UNDERSTANDING THE ACTIONS OF MILGRAM'S SUBJECTS IN TERMS OF ANSCOMBE'S CONCEPTION OF PRACTICES

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Abstract: The normative approach to Milgram's experiment argues that participants do not obey because of submission to authority, but because they are following explicit and previously justified rules. However, this approach remains theoretically ambiguous and empirically imprecise, due to a confused use of the concept of normative necessity. In this article, I draw on Anscombe's account of practice to clarify this concept and to develop a more precise interpretation of the subjects' behavior within Milgram's experimental framework.

Key Words: Milgram; normative approach; explicit rules; Anscombe; practice; normative necessity; prods.

1. Introduction

Milgram was long believed to have demonstrated that, in a situation of subordination, anyone is willing to do anything, as long as the authority figure to whom they are subordinated gives the order. This interpretation of his findings has recently been challenged by new data concerning the experiment—data that appear to show that the commands issued by the experimenter during the procedure never actually succeed in compelling subjects to continue administering shocks. If obedience to authority is not what motivates participants to inflict electric shocks on an innocent person, then what does motivate them?

A recent line of argument suggests that what motivates them are explicit and justified rules. However, this account is both theoretically unclear and empirically abstract. In this article, I explore the hypothesis that the difficulty in producing a coherent and empirically adequate theory stems from the assumption that there is only one type of normative necessity. I further suggest that the philosophical work carried out by Anscombe on the concept of practice provides a foundation for distinguishing between different kinds of normative necessity—and thereby allows for a more precise formulation of the normative approach to Milgram's experiment.

This project unfolds in four stages. First, I present and justify the normative approach to Milgram's experiment, while also outlining its current limitations (section 2). I then turn to Anscombe's philosophy of practice, which I develop over the next two sections (sections 3 and 4). I then apply Anscombe's distinctions to Milgram's experiment in order to clarify how the subjects might

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be understood to interpret their situation (section 5).

My presentation of Anscombe's philosophy of practice retrospectively frames it as a contribution to social ontology. This account proceeds in two steps. First, I present her argument for the existence of practices as irreducible to the sum of the bodies and minds present in a given situation (section 3). Then, I reconstruct her account of the essential nature of this practical reality (section 4).

2. The normative interpretation of the «Obedience to Authority Experiment»

After an initial wave of intense discussion, the commonly accepted interpretation of the submission to authority experiments–and echoed in textbooks (Griggs & Whitehead 2015)—is that it shows that people who disapprove in principle of torturing innocents are in practice capable of torturing, or even killing, innocents when ordered to do so by an authority (Kaposi 2022). The experimental situation designed by Milgram excludes that obedience to authority be motivated by the threat or promise of a (material, institutional or symbolic) reward, it also excludes that the subjects administer electric shocks to an innocent person out of sadism, out of personal hatred (even suddenly contracted), or out of culturally or ideologically inculcated hatred. Therefore, the orders given by the experimenter seem to intrinsically be the cause of the teachers continuing to increase the intensity of the shocks despite the signs of suffering and the protests of James McDonough, who played the learner.[1] Milgram explains this result as evidence that subordination causes a loss of our sense of responsibility for our own actions. This psychological state, known as the agentic state, occurs when an individual sees themselves merely as the executor of an authority figure's orders and thus disclaims personal responsibility, attributing their actions to that authority rather than to their own volition.

