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## REASONS FOR ACTION AND PRACTICAL REASONING

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### *Abstract*

This paper seeks a better understanding of the elements of practical reasoning: premises and conclusion. It argues that the premises of practical reasoning do not normally include statements such as ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’; that the reasoning in practical reasoning is the same as it is in theoretical reasoning and that what makes it *practical* is, first, that the point of the relevant reasoning is given by the goal that the reasoner seeks to realize by means of that reasoning and the subsequent action; second, that the premises of such reasoning show the goodness of the action to be undertaken; third, that the conclusions of such reasoning may be actions or decisions, that can be accompanied by expressions of intention, either *in* action, or for the future; and that these are justified, and might be contradicted, in ways that are not only peculiar to them (i.e. in ways that diverge from those found in theoretical reasoning), but are distinctively practical, in that they involve reference to reasons for *acting* and to expressions of *intention*, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

This paper explores practical reasoning. In particular, it seeks a better understanding of the elements of practical reasoning (premises and conclusion) and their relation. These are large and much debated issues. I shall first focus on the question: ‘What are the premises of practical reasoning?’ and, towards the end of the paper, will say something about the conclusion of practical reasoning. As will become clear, my discussion is inspired in Elizabeth Anscombe’s remarks on practical reasoning in *Intention* and in her paper ‘Practical Inference’.<sup>2</sup>

A preliminary point. The term ‘practical reasoning’, one might think, is ambiguous, for it can be used to refer to the process of practical reasoning, or to the ‘content’ of that reasoning. I am not convinced by this ambiguity claim. At any rate, by ‘practical reasoning’ I shall here mean the reasoning that we, as rational agents, engage in. Engaging in such reasoning is taking certain statements as premises and, if all goes well, reaching a ‘practical’ conclusion, which has those premises as its grounds. So the questions I am concerned with can be put without ambiguity: what kind of statements play the role of premises when we engage in practical reasoning? And what is the conclusion of such reasoning?

### **The premises of practical reasoning**

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<sup>1</sup> I should like to thank John Broome, Alex Neill, Aaron Ridley, Daniel Whiting and participants at seminars where earlier versions of this paper were presented for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957); and ‘Practical Inference’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. M. Geach and L. Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), pp. 109-48. For a detailed discussion of Anscombe’s views on this see, C. Vogler, ‘Anscombe on Practical Inference’ in E. Millgram, editor, *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, (MIT University Press, 2001), pp. 437-64.

Many contemporary philosophers think the following gives the form of the most basic and simple piece of practical reasoning:

- P1. I want to  $\varphi$
- P2. I believe that  $\psi$ -ing is a means of  $\varphi$ -ing
- C. I shall/ should / ought to/ must,  $\psi$ .<sup>3</sup>

That is, for many contemporary philosophers, the *first* premise in practical reasoning is a statement such as ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’.<sup>4</sup>

It is, then, striking, though not surprising, that one should find the following remark in Anscombe’s discussion of practical reasoning: “‘I want’ does not rightly occur in the premises [of practical reasoning]’.<sup>5</sup>

I say it is not surprising to find that her view on this is at odds with prevailing contemporary views because she tended to think that contemporary philosophers had lost sight of some important insights about human agency that Aristotle and his medieval commentators had gained. Nonetheless, her remark above requires explanation and defence, for contemporary philosophers certainly have on their side the strong *prima facie* plausibility of the claim that what was given above captures in schematic form how we often summarise the reasoning behind, or leading to, an action.

So why does Anscombe say that ‘I want’ does not rightly occur in the premises of practical reasoning? In order to answer this question, I shall make explicit something I take to be an uncontroversial claim, namely that whenever an action has a piece of practical reasoning as its grounds, the premises of the relevant practical reasoning are one’s reason for acting. Therefore, if we establish what our reasons for acting are, we shall know what kind of statements play the role of premises in practical reasoning, and will then be able to decide whether statements such as ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ have any business playing that role. If, having done that, we find that Anscombe is right, then we will still have a question left: what role, if any, do such statements play in practical reasoning?

A point of terminological clarification is needed. The phrase ‘one’s reasons for acting’ may be used refer to the reasons that there are for one to act: what in the literature is called ‘normative reasons’. Here, I use the phrase rather to refer to what in the same literature is labelled ‘motivating reasons’: the reasons for which one acts, when one acts for a reason. These are reasons that favour one’s action in one’s eyes; they present the action as good or valuable in some respect; and they are the reasons in the light of which one acts.

