

How to Contradict an Expression of Intention*

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If I say I am going for a walk, someone else may know that this is not going to happen. It would be absurd to say that *what* he knew was not going to happen was not the very same thing that I was saying *was* going to happen.

Nor can we say: But in an expression of intention one isn't saying that anything is going to happen! Otherwise, when I had said 'I'm just going to get up', it would be unreasonable later to ask 'Why didn't you get up?' I could reply: 'I wasn't talking about a future happening, so why do you mention such irrelevancies?' (G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (2nd ed.), p. 92)

1 Introduction

This chapter presents a novel interpretation of G. E. M. Anscombe's discussion in Section 31 of *Intention* of the relationship between expressions of intention and descriptions of matters of fact.¹ I begin in section 2 by drawing out what is uncontroversial in the passage under consideration, namely that according to Anscombe an expression of intention in a statement like "I'm raising my arm" or "I'm going to get up at seven o'clock", which on its face offers a description of what is happening or is going to happen, is *contradicted* only by an opposing command or the expression of an opposing intention. Having clarified this much, I then ask: How should we interpret this claim, and what is its place in the broader argument of *Intention*?

Section 3 considers a response to these questions that reads Anscombe as saying that the *truth* of a statement expressing an intention is independent of whether the intended action is actually performed. I argue that this interpretation is no good, as it stands in tension with too much of what Anscombe says in her book, especially her insistence that the expression of one's intention in

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¹The interpretation is no longer *quite* novel, since between writing this chapter and revising it for publication I outlined the same interpretation, though in less detail, in Schwenkler (2019, 106-111).

acting also expresses practical knowledge of *what happens* when one acts. In section 4 I then offer an alternative interpretation of the passage that makes equally good sense of the text while avoiding this problematic conclusion. The key, I'll argue, is to see that Anscombe is speaking only of what *contradicts* expressions of intention, and that everything she says is compatible with what she insists on many times elsewhere, namely that an expression of intention describes the world in a way that will be *contrary* to, and so incompatible with, any opposing statement of fact.

2 The Passage

To begin, here is the passage in question:

What is the contradictory of a description of one's own intentional action? Is it 'You aren't, in fact?'—E.g. 'You aren't replenishing the house water supply, because the water is running out of a hole in the pipe'? I suggest that it is not. To see this, consider the following story, which appeared for the pleasure of readers of the *New Statesman's* 'This England' column. A certain soldier was court-martialled (or something of the sort) for insubordinate behaviour. He had, it seems, been 'abusive' at his medical examination. The examining doctor had told him to clench his teeth; whereupon he took them out, handed them to the doctor and said 'You clench them'.

Now the statement: 'The water is running out of a pipe round the corner' stands in the same relation to the statement 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' as does 'My teeth are false' to the order 'Clench your teeth'; and so the statement (on grounds of observation) 'You are not replenishing the house water-supply' stands in the same relation to the description of intentional action 'I am replenishing the house water-supply', as does the well-founded prediction 'This man isn't going to clench his teeth, since they are false' to the order 'Clench your teeth'. And just as the contradiction of the order: 'Clench your teeth' is *not* 'The man, as is clear from the following evidence, is not going to do any clenching of teeth, at least of the sort you mean', but 'Do not clench your teeth', so the contradiction of 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' is not 'You aren't, since there is a hole in the pipe', but 'Oh, no, you aren't' said by someone who thereupon sets out e.g. to make a hole in the pipe with a pick-axe. And similarly, if a person says 'I am going to bed at midnight' the contradiction of this is not: 'You won't, for you never keep such resolutions' but 'You won't, for I am going to stop you'. (*I*, pp. 54-55)

Though the text is almost impossibly dense, it's easy enough to see what Anscombe is claiming about the relations between statements like those in the

three groups shown in Table 1. In each case, the first statement is either a command (in Group 1) or the expression of an intention (in Groups 2 and 3) to act in a certain way. The same goes for the third statement, though here what is commanded (in Group 1) or intended (in Groups 2 and 3) is the opposite of what the first statement commands or expresses an intention to do. Finally, the second statement in each group differs from the first and third in being what Anscombe elsewhere calls an *estimate* of what is happening or is going to happen: in saying these things the speaker expresses a judgment (that he won't clench his teeth, that the water-supply isn't being filled, that someone won't go to bed at a certain time) that would be justified by reasons "suggesting what is probable, or likely to happen" (*I*, p. 4). And Anscombe's claim is that the contradiction of the first statement in each group is not the second, but the third: in general, *a command or expression of intention is contradicted only by an opposing command or the expression of an opposing intention, rather than by an opposing estimate.*