Strangely enough, some 50 years after the experiment was conducted, an influx of new data has challenged the painfully established consensus. First, the Milgram archives, opened in 1997, have been the subject of a wave of investigation since 2010. Second, despite the ethical obstacles to doing so, Milgram's experiments have been the subject of an ingenious partial replication by Jerry Burger and his colleagues (Burger 2009), which has yielded data that Milgram did not provide. This replication is based on a new analysis of Milgram's original data. Burger notes that in the original experiment, out of the 14 people (out of 40) who refused to complete it, only 1 stopped before 150 volts and 6 immediately after. Therefore, those who continued after 150 volts had a 25/33 chance of completing the experiment. The «jaw dropping» moment in Milgram's experiment is the interval between 150 and 165 volts. This is the moment that both those observing the experiment and those trying to predict its

[1] Milgram speaks explicitly of «order» (see Milgram 1974: 21).

outcome fail to believe. Burger argues that it was not necessary to wait for the subjects to administer 450 volts in order to appreciate the robustness of Milgram's results: if he obtained the same proportion of people willing to administer 165 volts as Milgram, he could conclude that 79% of them would have gone through with the experiment if the replication had been complete.[2]

Following his own replication of the experiment, Jerry Burger sought to quantify the effectiveness of each of the «rompts» («prods») employed by the experimenter in triggering Teacher compliance. These «prods» were used only as a response to the question of whether or not to continue the experiment or to the expression of the decision to stop participating. There were four of them:

> Prod 1: «Please continue» or «please go on».
>
> Prod 2: «The experiment requires that you continue».
>
> Prod 3: «It is absolutely essential that you continue».
>
> Prod 4: «You have no other choice. You must go on».
> (Milgram 1974, 21)

The new data available to Jerry Burger allowed him to establish two facts: 1. that the effective «prods» were not formulated as orders; and 2. that the prods formulated as orders did not in any case prevent the subject from ending their participation in the experiment. In other words, while all the people who «disobeyed» went through the 4 prods, the fourth one had no effect, and all those who did yield to the third one ended the experiment. Stephen Gibson completes this discovery by identifying a case in the archives where, in the most intense variant of the experiment–i.e., the one where the teacher has to hold the student's hand on the electrode–, one person inflicted all the shocks without once needing to be encouraged to do so (Gibson 2018). Since order is the form that the expression of authority takes, the lack of order in Milgram's designed device seems to indicate that the «experiment on submission to authority» was not an actual experiment on submission to authority, and that it is unclear what it actually measures. Burger concludes: « (I)f the participants were not obeying orders, then alternate interpretations of Milgram's finding should be explored» (Burger & al. 2011: 6).

How can we explain the behavior of people who, confronted with the situation invented by Milgram, go as far as 450 volts, even though this behavior conflicts with their own values, given that nothing motivates this behavior and that they are not even ordered to behave in such a way?

This question is tackled in many different ways within the new paradigm of Milgramesque criticism: subjects who continued to administer shocks till the end

[2] This exposition of the normative approach to Milgram's experiment draws on my previous paper on the topic (Künstler 2024).

did so because, at the time they did so, they thought it was legitimate (Haslam & al. 2015), and they thought so because they identified with the experimenter's authority (Reicher & Haslam 2011; Reicher & al. 2012; Birney & al. 2024). This explanation had long been considered predominant, but is now challenged by new data and analytical methods (Turowetz & Hollander 2017), (Gibson 2018). Russell & Gregory argue that: «Milgram's experiments have less to do with obedience to authority per se and more to do with how people resolve moral dilemmas confronting them in a structured organizational setting» (Russel & Gregory 2011: 495). However, as they concede: « (T)he end product is more conceptual and speculative than strictly empirical» (Russell & Gregory 2011: 503) (Russell & Künstler 2024). Another hypothesis aims to explain the defining role of the experimenter's argumentation (Hollander 2015), (Gibson 2019). This hypothesis is supported by such archival research as Gibson's rhetorical analysis (2019) and Hollander's conversational one (2015) (Hollander 2024): it highlights the discrepancy between what actually took place during the experiment and Milgram's account of it. Based on other sessions, Gibson (2018) put forward another explanation for why people obey: they are subjected to a Foucauldian form of power. Gina Perry & al. (2020) argue that subjects' perseverance is explained by their disbelief; but they do not explain why disbelief should lead to obedience rather than to a cessation of collaboration in the experiment (Doris & ali. 2024). David Kaposi (2017) shows that the conduct of Milgram's subjects can be explained by the fact that they are being subjected to a form of coercion. Finally, an eclectic stance can be taken (Turowetz & Hollander 2018): one that acknowledges the complexity of Milgram's situation as consisting of a series of small events each endowed with a causal influence.