The view about practical reasoning that I attributed to many contemporary philosophers goes, unsurprisingly, hand in hand with what is often called the ‘Humean view

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<sup>3</sup> The first premise is sometimes said to be: ‘I intend to  $\phi$ ’; and the conclusion is sometimes given as: ‘I intend to  $\psi$ ’. For my purposes here, this difference is of no relevance, so I shall focus on the first suggestion. I shall, however, say something below about versions of practical reasoning that take the first premise and the conclusion to be the ‘content’ of an intention.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. David Velleman, *The Possibility of Practical Reasoning* (2000), esp. 193-199, although his account of the sense in which ‘I want to  $\phi$ ’ is the first premise of practical reason is complex. For a (sympathetic) explanation of this as the basic schema for practical reasoning see also Robert Audi, *Practical Reasoning and Ethical Decision*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) pp.96ff. Audi also provides a very helpful survey of various views on the basic structure of practical reasoning on pp. 82-6.

<sup>5</sup> *Intention*, p.ix. The remark appears in the ‘Table of Contents’ and is developed further in section §35.

of motivating reasons'.<sup>6</sup> This is the view that my reason for  $\psi$ -ing is that I want to  $\varphi$  and that I believe that  $\psi$ -ing is a means of  $\varphi$ -ing.<sup>7</sup> On this Humean view, then, when someone digs in order to find some treasure his reason for digging is that he wants to find some treasure and believes that digging is the way to find it.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, on this view an agent's reason for  $\psi$ -ing, that is, the reasons that motivate him to  $\psi$  are that he wants to  $\varphi$  and that he believes that  $\psi$ -ing is a means of  $\varphi$ -ing. And since the reason that motivates can play the role of premises in practical reasoning, then, on this view, the premises of practical reasoning are statements to the effect that one wants and believes certain things; in our example, the relevant premises would be 'I want to find some treasure' and 'I believe that digging is the way to find it'.

I have argued elsewhere that this view of motivating reasons is wrong: the reasons that motivate me to act are not, or not typically, that I want something, or that I believe something about how to achieve what I want.<sup>9</sup> But it should be noted that, although both claims are wrong, the claim about wanting is doubly wrong. For, although the fact that I believe something is not normally my reason for acting, *what* I believe can be. So, for example, if I move house because my current house is too small to keep my books in, then my reason for moving house is not that I believe that my current house is too small to keep my books in. However, my reason *is* something I believe (or know): namely, that my current house is too small to keep my books in. By contrast, neither the fact that I want something, nor what I want, is normally my reason for acting.

Here I shall summarise an argument against the idea that the fact that I want something is my reason for acting.<sup>10</sup> Reasons for doing something are, as we saw, reasons that favour the action in the agent's eyes: such reasons encapsulate some feature or property of the prospective action that makes, or appears to the agent to make, the action good or valuable. But, in general, the mere fact that I want to do something does not favour, nor does it appear to me to favour, doing it.

The fact that I want to do something does have a connection with my reason for doing it, but the connection is not that the fact that I want to do it is itself my reason for doing it. Rather, the connection lies in the truth that many of the things we want, we want for reasons. Borrowing a term from Anscombe, we might call my reason for wanting to do something the 'desirability characterisation' that doing it has for me. And that desirability characterisation relates my doing that thing to the good (broadly conceived), because the things we want, we want because we see some good in them (the good may be aesthetic, prudential, hedonic, etc.). Whatever good we see in what we want is the reason why we want that thing; and for many of these things wanted, this good we see in them is also *our* reason for wanting them. As the Aristotelian-mediaeval slogan has it, what is wanted is wanted *sub ratione boni*

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<sup>6</sup> The view is associated with Donald Davidson because of his account of the 'primary reason' why someone acted. See D. Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.4. Whether he actually held this view about practical reasoning is not to the point here as it is held by many people who take themselves to be following him on this.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that doing one thing is a means of doing another is to be interpreted here quite loosely so that doing the one thing may be a way or even an instance of doing the other.

<sup>8</sup> This view is often thought to imply that motivating reasons are mental states of the agent's but I shall not assess that claim here. See Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>9</sup> See Alvarez, *Kinds of Reasons*, especially chapter 5. I say 'typically' above because they may. I return to this point below.

<sup>10</sup> I have argued for this in detail elsewhere: see my 'Reasons, Desires and Intentional Actions', in *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, ed. C. Sandis (London: Plagrove Macmillan, 2008), pp. 203–19; and *Kinds of Reasons*, chapters 3 and 4.

(‘under the aspect of the good’).<sup>11</sup> Anscombe puts this point by saying that ‘good is the object of wanting’ as ‘truth is the object of judgment’ (*Intention*, p. 77); and she adds:

it does not follow from this that everything judged must be true, or that everything wanted must be good [...] the notion of “good” that has to be introduced in an account of wanting is not that of what is really good but of what the agent conceives to be good (*Ibid.*).

