**Anscombe and Wittgenstein on Knowledge ‘without Observation’**

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**Abstract:** In this chapter, which is purely exegetical, I suggest that close attention to the legacy of Anscombe’s mentor Wittgenstein can shed some unaccustomed light both on the idiosyncratic form of inquiry in her book *Intention* and on some of the particular conclusions found in that book.  In the first part, I point to a methodological parallel between Wittgenstein’s post-1945 investigations into the nature of everyday psychological concepts and Anscombe’s treatment of the concept of intention.  In the second part, the Wittgensteinian provenance of Anscombe’s logical category ‘knowledge without observation’ is exhibited, and her extension of what falls under this form of knowledge (from Wittgenstein’s case of knowing the arrangement of one’s limbs, to matters concerning intention as well) is outlined.  This extension will require a twist in how the intentional form of such knowledge is regarded as corrigible.  Finally, I identify the odd form of knowledge just explicated with ‘practical knowledge’ as Anscombe sees it, and try to show that some puzzles revolving around her invocation of Theophrastus’ principle and Aquinas’ view of the causal power of practical knowledge may be resolved thereby.

**Keywords:** Anscombe, Wittgenstein, Knowledge Without Observation, Intention, Action, Practical Knowledge, Psychological Concepts

Anscombe’s invocation, in *Intention*, of an odd, sui generis kind of knowledge, which she takes to be fundamental for any non-circular, practice-based, conceptual account (like hers) of what human action is, has engendered considerable confusion and resistance, even among her most sympathetic readers. She employs two terms for this odd variety of knowing: *knowledge without observation* and *practical knowledge*. The concept denoted by the first term has its origin in Wittgenstein’s late writings, though the term is hers, and the concept denoted by the second was given that name by various medieval thinkers, notably Aquinas – but the two descriptive names, in Anscombe’s account, point to the same thing seen from two different angles.

I will argue that much of the confusion and resistance surrounding Anscombe’s use of these terms is owing (1) to an unshakeable attachment to some form of a ‘justified true belief’ account[[1]](#footnote-1) of all knowledge, and (2) to a lack of recognition of the fact that Anscombe’s whole mode of proceeding in *Intention* is based as much on the methods of the later Wittgenstein as on those of Aristotle. If one pays little attention to Wittgenstein’s methods and results[[2]](#footnote-2) and approaches Anscombe’s work from any one of the usual action-theoretic directions available to us now – whether it be post-Davidson analytic action theory or some view of action refracted through a Kantian or Thomist lens, say – then some misunderstanding is almost inevitable.[[3]](#footnote-3)

I

Taking the second point above first, I want initially to point out a close parallel between a key methodological statement by Wittgenstein in RPPII and the first twenty or so sections of *Intention*, which may help to illuminate Anscombe’s peculiar manner of proceeding in that book and set the stage for her treatment of knowledge without observation. In RPPII §63 Wittgenstein states the outline of a “plan”, which he will continue in §148:[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Plan** for the treatment of psychological concepts.

Psychological verbs characterized by the fact that the **third person** of the present is to be identified by **observation**, the **first person** not.

Sentences in the third person of the present: **information**. In the first person present, **expression**. ((Not quite right.))

Sensations: their inner connexions and analogies.

All have genuine **duration**. Possibility of giving the beginning and the end. Possibility of their being synchronized, of **simultaneous occurrence**.

All have **degrees** and qualitative mixtures. Degree: scarcely perceptible – unendurable.

In this sense there is not a sensation of position or movement…[[5]](#footnote-5)

This statement of a ‘plan’ is not merely aspirational on Wittgenstein’s part; it is buried deep in the middle of an on-going minutely focused execution of the plan itself, in the second of the two lengthy RPP typescripts. There is also a foretaste of it in RPPI §836. The whole patchwork of remarks on psychology in PI-PP and the post-1945 *Nachlass* testifies in a mass of detail to his devotion to such a plan of conceptual investigation.

Our developed psychological concepts (expressed in psychological verbs and verb phrases) are far more subtle than what can be adumbrated in some of the simplest language-games in the beginning of PI, such as the ‘builder’s game’ in §2, involving ‘shaped-object’ concepts (or at least proto-concepts, see RFM p. 433) like ‘slab’ or ‘beam’, or the ‘shop for five red apples’ game sketched in §1, which may be seen as outlining very basic versions of our concepts of ‘number’, ‘standing color’, ‘kind of object’ (as well as undermining the ‘Augustinian’ conception that language fundamentally works by ‘standing for things’). What psychological concepts might seem to ‘refer to’ usually escapes direct public ostension or determination – slabs can publicly be contrasted with beams, colors can be pointed to (once the linguistic groundwork for such pointing is established), and counts can be agreed upon unambiguously, whereas pains, beliefs, perceptions, expectations, or thoughts are not *fully* public in the same way (which is not to say they are fully private either, as the private-language arguments in PI are intended to show). So games which are essential for the acquisition and use of everyday psychological concepts will be, as it were, games on top of games. The latter, more ‘basic’ games will often be more suited to describing material features of our ordinary environment, or will be more broadly applicable and amenable to intersubjective agreement on the state of play than the full-bore mental games, though these are not hard and fast requirements.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It might strike us that Wittgenstein’s ‘plan’ above begins with a remark that is clearly *grammatical* in all senses of the word, concerning first- and third-person present-tense psychological utterances: “Psychological verbs [are] characterized by the fact that the third person of the present is to be identified by observation, the first person not.” This is immediately expanded in a corresponding rough distinction, already familiar to readers of PI, between *expression* in the first person and *information* in the third. For example, ‘to be in pain’ is a psychological verb. If I avow I’m in pain (truly), this avowal has no observational component of any kind on my part, for Wittgenstein; if I declare ‘She’s in pain’, however, I must do so on the basis of something like my or others’ observation, testimony, or conclusions therefrom. This should be familiar Wittgenstein territory. This opening statement of a verb asymmetry is meant to indicate a quite general feature of our *mental-concept* language-games.[[7]](#footnote-7) Let’s call it the *mental-verbs* principle. In order to move on to the characterization of more specific mental concepts, Wittgenstein then outlines the practice of more specific games, each of which individually will respect the mental-verbs principle.