In a recent paper (Künstler 2024), I've argued that the theoretically central fact in Milgram's «experiment on obedience to authority» continues to elude commentators: the presentation to the subjects of an explicit set of rules. Taking this fact into account solves Burger's puzzle by supporting a new interpretation of the subjects' conduct: they are not submitting to an authority, they are not obeying orders, they are *simply applying explicit rules*.

If this is indeed the case, the results of the experiments must be primarily explained *normatively, rather than psychologically*.[3]

The instructions the experimenter actually gave can be reconstructed according to the following rule set:

«Read the list of word pairs once».
«Read the adjective and then the four possible answers».

[3] Previous authors (Russell & Gregory, 2011; Hollander & Turowetz 2023) have highlighted the normative and moral dimensions of Milgram's lab situation. But while the norms they refer to are implicit, I claim that the normative dimension of the experiment is taken up by explicit rules.

«If the student gives the correct answer, say "correct", and move down the list one notch».
«If the student gives a wrong answer, say wrong, announce the level of shock that he deserves, and administer this shock».
«With each incorrect response, increase the shock administration by 15 volts».
«Before you inflict the shock, announce the voltage».
«After inflicting the shock, give the correct answer».
«Once you have finished reading the list of questions, start at the beginning».

How the preliminary enunciation of a set of rules determines certain subjects to continue the administration of shocks to the end without having received any order whatsoever still has to be explained.

We must distinguish between Milgram's subjects' interpretation of the meaning of their situation and the theorists' interpretation of the subjects' behavior. These subjects are not machines, they interpret their situation, hence the need to deceive them in order to study the way they will react to this situation, and to do so without their knowledge. This interpretation is the indirect cause of their action since it determines the way in which they understand the problem-situation they have to solve, and therefore the options of action that can be considered as well as those they actually choose. Understanding the subjects' behavior consequently implies an understanding of how they themselves understand their situation.[4]

Now, the enunciation of a rule determines the way in which the participants in a practice interpret their respective actions. Why do the people around me move a ball with their feet? If I do not know the rules of the game, the way they should be applied will seem very mysterious to me, and I myself will be unable to respond adequately: my behavior would be explained by my ignorance of the rules of the game, just as, in the opposite case, my knowledge of these rules would contribute to the explanation of the way I behave. A rule is an objective fact that is publicly known and that everyone bears in mind for the duration of the practice that it constitutes. Before having psychological or physical effects, the enunciation of a rule has logical and normative consequences. Depending on the circumstances that arise during a given practice, this or that clause of the rule is activated, so that it is one individual rather than another who must act, and act in one way rather than another.

In order to understand how the collective acceptance of rules affects the conduct of each individual's conduct, we must first wonder what the objective consequences of the rules on the situations faced by the participants are. If the

[4] Moreover, the subject's understanding of her situation can be broken down as follows: 1. Representing the situation's causal structure; 2. Grasping its rules; 3. Understanding how others understand one's actions and one's own actions; 4. Understanding how others understand the subject's understanding of the situation.

latter have normal cognitive abilities, and if the set of rules is not too complicated to be memorized and applied without the help of specialists, it has to be assumed, by default, that the conclusions that subjects must or should draw from these rules are those that they actually draw or have drawn from it. In the case of Milgram's experiment, in order to understand the subject's point of view, one must pretend that the situation is real, that the experiment on memory is actually taking place, and ask what actions the regulation prescribes to the various participants in each of the circumstances imagined by Milgram. As already stated, the interpretation of the conduct of Milgram's subjects should not be psychological but normative.

