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Analytic Philosophy of Action: a Very Brief History

In this essay, I provide a very short history of analytic philosophy of action. I trace the origins of the discipline to questions raised by Wittgenstein and Elizabeth Anscombe, and I argue that well known problems with the standard causal theory of action ought to lead us to take Anscombe's own Aristotelian approach to action more seriously. The Aristotelian approach, I argue, takes the relationship between practical reason and action to be logical rather than causal.

It is a surprisingly difficult task to delineate the field of philosophical inquiry commonly known as 'the philosophy of action.' Of course, the structure and explanation of human action has long been theorized by philosophers, but typically either as part and parcel of a general theory of human or rational agency, or as a necessary propaedeutic to ethical analysis; only in the twentieth century did it come to be viewed as a special topic of study in its own right. Insofar as action theory is supposed to be an autonomous philosophical sub-discipline with a rightfully segregated topic, many have argued that it seeks to answer a question posed by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*¹: "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?"².

For those who are doubtful of the prospects of this particular bit of philosophical arithmetic, we might look to Wittgenstein's student, Elizabeth Anscombe, for an alternative approach. At the opening of her classic monograph on action, *Intention*, she defines the inquiry at hand more directly: "What distinguishes actions which are *intentional* from those which are not?"³. Her own answer to the query would eventually prevail over all other candidates; she writes, "They are the actions to

1 See J. David Velleman in his introduction to *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2000, p. 1.

2 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1953, § 621. Another influential version of the question can be found in Harry Frankfurt's influential essay, "The Problem of Action" where he writes, "The problem of action is to explicate the contrast between what an agent does and what merely happens to him, or between the bodily movements that he makes and those that occur without his making them. H.G. Frankfurt *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 69.

3 G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2000, § 5.

which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting”⁴. Setting the disagreements to one side, almost everyone takes it for granted that the explanation of action must come by way of reflection upon an agent’s reasons for acting.

Though its influence would become legendary by the end of the century in which it was published, Anscombe’s *Intention* was initially largely ignored; indeed, her views might have been forgotten entirely had some of them not become central to the work of Donald Davidson. In his seminal essays on action⁵, Davidson sought to preserve Anscombe’s insight into the essential connection between reasons and actions; in particular, he championed her idea that actions are ‘intentional under some description’, and that the intentional descriptions of action are those essentially linked to the agent’s reasons for acting. At the same time, however, Davidson wanted to push back against Anscombe’s claim that the connection could not be causal⁶. Our ability to answer the ‘Why?’ question, he argued, just is our ability to identify the psychological states that serve as our reason for acting, and *qua* reason cause the action to occur⁷.

So Davidson’s view is that rationalization is a special kind of causal explanation. Nevertheless, he thought it a mistake to hold that action explanation is reducible to the kinds of explanations we find in the sciences⁸. Davidson’s *via media* between the reductive naturalists and the anti-causalists allowed him to respect Anscombe’s key insight into the rational character of intentional actions without thereby making action explanation radically alien from more acceptable forms. Or so he argued.

The rise of the Davidsonian causal account of action was swift and definitive; its pre-eminence is evidenced by the fact that it is widely referred to as ‘the standard account’. It earned this moniker not because the majority of subsequent theorists found nothing to disagree with in its articulation, but because those disagreements took the form of modifications or supplementations to Davidson’s framework rather than wholesale critiques of it. The disagreements amongst the causal theorists tended to center around the question of which mental states we should identify with an agent’s reasons for acting, and the specific nature or functional character of those states. On these questions, a variety of different theories have proliferated,

4 *Ibid.*

5 See the first six essays in Davidson’s, *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980, pp. 3-148.

6 Anscombe was hardly alone in denying the connection could be causal; other examples include: S. Hampshire, *Thought and Action*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame 1982, and A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1963, A.I. Melden, *Free Action*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1961, G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Barnes and Noble, New York 1949.

7 D. Davidson (1980, pp. 4-7).

8 For one thing, he thinks that scientific explanation always involves appeal to some causal law, but this condition does not hold for rationalizations. See Davidson (1980, p. 15).

each yielding different accounts of the relevant psychological backstory⁹. But the basic project has remained the same.

