it eliminated the need to ask. (Hursthouse 2000, 83)

The causal account has a need of explaining what intentions are, since the causal account makes intentions distinct existences that precede and somehow neces-



sitate their effects. Anscombe's teleological theory has no such need: intentions are specified by the agents who give their purpose or reason in acting. It is the agent's specification of the purpose P that makes the action intentional under that particular description P. If an agent fails to recognise an action under description P as her own, then her action is not intentional under P. As Anscombe says, if when asked, "Why are you sawing the plank?" someone says, "I did not know I was doing that," then the agent's action is not intentional under the description 'sawing the plank.' Intentions, then, live in an intensional, not extensional context. Given the way that an agent's acceptance of a certain description shapes the identity of her action, it is simply not possible, on Anscombe's account, for there to be the radical separation of intention and the resulting action for many basic cases.

Taking into account the constitutive connection between intending to  $\phi$  and  $\phi$ -ing, one can mount a convincing explanation of our *entitlement* to knowledge of our actions based on knowledge of our intentions. Peacocke (2003) proposes such an entitlement model. A minor difference between Peacocke's original model and the model presented here is that Peacocke focuses on the link between tryings or volitions to  $\phi$  and  $\phi$ -ing, rather than intentions to  $\phi$  and  $\phi$ -ing. The essence of Peacocke's proposal is to draw a parallel between entitlements to perceptual knowledge and knowledge of action. In the case of perception, the entitlement argument runs as follows:

- (i-p) S has a perception that represents her as being in environment E.
- (ii-p) Normally, what makes it the case that S's perception has the content 'I am in E' is that S *is* in E.
- (iii-p) S is entitled to assume, in the absence of explanation to the contrary, that her perception is correct: she is in E.

On a causal theory of perception, S's perception is explained as having the representational content that it does because it is caused by her being embedded in the very situation that it represents. S's entitlement to take the content of her perception at face value holds so long as she has no reason to think that she is being deceived, is hallucinating, or otherwise is in some skeptical scenario. Finally, on some theories of knowledge, in the case where S's perception is veridical and she is entitled to believe it, S really does know the content of her perception (i.e., in this case, that she is in E). A similar argument can be run for the case of judgements about one's action based on intention. The argument would run:

- (i-a) S has an intention-in-action with the content that represents her as moving her body thus and so (B-wise).
- (ii-a) Normally, what makes it the case that S's intention-in-action has the content 'I am moving my body B-wise' is that her intention is being fulfilled in action: she really is moving her body B-wise.
- (iii-a) S is entitled to assume, in the absence of explanation to the contrary, that her intention is being fulfilled: she is moving her body B-wise.



As with the perceptual case, the entitlement to take the representation (in this case, the intention) at face value holds in the absence of reason to think that one is being deceived. So, for example, if someone has been recently paralysed and is now uncertain about her bodily powers, she is not entitled to take her intentions to move as being fulfilled. Nonetheless, in the case where the intention *is* being fulfilled and S is entitled to believe her intention is being fulfilled, she may be said to know that the content of her intention is fulfilled: she is moving her body B-wise.

The entitlement model is a considerable improvement on crude reliabilism. It incorporates the fact that the intention is linked to the action in a way that isn't just reliable, but constitutive. Further, the notion of entitlement neatly captures the way in which a kind of default knowledge is being claimed. The entitlement theory makes it clear that the notion of agents' knowledge is not meant to be a skeptic-proof claim to knowledge. That is, the fact that we *can* be deceived by our apparent awareness of our actions is no objection to the claim that agents usually do have knowledge of their actions.

The entitlement model is limited insofar as it is only able to explain our knowledge of on-going actions, not knowledge of our future planned actions. Possibly the model could be extended to knowledge of future planned actions. This would require revising (ii-a) to maintain that what makes it the case that an agent's intention has the content it does is that she will eventually act on that content. However, if an intention is treated as an efficient cause of an action, then the link between intention and action is weaker than Anscombe needs it to be. Both of these models—the body sense model and the entitlement model—attempt to make sense of Anscombe's doctrine of practical knowledge in a foreign context, that of the causal account of action.