In this she is following Aristotle, who says that the object of desire ‘may be either the real or the apparent good’.<sup>12</sup>

This connection between wanting and the good applies to wanting to do things; and the desirability characterisation that the action has for the agent may be that she sees her doing that thing as good intrinsically or instrumentally. When it is regarded as intrinsically good (and hence it is intrinsically desired), the characterisation refers to something that is a form of the good of human beings, and recognisably so: such as health, or pleasure, or friendship, or beauty, etc. In such a case, the agent’s answer to what her reason for wanting to do that thing is will be a desirability characterisation that puts an end to the question: ‘What for?’ (See Anscombe, *Intention*, p.74). When, by contrast, the desirability characterisation is instrumental, then it is possible to ask the question ‘What for?’ repeatedly, until we reach an answer that points to an intrinsic good and puts an end to that question.

Although every action that has a piece of practical reasoning as its grounds is done for a reason, the converse does not hold. What is the difference between actions done for a reason that have a piece of practical reasoning as their grounds, and those that are merely done for a reason?

One difference, emphasised by Aristotle, Aquinas and Anscombe, is that the former involve means-end *calculation*.<sup>13</sup> So, for instance, ‘Skiing is healthy and fun so I’ll go skiing’ is not an instance of practical reasoning because no calculation about means to an end is involved here. If I go skiing on the grounds given in that statement, then my reason for going skiing is that it is healthy and fun. But that reason is not a premise in practical reasoning for I engaged in none (not even implicitly) when deciding to go skiing. Consider, by contrast, the following: ‘My doctor has recommended relaxing activities to lower my blood pressure; skiing is something I find relaxing, so I’ll go skiing’. Here, there is calculation about how to achieve an end (lowering my blood pressure through relaxation) and there is therefore practical reasoning. And the premises in this reasoning are my reasons for going skiing: ‘that my doctor has recommended relaxing activities; that skiing is something I find relaxing’, etc. It is possible, though not necessary, that there should have been more premises in between the first premise and the conclusion; for instance, premises comparing the relative merits of skiing with other relaxing activities vis-à-vis the end in view; and perhaps vis-à-vis other ends I have. For instance: ‘Sailing is also relaxing; but it’ll be harder to find sailing companions than skiing companions. Besides sailing is more dangerous/ expensive/ etc., than skiing and is not such good exercise’. And so on. Each of these statements are premises in my reasoning and are also my reasons for going skiing, if that is what I do as a result of this reasoning. The premises together show what the good of going skiing is for me; in this case, that it is a relatively inexpensive and healthy way of achieving my end.

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<sup>11</sup> Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, T. Gilby (ed.) (Oxford: Blackfriars, 1960-73), 1a2ae, 8, 1. See also Aristotle’s *Physics*, II, 3, 195a26; and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a3 (all references to Aristotle from *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*. J. Barnes (ed.), Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> *De Anima* III, 433a28.

<sup>13</sup> See Aristotle, Aquinas, 1a, q.22, a.1 ad.3 (*et passim*); Anscombe, *Intention*, p.60ff.

Practical reasoning is employed, according to this view, in order to find means to achieving an end the agent has already settled upon, or to determine which end to pursue among various ends one has. Some of the ends that practical reasoning is deployed to achieve may themselves be the result of practical reasoning, namely those ends that are viewed by the agent as themselves instrumental to other ends. But ultimately each piece of practical reasoning will be related to some end that is itself not the result of the calculation of practical reasoning. Those are the ends that put an end to the question: ‘What for?’ for they are ends that are instances of some form of the good of human beings.<sup>14</sup>

So, among the reasons that play the role of premises in practical reasoning, some describe what is wanted by reference to some good-making aspect that the wanted thing might have for the agent; for example: ‘Skiing is relaxing’; ‘It is an exhibition of my favourite artist’, etc. Other premises concern facts about different ways of achieving the thing wanted and the relative merits of those different ways of doing so. Examples of these are: ‘If I call the ticket office, I can get tickets’, ‘If we take the train, we’ll get to the skiing resort faster than if we drive’, ‘If I go to the market, I can buy quality trainers at discount prices’, etc. (These premises can but need not appear in conditional form; so the same role as above can be played by the corresponding premises: ‘one can buy tickets by calling the ticket office’, ‘taking the train is faster than driving’; ‘they sell quality trainers at discount prices at the market’; etc., which give reasons for calling the ticket office, taking the train and going to the market respectively.) Yet other premises in practical reasoning provide background information which, together with premises of the above kind, show why the action is good in the agent’s eyes. These premises are very varied: they may state the fact that one lacks a certain good, that circumstances threaten a good one has, or that a good one wants is incompatible with another good one has or wants, etc. Examples of these are: ‘The road is flooded’, ‘It is a fun but very risky activity’; ‘It is raining’, ‘His illness is very infectious’, ‘It will be quite expensive’, ‘We’ll miss the movie’, ‘It is terribly boring’, etc. In addition, a piece of practical reasoning may but need not include statements about the relative merits of different ways of achieving a goal and of the impact of doing so on achieving other goals the agent may have: it need not because we do not always reason to the best or even the better means of achieving our goals; often the reasoning seeks simply satisfactory means of doing so.