Although the causal account quickly rose to prominence, it was not without its detractors. Besides Anscombe¹⁰, Harry Frankfurt was one of its earliest and most forceful critics. In his justly famous paper, “The Problem of Action”, Frankfurt noted that the causal theorist marks the crucial distinction of the discipline – between intentional action and what merely happens or occurs in one’s body – solely in terms of the causal antecedents of the phenomena in question¹¹. Such a theory, Frankfurt complains, leaves the action itself radically un-theorized, since it diverts our attention away from the action or performance and towards something that is prior and necessarily distinct from it. However, when we turn to the deed itself, we notice that the causal theory is ill equipped to explain it, for two reasons.

First, Frankfurt argues that an action takes time to be brought to its completion and this demands an active agent that sees the performance to its specified end; the trouble with the causal theory is that it can only account for the activity of the agent up to the time the action is ‘caused’ by his psychological states. Once the action has ‘gone off’, as it were, the subsequent ‘effects’ – i.e., the actual performance or doing – is simply a matter of nature taking its course¹².

Second, the causal theory casts the explanandum in too narrow a frame. Frankfurt notices that other animals are active rather than passive with respect to the ends they pursue – i.e., the actions they perform. To illustrate his point, he contrasts a spider that moves its legs naturally as it scuttles across its web towards an insect, with a spider whose legs are moved in precisely the same ways towards precisely the same end, but on account of being manipulated externally¹³. We find in the spider the same contrast between goal directed activity attributable to the whole spider, by contrast to bodily movements that can only be located in some part of the spider’s body; so here too we find we can mark a contrast between what happens to the spider’s body and the actions we can attribute to the spider itself. Psychological states strike Frankfurt as a poor candidate to delineate the difference

9 It is well beyond the scope of this small essay to taxonomize the variety of theories that have flowered in the wake of Davidson’s essays; moreover the task has already been adequately discharged by Kieran Setiya in his article “Intention” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/intention>.

10 See her essays, “Von Wright On Practical Inference” in P.A. Schilpp and L.E. Hahn (eds), *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik von Wright*, Library of Living Philosophers Series Volume XIX, Open Court, La Salle, ILL 1989. Reprinted in R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. Quinn (eds), *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995, pp. 1-34; and “The Causation of Action” in C. Ginet (ed), *Knowledge and Mind*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983, pp. 174-90.

11 H.G. Frankfurt *The Importance of What We Care About*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 69-79.

12 For a more recent and forceful articulation of the same worry, see J. Hornsby “Actions in their Circumstances” in A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (eds) *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2011, pp. 105-127.

13 See Frankfurt (1988: 58 and 78).

in question, since a spider presumably lacks those; moreover, we rational animals can be entirely passive not only with respect to our own propositional attitudes but also to the movements they sometimes cause without our wanting them to¹⁴; finally, we are perfectly capable of behaving as mindlessly as the spider, though we do not appear to move ourselves unintentionally thereby¹⁵. Most of the things one does from habit, for instance, are not explained by what was going on in one's head prior to the performance; often enough in human life we act without a whit of reflection or thought. But for all that, habitual and thoughtless actions are typically intentional and rational, and explained by the agents who perform them immediately and without any special difficulty.

Though he does not even so much as mention Anscombe, I would argue that Frankfurt's arguments against the Davidsonian standard account point us back to the doctrine of *Intention*, a doctrine that is only just beginning to be made articulate and taken seriously in the past decade¹⁶. For Anscombe too insisted that the philosopher of action must pay attention *to the action itself*, in particular to its peculiar structure or form. She thought that understanding this form was the key to understanding the connection between reasons and actions, a connection that for her was not psychological but logical or conceptual. And Anscombe also noticed that the structure of intentional action could be found in other animals, and that this structure was irreducibly teleological and temporal. And it was precisely because she paid attention to the internal means-end teleological structure of action that she was led to defend a thesis that many causal theorists – Davidson pre-eminently among them – flatly deny: that an agent must know what she is doing if she can be said to be doing it intentionally. And not only that, Anscombe argues that the agent must know what she is doing non-observationally and immediately or non-inferentially. And finally what must know is a potentially observable event unfolding in time in the world. As Anscombe puts it, in acting intentionally, "I do what happens"¹⁷. Most causal theorists have balked at this suggestion. After all, though an agent doubtlessly has a privileged access to her own mind, how can we