<i>Group 1</i>	<i>Group 2</i>	<i>Group 3</i>
"Clench your teeth."	"I'm replenishing the house water-supply."	"I am going to bed at midnight."
"My teeth are false (and so I cannot clench them)."	"The water is running out of a pipe round the corner (and so the water you are pumping is not getting to the house)."	"You won't go to bed at midnight, for you never keep such resolutions."
"Do not clench your teeth."	"Oh no, you aren't" (said by someone who sets out to make a hole in the pipe running to the house).	"You won't go to bed at midnight, for I am going to stop you."

Table 1: The three groups of statements considered in Section 31.

It will help to have a formalism on hand to represent these distinctions, since as we can see already there is a great variety of ways to express both intentions and estimates of matters of fact, some of which are liable to be confused for members of the other category—as in one of Anscombe's best examples:

... if I say 'I am going to fail in this exam' and someone says 'Surely you aren't as bad at the subject as that', I may make my meaning clear by explaining that I was expressing an intention, not giving an estimate of my chances. (*I*, pp. 1-2)

Here, a statement that is heard at first as an estimate of how the speaker is going to do turns out to have been an expression of intention: and so the way

to contradict what the speaker says is not by giving a different estimate of her chances, but rather with the expression of an intention to prevent her from failing, or a command that she do what is needed to pass. This shows that the very same sentence can be used sometimes to give a command or express an intention and other times to express an estimate: the difference between these kinds of speech act isn't always evident in syntax. For our purposes, therefore, it will help to adopt the following convention:

- (C) Let “EST(...)” abbreviate the *estimate* that a certain thing is happening, or is going to happen, and “INT(...)” abbreviate the command or expression of intention to do the thing described.²

Following (C), the original statement in Anscombe's test example will be written as “INT(I am going to fail this test)”, and the mistaken interpretation of it as “EST(I am going to fail this test)” — the INT and EST operators are silent, as it were, in ordinary speech, and this is what creates the potential for confusion, though in most cases it's clear enough from context and intonation which category a given statement falls into.

This proposal raises some questions. One has to do with the fact that commands often have an imperatival form rather than a propositional one: for example, “Clench your teeth!” or “Take this patient to the operating theatre.”³ By contrast, the form of an estimate is necessarily propositional. Given this, what ensures that there is a *single* description that can both say what is commanded and figure in an estimate of whether the command is going to be obeyed? In fact there is a straightforward answer available, which is that for any command there must be courses of action that would count as doing or failing to do what is commanded, and so grasping a command must involve a grasp of what these courses of action are.⁴ It is this grasp that is in the background of statements like “Okay, I'll do it” and “No I won't!”, which express the intention to obey or disobey the command precisely by giving a description of what one will do. And it is just for this reason that commands, like expressions of intention, can have the outward form of descriptions of future happenings — as when a parent tells her child “You are going to clean your room this evening”, or in another great example of Anscombe's:

... when a doctor says to a patient in the presence of a nurse ‘Nurse will take you to the operating theatre’, this may function both as

²To be clear, nothing in this formalism commits us to viewing commands as a kind of expression of intention.

³For the latter example see *Intention*, p. 3. As I note just below Anscombe's own formulation of this command is different, and serves to illustrate just the point I mean to make here.