The first, more specific, group of mental concepts addressed by Wittgenstein in RPPII §63 is the class of *sensation*-concepts (further classes of concepts, *mental images* and the *emotions*, will appear later in this remark and RPPII §148).[[8]](#footnote-8) ‘Sensation’ here includes both feelings and perceptions; this usage is common to both Wittgenstein and Anscombe.[[9]](#footnote-9) The first general feature of games that define sensation mentioned in §63 is attribution of duration and possible simultaneity: for example, I can talk about *how long* a pain or a sound lasts, and whether I *heard* a recording start playing *at the same moment* when I *felt* the spring-like resistance as I pushed the ‘play’ button.

Now what I want to highlight here, with a view to understanding Anscombe’s procedure in *Intention*, is how Wittgenstein begins with a general grammatical characterization of the conceptual territory (the mental) via the mental-verbs principle, and then continues with finer general determinations of more specific mental concepts (the immediate ones in question being *sensation* and *imagination*). In so doing he will exhibit a dependence of the ‘mental’ concept *sensation*, e.g., on subsidiary – for his immediate classificational purpose – concepts like *knowledge*, *observation*, *expression, image, information* (each having some mental overtones itself), and *duration, simultaneity*, *position*, *degree* (which are not prima facie mental concepts at all) – all of these words listed are mentioned in the text of §63, not all of which was quoted above. RPPII §63 continues, in part:

…**Place of feeling** in the body: differentiates seeing and hearing from sense of pressure, temperature, taste and pain.

(If sensations are characteristic of the position and movement of the limbs, at any rate their place is not the joint.)

…Pain differentiated from other sensations by a characteristic **expression**. This makes it akin to joy (which is not a sense-experience).

…While I am looking at an object I cannot **imagine** it.

It is important to note that these bold-faced ‘subsidiary’ concepts are not meant to be *reductive* of the sensation-concepts in any philosophically substantive sense; rather, groups of concepts are simply being situated by Wittgenstein relative to each other (and thus their corresponding games and grammar are so situated). One could only call such a web of conceptual elucidations a *reduction* if it were *complete*, and Wittgenstein offers no guarantee of completeness in his grammatical remarks. Here we may catch a glimpse of the layering of ‘games on top of games’ mentioned above: the game of talking about *seeing*, e.g., differs from the game of talking about *feeling pain* in that the latter involves referring to a *position* of feeling in the body while the former does not. The game of pain is played ‘on top of’ the game of position.

It also should be emphasized that these brief classifications in RPPII §63 and §148 are *not* meant to be the result of *introspection* – rather they result from the examination of the language-games we use in employing the words and concepts involved. This is seen more clearly when specific instances of these concise programmatic remarks are worked out in detail throughout the late notebooks and typescripts.[[10]](#footnote-10)

With this sketch of Wittgenstein’s plan in mind, a corresponding plan of conceptual ‘analysis’ in the first (roughly) twenty sections of *Intention* becomes visible. What Anscombe is trying to elucidate in that work is the group of interrelated concepts *intentional,* *reason for action* and *the (in)voluntary*. She begins by declaring that these concepts can be fully characterized via a basic language-game with a clearly grammatical flavor – this is her homologue, for the concept of ‘intention’, of Wittgenstein’s mental-verbs principle that spans the psychological – the ‘Why are you φ-ing?’ game.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In §16 of *Intention*, Anscombe, after some already arduous conceptual work, summarizes the results she has obtained so far, in specifying the scope of the ‘Why?’ game (note the boldface concepts below; again the emphasis is mine). The reader should imagine or try to ‘hear’ Anscombe’s paragraph quoted below as a correlate, for *Intention,* of Wittgenstein’s ‘plan’ for his voluminous unfinished notes on mental concepts in the *Nachlass*.

**Intentional actions** are a sub-class of the events in a man’s history which are **known** to him *not* just because he **observes** them … . [Such] actions, then, are the ones to which the question **‘Why?’** is given application, in a special sense which is so far explained as follows: the question has not that sense if the answer is **evidence** or states a **cause**, including a mental cause; positively the answer may (*a*) simply mention **past history**, (*b*) give an **interpretation** of the action, or (*c*) mention something **future**. In cases (*b*) and (*c*) the reason is already characterised as a **reason** for acting, i.e. as an answer to the question ‘Why?’ in the requisite sense, and in case (*a*) it is an answer to that question if the ideas of **good or harm** are involved in its meaning as an answer; or again if further enquiry elicits that it is connected with ‘interpretative’ **motive**, or **intention *with which***. (*Intention*, §16)

So I wish to highlight, in summaries 1 and 2 below, the near-homology of method between Wittgenstein in his post-1945 notes on psychology and Anscombe in *Intention*. I submit that this way of reading *Intention* can help demystify the strangeness of Anscombe’s mode of proceeding – a strangeness which made the book almost incomprehensible to its initial reviewers and still leaves people scratching their heads.

1. **Wittgenstein** identifies a basic language-game grammatical feature that characterizes a very wide range of our **mental concepts**: the mental verbs principle. He further qualifies what counts as an instance of these games using the concepts **information** and **expression**. He goes on to portray the subclass of mental concepts that can be called **sensations** using sensation-independent[[12]](#footnote-12) concepts like **duration**, **simultaneity**, **degree**, **location**, and related mental concepts like **imagination**.