### III. THE REASONS-BASED ACCOUNT

#### A. PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AS CONSTITUTIVE OF KNOWING WHAT ONE IS DOING

It is a striking fact that many discussions of Anscombe's theory of knowledge of actions tend to ignore her remark that "[t]he notion of 'practical knowledge' can only be understood if we first understand 'practical reasoning.'"<sup>17</sup> An exception to this trend is Richard Moran's recent exegesis of *Intention* in Moran (2004). Both Moran (2004) and Hursthouse (2000) are right on the mark in rejecting the notion that intentions are efficient causes of actions. Both rightly interpret Anscombe's remark that an agent's practical knowledge of her action is "the cause of what it understands" as stating that intentions are the *formal* causes of the intentional actions with which they are associated.

There is still more work to be done in understanding how the exegesis of Moran enables us to interpret Anscombe's remarks as providing a complete and coherent theory of agent's knowledge. Moran himself says:

I do not attempt to show that Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge is perfectly clear, nor that her appeal to the 'non-observational' character of this knowledge is without problem. (Indeed, one of my purposes here is to untangle quite distinct strands of this appeal and to claim that they cannot all be expected to do the same kind of work in her argument). (Moran 2004, 44)

My contribution will be to follow up one of the main suggestions of Moran's exegesis and to then extract an account of Anscombe on practical self-knowledge that can then be evaluated relative to other traditional accounts. On my account, based on Moran's main interpretative suggestion, practical knowledge is simply *knowledge of reasons* for acting. Let's call this theory 'the reasons-based account.' As Anscombe insists, on this account, practical knowledge is not confined to some purely mental realm. Rather, it extends "all the way out" to the action in the world. The problem is to see how this can be so.<sup>18</sup>

Consider once again Anscombe's remark:

What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. Further, it is the agents' knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention. (Anscombe 2001 [1957], 87)

The significance of this passage is that it illustrates the role of the agents' knowledge in constituting the identity of her intentional action. As Moran puts it "the agent's own conception of what he is doing is not just another description, side by side all the others, but has some claim to determine what the action itself is."<sup>19</sup> The idea is that having practical knowledge of a certain sort is *constitutive* of performing that very intentional action. Without the practical knowledge, one would not be acting in the light of certain reasons. One's action would not actually have the same intentional, purposive character without being backed up by such practical reasoning. So practical knowledge determines *what* it is that one is doing.

The constitutive role that practical knowledge plays in determining the identity of intentional actions has its analogy with the role played by an agent's interpretation of emotion in constituting emotions. As Taylor (1981) emphasizes and Moran (2001) explains, some emotions depend for their identity on the agent's interpretation of them as such. For example, an agent cannot truly be said to feel regret, unless the agent interprets her feeling as being sorry for something that she has done. The application of the idea that interpretation can shape the identity of a representation is perhaps more startling in the case of practical knowledge, because such knowledge concerns a change in the world rather than just a change of mind.

Practical knowledge cannot, on the face of it, determine that one actually does something. The world's cooperation is required for the successful performance of many actions. The claim is simply that practical knowledge determines *what* it is that is done insofar as it supplies the descriptions under which one's action is intentional. This point explains the first-person authority that seems to accompany claims of practical knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

Practical reasoning is reasoning about what to do. On the standard contemporary view, which seems correct, practical reasoning culminates in a resolution or adoption of an intention to perform a certain action.<sup>21</sup> The intention reached by the agent supplies the germ of the most important description under which the agent's action is intentional.<sup>22</sup> The practical reasoning leading up to the adoption of the intention gives the alternative descriptions under which the action is intentional.<sup>23</sup> In some way, the practical reasoning constitutes the formal structure of the action known.

In order to consider how knowledge of one's mere *reasons* can deliver knowledge of *action*, it is helpful to consider a specific example. Consider the following piece of complex practical reasoning, which has been popularly attributed to Harry Truman.<sup>24</sup> We should hasten to add, as a historical aside, that it does not reflect Anscombe's own controversial view of Truman's actions.<sup>25</sup> In deciding to drop the atomic bomb, Truman was said to have reasoned as follows:

Example: (Harry Truman)

- (1) I would like to end the war with a US victory as quickly as possible.
- (2) To end the war, I must make the Japanese surrender.
- (3) The Japanese will never surrender voluntarily.
- (4) I must use devastating force to make them surrender.
- (5) The most devastating effective force I can use is to drop an atomic bomb.
- (6) Therefore, I will drop an atomic bomb on Japan.