In order to account for the effectiveness of the prods, it is necessary to first show that, even without them, subjects are already bound by an obligation to deliver shocks. To establish this point, one must spell out the logical implications of the instructions given prior to the experiment. Here are some of the normative consequences that the regulation has on various aspects of the situation devised by Milgram: A rule is general, whereas an order prescribes a specific act, and a rule may be impersonal, whereas an order is always addressed by one person to another. Consequently, in applying a rule, *the agents do not conceive of themselves as obeying orders or an authority, but as applying a rule*. *Milgram's experiment is thus an experiment not on the force of authority, but on the force of norms*. — The act of accepting a rule, whatever the reason for this acceptance, is the condition for its application. Consequently, *the subject, by accepting to inflict the first shock, manifests his acceptance of the rule stated by the experimenter*. Since the commentators did not take the rule of the experiment into account, they refrained from reflecting on the subject's first act, i.e., that of accepting this rule. – A rule defines a set of actions and the acceptance of the rule produces the obligation to perform these actions. By accepting the rule, the subjects have accepted the obligation to perform the set of actions defined by the rule: *even before they begin to act, they have already accepted the possibility of having to inflict 450 volts of shock to the student*. –The confrontation of a rule with situations transforms the general obligation to follow the rule into an obligation to perform particular acts: when the condition of the rule is satisfied, the agent is obliged to apply its consequence. Thus, in the context of the rule, it is *the student's failure in the memorization exercise that morally obliges the teacher to shock him, and it is the repetition of these failures that obliges him to increase the shocks, up to 450 volts*. Once the regulation has been formulated, the experimenter is no longer needed to produce obligations. *The prods do not initiate the occurrence of a particular obligation, but follow it*.

In this general context, what is the import of the prods? – In the context of a rule that one has accepted, not performing an act whose clearly specified conditions have been fulfilled is a fault, since it violates a commitment. Even if one no longer adheres to a rule that one had previously accepted, one remains morally bound to the application of that rule if one feels obligated to someone to

apply it. Therefore, *the subject must understand the refusal to inflict a shock as a fault*. Similarly, *the subject must believe that when the student refuses to continue the experiment, the student is committing a fault*. The only way to break a commitment without being at fault is to get others to dispense us from it. Thus, *Milgram's subjects can interpret the prods as an expression of the experimenter's refusal to dispense them from their commitment. The power of the experimenter does not come from the fact that he is an authority, but from the fact that he can dispense the subjects from the norm*. When we have accepted a rule, and then find it difficult to apply it, others may encourage us to do so. In the same way, the *experimenter's prods can be interpreted by the subjects as encouragement*.

The normative approach I am advocating is still too imprecise to deserve being called a theory: it is more accurately described as a research program that needs to be refined both empirically and theoretically. *Empirically*, because it must provide a detailed account of the motivational effectiveness of the various aspects of Milgram's experimental setup. The normative approach does offer, as we have seen above, a general interpretation of how the prods function. But a robust theory should be capable of offering a differentiated explanation of why the various utterances used by the experimenter are able to reactivate the subjects' activity: since the second prod sometimes succeeds in re-engaging individuals who were unaffected by the first, and similarly for the third, their respective effectiveness cannot necessarily be explained in the same way.-How are the various decisions made by the subjects connected? What is the relationship between agreeing to respond to the advertisement and accepting to administer potentially lethal shocks three times in a row? And so on.

Theoretically, since the subject's feeling of obligation, which explains his behavior, is itself in need of explanation. It can be interpreted in at least six different ways:

The feeling of obligation may be produced by a Foucauldian form of Power (Gibson 2018).

- The feeling of obligation may result from general implicit norms (Hollander & Turowetz 2024).
- The feeling of obligation may stem from a commitment (in the sense of a tacit promise or consent) to follow the rules stated by the experimenter (Künstler 2024).
- The feeling of obligation might result from the initial contract.
- The feeling of obligation may stem from a rational justification of the value of the action required (Künstler 2024).
- The feeling of obligation may arise from a general assessment of the rationality of one's conduct: once they have made the trip to Yale, it

> seems absurd to interrupt the experiment. This is a classic case of the gambler's fallacy.