2**. Anscombe** identifies a basic language-game with a grammatical flavor that characterizes our concept of **intention**: the **Why are you φ-ing?** game. She further qualifies what counts as an instance of this game (i.e. whether the intended sense of ‘Why?’ “has application”) in terms of such non-voluntary concepts as **knowledge**, **observation**, **evidence**, **cause**, **past/present/future**, **interpretation**, **goodness**, and **motive.**

Why doesn’t Anscombe just try to *explain* to us, in some traditionally *philosophical* way, what intention (i.e. the will) *is* – in the manner of Kant or Aquinas, say – some of her readers might well be inclined to ask? I contend that this is precisely the same question as: Why doesn’t Wittgenstein do something more traditionally philosophically palatable in his own late work?

(It should be noted that ‘intention’ itself is a mental concept, of course, and verbal expressions of intention themselves obey the mental verbs principle: Wittgenstein’s asymmetry between “I’m going to φ” and “He’s going to φ” holds, though Anscombe doesn’t lean on this.) A fully convincing exegesis of this near-homology between the methods of Wittgenstein and Anscombe of course would require a good deal more elaboration than I will attempt in this space, and I fully acknowledge the presence of a clear Aristotelian influence in Anscombe’s manner of thought that is absent in Wittgenstein. But I would like to propose that the parallels between their approaches that we have briefly set out above make an apt frame for our discussion of Anscombe’s ‘appropriation’ of Wittgenstein’s remarks about the sort of knowledge we have of the position and motion of our limbs: knowledge without observation.

II

The class of things *known without observation* by a human being is concisely introduced by Anscombe in the first paragraph of §8 of *Intention*. The paradigm example of this class is our ordinary knowledge of the position of our limbs – what is usually called, perhaps tendentiously, *kinaesthetic* knowledge – but she will, after justifying this formula as applying to kinaesthetic phenomena, go on to extend this form of description to apply also to our ordinary knowledge of what we are doing intentionally. Though it probably was not apparent to her original readers, what she says in §8 about limb position and pain is clearly a distillation of what Wittgenstein wrote in various places, including PI, the two volumes of RPP, the first volume of LW, and OC,[[13]](#footnote-13) as the following juxtapositions indicate:

**Anscombe:** [Describing non-circularly the notion of the ‘involuntary’] can be done as follows: we first point out a particular class of things which are true of a man: namely the class of things which he *knows without observation*. E.g. a man usually knows the position of his limbs without observation. It is without observation, because nothing *shews* him the position of his limbs; it is not as if he were going by a tingle in his knee, which is the sign that it is bent and not straight. (*Intention*, §8)

**Wittgenstein:** [The interlocutor suggests:] “My kinaesthetic sensations apprise me of the movements and positions of my limbs.”

[Wittgenstein replies:] I let my index finger make an easy pendulum movement of small amplitude. I either hardly feel it or don’t feel it at all. Perhaps a little in the tip of the finger, as a slight tension. (Nothing at all in the joint.) And this sensation apprises me of the movement? – for I can describe the movement exactly.

“But still, you must feel it, otherwise you wouldn’t know (without looking) how your finger is moving.” But “knowing” it only means: being able to describe it.

(PI-PP, §§56-57)

**Anscombe:** [continuing §8] Where we can speak of separately describable sensations, having which is in some sense our criterion for saying something, then we can speak of observing that thing; but that is not generally so when we know the position of our limbs. Yet, without prompting, we *can say* it.

**Wittgenstein:** If I did not *see* that my arm has moved after being convinced I had moved it with my face turned away, I should become confused and should presumably trust my *eyes*. Seeing can at any rate tell me whether I have carried out my intended movement exactly, e.g. have reached the position that I wanted to reach; the *feeling* wasn’t able to do that. I feel that I am moving all right, and I can also judge roughly *how* by the feeling – but I simply *know* what movement I have made, although you couldn’t speak of any *sense-datum* of the movement, of any immediate inner picture of the movement. And when I say “I simply *know*…” “knowing” here means something like “being able to say” [*sagen können*] and is not in turn, say, some kind of inner picture. (RPPI §390)

**Anscombe:** [continuing §8] I say however that we *know* it and not merely *can say* it, because there is a possibility of right or wrong: there is point in speaking of knowledge only where a contrast exists between ‘he *knows*’ and ‘he (merely) *thinks* he knows’.

**Wittgenstein:** --For “I know” seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact. One always forgets the expression “I thought I knew”. (OC §12)

**Anscombe:** [continuing §8] Thus, although there is a similarity between giving the position of one’s limbs and giving the place of one’s pain, I should wish to say that one ordinarily *knows* the position of one’s limbs, without observation, but not that being able to say where one feels pain is a case of something known.

**Wittgenstein:** “I know where I am feeling pain”, “I know that I feel it *here*” is as wrong as “I know that I am in pain”. But “I know where you touched my arm” is right. (OC §41)

Wittgenstein, throughout his writings, calls attention to our different uses of words like ‘know’: he has no unitary account of knowledge, because, we, in our usage, do not use the word in a wholly unitary fashion. In OC he discusses other senses of ‘know’ than the one he and Anscombe are interested in here, for example the ‘I know’ of ordinary empirical knowledge or the ‘I know’ that means ‘I have learnt from authority’. I shall try to make clear the sense of ‘I know’ that’s relevant here, that is, the sense in question when Anscombe, prompted by Wittgenstein, speaks of *knowledge without observation,* via two connected definitions, as follows:

**(CS)** ‘I can say X’ means by definition ‘I can, with unique authority, and without any grounds, observational or otherwise, *vouch for* X’.

**(KWO)** ‘I know X without observation’ (abbreviated as ‘I knowWO X’) means by definition ‘I can say X (as defined in CS above) – *but* what I (sincerely and understandably) vouch for in saying X is not indisputably true, and in exceptional cases I am subject to objective public correction of this knowledge by myself or someone else.’