14 This is the problem of "wayward causation". It is illustrated nicely by an example provided by Davidson himself: A climber wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on his rope, and he believes that loosening the rope will achieve his end. But these thoughts so unnerve him that he loosens his hold and attains his end, though unintentionally. The rationalizing ideas do not cause things in the right sort of way. See "Freedom to Act" in (1980: 79).

15 This theme of Frankfurt's has been developed in interesting ways by Richard Moran. See his *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

16 Notable recent attempts to return to Anscombe include: R. Teichmann (ed) *Logic, Cause and Action: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Anscombe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000; S. Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2004; M. Thompson *Life and Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2008; A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (eds), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2011; Eric Marcus, *Rational Causation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2012.

17 *Intention*, § 29.

say that an agent has non-observational and non-inferential knowledge of *things that happen in the world*? Surely only a divine or infallible being could have such powers!

Some of the most interesting recent work in the philosophy of action has centered on attempts to make heads or tails of Anscombe's knowledge requirement. The general consensus is that Anscombe was too naïve in all she granted to an agent's epistemic powers; therefore, the knowledge requirement must be qualified and suitably chastened in order to reflect our fallible and finite natures. Accordingly, it has been recently argued that perhaps we should admit that such knowledge is observational¹⁸ or inferential¹⁹; or, if we find that we can't admit that, then perhaps we really must not say that it is knowledge at all, but rather belief or degrees thereof²⁰; and even then maybe we ought not to say its object is "what happens" (after all, things can always go badly in human life) but to our bodily movements; or, if even that seems like too much, given that our bodies sometimes fail us completely, we might push things back even further to knowledge of our 'tryings'²¹, or simply to what we intend to do²².

An immediately striking fact about this literature is that it tends to generate theories that are utterly useless to explain other facets of our knowledge of what we do intentionally that are equally important to Anscombe's own account. These are as follows: (1) When the knowledge fails, the mistake is not one of judgment of facts but of the performance itself²³; (2) The contradiction of a statement of this knowledge is not a contrary statement of fact, but the doing of an action with a contrary aim²⁴; (3) This knowledge is the cause of its own objects and the measure of what it produces²⁵; (4) This knowledge is unintelligible without the practical syllogism; (5) This knowledge presupposes a certain kind of skill or know-how²⁶.

In a recent volume, *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, several spirited defenses of Anscombe's knowledge requirement are made that do not attempt to qualify her claims. For instance, Michael Thompson argues that the knowledge an agent has of his own intentional actions is non-observational and non-inferential because it is a species of self-knowledge. It is a (rather common) Cartesian error, Thompson claims, to think that self-knowledge cannot extend "beyond the inner recesses of

18 H. Pickard, "Knowledge of Action Without Observation", in «Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society», 104 (1) 2004, pp. 205-230.

19 S.K. Paul, "How We Know What We're Doing", in «Philosopher's Imprint», 9 (11), pp. 1-23, 2009.

20 K. Setiya, "Practical Knowledge", in «Ethics», 118 (3), pp. 388-409, 2008; "Knowledge of Intention" in A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland, *op. cit.*, pp. 170-197.

21 J.R. Searle, *Intentionality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1983.

22 R. Moran "Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge'", in J. Hyman and H. Steward (eds), *Agency and Action*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 43-68.

23 *Intention*, § 4, § 32, § 45.

24 *Intention*, § 31, § 32.

25 *Intention*, § 28, § 48.