What is it that Truman knows? He knows that he is going to drop a bomb. Does he know that he *will* in fact do it? Maybe not. So (6) misrepresents what Truman knows if read strictly. But Truman knows that he is going to do it, if nothing prevents him from doing so. We can take (6) as expressing this conditional claim if we make allowances for colloquial speech. Of course, we also have to allow that Harry Truman's action of "dropping the bomb" was an action of his own despite being performed by others and at a distance from himself.

Practical reasoning starts out with the goal or aim and concludes with a recommendation of a certain course of action that will help meet that aim. The premises supply reasons for acting in that particular way. So practical reasoning is a kind of calculation designed to show what course of action will satisfy one's desires or achieve one's goals. Now how does such practical knowledge yield knowledge of an *action*? In engaging in practical reasoning, the agent forms an intention, which functions as a plan about what must be done if the agent's goal is to be achieved. Truman knows his intention is to drop a bomb on Japan. Truman will not—before the fact—have contemplative, factual knowledge of his action. He will—before the fact—have the practical knowledge, that *if* things go as he intends, then he will have dropped a bomb on Japan. Less conditionally, he will know (at the time of his intending) that he is *going to* drop the bomb. It can be true that he is going to

drop the bomb at some time  $t_1$ , even though he changes his mind at time  $t_2$  and decides no longer that he is going to drop the bomb.

Truman would have known his practical reasons for taking action in a way that someone not privy to his reasoning would not. But the point is not merely that knowledge of one's reasons provides a privileged route to knowing what one is doing. Rather, the claim is that practical knowledge is constitutive of its being the case that one performs that very action. So, for example, had Truman not reasoned that dropping the bomb would end the war quickly, then his action would not be intentional under 'acting so as to end the war quickly.' Had his reasons been different, the range of descriptions under which his action counts as intentional would have been different too. In some sense then the action itself is different, since actions are identified with reference to the range of descriptions under which they are intentional.

This account satisfies desirable criteria for an interpretation of Anscombe on knowledge of actions. Such practical knowledge is going to be something that is immediately accessible only to the agent who acts on certain reasons, not observers. Moreover, such knowledge is spontaneously generated by the agent (through reasoning) rather than being something passively acquired just by observation. So one can also say that such knowledge is "the cause of *what* it understands" insofar as it is practical reasoning that supplies the descriptions under which it is intentional at all.<sup>26</sup> Such knowledge has all the right characteristics to qualify as an account of agents' knowledge that is faithful to Anscombe's approach. That is, such knowledge is known without observation; it is a distinctive kind of knowledge, and it appears to extend to actions under quite broad descriptions.

What kind of knowledge, then, is knowledge of reasons on this account? Knowledge of reasons need not be introspective. Gibsonians claim that we can perceive reasons for acting directly in the world. However, in the context of Anscombe's discussion, where agents are deliberating about what to do and coming up with responses, it seems more appropriate to hold that the reasons involved are internal reasons, consciously accessible and motivating for the agent. If an agent's practical knowledge is really based on her own practical reasoning, then it will consist in a grasp of what Bernard Williams calls *internal* reasons.<sup>27</sup> Internal reasons appeal directly to agents, as opposed to external reasons which may be present "objectively" in the space of reasons or in the environment, without appealing to agents. Agents will be in a privileged, though not infallible, epistemic position with respect to internal reasons.<sup>28</sup>

Once again this account fares notably better than efficient causal accounts in explaining why an agent's knowledge of actions is under broad rather than narrow descriptions. Knowing what one is doing in the light of one's reasons is not a manner of knowing which fine movements one is making with one's body. It is a matter of knowing broad descriptions of one's actions. The kinds of descriptions that figure in deliberation are typically broad descriptions. (This is reflected in Aristotle's remark that "deliberation is of ends, not means." One may think of