These two shortcomings are related: as long as these theories remain at the level of general accounts that are compatible with the experimental data but do not allow for any explanation of the experiment's finer details, the debate remains at a pre-scientific stage – that is, at the level of conflicting but unfalsifiable interpretations.

How can we grasp the connection between the subject's acceptance of their participation in the experiment, their acceptance of its rules, and the effectiveness of the experimenter's utterances? How do subjects interpret the situation? How do they interpret what the experimenter means when he utters his instructions? – The ability to answer these questions depends on conceptual work concerning the vague notions of obligation and practical necessity. My hypothesis here is that the theoretical impasse and the lack of empirical precision stems from a confusion between different forms of practical necessity – a confusion that prevents us from grasping their internal articulation. Now, as we shall see, Anscombe's work on social practices precisely aims to distinguish and classify various forms of practical necessity. The working hypothesis I want to develop in what follows is that this distinction can enable a more precise formulation of the normative approach to the experiment in terms of explicit and justified rules.[5]

3. Anscombe's argument for the existence of practices

The term *practice* has been the subject of extensive philosophical debate and various terminological elaborations.[6] But why focus on a particular conceptualization? Is it merely a matter of engaging in philosophical lexicography – an effort to determine the meaning that Anscombe assigns to the term?

Moreover, Anscombe's vocabulary concerning practice is not fixed. As an adjective, practical plays an important role in *Intention*, where it serves to characterize practical knowledge – as opposed to theoretical knowledge – and the practical syllogism, in contrast to the theoretical syllogism (or, equivalently, theoretical reasoning). Practical is thus opposed here to theoretical. As a noun, practice appears only twice in *Intention*—in §29 and §30—with two distinct meanings: first, in the sense of «in reality» («In practice, of course, what I write will very likely not go on being very legible if I don't use my eyes»), and second, in the sense of training («Now my instruction is: Keep it level, and with a bit of practice I learn to do so»). In the third volume of her collected works (Anscombe

[5] Regarding how I conceive the relationship between philosophical work and social sciences, see Künstler (2025).

[6] See for instance Rawls (1955), Haslanger (2018).

1981), the word «practice» appears 50 times with several distinct meanings. These range from habitual behavior and moral discipline to rule-governed activity, institutional custom, and linguistic convention. In some contexts, practice refers to individual habituation, particularly in moral education. For example, Anscombe writes that one learns morality not by memorizing ethical propositions, but «by learning what to do or abstain from in particular situations and getting by practice to do certain things, and abstain from others» (Anscombe 1981: 47). Here, practice is a form of embodied learning through repeated action, echoing Aristotelian ideas of virtue as habituated excellence.

Elsewhere, «practice» denotes ascetical or ethical discipline, as in «the goodness of severely ascetical practices, so long as they do not damage the body or its faculties» (*ibid.*: 49). In this sense, a practice is a structured regimen undertaken for moral or spiritual purposes.

A third and frequent usage refers to social or institutional norms: for example, «a long-established practice of the same kind, already a body of rules made by predecessors» (Anscombe 1981:133). These are patterns of action sustained within communities or institutions, which may ground obligations or justify authority. Similarly, when Anscombe says «in practice they went in for swindling» (Anscombe 1981: 56), she contrasts declared ideals with actual social behavior – practice as lived reality, not proclaimed norm. Anscombe also uses the term in contexts shaped by Wittgensteinian considerations, especially where practice refers to rule-governed language use. For instance, she writes: «the rule may merely be the rule of a practice which you are at liberty to engage in or not» (Anscombe 1981: 102), suggesting that practices structure the very possibility of meaningful action or speech. Finally, practice can designate the contrast with theory, as in: «even if the purpose of such a theory is, as Aristotle says, not knowledge but practice» (Anscombe 1981: 48). In such passages, practice marks the field of action or application that gives theory its orientation and relevance.