⁴Admittedly this can be complicated in cases where a command is addressed to several people. (I thank an anonymous referee for this observation.) For example, if I tell my children all to clean their rooms, but only two of them do so, then has my command been obeyed? A full treatment of this question would require distinguishing the case where several people are commanded to do something *together*, from the case where *each* is commanded to do something separately from the others. And this would require reflecting on the distinction between joint and merely co-incidental action. On the last distinction, see Laurence (2011) and Rödl (2018).

an expression of his intention (if it is in it that his decision as to what shall happen gets expressed) and as an order, as well as being information to the patient; and it is this latter in spite of being in no sense an estimate of the future founded on evidence, nor yet a guess or a prophecy; nor does the patient normally *infer* the information from the fact that the doctor said that; he would say that the doctor *told* him. This example shows that the indicative (descriptive, informatory) character is not the distinctive mark of ‘predictions’ *as opposed to* ‘expressions of intention’, as we might at first sight have been tempted to think. (*I*, p. 3)⁵

A more difficult question about this proposal is whether the difference that is marked in (C) by the operators EST(...) and INT(...) should be read as a difference in the kind of *attitude* that is expressed by a given statement, or in the *content* of this attitude, or both.⁶ The analysis I’ve just given may suggest a way of arguing that estimates, commands, and expressions of intention all express attitudes that can share a common content: this will be the proposition that such-and-such a person is doing, or is going to do, such-and-such a thing (at an appropriate time). But a difficulty for this position is that intention seems to be an essentially first-person attitude, and command an essentially second-personal act, and there are powerful arguments for denying that self-consciousness and address can be understood as special ways of relating to the same proposition that can also be grasped from a third-person perspective.⁷ Since I find these arguments convincing I am inclined to reject the claim of shared content, though it will be crucial to what follows this rejection must be compatible with thinking that, in virtue of the logical connections between the truth- and satisfaction-conditions of these different statements, the same *reality* that is describable third-personally in estimates of what is happening or is going to happen can also be taken up in self-conscious expression and in second-person address: so any difference in content between them cannot mean that these acts all have different subject-matters. To say otherwise would be to fall prey to the very dualisms that Anscombe is trying to get us to resist.

⁵Anscombe adds two paragraphs later: “Execution-conditions for commands correspond to truth-conditions for propositions. What are the reasons other than a dispensable usage for not calling commands true and false according as they are obeyed or disobeyed?” (*I*, p. 3).

⁶Here I am grateful again to an anonymous referee.

⁷On the first person, see Anscombe (1981b), Doyle (2018), and Rödl (2007). On address, see Haase (2014). Notice that this problem will arise even if *some* intentions concern the actions of other people (on which see Ferrero (2013)), and *some* commands have a third-person form (as in the example given just above, perhaps). While in Marušić and Schwenkler (2018, 331-333) I defended a construal of intention as having a propositional content, I no longer think this is required for a defense of cognitivism about intention, though I cannot pursue the issue here.

3 Infallibilism

All of the above will be uncontroversial in the interpretation of Section 31. The further bit of interpretation that I do think should be controversial, and that I'm going to challenge here, takes it to support the attribution to Anscombe of what I'll call an *infallibilist* conception of practical thinking, or thinking about what one is doing or is going to do. I'll begin this section by discussing Anscombe's conception of the knowledge of action, and explaining how the infallibilist conception might be thought to resolve some of the difficulties that arise in connection with it. I'll then explore how the passage from Section 31 can be read as an argument in support of this position. Finally, I'll argue that Anscombe wasn't an infallibilist at all, so this passage shouldn't be read along these lines. The following section will offer a different reading in place of it.

3.1 The infallibilist reading of Section 31

To see what's at stake in interpreting Section 31, we need to recall its broader context. Anscombe had proposed three sections earlier to "look more closely into the formula which has so constantly occurred in [her] investigation: 'known without observation'" (*I*, p. 49). That phrase occurred first in Section 6, in the course of Anscombe's discussion of the conditions under which the question "Why are you doing that?", asked in a sense which seeks to discover the agent's reasons for acting, *fails* to have application to the action it concerns. Two of these conditions are, first, when a person did not know that she was acting in the way in question, and, second, when a person knew that she was acting in this way "only because [she] observed it" (*I*, p. 14): in either of these conditions, Anscombe argues, the question "Why?" lacks application, from which it is supposed to follow that the action in question was not intentional. This argument is taken to yield one of Anscombe's best-known doctrines, that an action is intentional under a given description only if the agent *knows without observation* that she is acting in this way—and it is this doctrine that, beginning in Section 28, she means to defend.⁸

The challenges in upholding this doctrine are obvious enough. How can it be that a person knows without observation *whatever* she is intentionally doing, including under descriptions that characterize her action in terms of what is happening at a great distance from her body? Consider the example from Section 23 that Anscombe recalls in the passage we have been considering:

A man is pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house. Someone has found a way of systematically contaminating the source with a deadly cumulative poison whose effects are unnoticeable until they can no longer be cured. The house

⁸In Schwenkler (2019, 189-191) I criticize this argument on the grounds that the statement "I didn't know that *p*" has the implication that one had *no idea* of the fact in question: so the proper conclusion to draw is only that a person who is doing something intentionally must either know *or believe*, in a way that is not grounded in observation, that she is doing the thing in question.

is regularly inhabited by a small group of party chiefs, with their immediate families, who are in control of a great state; they are engaged in exterminating the Jews and perhaps plan a world war.— The man who contaminated the source has calculated that if these people are destroyed some good men will get into power who will govern well, or even institute the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and secure a good life for all the people; and he has revealed the calculation, together with the fact about the poison, to the man who is pumping. The death of the inhabitants of the house will, of course, have all sorts of other effects; e.g. that a number of people unknown to these men will receive legacies, about which they know nothing. (*I*, p. 37)

If Anscombe is right, then the man operating the pump must have non-observational knowledge of what he is doing under *all* the descriptions under which his action is intentional: so the man must know without observation not just that he is moving his arms and operating the pump, but also that he is sending water through the pipes, filling the cistern with poisoned water, and so on. And the challenge is to explain *how* the man can know all these things except through his observation of what is happening, given the possibility that (e.g.) there may be a hole in the pipe, which the poisoned water is flowing out of before it can reach the party chiefs' cistern.

It's against the background of these difficulties that the infallibilist conception of practical thinking can begin to seem attractive. Put simply, if the problem is that a person's beliefs about what she is doing can seem false or unjustified in certain circumstances, especially in the absence of an observational basis, then a natural response is to construe those beliefs as having a special character that means they *can't* be false or unjustified, at least not as easily as beliefs of other sorts can be. This general strategy is familiar from philosophical work in other domains of first-person authority, where the self-ascription of mental states is sometimes treated as having a self-verifying or "constitutive" status; here, the idea is that something similar can be said about a person's thought about what she is intentionally doing.⁹

To make this strategy work, however, we need an explanation of *why* this thought should be seen as secure from error in the way required. And this is where the argument of Section 31 can seem relevant. As we have seen, Anscombe's claim there is that a statement of the form "I am doing A", where this expresses the speaker's intention to act in this way, is not contradicted by a statement made on the basis of *evidence* that the original statement was false: thus the fact that there is a hole in the pipe carrying water relates to the man's statement that he's replenishing the water-supply "as does the fact that the man has no teeth of his own to the order 'Clench your teeth'; that is, we may say that in the face of it his statement falls to the ground, as in that case the order falls to the ground, but it is not a direct contradiction" (*I*, pp. 56-57). On this

⁹For a reading of Section 31 along these lines, see Hubbs (2016). For sympathetic discussion of "constitutivist" views of self-knowledge in the psychological domain, see Coliva (2012).

reading, since the description of what one is intentionally doing has the form INT(I am doing A) rather than EST(I am doing A), this description can be *true* even in those circumstances where EST(I am doing A) is false, and this guarantees those descriptions the kind of infallibility needed to resist the threat to Anscombe's doctrine of non-observational knowledge.

3.2 Why the infallibilist reading cannot be correct

So much for the infallibilist reading of Section 31. While I think it is attractive in certain respects, not least in how it offers a straightforward way to make sense of this very difficult passage, I am going to argue now that it cannot be correct.

The first reason for this is narrowly textual. Though there are a few places in *Intention*, the discussion of “contradictories” in Section 31 among them, where Anscombe may seem to flirt with an infallibilist conception of practical thinking,¹⁰ there are many more places where she very clearly rejects this idea, claiming instead that the truth-conditions of expressions of intention *are* linked straightforwardly to those of corresponding estimates. The following are the most relevant examples of this:

1. “... if I don't do what I said [I was going to do], what I said was not true (though there might not be a question of my *truthfulness* in saying it). But ... this falsehood does not necessarily impugn what I *said*. In some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*.” (*I*, pp. 4-5)
2. “Say I go over to the window and open it. Someone who hears me moving calls out: What are you doing making that noise? I reply ‘Opening the window’. I have called such a statement knowledge all along; and precisely because in such a case what I say is true—I do open the window; and that means that the window is getting opened by the movements of the body out of whose mouth those words come.” (*I*, p. 51)
3. “... if nothing guarantees that the window gets opened when I ‘opened the window’, equally nothing guarantees that my toe moves when I ‘move my toe’; so the only thing that does happen is my intention; but where is that to be found? I mean, what is its vehicle? ... And if the intention has no vehicle that is guaranteed, then what is there left for it to be but a combination in a vacuum?” (*I*, p. 52)

¹⁰The most difficult case is the paragraph in Section 45 beginning “Orders, however, can be disobeyed ...” (*I*, p. 82). There is much that could be said about this passage, but even if we took it all at face value and as expressive of Anscombe's own position, the position it supports is *not* the infallibilist one that an agent's description of her action can be *true* despite her failing to do what she says, but rather one on which practical knowledge can be *non-factive*, such that it can remain knowledge “even though what it [is] knowledge of [is] not the case” (*ibid.*). It is, however, impossible to believe that Anscombe could have thought this. For further discussion of this passage see Schwenkler (2019, 184-187).

4. “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. It may be untrue because, unknown to the agent, something is not the case which would have to be the case for his statement to be true; as when, unknown to the man pumping, there is a hole in the pipe round the corner.” (*I*, p. 56)
5. “... is there not possible another case in which a man *simply* is 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. This I will call the *direct* falsification of what I say.” (*I*, pp. 56-57)
6. “If I say I am going for a walk, someone else may know that this is not going to happen. It would be absurd to say that *what* he knew was not going to happen was not the very same thing that I was saying *was* going to happen.” (*I*, p. 92)
7. “In saying ‘I am going to [do something]’, one really is saying that such-and-such is going to happen ... which may not be true.” (*I*, p. 93—ellipsis in the original text)

All these remarks except the third concern examples of what in Section 31 Anscombe calls the “description of one’s own intentional action”, and in each of them Anscombe says that such a description will be *false*, or at least untrue or not expressive of knowledge, unless the truth-conditions of the corresponding “estimative” descriptions are satisfied. Nor are these remarks mere sidenotes: rather they are just what Anscombe *needs* to say if she is to insist, as she does for example in the second and sixth remarks above, that the *object* of an agent’s practical knowledge is something that also can be known “from without” by someone who observes what she does.¹¹ That is, the problem with the infallibilist reading is not just that it’s at odds with what Anscombe says in these particular passages, but the way it opposes an idea that is absolutely central to the argument of *Intention*, namely that *what we know* when we know what we are intentionally doing is something that’s not just mental, but physical, too—i.e., that the knowledge a person has “in intention” of what she is doing is a knowledge of *what is happening* when she acts, under *all* the descriptions under which what is happening is part of her intentional activity. This is an idea that Anscombe emphasizes consistently in in response to the challenge that she poses to herself in Section 28:

¹¹This position is encapsulated in the notoriously difficult formula, “I *do* what *happens*” (*I*, p. 52). It also falls out of Anscombe’s observation in Section 4 that intentional action can be *observed*, so that chief among “the sort of things you would say in a law court is [*sic*] you were a witness and were asked what a man was doing when you saw him” are the things that the man would have been doing intentionally—i.e., those things which the man himself “could say he was doing, perhaps even without reflection, certainly without adverting to observation” (*I*, p. 8). Saying this requires denying that intentional action is *private* in the way that the infallibilist conception seems to entail. I thank Jennifer Frey for helping me to see how this point bears on my argument here.

‘Known without observation’ may very well be a justifiable formula for knowledge of the position and movements of one’s limbs, but you have spoken of all intentional action as falling under this concept. Now it may be e.g. that one paints a wall yellow, meaning to do so. But is it reasonable to say that one ‘knows without observation’ that one is painting a wall yellow? And similarly for all sorts of actions: any actions that is, that are described under any aspect beyond that of bodily movement. (*I*, p. 50)