broad descriptions as specifying the end of the action. Of course, some descriptions may at the same time give the means for attaining an even broader end.) So this approach in terms of reasons is suited to explaining Anscombe's claim that agents know what they are doing in the case of actions such as "opening the window," "painting the walls yellow," and other actions with broad descriptions.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, the reasons-based model does not explain Anscombe's claim that agents know without observation of their body movements. This phenomenon, itself based on proprioception, it seems to me, is misleadingly lumped together with more clear cut cases of agent's knowledge of intentional actions.<sup>30</sup> It is not even clear that bodily movements undertaken without a reason in mind really should qualify as intentional actions at all. Anscombe classifies such movements as voluntary but not intentional.<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, the reasons-based account crucially secures the feature that our knowledge of our actions is distinctive and different from speculative, empirical knowledge. The account makes practical knowledge distinctive by grounding it in something distinctive: knowledge of one's reasons for acting. Now Anscombe objected to the idea that what makes practical knowledge unique is just its subject-matter. As she remarked, a syllogism about mince-pies is not practical because it is about pies. What makes an agent's knowledge of action practical is that it is the upshot of practical reasoning. Such practical reasoning concerns potentialities for action in the world, rather than the observation of existing features in the world.

## B. OBJECTIONS AND QUALIFICATIONS

I want now to consider three objections to the "reasons-based" interpretation of agent's knowledge. First, it is simply not at all evident that knowledge of one's reasons is tantamount to knowledge of one's actions. Second, it may be objected that the reasons-based account provides too intellectual a model of our knowledge of action. Third, some psychological studies (Nisbett and Wilson (1977), Wegner (2002)) seem to undermine the claim to first-person authority inherent in the reasons-based account of knowledge of our actions.

The first objection is that knowledge of one's reasons for acting can fall short of knowledge of one's action. This objection repeatedly crops up in discussions of agent's knowledge and goes to the most vulnerable part of many accounts of agents' knowledge. One way of meeting it is to note the generally reliable connection between having an internal reason to  $\phi$  and  $\phi$ -ing, as well acknowledging that knowledge of our actions may well be fallible. Having an internal reason to  $\phi$  will be reliably linked to  $\phi$ -ing if we take seriously the idea that internal reasons are immediately motivating for the agent, coupled with the thesis that, the agent's motivations are efficacious. To be sure, an agent's motivations may fail to be efficacious. But now the objection is an objection to the fallible nature of agents' knowledge. If an agent has the internal motivation to  $\phi$ , then her awareness of this motivation provides good, but not infallible, evidence that she is indeed going to  $\phi$  at some future point. If we allow fallible knowledge, then

we should allow that knowing one's internal reason in acting can provide such fallible knowledge.<sup>32</sup>

The second main objection to the account is that Anscombe's notion of intentional action is *too intellectualist* and so is the model of agents' knowledge presented in the reasons-based account. In particular, we often act purposefully without being aware of planning or deliberation, and our knowledge of what we are doing in these kinds of cases cannot derive from knowledge of our decision of how to act. Moreover, the reasons-based model seems fine for knowledge of future deliberate actions, but not appropriate for knowledge of our on-going actions. Some actions are not premeditated and are spontaneous.<sup>33</sup>

There are a number of ways of relaxing Anscombe's notion of intentional action and of making the reasons-based account less intellectualist. First, although it is true that Anscombe's notion of intentional action seems to require that  $\phi$ -ing intentionally is always accompanied by awareness that one is  $\phi$ -ing, it is not obvious that this awareness has to be conceptual and be articulated in propositions. The thought that this awareness has such a propositional character comes from the fact that the awareness is based on deliberation. However, it would be possible to adopt a less conceptualist account of deliberation.<sup>34</sup> Roessler (2003) proposes such an account, on which deliberation can consist in imaginatively simulating possibilities and choosing a desirable outcome. Roessler's example of practical knowledge is the use of visual imagination to see how to fit a table through the door. On the basis of such "practical reasoning," one can learn how one needs to tilt the table in order to fit it through the door. So practical reasoning need not consist in consciously rehearsing a syllogism. If one likes, one can think of the practical syllogism as "running in the background" of the agent's mind, perhaps not in a fully conscious way. Then, when one has decided what to do, the upshot of one's practical reasoning (the intention) "pops out" and becomes the object of conscious attention. This seems to capture the phenomenology of some types of practical reasoning, especially the type directed at solving a concrete problem. Moreover, it would explain why practical knowledge does not strike one as based on inference, even though the structure of practical reasoning is inferential.