Thus, the premises of practical reasoning jointly show what good (or apparent good) there is in my doing something. But among those premises we won’t normally find the mere fact that I want to do something because that fact does not normally contribute to the good-making characteristics of the action. What does contribute, and what we will find among the premises, is statements that describe the thing wanted and give the agent’s reason for wanting to do that thing (and, needless to say, many of these statements may be implicit in one’s reasoning.)

Let me turn to the qualification ‘normally’ that I’ve just made and was mentioned earlier. I say ‘normally’ because the fact that I want something might, in unusual cases, occur in the premises of practical reasoning. For instance, I might reason as follows: I want to eat chocolate all the time; but wanting to eat chocolate all the time must be a symptom of some kind of physiological dysfunction, so...I’ll visit a doctor.<sup>15</sup> Here the fact that I want to eat

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<sup>14</sup> See T. H. Irwin’s ‘Practical Reason Divided; Aquinas and his Critics’, in *Ethics and Practical Deliberation*, G. Cullity and B. Gaut, (eds.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 189-214, for a discussion of Aquinas’s views on the role of practical reasoning concerning ‘prudence’, which relates to finding means; and to ‘synderesis’ which relates to the grasp of ‘the end aimed at by the moral virtues’ (p.203).

<sup>15</sup> The same is true of the fact that I believe something. To paraphrase an example of Ryle’s, the fact that I cannot help believing that the ice will crack and the fact that my believing this makes me very

chocolate all the time is part of my reason for visiting the doctor. So here my want, or more accurately, the fact that I want something is a premise. But that want (to eat chocolate) is not an end that the reasoning is aimed to achieve: that end is rather being healthy. So here the fact that I want to eat chocolate (a premise) plays a very different role from that played by the fact that I want to be healthy.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if we put aside unusual examples such as the one just examined, where ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ is among the premises, we can see why, as Anscombe argued, ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ does not rightly occur in the premises of practical reasoning: those premises tell us what the good of the action is, and the fact that I want to do something does not do this, although the fact that what I want to do has some good-making feature (or appears to me to do so) does. This brings us to a question I mentioned in the first section above: if Anscombe is right that ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ does not rightly occur in the premises of practical reasoning, what role, if any, do such statements play in practical reasoning? The following passage can help us towards an answer to that question:

The rôle of ‘wanting’ in the practical syllogism is quite different from that of a premise. It is that whatever is described in the proposition that is the starting-point of the argument must be wanted in order for the reasoning to lead to any action (Anscombe, *Intention*, 66).

Several points can, I think, be derived from this passage – some of which Anscombe makes explicitly elsewhere. I shall focus on the following two:

(i) What is wanted by someone who engages in practical reasoning is, in a sense to be explained, the starting point of practical reasoning.

(ii) What makes reasoning *practical* is that it leads to intentional action.

I shall examine each of these claims, starting with the first.

### **Practical reasoning and goals**

As I said earlier, the claim that ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ only very rarely appears as a premise in practical reasoning may strike one as patently false. For we often say, ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ,  $\psi$ -ing is a means of  $\varphi$ -ing, so I’ll  $\psi$ ’. And one might insist that, although this may not be a very sophisticated piece of practical reasoning, it is, contrary to what Anscombe says, an instance of practical reasoning all the same. I have argued that it is not but my claim can be made more acceptable if I can provide an explanation of what arguments of the kind just given (if they are arguments) express.<sup>17</sup>

I said above that claiming that ‘I want to  $\varphi$ ’ is my reason for acting is, in a sense, more wrong than saying that ‘I believe that  $p$ ’ is my reason for action because although neither are (normally) my reasons, and therefore neither are premises in practical reasoning, what I believe can be, whereas what I want cannot be.<sup>18</sup> And this is because what I want is

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unsteady on my skates may be my reason for refraining from skating - even though I know that it is very unlikely that the ice will crack.

<sup>16</sup> See Anscombe’s ‘Practical Inference’, p.115-16.