Wittgenstein introduced these concepts, these fundamental usages, in connection with our talk about the position of our limbs and our pains – or, perhaps more accurately, he *observed* these patterns of usage in those kinds of talk. The CS part of the usages is common to both language-games, those to do with our limbs and those to do with our pains. Anscombe, in a stroke of brilliance, noticed that KWO applies formally to games other than limb position as well, to those involving intention, to part of what we call the involuntary, and to what she termed ‘mental’ efficient causes, such as the unexpected sight of a face at the window.[[14]](#footnote-14) Therefore, following Anscombe and Wittgenstein, we may think of KWO, an ‘avowal’ concept that specializes CS, as a specific logical form of ‘knowledge’ (knowledge of a kind that is clearly *not* ‘justified true belief’, since it has no justification and may sometimes be untrue) having rather broad applicability to a number of our most fundamental concepts concerning human feeling and acting. What Anscombe writes about knowledge in *Intention* can only be fully understood if one keeps in mind, throughout the book, her Wittgensteinian leitmotif: “there is point in speaking of knowledge only where a contrast exists between ‘he *knows*’ and ‘he (merely) *thinks* he knows.”

The ‘pure’ case of ‘can say’ allows no possibility of error on the part of the sincere sayer under ordinary circumstances, i.e. no correction of what is thereby said by others: examples of this case are my honestly saying *that I’m in pain* or saying *where it hurts me*. A hearer’s disputing what I vouch for in this way will involve adducing grounds for dispute on her part: something like doubting my sincerity or my mental health, or expressing confusion about what I could possibly have meant – “as, e.g. if you say that your foot, not your hand, is very sore, but it is your hand you nurse” (*Intention*, 14). The ‘impure’ case of ‘can say’, i.e. the case in which we ‘knowWO’, allows for the sincere comprehensible knower sometimes being wrong and being corrected, though being wrong is never the *norm* here: Anscombe’s examples of this form of knowledge are knowing the position and motion of one’s limbs, knowing one’s intention (what one is intentionally *doing*),[[15]](#footnote-15) knowing a ‘mental cause’ such as a loud bang that made me jump, and knowing an involuntary movement of my body, like giving a jerk as I fall asleep.[[16]](#footnote-16)

The ‘can’ on the right-hand side of the CS definition is a logical (i.e. grammatical, semantic) ‘can’: it means there is a possibility of declaring the truth in this way that is *licensed by the language game(s) in play.* It is analogous to the ‘can’ in ‘You can move your rook in such-and-such a way’ or ‘a unique tangent can be found at any point on a circle’ (for Wittgenstein mathematics is rule-governed in roughly the same sense that chess is). ‘With unique authority’ means that in any game in which ‘can say’ is valid, the person who *says something* in this way is *the one who gets to say it*, according to the rules of the game. (As noted above, what is said with this unique authority may sometimes be questioned, though no other speaker gets to ‘take over’ the authority.) ‘Without any grounds’ means no results of observation, perception, feeling, fact-checking or logical consequence are relevant for me, the sayer, to what I truly *can say* in this sense: the question ‘How do I know?’ addressed to myself here makes no sense.

The additional qualification, over and above what is meant in ‘I can say X’ in the KWO definition of ‘I knowWO X’, which requires my corrigibility in so saying X, means that in a *logical* sense KWO is *stronger* than CS (since the former must satisfy an additional condition), whereas in an *epistemic* sense KWO is *weaker* than CS (since the former is subject to correction and the latter is not). When Anscombe says, regarding one’s knowledge of the position of one’s limbs, “I call this sort of being able to say ‘knowledge’ and not *merely* ‘being able to say’ (*Intention* §8, 14), her ‘merely’ is an indication that she’s talking about the *logical* sense.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It should be noted that it is part of the meaning of ‘vouch for’ in the definition of ‘can say’ that ‘I can say X’ entails that I’m *aware of*, *conscious of* – or at least can come to be aware of at the time of saying what I ‘can say’ – what is thereby said, X. This doesn’t mean that I necessarily had to have a conscious thought of X *ever* before being asked. If asked ‘Why are you going upstairs? Are you fetching your camera?’, for example, I may reply ‘No, I’m looking for the camera manual, since I’m planning to do a long exposure later,’ without any implication that I explicitly *had the* *thought* that I needed to go upstairs to look for the manual at some moment before, or even during, my starting up the stairs. This ‘vouch for’ part of the definition of ‘knowWO’ has the consequence that a sincere denial that I was *aware of –* that is that *I knew* in the sense of awareness (part of the language game of ‘Why?’ here, not a bit of introspective psychology) – what I was interrogatively accused of doing, is a denial that I can *vouch for* the accuser’s description, and is thus a denial that I knewWO that I was acting under that description, which is why Anscombe says “[‘Why?’] is refused application by the answer ‘I was not aware I was doing that’”. (It must be said that Wittgenstein, as far as I can tell, did not explicitly consider the ‘awareness’ sense of ‘knowledge’, though he may be touching on this sense in RPPI §564 or §735.)

We may now approach the key step in Anscombe’s application of the KWO form to intention. In the cases of limb position or what the ‘mental cause’ of some involuntary response was, the knowledge without observation in question is of a state of affairs. It may be corrected by a third party who is observing me in the normal way we make public corrections concerning objective states of affairs. “I’m sorry, you don’t have your legs crossed: I can see them” or “It wasn’t a loud bang, it was an odd surreptitious scratching that made you jump – in fact I was recording with my phone and can play it back for you” may serve properly as public corrections of particular *descriptive* errors in my vouching for my knowledgeWO. These mistaken avowals by me about my legs or a loud bang were not expressions of *speculative* knowledge, since they had no grounds (by definition), but they are nevertheless contradicted by my interlocutor *in the same way she would contradict a grounded speculative assertion of empirical fact*.