Loosening up our notion of practical reasoning in this way also provides us with the resources to enable the reasons-based account to explain both knowledge of on-going actions and knowledge of future planned actions. The more rigid account, on which an agent does engage in conscious propositional deliberation, seems suited to explaining knowledge of future planned actions. The looser account, in which the agent is just aware of the upshot of her practical reasoning but does not consciously rehearse the steps, may be suited to explaining knowledge of on-going actions. There will be a small but still significant temporal delay between formation of the intention to act thus and so (now) and enacting the intention. So knowledge of one's on-going action based on knowledge of the decision will have the anticipatory character we attribute to practical knowledge.

A third and final objection to the account is that it seems to give agents an *unquestioned first-person authority* in knowing their reasons for acting. But, quite often, agents can be wrong about their reasons for acting. One's real reasons for acting may be opaque to oneself. Psychological studies such as Nisbett and Wilson (1977) have cast doubt on the authority of agents to accurately report their reasons for acting. In the experiment, agents claimed that they bought a certain pair of shoes because it seemed better in quality than another pair, when in reality there was no qualitative difference between the shoes. The major role in shaping preference appeared to be the product's location in egocentric space (to the left or to the right of the agent), even though agents remained unaware of this factor as an influence shaping their actions. Furthermore, agents may confabulate about their reasons for acting in order to protect their self-image. As psychologist Daniel Wegner writes:

The process of intention revision, in short, is a process of fabrication that depends on an *image* of ourselves as responsible agents who choose our actions with foreknowledge and in accord with our conscious intentions. Although such an agent may not actually animate our intention and action, an idealized image of this agent certainly serves as our guide for our invented intention. When we look back at our behavior and believe that the circumstances surrounding it are compatible with seeing ourselves acting as agents, we construct—in view of what we have done—the intention that such an agent must have had. Then we assume we must have had that intention all along. (Wegner 2002, 180)

Wegner is discussing cases in which school children are asked to write essays contrary to their beliefs. In such cases the children will report inaccurately that they held those beliefs all along. This demonstrates that *retrospective* self-attribution of intentions can be inaccurate. However, Anscombe's theory is not mainly about knowledge of past intentions and actions. It may well be that memories of actions are inaccurate.

Limitations in accurate self-reporting of intentions do not establish that agents do not, in a wide variety of cases, know their intentions in acting. In a wide variety of ordinary cases, where, for example, one intends to brush one's teeth and then does so, there is no problem for the agent in identifying her intention. Such an agent is typically more or less rational, self-conscious, and not self-deceived. The action in question is also one where the agent's self-image is not at stake. The reasons-based model primarily explains how such agents could have non-observational knowledge of such actions. In this way, the reasons-based model is an *ideal* model, and actual agents may depart from it in various ways. Since the reasons-based model is being invoked as part of a normative project of legitimating practical knowledge, the shortcomings of actual agents studied by psychologists are not a relevant objection to this project. All that matters is that there should be instances of self-knowledge that obey Anscombe's theory. Manifestly, there are such cases. What the psychological studies may show is that the ideal of wholly self-conscious,



rational, intentional action is less commonly instantiated than supposed in classical philosophical theory. The same sort of discrepancy between the ideal of a rational agent and the psychological reality of individuals occurs in economic theory. Here as there, the discrepancy is not by itself sufficient to render the classical theory, with its ideal conception of agents, useless.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Let us return to the original question motivating this study: can any sense be made out of Anscombe's claim that agents have a special knowledge of their intentional actions, that such actions are "known without observation"? I have argued that contemporary treatments of knowledge of action, by Pickard (2004) and Peacocke (2003), do not make Anscombe's idea of a special practical knowledge really intelligible. Perhaps these authors—especially Pickard—would be the first to admit that they do not want to save Anscombe's doctrines. Peacocke's account does in fact offer a really valuable insight into the kind of epistemology that clearly does play some role in legitimating practical knowledge for Anscombe. A sure sign that such reliabilism is on the right track in interpreting Anscombe is the sense it makes of her claim that failures to act as intended are "necessarily rare."