26 *Intention*, § 48.

the mind, beyond the narrowly psychical, and into the things that I am doing”²⁷. To see this, Thompson thinks we must recognize that what is self-consciously known is, as Frankfurt stressed, something in progress or imperfective: a performance or a doing. While an agent necessarily knows what she is *presently* doing, she does not necessarily know that she will in fact reach her end successfully. So, the fact that an agent knows she is ϕ -ing does not entail that she knows that she has ϕ -ed. Thompson argues that the proper understanding of Anscombe’s knowledge requirement must respect that she was after first person, present tense knowledge of the deed itself – of what is *happening*²⁸. Once we grasp this, the most common objections against the naïve view of *Intention* fall to the ground, as they stem from carelessness about tense and the neglect of the temporal structure of action.

There is a clear connection between Thompson’s emphasis on the progressive nature of intentional performances and Frankfurt’s insistence that we see an agent as ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ as his action unfolds; for Thompson, this continued activity is the key to seeing our way out of the kinds of counter-examples Davidson thought vitiated the knowledge requirement²⁹. Davidson could not see the solution to the problem of practical failure because he did not take note of the progressive nature of performances and our active relation to them, and thus he could not see that an agent can simply correct a performance and adjust it in light of its manifest success or failure. Of course, as soon as we draw attention to the idea of correction and adjustment we notice that in order to recognize that one is doing something poorly or unsuccessfully, one must already know what it is that one is doing. An agent’s correction of her action necessarily depends upon her knowledge of what she’s up to in the first place.

Important as its insights are into showing how we can have a form of self-knowledge of observable events unfolding through time, Thompson’s article does not explain in what sense the knowledge he discusses is truly *practical* knowledge, and thus it does no better in explaining the other features of Anscombe’s knowledge requirement we outlined above. For that task we can turn to Sebastian Rödl’s essay in the same volume, “Two Forms of Practical Knowledge”³⁰. What is most interesting about Rödl’s essay from our perspective is that he takes on Anscombe’s claim that practical knowledge is unintelligible without an account of practical reasoning, and tries to give an account of the connection.

27 M. Thompson, “Anscombe’s *Intention* and Practical Knowledge”, in A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (eds), *Essays on Anscombe’s Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2011, p. 200.

28 For a detailed account of the temporal structure of intentional action, see his “Naïve Action Theory”, in *Life and Action*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2008, pp. 85-146.

29 See D. Davidson, “Intending”, 1980, p. 92.

30 This essay draws heavily on material he articulated in “Action and the First Person”, in S. Rödl, *Self-Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2007, pp. 17-63.

Rödl follows Anscombe in thinking that practical reasoning is comprehended through Aristotle's practical syllogism³¹. Nonetheless his account appears to diverge from Anscombe's in important ways. Anscombe thinks of the practical syllogism formally: it lays bare the inferential connections between its elements. Unlike the theoretical syllogism, the practical syllogism does not take as its elements propositions, nor is the inferential structure it lays bare truth-preserving; rather, in practical reasoning, what is preserved is not truth but goodness (specifically, the goodness of the end towards which the reasoning is aimed), and goodness holds not between propositions, but between an end and the means necessary to attain it³². Thus Anscombe nowhere supposes that agents "syllogize" before acting or that the practical syllogism is meant to explicate our rational psychology. Rödl, by contrast, gives an account of the practical syllogism as the unity of an agent's practical self-consciousness, and he takes the inferences of the practical syllogism to be self-conscious acts of mind.

Rödl argues that the first premise of practical reasoning is the subject's self-consciousness of the principle of her action, her end. It represents a self-conscious desire: a representation through which its subject is the cause of the existence of its object³³. The second premise of the syllogism is consciousness of an independent fact about the world and amounts to speculative knowledge of the way things are, though such knowledge is still essentially aimed or directed at attaining the end specified in the first premise, and remains practical in its end. The conclusion of practical reasoning is an action: the actual pursuit of the specified end in light of the specified means.