The crucial move Anscombe makes at this point, in order to apply the general KWO form of knowledge to the game of my knowing *what I’m doing*, is to allow objective public correction *only* of my *execution* of what I’m doing, not of those *descriptions* that I vouch for when I honestly say I’m doing X but fail in pulling X off in some way. If the KWO form is to apply to what I *do*, as opposed to where my limbs are, the only correction (*some* form of corrigibility is needed for my ‘can say’ additionally to rise to the status of a ‘knowingWO’) allowed in the ‘intentional action’ game is of *how well I pull off, execute* what I’ve avowed I’m doing. My avowal of the *description* of what I’m doing, qua description, is not subject to criticism in the doing-something game, even if the description turns out to be strictly false owing to my botched execution of an action fitting that description. If the botched execution is pointed out to me after my avowal of Xing, I can say ‘In any case I was Xing, although I didn’t succeed’. We may slightly rewrite KWO, in its intentional version, to reflect this account, as

**(KWOI)** ‘I know I’m Xing without observation’ (abbreviated as ‘I knowWO I’m Xing’) means by definition ‘I can say I’m Xing’ (as defined in CS above) – *but* what I (sincerely and understandably) vouch for in saying I’m Xing is not indisputably true in its *execution*, and in exceptional cases I am subject to objective public correction of what I said I was doing, in light of its faulty execution, by myself or someone else.’

It might be objected to this formulation that it sounds rather like the assertion that I “really ‘do’ in the intentional sense whatever I think I am doing”, which Anscombe rejects in *Intention* §29 as a way out of her difficulties. But KWOI, as the form of a *practice*, depends on there being a quite regular, quotidian identity between what I can say I’m doing and what I actually succeed in doing: whence the “exceptional cases” qualification in KWOI. When in such an exceptional case it emerges that I merely *thought* I knewWO I was Xing, my knowledgeWO has been compromised, though the description of what I sincerely thought I was doing is not: an honest description is the basis for impugning the execution. Whether the description is properly understood and genuine, though, *can* be questioned; there may sometimes only be what Wittgenstein called “imponderable evidence” (PI-PP, §§355-360) of an intention. In this situation Anscombe says “there comes a point where a man can say ‘This is my intention’ and no one else can contribute anything to settle the matter. … I.e. here ‘knows’ only means ‘can say’” (*Intention* §27, 48).

Consider how KWOI fits with what Anscombe says about contradicting an expression of intention, an expression of knowledgeWO, in *Intention* §31 – here ‘contradict’ has the oldest sense in the OED, that of ‘speaking against’: “I’m poisoning the inhabitants” said by her pumper is contradicted by “You won’t, for I’m going to stop you”, she says, not “You aren’t, in fact”. The contradictor thus allows the description ‘poisoning’ to stand, but predicts he will interfere with or prevent the *execution* of what the pumper knowsWO he is doing.

This way of reading the application of the logical category *knowledge without observation* to intentional action is, I think, the only clear way to make charitable sense of Anscombe’s ‘dark sayings’ in *Intention* about execution and Theophrastus’ Principle. Kim Frost (2019, 319, 333) has noticed that Anscombe should be seen as cashing in her early aside (*Intention*, 4) that “there are other ways of saying what is not true besides lying and being mistaken” later in *Intention*, and we may read §45 in that way, where full-blown practical knowledge and the ‘writing *I am a fool* on the blackboard’ case are discussed. In that place, Anscombe appears to directly say, with infuriating concision, that if something went wrong with the chalk I was holding, such that the phrase ‘I am a fool’ did not legibly appear when I’d intended to write that, that my knowledge of my intention *in failure* was the same as my knowledge would have been if I’d managed to write the phrase successfully. I want to say that that’s *exactly* what she *did* mean, regarding her (practical) knowledge (without observation) of what she had been writing. If one allows the ‘funny’ sort of knowledgeWO that I’ve described in KWOI to be what’s in play here, the paradoxical appearance of these passages evaporates. She knewWO (*could say*) what she was writing in either case, but stumbled in writing it in the bad case, which made her execution, though not her description, corrigible.[[18]](#footnote-18)

III

Armed with the logical category KWOI and its application to intentional action, we may now address some of the daunting puzzles in Anscombe’s treatment of practical knowledge in *Intention* §§45-48. She first broaches the topic of practical knowledge in §32 of that work, as something the medievals saw a need for but which modern philosophy seems to have forgotten, immediately after she describes the situation of someone who inadvertently presses the wrong button:

The case that we now want to consider is that of an agent who says what he is at present doing. Now suppose what he says is not true. … [And what if he is] *simply* not doing what he says? As when I say to myself ‘Now I press Button A’ – pressing Button B – a thing which can certainly happen. …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. (*Intention*, §32, 56-57)

Here, applying the KWOI pattern, the button-presser has knowledgeWO of his pressing Button A, whereas observation (by another or himself) will show that he accidentally pressed Button B. The knowledgeWO of what he was *doing*, however, i.e. pressing Button A, on this reading remains valid after the error, and the point of this ‘funny’ concept of knowledge can perhaps be seen in its justifying the use of the adverb ‘accidentally’ here: ”Why did you press Button B?” “I was pressing Button A, but hit Button B by mistake, since I usually press Button B”. The button-presser’s hearer may believe this reply or not, but if he does, he is acknowledging the button-presser’s knowledgeWO of what he was doing.

Note that Anscombe says nothing here or elsewhere to suggest that she is *distinguishing* what counts as ‘knowing without observation what one is doing’ from ‘having practical knowledge of what one is doing’, and I will thus take them to be one and the same thing. The point of having two names for the same knowledge will emerge in *Intention* §48.

Anscombe then turns, in §47,[[19]](#footnote-19) to the ‘form of description of intentional actions’. Her discussion here is notoriously difficult to interpret; it might even be said to positively *invite* misunderstanding. It looks as if she is dividing this form into a threefold group of verb phrases exemplified in (a) ‘**sliding (passively) on ice** for the fun of it’, (b) ‘**intruding** on a gathering’, and (c) ‘**telephoning** one’s friend’, listed in ascending order of ‘implied intentionality’ of the description-verbs in question. Verbs of type (a) have no implied intentional form unless complemented by an ‘in order to’ or interpretative phrase like ‘for the fun of it’, those of type (b) depend on the ‘Why?’ game for their existence as concepts, though they may be used non-intentionally sometimes, and those of type (c) are almost invariably used to express intention.

