

A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland, eds., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 324 pages. ISBN: 978064051027 (hbk.). £ 33.95.

The papers in this volume explore the nature of intention and intentional action against the background of G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention* (2nd ed., 1963; repr. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Taken together, they demonstrate why the position that Michael Thompson has called Anscombe's "analytical Aristotelianism" deserves to be regarded as a serious alternative to the analytical Humeanism (to coin a label) that has prevailed in Anglophone philosophy of mind and action since the work of Donald Davidson. (For a brief bibliography of work in the latter tradition, see the books and authors cited by Anton Ford in his essay, p. 78 fn. 5.) Let me begin by explaining what I mean by this.

Davidson did, of course, recognize Anscombe as an extremely important figure in the philosophy of action, and frequently credited her as a main influence on his own work. But these essays illustrate clearly that Anscombe's disagreement with Davidson concerning what she called "the standard approach" to understanding action – one according to which an action is an event that is caused by certain things that happen in a person's mind – marks an absolutely fundamental difference in their philosophical outlooks. For Davidson, every mental event (including every action) is identical with some physical event, and the workings of reason in changing the world have the same structure as the causal processes of fundamental physics, wherein one event causes another by virtue of law-like connections between them. (Davidson's claim that psychological explanations are never exceptionless doesn't change this: he just thought it entailed that mental events are identical to physical ones.) By contrast, as Frederick Stoutland explains in his introductory chapter to this volume, Anscombe's worldview was saturated with the concepts of Aristotelian biology rather than Cartesian physics: she held that the world of humans and other animals "is not just particles and forces; it is food and drink, allies and enemies, mates and offspring, which are not mere causes of their activities but what it is in their nature to respond to as the kinds of beings they are" (p. 20). It is in her account of this responsiveness that Anscombe does the most to challenge philosophical orthodoxy.

Here is a (no doubt partial) summary of the Aristotelian concepts and theses that are defended and put to work in these essays: there is talk of substances, essences, accidents, and categories; of powers and capacities; of form and matter (and even *materia prima*); of formal and final causality; of the teleological nature of action and human (and non-human) life; of the irreducibility of action to the causation of event by event; of the distinction between *kinesis* and *energeia*; of the peculiarity of relating to oneself "as other"; of the practical syllogism; of intellect and will; and of the distinction between "practical" and "speculative" knowledge. In most cases the notions are deployed non-technically and introduced in a way that will make sense to the uninitiated reader, and then put to use in addressing philosophical problems that adherents to the standard approach have trouble seeing their way around, thus helping us to view things in a new light.

A couple of examples will help to bring out this achievement. In "Action and Generality", Anton Ford discusses the relationships between actions, intentional actions, and events. As Ford explains, philosophers who take the standard approach are committed to

understanding each of these categories as related to the others only additively: just as we can understand the concept *brother* by the equation *sibling* + *male*, so actions are supposed to be events, and intentional actions actions, with special further properties. Ford calls this “accidental generality”, in which a species can be understood by combining a genus and a differentia, which can be understood independently of one another and the species in question.

But Ford then observes that not all generality adheres to this model. For example, the concept *red* is not equivalent to the concept *colored* + *x*, at least if this *x* is supposed to be apprehended independently of one’s understanding of what makes red the color it is. This is rather a case of what Ford calls “categorical generality”, where understanding the genus in question requires already having understood at least some of its various species. Similarly, pairs of concepts like *gold* and *pure gold* or *circle* and *perfect circle* also fail to conform to the additive model of accidental generality, even though there are things we count as circles despite being imperfect, and as samples of gold despite being impure. According to Ford, these are cases of “essential generality”, where the “pure” or “perfect” form makes up the essence of the genus, and so the understanding of that species is “coeval” with the understanding of the genus in question. And Ford suggests that the relation of the concept *intentional action* to *action* is one of essential generality, while that of *action* to *event* is one of categorical generality: in neither case can the species in question be apprehended merely additively, and so the standard approach is bound to fail.

Along with Ford’s, the paper that aims most directly to demonstrate the superiority of Anscombe’s approach to the standard one is Jennifer Hornsby’s “Actions in Their Circumstances”, which argues against the possibility of understanding actions as events caused by bodily movements, and in so doing shows that the distance between Anscombe and Davidson was greater than the two of them ever seemed to recognize. Most of the other authors are concerned to interpret and defend several of Anscombe’s key doctrines, especially those concerning the “practical” or “non-observational” knowledge that she says we necessarily have of our intentional actions. (There is also a helpful summary of the argument of *Intention*, written by Stoutland, as well as an exhaustive index to Anscombe’s text that is far superior to the one supplied by the publishers – for the obsessed, this alone may be worth the cost of the volume.) And at the end, the two papers by Anselm Müller and Ben Laurence take a different tack, by exploring how an Anscombian framework can help us account for phenomena that from the perspective of the standard approach are stubbornly puzzling. (For Müller, this involves arguing that Anscombe herself failed to recognize the importance of the phenomenon – that of the explanation of actions by “backward-looking” reasons – that is his focus.) This may be the most effective way to convince philosophers of the promise of analytical Aristotelianism: for there is no denying that the standard approach has been philosophically fruitful, and thus it helps to have it illustrated what we can accomplish if we follow Anscombe instead.

Laurence’s paper does this by showing how Anscombe’s account of instrumental rationalization – roughly, the idea that what it is for an action to be intentional under a series of descriptions is for each such description to be related to the others in a means-end ordering that would be brought out in the agent’s answers to the question “Why are you doing that?” – can be extended to explain the difference between collective action and mere collections of actions of individuals. He suggests that a person is acting as part of a group, and not just on her own, whenever she can explain her action by appeal to what “we” are doing (or trying to do). This is not, Laurence argues, reducible to explanation in terms of one’s own actions or aims, and so it is

not something that explanation of action in terms of beliefs and desires – which are, at least approximately, all that there is in toolbox of the standard approach – could get us to.

Here we might anticipate an objection. Surely it is not possible for collective actions to be different even as the thoughts and behaviors of the collected individuals remain the same. (In more official terms, collective actions supervene on the actions of individuals, which seem in turn to supervene on what happens in the “purely physical” world.) So then what is there to collective rationality, if all the explanations we give in terms of it could be replaced by explanations in other terms?

The inference is invalid, however. Indeed, even Davidson saw that it was compatible with his monism that psychologistic explanation should be irreducible to explanation in terms of the physical events with which psychological ones are (supposedly) identical. Moreover, as Hornsby shows in her chapter, recognizing the causal character of rational action-explanation (as Davidson rightly argued we must) does not require identifying reasons with antecedent events except under the dubious assumption that the causation of event by prior event is the only kind of causation there is. This and other tenets of the standard approach are exactly what Anscombe was calling into question; so it would obviously be inappropriate to rely on them in arguing that she must have been wrong.

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