It’s after raising this challenge that Anscombe says the things quoted in (2) and (3) above, and rejects what she calls the “false avenue of escape” of saying “that I really ‘do’ in the intentional sense whatever I think I am doing” (*I*, p. 52)—and so the point of these passages leading up to Section 31 is *precisely to rule out* the strategy of separating the content of an agent’s practical knowledge from what happens in the material world. Against this suggestion, she insists that in acting intentionally “I *do* what *happens*” (*I*, p. 52), and so my knowledge of what I am doing is knowledge of my outwardly observable act. It is on these grounds that she rejects the idea that “there must be two objects of knowledge” corresponding to the two ways of knowing in question—observer’s and agent’s; “one by observation, the other in intention” (*I*, p. 57). Rather, Anscombe’s view is that there is *one* thing that can be known in both of these ways, and that thing is an event or process in the material world. And the reading of Anscombe as an infallibilist loses sight of this, since on that reading a person can know “in intention” that she is doing something even when the right sort of happening isn’t present for the corresponding observational or otherwise “estimative” knowledge to be possible. If this were true, then the fact of such a happening wouldn’t be contained in the agent’s knowledge of what she is doing, as that knowledge would be too independent of what actually happens.¹²

In raising these objections to the infallibilist reading I do not mean to deny that Anscombe takes there to be something distinctive in the *kind* of error involved in sincere but mistaken statements about what one is doing or is going to do. When this happens, she says, we have a case where “the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*”:

This is sometimes so when I change my mind; but another case of it occurs when e.g. I write something other than I think I am writing; as Theophrastus says (*Magna Moralia*, 1889b 22), the mistake here is

¹²As I have argued elsewhere (see Schwenkler (2011, 140-141 and 2019, 182-183)), Anscombe’s insistence on this point also undermines the strategy of defending her position by appeal to the openness and broadness of the progressive tense. Though it’s true that, for example, I can be running a mile even if I am right now bending down to tie my shoe, and be crossing the street even if a bus hits me before I make it to the other side, if it were *always* possible to salvage even in this way the truth of the statement that I am doing such-and-such then my knowledge of what I am doing would be prone to collapse in on itself. (“I *am* raising my arm; it’s just that I’m paralyzed and so it happens not to be going up.”) For a defense of Anscombe that seems vulnerable to this objection, see Thompson (2011). For a similar criticism, see McDowell (2013).

one of performance, not of judgment. There are other cases too: for example, St. Peter did not *change his mind* about denying Christ; and yet it would not be correct to say that he made a lying promise of faithfulness. (*I*, pp. 4-5)

Anscombe reiterates this distinction at the end of Section 31, saying of her case where “a man is *simply* not doing what he says” that here

... 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. (*I*, p. 57)

These remarks are important, and I’ll return to them below, but they do not support the interpretation of Anscombe as an infallibilist about practical thought. Rather, Anscombe’s distinction between mistakes of judgment and mistakes of performance evidently *rests on* the obvious idea that there is such a false or untrue, but still sincere, statement of what one is doing or is going to do, and is part of an alternative diagnosis of the distinctive kind of mistake or error involved in such cases.¹³ Nowhere in this diagnosis do we find her saying that an expression of intention can be *true* when a corresponding estimate would not be.

4 Practical contradiction

So far I’ve introduced and then argued against the infallibilist reading of Section 31 of *Intention*, on the grounds that the position it ascribes to Anscombe is deeply un-Anscombean. The present section will explain how else I think we should understand Anscombe’s talk of “contradiction”.

The key to my alternative reading is a distinction between two forms of logical opposition that Aristotle identifies in the *De Interpretatione*:

I call an affirmation and a negation *contradictory* opposites when what one signifies universally the other signifies not universally, e.g. ‘every man is white’ and ‘not every man is white’, ‘no man is white’ and ‘some man is white’. But I call the universal affirmation and the universal negation *contrary* opposites, e.g. ‘every man is just’ and ‘no man is just’. So these cannot be true together, but their opposites may both be true with respect to the same thing, e.g. ‘not every man is white’ and ‘some man is white’. (*De Int.* VII, 17b16-25)

In this passage, Aristotle is distinguishing the relations between propositions of the following four forms:

¹³For a similar point see McDowell (2010, 429-430).