<sup>17</sup> We are inclined to think that they are arguments because the connective ‘so’ suggests this; but of course that is not a decisive factor. Consider: ‘He wanted more money so I told him that he could leave the company’.

<sup>18</sup> Unlike what I believe, what I want (or intend, etc.) does not even have the right form to be a reason because it is not propositional in form; what I want is, e.g. to buy a new house, to excel at bridge, to get a more balanced view of this issue, etc., and even when these are expressed as ‘that’-clauses, the corresponding clauses do not express propositions, at least not without doing some violence to the grammar of the relevant language. I discuss this further in my *Kinds of Reasons*, chapter 3. But see

not a reason but a goal.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, what is wanted, though not a reason, does play a central role in practical reasoning and in action – it is that for the sake of which we reason and act. As Aristotle put it, *το ορεκτον*, what is wanted, is the starting point of motivation and of practical reasoning. Thus, he asks what is the source of (local) movement for us, and he answers:

Both of these then are capable of originating local movement, thought and appetite; thought, that is, which calculates means to an end, i.e. practical thought (it differs from speculative thought in the character of its end); while appetite is in every form of it relative to an end; for *that which is the object of appetite is the stimulant of practical thought*.<sup>20</sup>

So, according to Aristotle, on the one hand there are goals, which are ‘the objects of appetite’ and ‘the stimulant of practical thought’. On the other hand, there is practical thought, which involves means-ends reasoning about how to achieve those goals, as well as about how the satisfaction of one goal may affect other goals one also has, etc.<sup>21</sup>

A goal is something wanted and as such, as we saw earlier, it can be wanted for its own sake, or as a means to something else. If the goal is wanted for its own sake – because it is regarded as a good in itself – then the practical reasoning stands on its own, as it were, i.e., without needing to be underwritten by a reason for pursuing that goal. Thus, if my goal is skiing and I want to do it for its own sake, then the first premise might be ‘Skiing is healthy and fun’, which describes what is wanted (skiing) under the aspect that makes it good for the agent (health and enjoyment), so the question: why have this goal? does not arise. When the goal is something wanted instrumentally, then we can question the value or goodness of the goal (for example, we may question why someone should want to collect paper clips). This process of questioning the value of one’s goal can be repeated until one reaches the specification of a goal that shows that it is something wanted for its own sake, because it is regarded by the agent as something that is intrinsically good. Here, the question: ‘Why want that?’ does not arise – because, and to the extent that, it is possible to see how, for the agent, that goal embodies some form of the good.

Now we can see that although ‘I want to  $\phi$ ,  $\psi$ -ing is a means of  $\phi$ -ing, so I shall  $\psi$ ’ are not statements of the premises and conclusion of a piece of practical reasoning, they do convey information about the relevant practical reasoning. In particular, ‘I want to  $\phi$ ’ states what the agent who engages in practical reasoning wants. And in stating this we state the *point* of the piece of practical reasoning – which is the goal for the sake of which the agent engages in practical reasoning and for the sake of which he acts, if he acts on that reasoning. Thus, Aquinas says: ‘Good has the aspect of an end, and the end is indeed first in the order of intention and last in the order of execution’.<sup>22</sup> thus, a goal, which is something wanted under the aspect of the good, is the beginning of practical reasoning (first in the order of intention), and the end of reasoning and action (last in the order of execution). So, although not the first premise, or indeed a premise at all, a goal is the beginning of practical reasoning in the sense

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Broome, ‘Practical Reasoning’, in *Reason and Nature: Essays in the Theory of Rationality*, edited by J. Bermudez and A. Millar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.85-112; p.87 for the contrary view about the content of intentions.

<sup>19</sup> Of course, wants are sometimes called ‘reasons’ but my point is that, even so, they are not premises in reasoning.

<sup>20</sup> *De Anima*, Book III, section 10; 433a, 14-18. My italics.

<sup>21</sup> On this see also Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae, q.25, a.2.

that unless an agent has some goal, i.e. something he wants or seeks to achieve, he will not engage in *practical* reasoning (though he may engage in it as an exercise - what Anscombe calls an 'idle practical syllogism').

Thus we see that statements of the kind 'I want to  $\varphi$ ' *seem* to be the first premise of practical reasoning because they convey the agent's goal. But, as we have seen, this does not mean that these expressions are premises of practical reasoning, or that they express our reasons for acting. This is, I think, why Anscombe says that 'it is misleading to put 'I want to' into a premise if we are giving a *formal* account of practical reasoning' (*Intention*, p.65).

And this brings me to the second point: (ii) What makes reasoning *practical* is that it leads to intentional action.