It is true that she outlines this threefold classification of the rich selection of verbs we have at our disposal that stand ready to express descriptions of intentional action. It seems to me *false*, however, that she intends this classification itself to be the essence of the ‘form of description of intentional actions’. The point is that, in analogy with how (Anscombe 1971, 137) we can learn the general term ‘cause’ only after learning a host of particular verbs displaying the form of description ‘cause’ – like *infect*, *scrape*, *burn* – we can learn the ‘Why?’ game only in the course of learning a host of verbs possibly displaying the form of description ‘intentional action’. The key sentences here are “In fact the term ‘intentional’ has reference to a form of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question ‘Why?’” (*Intention*, 84). Looking ahead to §48, I shall take this to mean that any verb phrase φ that *can* truly describe an event E involving what a single human body does or undergoes, such that E (under description φ) is properly subject to *Intention*’s ‘Why are you φ-ing?’ question, has the requisite form of description.

The climax of this section of the book – the place where the ‘form of description of intentional actions’ is put to work and where the phrase ‘practical knowledge’ is allowed to throw a whole new light on KWOI as so far explained – is Anscombe’s taut working out of the meaning of a Thomistic formula granting causal power to practical knowledge:

[W]e can say that where (*a*) the description of an event is of a type to be **formally** the description of an executed intention [and] (*b*) the event is **actually** the execution of an intention (by our criteria) then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds: Practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’, unlike ‘speculative’ knowledge, which is ‘derived from the objects known’. (*Intention*, 87, my boldface)

The key to interpreting the point of the conjoined conditions (*a*) and (*b*),[[20]](#footnote-20) which is not at all obvious from Anscombe’s text, I shall argue, is the preceding passage on the same page

[F]ailure to achieve what one would finally like to achieve is common; and in particular the attainment of something falling under the desirability characterization in the first premise [of the practical reasoning corresponding to a hierarchy of means to an end in action]. It often happens that people do things for pleasure and perhaps get none or little, or for health without success … and these failures interest us. What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man’s performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. (*Intention*, 87)

What she is describing here might be called *trying* to achieve a desirable goal by truly acting intentionally but not hitting that goal, while *still* managing intentionally to achieve some *means* (a ‘more immediate description’ of an action) to that goal. For example, trying to improve one’s health by a deliberate dietary change that turns out in fact to be inefficacious (according to later medical science): replacing green beans with beef, say, in an Atkins diet. If on a particular occasion, I am truly describable as deliberately eating beef for my health but I am not truly describable as improving my health (a more remote and general goal), my action of eating (an ‘event’) satisfies conditions (*a*) and (*b*) of the ‘causal’ paragraph under the ‘eating beef’ description – Why am I doing it? For my health. Did I carry it out in actuality (eating beef)? Yes – and my practical knowledge (without observation) that I am deliberately eating beef *is* here the cause of what it understands: my eating beef; that I know I’m doing it *brings about* what I’m doing (more on this below: I maintain that the important sense of ‘cause’ here is *efficient* cause).

However, the same event, under the ‘less immediate’ description ‘improving my health’ fails condition (*b*), since the health improvement is not *actual*, and we cannot invoke Thomas’s formula; my knowledge without observation that I’m improving my health *fails* to cause my health to improve. Another case of satisfying (*a*) but failing (*b*) is straightforward: a direct failure in execution. So I may mistake cooked ostrich for beef, and eat that when I meant to consume beef. Then the description ‘eating beef’ was *formally* appropriate, but did not *actually* occur. In that case also Thomas’s formula fails: I had practical knowledge but it didn’t cause what it understands – eating beef – rather it caused the eating of ostrich. A third case of failing (*b*) would be a situation in which my car is slowly rolling backwards, unbeknownst to me, the driver, while I have my foot on the brake pedal and intend to be stationary (this has happened to me). The description ‘rolling slowly backwards in my car’ can express an intention or not: it has the form required by condition (*a*); but it does not describe an intentional action *in fact* because of my lack of awareness, and thus fails condition (*b*).

What about condition (*a*), the formal condition, failing? Well, then there is no practical knowledge of what I’m doing under that description, since the question ‘Why?’ lacks application. No practical knowledge, no *causation* by practical knowledge. So (*a*) is a minimal requirement for both intentional description and Thomas’s formula. Requirement (*b*) serves to filter out (i) the ‘less immediate descriptions’ of my action that may be too remote to find execution in practice, and (ii) formally intentional true descriptions that are not actually intentional, and also to require the ‘more immediate descriptions’ of my action to be truly carried out without error.

So *being the cause of what it understands* is on Anscombe’s account not the *definition* of practical knowledge, as it seems to have been for Aquinas. What *defines* it is the KWOI logical form, but Anscombe has in §48 asserted that that form leads to the truth of what Aquinas said about practical knowledge in many actual cases: those situations where we have learned to use a rather ‘immediate’ description of what we are doing, a description that has the logical form required to be in play in the ‘Why?’ language-game, and where we have *in fact* successfully *done* what we *knewWO* we were doing under that description. In such cases Anscombe’s formula ‘I do what happens’ applies, and practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands: that is, it is the cause of what I’m doing under the relevant description.

Now it has sometimes been asserted in the literature[[21]](#footnote-21) that Anscombe here is talking about *formal* causation (in Aristotle’s sense) *only*. It is trivially true, of course, that where the Thomistic formula applies to practical knowledge, it is that knowledge which confers the form on what happens: “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.” (*Intention*, 87). But what is much more interesting here is that what is being described is also a kind of *efficient* causation. This need not be contrary to our intuitions about the situation at all: after all, it would not be unnatural to say, in a case of successful intentional action, that my practical knowledge of what I’m doing~~,~~ as I’m doing it, *brings about* what I’m doing. Or that what I’m doing *derives from*, *arises out of*, *comes of* (Anscombe 1971, 136) my concurrent practical knowledge. In fact, Hornsby has pointed out an implicit appeal in *Intention* to a form of efficient causation that escapes the Davidsonian ‘event causes event’ pattern, which she calls *agent causation*.[[22]](#footnote-22) I take Hornsbian agent causation to be an apt name for the efficient causation expressed in the Thomistic formula.