- (A) Every S is F.
- (E) No S is F.
- (I) Some S is F.
- (O) Not every S is F.¹⁴

As Aristotle observes, while propositions of form (A) are logically opposed to ones of (E) as well as ones of form (O), these two kinds of logical opposition are different: specifically, corresponding (A)-form and (O)-form propositions are such that it's impossible for both members of such pair to be true *or* for both members to be false; whereas with corresponding (A)-form and (E)-form propositions it's only impossible for both to be true at once, while both can be false if the corresponding (I)-form and (O)-form propositions hold. Aristotle calls the first kind of opposition that of *contradictories*, and the second that of *contraries*: a pair of statements are contradictories if the truth of each entails the falsehood of the other *and vice versa*; and mere contraries if the truth of each entails the falsehood of the other, but the falsehood of each is compatible with the other's falsehood or truth. Finally, propositions in the form of (I) and (O) are said to be the *subalterns* of those in the former of (A) and (E), respectively, since the truth of the former follows from that of the latter and the falsity of the latter from that of the former, while (I)-form and (O)-form propositions relate to one another as *subcontraries*, since they can both be true but cannot both be false. These relations are laid out as a truth-table in Table 2.

		<i>A</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>O</i>
<i>A: Every S is F.</i>	T		F	T	F
	F		T or F	T or F	T
<i>E: No S is F.</i>	T	F		F	T
	F	T or F		T	T or F
<i>I: Some S is F.</i>	T	T or F	F		T or F
	F	F	T		T
<i>O: Not every S is F.</i>	T	F	T or F	T or F	
	F	T	F	T	

Table 2: Logical relations among the four Aristotelian propositional forms.

The suggestion I want to make about Section 31 is that Anscombe's use of the language of "contradiction" and "contradictory" is an invitation to recall these Aristotelian distinctions, and that in saying that it is INT(\sim p), rather than EST(\sim p), that is the contradiction of INT(p) she invites the thought that the second of these judgments is *contrary* to the last, in that it's impossible for both to be true at the same time. This reading makes good sense of Section 31 while also remaining consistent with the many passages quoted above where

¹⁴On the proper formulation of Aristotelian (O)-form propositions, see Parsons (2021).

Anscombe clearly depicts $\text{INT}(p)$ and $\text{EST}(\sim p)$ as logically opposed, even as standing in “a kind of contradiction”: that kind of contradiction, I suggest, is a practical form of Aristotelian *contrariety*, which is not the same as the “head-on” contradiction found in “pairs of contradictory orders, contradictory hypotheses, or opposed intentions” (*I*, p. 92).

It will be clear that the distinction between contradiction and contrariety that I’m reading into Section 31 can’t be *just* the same as the traditional distinction deriving from Aristotle, not least because it doesn’t map onto the distinction between universal and non-universal propositions. Yet it’s plausible that a *similar* distinction should be drawn here: just as Aristotelian contradictories are such that each denies *exactly* what the other says, and nothing more or less, so it is with Anscombean ones, as here each is of the same “logical order” as the other, expressing something *directly* opposed to what the other one does.¹⁵

Can we push the parallel further than this, toward an account of the logical relations between estimates, commands, and expressions of intention that’s similar to Aristotle’s account of the relations between his four propositional forms? The discussion above suggests that such an account would need to respect at least the following constraints:

- First, the statements $\text{EST}(p)$ and $\text{EST}(\sim p)$ are like Aristotelian contradictories in being both exclusive and exhaustive: if either member of the pair is true it follows that the other member is false, and likewise if either member of the pair is false it follows that the other is true.¹⁶
- Second, the pairs $\text{INT}(p)$ and $\text{EST}(p)$, on the one hand, and $\text{INT}(\sim p)$ and $\text{EST}(\sim p)$, on the other, are rather like the Aristotelian “subalternating” pairs (A)/(I) and (E)/(O): the truth of the second member of each pair follows from that of the first member, and likewise if the second member of either pair is false then the first member must be false as well, but the truth of the second member is compatible with either the truth *or* the falsity of the first one.
- Finally, $\text{INT}(p)$ and $\text{INT}(\sim p)$ should stand to one another *at least* in the relation of Aristotelian contraries: the truth of each will entail the falsity of the other.

It remains to consider what follows from the falsity or non-satisfaction of commands and expressions of intention. As far as the corresponding estimates are concerned it seems clear that nothing at all should follow: for example, if you tell me to leave my dishes on the table and I do leave them there, I may have either have followed your order or refused it but left them there because I had

¹⁵For this use of “logical order”, see Haddock (2011, 158).