### ***Practical reasoning***

I have argued that the premises of practical reasoning include statements that describe the agent's goal, including the agent's reasons for having that goal and others that describe means of achieving that goal; and added that they may but need not include statements of the relative merits of different means to achieve that goal, and of the consequences that taking those means could have for other things wanted by the agent. To that extent, the premises of practical reasoning do not seem to differ from those of theoretical reasoning, since both are simply statements of facts. If this is right, the question arises: what makes practical reasoning *practical*?

One way of approaching this question is by exploring the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning. However, although the distinction between them seems intuitive, its precise nature is hard to capture. It is often said that the distinction lies in the fact that theoretical reasoning is reasoning about what to believe, while practical reasoning is reasoning about what to do.

On this view, what distinguishes theoretical and practical reasoning is basically the subject matter of the premises and the conclusion: in the practical reasoning these concern actions. However, as Anscombe argues, it's plausible to think that the different is more fundamental:

I have always objected to accounts of practical reasoning which reduce it to theoretical reasoning, i.e. to the argument from the truth of the premises to the truth of a conclusion implied by them (...) My own view is that the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action or decision - that a man draws this conclusion shows that he wants to have or avoid something mentioned in the premises, and that the premises show what the point of the decision or action was.<sup>23</sup>

So this passage provides some features which, according to Anscombe, characterise practical reasoning. The first of the three positive claims she makes concerns the conclusion of practical reasoning, while the last two concern the premises and the purpose (the 'point') of the reasoning.

I have already examined and endorsed the second and third points by arguing that the premises of practical reasoning do not include statements that the agent wants something although they describe what is wanted. I have also argued that practical reasoning presupposes a goal in the person who engages in the reasoning, which is precisely the thing

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<sup>23</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Commentary on Chisholm's "Practical Reason and the Logic of Requirement"', in S. Korner, ed., *Practical Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), p. 19.



wanted and what gives the *point* of the reasoning and of the action to which the reasoning leads.<sup>24</sup>

Before turning to the much debated question of whether the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, I want to comment on what this passage says (or implies) about the relation between theoretical and practical reasoning.

In the passage Anscombe warns against reducing practical to theoretical reasoning, in the sense of taking the former to be reasoning from the truth of premises to the truth of a conclusion implied by them. But if practical reasoning is not to be thus reduced to theoretical reasoning, how are the two kinds of reasoning related? One way of conceiving of this relation is the following. Theoretical reasoning is reasoning whose formal object is truth: reasoning from the truth of premises to the truth of a conclusion. Practical reasoning *exploits* theoretical reasoning in the sense that in practical reasoning we put theoretical reasoning to a practical use. We put reasoning to that use when we have a goal – something we want to achieve and indeed something that we believe we can achieve – and reason about how to achieve it. In that respect, as Anscombe says, the subject matter of practical reasoning *is* restricted to ‘future matters which our action can affect’ (*Practical Inference*, p.131): that is, to what can be brought about by one, however indirectly, and hence about what is in the future and what involves one’s acting. Moreover, the goal governs the use to which theoretical reasoning is put in two ways: it determines which facts to select as premises, namely, those related to the value of the goal and to the means of achieving it; and it also determines when to stop reasoning, namely, when we reach (what seems to be) a satisfactory means of achieving the goal (cf. Anscombe, *Practical Inference*, p.116. There Anscombe shows how the premises of a piece of theoretical reasoning that, for instance, establishes that the contents of a bottle is poisonous to humans might come to an end with the –normally unstated– premise ‘I am a human’, given a certain goal, e.g. suicide; or it may instead end with ‘NN is a human’, given a very different goal; e.g. murder.) Thus, the premises of practical reasoning are statements of fact about things we desire and possible means of achieving those things; *which* such statements we attend to, and *when* we stop reasoning, is partly determined by the goals we have and for the sake of which we engage in practical reasoning. But the statements we attend to, and the truth relations between them, are just those of theoretical reasoning.<sup>25</sup>

The considerations and their logical relations are just the same whether the inference is practical or theoretical. What I mean by the ‘considerations’ are all those hypotheticals which we have been considering, and also any propositions which show them to be true. The difference between practical and theoretical is mainly a difference in the service to which these considerations are put.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps this way of understanding the relation between theoretical and practical reasoning is part of what Aristotle means when he says that practical thought ‘differs from speculative thought in the character of its end’ (*De Anima*, 433a, 15-16), if we understand this to mean that practical thought is theoretical thought put to a practical end.

Let me now turn to the question about the conclusion of practical reasoning – although this is a complex issue to which it won’t be possible to do justice here. The view

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<sup>24</sup> Unless, that is, one is just rehearsing how practical reasoning works, or reasoning on someone else’s behalf, as a detective might when trying to guess how someone might have acted.