There are several exegetical reasons favoring the ‘efficient’ conclusion. (1) Anscombe was very well aware of Aristotle’s four causes in 1957, but in the passage in question, citing a medieval Aristotelian (!), she declines to use the term *formal cause*. (2) Nowhere else in *Intention* does she speak of anything but efficient causes: seeing a face at the window that makes me jump is efficient; hearing the martial music making me pace up and down is efficient; a thought hammering away in my mind making me sign a document is efficient (all in §5). The bark of the crocodile making me jump in §8 is efficient. (3) What Anscombe says practical knowledge is “more than”, in the same place (*Intention*, 87-88), has the form of efficient cause: it’s *more than* what’s “observed to be a necessary condition of the production of necessary results”, and *more than* that “an idea of doing such-and-such in such-and-such ways is such a [necessary] condition”. These formulations embody the concept of necessary efficient cause that is criticized as lacking application to *all* efficient causes in her later paper (Anscombe, 1971); she doesn’t deny these phrases’ applicability here, but declares them ‘less than’ or perhaps ‘weaker than’ what she wants to say. If she had simply wanted to point out that the Thomistic formula’s causality was formal (and not efficient), her existing text would be quite odd.[[23]](#footnote-23) (4) As Hornsby has pointed out,[[24]](#footnote-24) there is a sharp parallel between the discussion in §47 and Anscombe’s list of causative verbs in Anscombe (1971). What is that paper concerned with? Answer: *efficient* causality, exclusively. The list of causative verbs found there (most of them, anyway) would fit on Anscombe’s left-hand list in *Intention* §47, and so are capable of describing an event of doing that is known without observation and subject to the ‘Why?’ game: “in learning to speak we learned the linguistic representation and application of a host of causal concepts. A small selection: *scrape*, *push*, *wet*, *carry*, *eat*, *burn*, *knock over*, *keep off*, *squash*, *make* (e.g. noises, paper boats), *hurt*” (Anscombe, 1971, 137).

So, in summary, Anscombe’s concept of intention is defined by her ‘Why are you φ-ing?’ language-game, which is itself partly determined by the concept of knowledge without observation, as applied to intention (what I have called the KWOI form of knowledge). This form of knowledge remains knowledge of a description even when what it knows (an action under that description) has misfired or been interrupted in execution, and the description does not hold. This form of knowledge may also be called ‘practical’, and when certain common conditions are met it is truly the efficient, as well as the formal, cause of what it understands, as Aquinas said. This is Anscombean *agent causation*, in which the practical knowledge of a human agent is described as causing an event directly and concurrently, without the aid of a prior Davidsonian event.

**References**

*Abbreviations of Wittgenstein’s works:*

PI Philosophical Investigations, Revised Fourth Edition, Hacker and Schulte, Eds. (2009), Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

PI-PP Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment, in: PI. Previously known as Part II of PI.

RPPI Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I (1980), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

RPPII Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume II (1980), Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

LW1 Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I (1982), Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

LW2 Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume II (1992), Oxford:

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OC On Certainty (1969), Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