Nonetheless, not even reliabilism coupled with entitlement theory can explain Anscombe's doctrine of practical knowledge. So long as the explanation insists on treating intentions as the efficient causes of actions, the explanation will not capture the idea that practical knowledge is "the cause of what it understands" in the formal sense. On the interpretation of Anscombe's doctrine suggested here—the reasons-based model—agents know what they are doing insofar as they know the reasons or purposes under whose descriptions their actions are intentional. Whereas on a causal analysis of action, knowing one's reasons in acting can seem entirely independent of knowing one's action, the two are not separate on Anscombe's account. Knowledge of one's reasons in acting constitutes the very identity of one's intentional action. The ontological inseparability of intentions and action explains as well why Anscombe sees no epistemic gap between knowledge of intentions and knowledge of action. Thus understood, knowledge of intentional action—understood using the appropriate teleological, reasons-based model—is indeed not based on observation.

#### ENDNOTES

1. For some attempts to treat of Anscombe's claim in the context of more empirical and psychological approaches to action, see Eilan and Roessler 2003, especially the papers by Roessler and O'Brien. Two important recent attempts to improve and recover our understanding of Anscombe's theory of intentional action are: Moran 2004, 43–69; and Hursthouse 2000, 83–106.

2. Danto (1999) points out the anti-Cartesian motivation of Anscombe's theory.
3. Anscombe 2001, 57.
4. I am not sure that this part of Anscombe's theory can be defended. If a defense is possible, it lies in likening knowledge of practical reasons to knowledge of a geometrical construction along the lines suggested by Hintikka 1974.
5. See Davidson 1963.
6. Velleman 1989 provides another able discussion. However, there is already a discussion of Velleman in Pickard 2004, to which I have little to add.
7. For another interpretation of Anscombe as reliabilist, see Velleman 2007. Velleman also ascribes a reliabilist view to Anscombe in Velleman 1989.
8. Pickard 2004.
9. This charge is one that is mentioned by Rosalind Hursthouse in her vigorous rebuttal of causal misunderstandings of Anscombe's theory in Hursthouse 2000.
10. Anscombe's example in Anscombe 2001 [1957], section 44.
11. See Libet 1985.
12. Anscombe, 2001 [1957], 53.
13. On the idea of teleologically basic descriptions of actions (as opposed to causally basic), see Hornsby 1980.
14. On the idea of an "internal feed forward model," see Blakemore 2000.
15. To be sure, the causal theory is subject to some serious objections, such as the problem of excluding causally deviant chains. There is also the problem that some actions seem intentional (in the sense of having satisfaction conditions) without being caused by a conscious prior intention on the agent's part. For a partial solution to the first problem, see Goldman 1976. The second problem is dealt with by Searle's distinctions between intention-in-action and prior intentions in Searle 1983.
16. Thanks to an anonymous referee of this journal for making this distinction, not clearly present in a previous draft of this paper.
17. Anscombe 2001 [1957], section 33, 57. This is reflected in the fact that most commentaries ignore sections 33–45 of *Intention* that follow on from this remark, and only pick up the text at 45 with the famous example of the building director. A welcome exception to this trend is Moran's recent exegesis of Anscombe's theory in Moran 2004.
18. My interpretation of Anscombe owes much to Richard Moran's recent exegesis of Anscombe's text in Moran 2004, which clears up many confusions regarding Anscombe's account. Like Moran, I emphasize the primacy of practical knowledge in Anscombe's account of an agent's knowledge of our actions. I also view practical knowledge as in some sense constitutive of intentional action, an interpretation again due to Moran.
19. Moran 2004, 44.
20. O'Brien discusses the first-person authoritative nature of practical knowledge in O'Brien 2003. I am broadly sympathetic to that discussion, but my focus is more narrowly on understanding Anscombe's theory rather than the general phenomenon of knowing what one is doing.