<sup>25</sup> With the qualification about the subject matter of practical reasoning mentioned above.

<sup>26</sup> Anscombe, *Practical Inference*, p.132. See also pp.122ff, for her discussion of Kenny’s suggestion (developed in his *Will, Freedom and Power* ch.7) that practical reasoning follows a ‘logic of satisfactoriness’, which is ‘the mirror image of ordinary logic’. This seems to provide an interesting way of construing the idea that practical reasoning exploits theoretical reasoning.

that Anscombe explicitly endorses in the passage quoted at the beginning of this section, namely that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action (or a decision – more on this later), is often associated with Aristotle.<sup>27</sup> But the view has seemed unacceptable to many, on various grounds.

Some reject it on the grounds that practical reasoning does not require any physical ability, while action (except for so-called ‘mental acts’) does, therefore practical reasoning cannot have an action as its conclusion. After all, one may conclude a piece of reasoning, e.g. by deciding that one shall  $\varphi$ , only to find out that one has become paralysed and cannot  $\varphi$ ; or only to change one’s mind later and decide against it. And here it seems that the relevant practical reasoning has been concluded before any action has been undertaken, so the conclusion of practical reasoning cannot be the action – the action is, we might say, the implementation of the conclusion.<sup>28</sup>

These considerations have some force but not enough, I think, to show that the conclusion of practical reasoning can never be an action. Or to put the point differently, part of their force derives from the fact that practical reasoning often concerns what to do in the future. In those cases, the conclusion may be a decision to act in the future and the subsequent action, if any, will be the implementation of the decision. But in cases where the practical reasoning concerns what to do now, there seems to be less reason to accept that the conclusion may not be an action. For if action is due now, there need not be a prior decision (or an intention) that is separate from the action: in such cases acting is what deciding consists in (and the intention is *in* the action). If so, in such cases the practical reasoning is not complete until the agent acts, for the action *is* the conclusion of that practical reasoning (both in the sense that the action is what the premises lead to and also in the sense that it is supported by them). Moreover, in cases where the action is in the future, the connection between the decision and the relevant action is such that the performance of the action is one of the *criteria* for attributing the decision to the agent. For if an agent claims, to himself or to others, to have decided to  $\varphi$  but in the absence of external obstacles, or of a change of mind, does not  $\varphi$  when the moment comes, then the claim that he *had decided* to  $\varphi$  comes under threat. And if the decision, as opposed to the action, is the alleged conclusion of practical reasoning, then in such cases it is not clear that the reasoning had indeed reached a conclusion, as the objectors claim. In other words: decision and action are not as separable from each other as the objection suggests.<sup>29</sup>

The reasons against accepting that actions can be the conclusions of practical reasoning are often reasons for the view that the conclusion of practical reasoning must be a judgement. For, on this view, reasoning just is moving from the truth of premises to the truth of a conclusion; and even if there is more to practical reasoning than that, as Anscombe claims, there surely cannot be less. And if this is right, the conclusion must be propositional, i.e. a judgement, or something judgement-like. For instance, the conclusion might be something like: ‘I ought to do this’; or ‘I must do that’.

There are several things to note about this thought. One is that such a conclusion is not practical, for one may indeed conclude this but not go on to decide to or intend to act;

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<sup>27</sup> For a sceptical view that this is right see Audi, *Practical Reasoning*, p.23ff.

<sup>28</sup> The following passage seems to capture this objection:

Aristotle took practical reasoning to be reasoning that concludes in an action. But an action – at least a physical one – requires more than reasoning ability; it requires physical ability too. Intending to act is as close to acting as reasoning alone can get us, so we should take practical reasoning to be reasoning that concludes in an intention. (J. Broome, ‘Practical Reasoning’, p. 85.)

For similar arguments see also Audi, *Practical Reasoning*, 89ff.

<sup>29</sup> The same, *mutatis mutandis*, is true of intentions as conclusions.

nor, of course, to act. Because of this, it is not clear that that would be a piece of *practical* reasoning. Moreover, this ‘judgement’ which is supposed to be the conclusion of practical reasoning is not, or at least very often is not, ‘necessitated’ by the premises. Actions are the subject of choice – and the latter is generally guided by reasons (or at least by apparent reasons, as an agent may deliberate and choose on the basis of false premises which express only apparent reasons). Often, there may be more than one acceptable way of achieving one’s goal, and then it is up to one which to choose. Geach expresses this point as follows:

In theoretical reasoning it cannot be equally justifiable to pass from A, B, C, ... to a conclusion D and to an incompatible conclusion D’. But in practical deliberation D may be a fiat expressing one way of getting our ends, and D’ may express another incompatible way: in that case it may be *up to us* whether from A, B, C, ... we pass on to accepting D as a guide to action, or rather, to accepting D’.<sup>30</sup>

An example of this might be a choice between walking to work and cycling. Someone may consider the following reasons: both walking and cycling are equally economical, they are good forms of exercise, cycling is faster but walking more relaxing, etc. Here, the overall set of reasons makes either right and therefore it leaves room for choice. It is important to note here that doing either will be explained by the reasons there are to do that thing. So suppose that in those circumstances, I choose to walk. My reasons for choosing that, and hence my reasons for walking, will be that walking is a practical, healthy and economical way to get to work and, though slower than cycling, it’s still more relaxing, etc. Had I, on the other hand, chosen to cycle, then my reasons for choosing that would be that cycling is a practical, healthy and economical way to get to work and, though less relaxing, it is quicker than walking, etc.<sup>31</sup>

Whichever course of action one chooses, it is supported, as one might put it, by the premises but it is not implied by them, even if we express the conclusion in propositional form: ‘I should walk’ or ‘I should cycle’. Admittedly, sometimes the reasoning will leave little room for choice, because it shows (or appears to) that there is only one means to achieve one’s goal. And in those cases it might indeed seem that the conclusion is implied by the premises. But most often this is not so.<sup>32</sup>

In any case, insisting that the reasoning must have such a conclusion, a judgement, seems to actually obscure the distinctive character of practical reasoning, namely that it is *practical*.<sup>33</sup> And, as we saw above, there is a way of understanding what it is for the premises of reasoning to lead to the practical conclusion other than to imply it, namely the premises are grounds for the action in that they show its goodness relative to some goal of the agent’s.

This action-as-conclusion, as Anscombe suggests, may be accompanied by statements such as ‘I’m  $\phi$ -ing’ in the case where the reasoning results in intentional action

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<sup>30</sup> P. Geach, *Reason and Argument*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p.98.

<sup>31</sup> There is also choice between incompatible goals. In that case, we may choose which of the goals to satisfy.

<sup>32</sup> Both von Wright’s and Broome’s accounts of practical reasoning are devised so that the conclusion is necessitated, in this sense, by the premises. But because of that, they are both hopelessly restricted in their application because if they work, they work only for reasoning about the necessary means of doing something.

<sup>33</sup> Thus Audi, for example, says that the view under consideration has the defect, among others, of making practical reasoning a hybrid process of ‘what is, intuitively, reasoning and, on the other hand, action based on it’ (*Practical Reasoning*, p.91). But far from seeming a defect of the view, one might think that this captures what is distinctive of *practical* reasoning, which is precisely a ‘hybrid process’ consisting of purposive action grounded on (theoretical) reasoning.

‘straightaway’; or ‘I shall  $\phi$ ’ when the action is in the future. And thus we may think of these as some kind of propositional correlates of the intentional action. But there is something important to notice about these statements, namely that they are *expressions of intention*: the first of intention ‘in action’, and the second of intention for the future. They are not statements that report observations of what is going on now, or predictions of what will happen based on evidence. Although they are truth-evaluable, and may be falsified if what is said is not what is the case, they are peculiar because they are the kinds of statements where, as Anscombe puts it, ‘Theophrastus’ principle’ applies: if what is said is not what is the case, then the mistake is *in the performance*. In addition, both their justification and their contradiction are also special. The first is by reference to *reasons* for acting (as opposed to evidence or other reasons for believing that things are so). And the second requires a contradictory *intention*, rather than a report that things are not as the expression of intention says they are. That is what Anscombe means when she says that the contradiction of ‘I am going to bed at midnight’ is not ‘You won’t, for you never keep such resolutions’ (inductive evidence) but rather ‘You won’t, for I am going to stop you’ (contrary intention).<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the reasoning in practical reasoning is the same as it is in theoretical reasoning and what makes it *practical* is, first, that the point of the relevant reasoning is given by the goal that the reasoner seeks to realize by means of that reasoning and the subsequent action; second, that the premises of such reasoning show the goodness of the action to be undertaken; third, that the conclusions of such reasoning may be actions or decisions, which can be accompanied by expressions of intention, either *in action*, or for the future; and that these are justified, and might be contradicted, in ways that are not only peculiar to them (i.e. in ways that diverge from those found in theoretical reasoning), but are distinctively practical, in that they involve reference to reasons for *acting* and to expressions of *intention*, respectively.

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<sup>34</sup> See *Intention*, pp. 2-7 and 55.