Having glossed the practical syllogism as the unity of self-conscious practical thought, Rödl argues that this form of reasoning corresponds to the unity of intentional action. He argues that an intentional action is always a pursuit of some end through some independently specifiable means. The order of the practical syllogism just is the order of intentional action in general, and what it shows is that the unity of the action is the unity of practical thought and reasoning. Such a unity is necessarily known in a practical mode: as "the cause of what it understands"³⁴. Or, as Rödl puts it, «this consciousness is conscious of its practical character, that is, is conscious of itself as constituting the teleological order of my action, it is knowledge of the reality it constitutes»³⁵.

Despite its psychologizing of the practical syllogism, Rödl's essay is helpful in that it makes plain what Thompson's left unacknowledged: that the unity of intentional action is the unity of a potential practical syllogism, and that a potentially

31 See *Intention*, § 33, where Anscombe states that practical reasoning and practical syllogism "mean the same thing".

32 Anscombe's mature thoughts on the practical syllogism can be found in her later article, "Practical Inference", *op. cit.*

33 Anscombe denies that the first premise names a desire. See *Intention*, § 35.

34 This is Anscombe's formula for practical knowledge that she takes over from Aquinas. See *Intention*, § 48.

35 S. Rödl, "Two Forms of Practical Knowledge", *op. cit.*, p. 220.

observable event with such a rational unity could only come to be through the agent's knowledge of it. Seeing the connection between practical thought and action in this way allows us to make sense of the other facets of the knowledge Anscombe highlighted: that the contradiction is the performing of an action with a contrary end or aim; the knowledge produces its object; the knowledge fails just in case the performance fails; and why the knowledge presupposes the skill to carry the performance out. Finally, Rödl's essay also makes helpfully clear how the practical syllogism lays bare a unique form of *practical* intelligibility; what the syllogism lays bare is the good of what one does by showing how one's action serves the goodness of the end stated in the first premise: the thing wanted by the agent. It gives a concrete sense to the notion of 'desirability' at play when we talk about an agent's intentional actions.

This leads us to the final debate in action theory: the role of the good in action explanation. While theorizing the 'good' is surely unavoidable in ethics, many have doubted that it is a proper topic for the action theorist³⁶. Though it used to be a philosophical commonplace that all action is undertaken by the agent *sub specie boni* – i.e., that the action is known to the agent *qua* good or desirable – it is now argued by many that actions can be intentional and yet utterly disconnected from the agent's beliefs about what is good. The akratic, the punk, the vicious, the ironic – all these agents act intentionally but their actions are in no way 'desirable' to them from the first person perspective.

Reflecting upon the connection between practical reasoning, practical knowledge, and the structure of action – that is, reflecting upon the core theses of *Intention* – can help us to see that the so-called "guise of the good" thesis was never a claim about the agent's beliefs in the first place, though it is easy to see how the causal theorist could be led to think of it in just this way, given his emphasis on psychological states and their propositional contents. Rather, the ancient and medieval philosophers who understood action *sub specie boni* took the connection between action and the good as a claim about the logical structure of practical reasoning and practical intelligibility – the very form of action explanation. According to this tradition, practical intelligibility, of the sort laid bare by the practical syllogism, shows the good of performing this particular action in light of the end (the good) that is sought. To be in the position of a first premise – to be wanted – just is to be good in the sense of *what is to be pursued* (the opposite, the bad, is understood in terms of *what is to be avoided*). Whatever we make of this idea, it is clearly not a claim about the propositional contents of an agent's psychological attitudes; the causal theorist misunderstands the very thesis it attacks.

These reflections on the role of the good in action explanation bring us back to where we began, with the difficulties of understanding how action theory is an autonomous philosophical sub-discipline, not to be subsumed under either

36 The two most influential articulations of this position are Michael Stocker's "Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology" *The Journal of Philosophy* 76 (12) December, 1979: 738-53; and J. David Velleman "The Guise of the Good" *Noûs* 26 (1) March, 1992: 3-26.

philosophy of mind or ethics. However, if Anscombe is right that an inquiry into intentional action is necessarily an inquiry into practical reason and the good, then we need a clearer account of how we can separate it from ethics. My own sense is that the line of demarcation is not as neat and tidy as everyone has so far assumed.

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