¹⁶Questions might be raised about the status of statements about the future: if there is as yet no fact as to whether a certain thing is going to happen, then can’t $\text{EST}(\text{It will happen})$ and $\text{EST}(\text{It won’t happen})$ both be false? I cannot address this question here, though a more plausible claim would be that the truth-value of these statements is *indeterminate* in these circumstances. For Anscombe’s view of the matter see her (1981a). I thank Juan Piñeros Glasscock for some discussion of this.

to dash away; and if you say you’re going to stop me from going on a walk in the morning and then we both oversleep, then while you didn’t do what you said you would it’s not because I managed to go for a walk despite you. On the other hand, there is *some* pressure to take a different view about the corresponding expressions of intention, due to the way that deliberation about one’s own actions can require taking a stand on one side or the other. For example, if you ask me whether I’m going a party then the answer “I don’t know; I might or I might not” can only mean that I am *so far* undecided—whereas when the time comes to leave, if I don’t say that I’ll go it can only be because I’ve decided not to. Could we leverage this observation into an argument that the forms $INT(p)$ and $INT(\sim p)$ are like $EST(p)$ and $EST(\sim p)$ in being both exclusive and exhaustive?

In fact the point fails to generalize—and this is good news, since the position it would yield is formally inconsistent.¹⁷ Think, for example, of a parent considering whether to tell her child to put away their dishes. The parent can refrain from giving the child this instruction but also refrain from telling the child to leave the dishes where they are: that is, she may simply wait to see what they do. Likewise, my own deliberation over whether to wake up early to exercise may conclude with the decision to wait and see what happens: I won’t set an alarm, but nor have I said I’ll sleep in late. In general, then, it’s possible for both members of the pair $INT(p)$ and $INT(\sim p)$ to be false at once. They are related in the manner of Aristotelian contraries, as shown in Table 3.

		$INT(p)$	$INT(\sim p)$	$EST(p)$	$EST(\sim p)$
$INT(p)$	T		F	T	F
	F		T or F	T or F	T or F
$INT(\sim p)$	T	F		F	T
	F	T or F		T or F	T or F
$EST(p)$	T	T or F	F		F
	F	F	T or F		T
$EST(\sim p)$	T	F	T or F	F	
	F	T or F	F	T	

Table 3: Truth-table for the statements $INT(p)$, $INT(\sim p)$, $EST(p)$, and $EST(\sim p)$.

¹⁷A demonstration of the formal inconsistency can be left to a footnote. Suppose for *reductio* that (i) $EST(p)$ and $EST(\sim p)$ are Aristotelian contradictories; (ii) $EST(p)$ is the subaltern of $INT(p)$; and (iii) $INT(p)$ and $INT(\sim p)$ are Aristotelian contradictories. Now let $INT(p)$ be false. By (iii), it follows that $INT(\sim p)$ is true, from which it follows by (ii) that $EST(\sim p)$ is true, from which it follows by (i) that $EST(p)$ is true. And this contradicts what we said above, that since $EST(p)$ is the subaltern of $INT(p)$ it should be possible for $INT(p)$ to be false and $EST(p)$ true. Since the suppositions (i) and (ii) are unimpeachable, (iii) should be rejected.

5 Conclusion

It is widely understood that Anscombe's defense of the possibility of non-observational knowledge of one's actions turns on her claim that this knowledge is *practical* rather than contemplative:

Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge. And this is the explanation of the utter darkness in which we found ourselves. For if there are two knowledges—one by observation, the other in intention—then it looks as if there must be two objects of knowledge; but if one says the objects are the same, one looks hopelessly for the different *mode of contemplative knowledge* in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting. (*I*, p. 57)

My aim in this chapter has been to undermine an interpretation of Anscombe's position on which her denial that practical knowledge "is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts" is an invitation to think that *discordance* between practical thinking and the fact of what happens is no threat to the truth of that thinking. If this were what Anscombean "practical truth" amounted to then its object would not be what Anscombe consistently claims it is—namely, a process in the physical world that can also be known by observation to a third party. The difference between practical and theoretical knowledge is not a difference in what each is knowledge *of*, but rather in the logical form of the considerations that ground them.

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