21. Aristotle says that the conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning is itself the course of action, but most philosophers regard this claim as impossible given weakness of the will.
22. Obviously, actions not preceded by prior intentions—as discussed by Searle 1983—are not immediately covered by this account. Not everyone is convinced, in any case, that there really are clear cut cases of intentional actions without prior intentions. It is not obvious that there could not be unconscious or species-level rather than individual prior intentions preceding all intentional actions in rational deliberate creatures, for example.
23. See Anscombe 2001 [1957], 80 on the structure of practical knowledge as an Aristotelian practical syllogism.
24. I have chosen the example not because I endorse its content, but because it is a good illustration of the means-end structure of practical reason.
25. Anscombe regarded Truman as a murderer for dropping the bombs on innocent civilians in the war. See Anscombe 1981. For further discussion, see a comprehensive such as Teichman 2008.
26. A point made by Moran 2004, though see also Hursthouse 2000.
27. See Williams 1981.
28. Cf. Roessler 2003. Roessler allows that the reasons answering the “Why?” question that applies to intentional actions may be external. On this way of thinking, the object’s qualities in the world appear to provide reasons for acting a certain way with respect to it. Although I think that this account of reasons as perceptible and objective stretches the notion of having a reason to act, even such an account can claim that the agent’s knowledge of reasons is not based on observation. Observation in this context is making inferences on the basis of sensation, so direct perception does not count as observation. Nonetheless, I think we should not externalise reasons for acting so radically in our account, on pain of dissolving the first-person authoritative character of agents’ knowledge.
29. See the examples used at Anscombe 2001 [1957], section 28, 51.
30. Moran 2004 makes this observation.
31. Anscombe 2000 [1957], 26 (paragraph section 17).
32. On the notion of fallible agent’s knowledge, see Newstead 2006.
33. Anscombe, it is fair to say, wanted to give a unified explanation of knowledge of current actions and future planned actions. The explanation is the same in both cases, consisting in a grasp of the conclusion of a practical syllogism.
34. As suggested by Roessler 2003.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anscombe, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret. 1981. “Mr Truman’s Degree.” In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe III, Ethics, Religion and Politics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 62–71.

- . 1983. "The Causation of Action." In *Knowledge and Mind*. Ed. C. Ginet and S. Shoemaker. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001 [1957]. *Intention*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Blackmore, Susan. 2000. "Monitoring the Self in Schizophrenia: The Role of Internal Models." In *Exploring the Self*. Ed. D. Zahavi. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Danto, Arthur. 1999. "Basic Actions and Basic Concepts." Reprinted in A. Danto, *The Body-Body Problem*. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Originally published in the *Review of Metaphysics* 32 (1979): 471–485.)
- Davidson, Donald. 1963. "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." *Journal of Philosophy* 60: 685–700.
- Eilan, Naomi, and Johannes Roessler, eds. 2003. *Agency and Self-Awareness*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Goldman, Alvin. 1976. *A Theory of Human Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hintikka, Jaako. 1974. "Practical and Theoretical Reason—An Ambiguous Legacy." In *Practical Reason*. Ed. Stephan Körner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 83–102.
- Hornsby, Jennifer. 1980. *Actions*. London: Duckworth.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. 2000. "Intention." In *Logic, Cause and Action: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Anscombe*. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 46. Ed. R. Teichman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Libet, B. 1985. "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8: 529–566.
- Nisbett, Richard, and Timothy Wilson. 1977. "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes." *Psychological Review* 84: 231–259.
- Moran, Richard. 2001. *Authority and Estrangement*. Princeton: Princeton University.
- . 2004. "The Agent's Point of View and 'What Happens': Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge.'" In *Agency and Action*. Ed. J. Hyman and H. Steward. London: Royal Institute of Philosophy.
- Newstead, Anne. 2006. "Knowledge by Intention?" In *Aspects of Knowing*. Ed. Stephen Hetherington. Amsterdam: Elsevier Press, 183–202.
- O'Brien, L. 2003. "On Knowing One's Own Actions." In Eilan and Roessler.
- Peacocke, Christopher. 2003. "Action: Awareness, Ownership, and Knowledge." In Eilan and Roessler.
- Pickard, Hanna. 2004. "Knowledge of Action without Observation." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104: 203–228.
- Roessler, Johannes. 2003. "Intentional Action and Self-Awareness." In Eilan and Roessler.
- Searle, John. 1983. *Intentionality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1981. "Hegel's Philosophy of Mind." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers* 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 77–96.
- Teichman, Roger. 2008. *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Velleman, David. 1989. *Practical Reflection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2007. "What Good is the Will?" In *Action in Context*. Ed. Anton Leist and Holger Baumann. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 193–215

- Wegner, Daniel. 2002. *The Illusion of Conscious Will*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1980. "Internal and External Reasons." In *Rational Action*. Ed. Ross Harrison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Reprinted in Bernard Williams. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)