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1. I use this phrase to indicate any post-Gettier account of knowledge that requires the truth of what is known together with some kind of justification of that knowledge, counterfactual or factual. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wittgenstein’s later (post-*Blue Book*) ‘results’ are not philosophical theories, but rather accounts of our concepts in terms of the practices we exhibit in weaving the words expressive of those concepts into our activities. It will emerge, I hope, that in *Intention* Anscombe uses some of Wittgenstein’s results to obtain new results of the same kind. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The argument here is entirely exegetical, since we need a clear view of what Anscombe was saying – which has been much contested -- before criticism can find a secure foothold. So I will not attempt to defend Anscombe’s or Wittgenstein’s views against competing accounts of intention, action, or knowledge. I shall also assume at least a glancing acquaintance with PI and *Intention* on the part of the reader of this paper, and will not defend my interpretation of the late Wittgenstein against, e.g., attempted ‘resolute’ accounts of his thinking. One hopes that the appropriateness of the interpretation will to some extent ‘take care of itself’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Chapter Two of Joachim Schulte’s book *Experience and Expression* (Schulte, 1993) for a discussion of the plan. The details of the plan suffuse Wittgenstein’s post-1945 notes and typescripts concerning philosophy of psychology, and are worked out in innumerable specific remarks, some of which found their way into PI-PP. Aficionados of Wittgenstein’s term *treatment* (*Behandlung*) should note that it is *not* used in this passage in the sense in which a physician ‘treats’ an illness (PI §255). I will go on to use the adjectives ‘psychological’ and ‘mental’ interchangeably in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The boldface emphasis is mine, and will be justified below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The notion of ‘more basic’ games may be left somewhat vague for our purposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The precise scope of this criterion for the mental might be disputed, but Wittgenstein clearly meant it to apply to a wide range of prima facie mental concepts. In RPPI §836 he tentatively calls these ‘*Erlebnisbegriffe*’ (the quote marks are his). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These two classes certainly don’t exhaust the mental, according to Wittgenstein. See his remarks on *thought*, *belief*, *hope*, or *expectation*, for example, which are neither sensations nor emotions; these remarks litter parts of PI and the later notebooks. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Anscombe (1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For example, the last line quoted, “While I am looking at an object I cannot imagine it” might mistakenly be taken to be a piece of phenomenology. But see e.g. RPPI §653: “…his pictures [*Bilder*] are ‘independent’ of him. What does that mean? He couldn’t use thoughts to dispel them. If, e.g., I imagine [*sich vorstellen*] the death of my friend, I may tell myself “Don’t think about it, think of something else”; but that wouldn’t be said to me if I were seeing the event before my eyes, e.g. on a film. Then I’d reply to someone who in the assumed case said to me “Don’t think about it”: “Think about it or not, I’m *seeing* it.”“ The discussion here is entirely of what can be *said*, by another or by Wittgenstein -- no introspection or phenomenology is invoked; this is typical of most of the remarks in the RPP volumes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I will ignore the past-tense form of ‘Why?’ in this article. It brings in the additional concept (game) of memory, which modifies the ‘can say’ (see below) nature of a present-tense answer to the question. Anscombe’s use of the present progressive is not accidental. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. That is, concepts that may overlap with sensation concepts, but which have wide ranges of application that are not directly ‘mental’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See, notably, RPPI §§382-408, 455, 698, 754, 758, 767, 771-773, 784-786, 790, 794-798, 843-844, 948; RPPII §63; LW1 §§386-389 (repeated in LW2, p. 4, and PI-PP §§56-59); OC §41. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See especially *Intention* §§6-10 and §16. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This application of ‘knowing without observation’ to intention references KWO, but contains a refinement that will be explained below. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For an excellent discussion of the basics of Anscombe’s reasoning about these seemingly odd categorizations, see Wiseman (2016, 92-97). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This ambiguity concerning which is ‘stronger’, ‘knowWO‘ or ‘can say’, may have been behind Michael Thompson’s twitting Anscombe for her Wittgensteinian ‘tics’: “Whether my foot *hurts* or whether I *intend* to leave Uppsala some day … --- these are supposed to be things I *can say*. I cannot myself be said to know them “except perhaps as a joke”” (Thompson, 2011, 198). Thompson has missed the point of Anscombe’s distinctions; she would indeed say he *can* have *known*WO that he intended to leave Uppsala, though not whether his foot hurt. (There is no evidence that Anscombe made a distinction between the idioms *going to φ* and *intend to φ*, although she mostly favored the former: “This consideration disinclines us to call [expression of intention] a prediction … even though ‘I intend to go for a walk but shall not go for a walk’ does sound in some way contradictory” (*Intention*, 5)). See also Wiseman (2016, 91-92). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Anscombe is not entirely clear whether it matters whether one says in such a case I ‘thought I knew’ or ‘I knew (falsely and corrigibly)’. In her first discussion of the case of writing something incorrectly (*Intention*, §29, 53), she says “without the eyes he knows what he writes” (this occurs in a section in which she is raising problems for herself, but she seems to assert it in her own voice). I treat ‘I knew but now am properly corrected’ as equivalent to ‘I thought I knew’ in KWOI cases throughout. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I agree with Schwenkler (2015, 2019) that the ‘maximal’ concept of practical knowledge that Anscombe begins anew with in *Intention* §45 – after a long digression on practical reason, its relation to intention ‘with which’, wanting, and picking alternatives – the case of a master architect who builds his structure in his imagination in the finest detail, choosing alternatives as he goes, is inspired by Aquinas’s picture of the mind of God creating what it already fully comprehends. Since Anscombe isn’t doing theology in *Intention*, I will treat this idealization of human practical knowledge as an illustrative digression; in fact in the text she immediately falls back to earth, to the homely case of writing on the blackboard mentioned above. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Setiya (2017b) clearly expresses the interpretative difficulty in making the argument in *Intention* §§47-48 consistent. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Setiya (2017, 159) explicitly makes this claim, and Moran (2004, 67) seems to as well. Schwenkler (2015) emphasizes the formal claim, but his (2009, 173-175) acknowledges a kind of efficient causality as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hornsby (2011, 105-110 and ff). Hornsby considers a person (‘Ann’) carrying -- ‘carrying’ is a ‘causative verb’ for Anscombe (1975) -- a suitcase. Hornsby says: “The causality here is internal to an event. Ann’s carrying the suitcase *is* the event of its being carried” (Hornsby, 2011, 107). Hornsby is not asserting that the event of carrying is *self-caused*; rather, she is noting the concurrency and inseparability of the carrying and its cause: that’s what makes the cause “internal”. Note that Ann’s KWOI, my presumptive cause, is concurrent with and inseparable from her action of carrying. “We might say that in such cases the person does the thing … *non-mediately*” (Hornsby 2011, 108). No mediation is conceptually needed between my knowledgeWO of my carrying, as I do it, and my carrying. So Hornsby’s *agent causality* may be seen as describing the same thing as KWOI efficiently causing “what it understands”. To the objection that any form of the agent’s knowledge is a mere property of the agent, and that *agent* causality properly speaking requires the *agent*, not one of her properties, to be a cause, I would reply that KWOI is not an *incidental* agential property, and press the question: What *is* an agent, for Anscombe? The paradigm of *human* agency (as opposed to the agency of a human actor’s physical mass or of non-human animals) is clearly intentional action. In her essay “The First Person” (1975) Anscombe explicitly connects what I have called KWOI with the essence of the use of ‘I’ (Anscombe 1975, 33-35). This would apply to “I am φ-ing (intentionally)”, which seems to be a fine expression of agency, even though ‘I’ doesn’t *refer* to any agent, she says. These matters clearly deserve further discussion; I am here merely recommending a reading along these lines as illuminative. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The ‘more than’ form of words might conceivably mean she intended to indicate a ‘stronger’ form of efficient causality than that expressed in necessary generalities. Or that there was an additional condition to be attached to the efficient-causality phrases (perhaps just that of exhibiting *formal causality as well*). Her next sentence declares that without practical knowledge what happens fails to be describable as execution of intentions. This would indicate a *necessity* for the practical knowledge, whether logical (formal cause) or ‘lacking this, no efficient cause’, or both. Interpretation is vexed, but doesn’t well support a ‘merely formal’ reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hornsby (2011, 106). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)