In order to avoid these two difficulties, my strategy here will be to consider practice as a theoretical entity introduced into social ontology to solve a specific problem. This problem is spelled out in her 1958 essay «On Brute Facts». Anscombe imagines a Humean philosopher reluctant to honor her debts, who invokes Humean ontology in order to cancel what she owes:

> Following Hume, I might say to my grocer: «Truth consists in agreement either to relations of ideas, as that twenty shillings make a pound, or to matters of fact, as that you have delivered me a quarter of potatoes; from this you can see that the term does not apply to such a proposition as that I owe you so much for the potatoes. You really must not jump from an 'is' – as, that it really is the case that I asked for the potatoes and that you delivered them and sent me a bill – to an 'owes'». Does my owing the grocer in this case consist in any facts beyond the ones mentioned? No. (Anscombe 1981: 22)

What can the grocer reply to the Humean reductionist? He has three options:

A. Accepting that the debt does not exist.
B. Rejecting the premise that there are no facts beyond those already mentioned.
C. Claiming that «to say I owe the grocer adds something non-factual to the statement that certain facts hold».

In the third case, the grocer must indicate how one can conclude a debt from matters of fact, that is to fill the inferential gap from 'is' to 'ought'. Something must be added. Anscombe suggests that what must be added is an 'institutional context'. This institutional context allows us to infer, from the truth of descriptions of matters of fact, the truth of a proposition assigning a duty (a debt). We can understand this context as constituted by conditional or quasi-conditional propositions, which ground the relation of logical consequence.

The argument for the existence of such an institutional context thus rests on two premises:

(1) It is true that the only facts present in the situation are that he delivered me the potatoes and sent me a bill.
(2) It is true that I owe the grocer money.

A practice is the theoretical entity that fills the inferential gap between (1) and (2).

4. Anscombe's conception of practices

Having now reconstructed the general argument in favor of the existence of practices, and established that Anscombe subscribes to it, we must turn to the question of how she conceives of such entities in a way that solves the inferential gap problem.

In order to respond to this question, I will mainly focus on her 1969 essay *On Promising and its Justice* (Anscombe 1981: 10-21). In line with her way of philosophizing, she develops her theory by seeking to resolve a problem grounded in a case study. It seems that there is a difference between saying «He promises that will ψ» and «He will ψ». When I hear the first sentence, I am more convinced that he will ψ than when he utters the second. The goal of Anscombe's essay can be construed as an endeavor to justify the inference from «he promises that he will ψ» to «he will ψ»: what additional premises should be true in order for this inference to be valid? In other words: what are the ontological commitment that are necessary to ground this inference?

The text starts with a logical paradox: as I must believe that I am promising to

do ψ in order to be promising that ψ, it seems that the concept of promising involves the concept of promising. Following Wittgenstein's motto according to which meaning is nothing but the use[7], Anscombe circumvents the problem of the self-referentiality of «I promise» by separating the pragmatic value – the «force» – from the semantic value of the utterance «I promise». To do this, Anscombe proposes to substitute for «I promise» a meaningless utterance – «bump» – and asks what would have to be added to this utterance for it to have the same force as «I promise».[8] Thus the goal of uncovering x in the problem:

Force («bump» + x) = Force («I promise» in ordinary life)

Anscombe's conception of practice is the solution to this problem. Anscombe's contribution to the theory of practice consists in her refusal to offer a comprehensive solution to the problem. Rather, she subdivides it into three distinct subproblems[9]: 1. Explaining how the statement «I promise» can have meaning; 2. Explaining how such statement can have modal consequences; 3. Explaining how these modal consequences can have a motivational effect.[10]

As Hume's complaint that «promise is not intelligible naturally» (Hume 1969 [1740]: 568) results from this assumption that meaning must be a mental representation, the appeal to Wittgenstein's theory of meaning provides a solution to the first problem.[11]

Let's take a simple language imagined by Anscombe: «I say ping and you have to say pong». Once this rule is established, the fact that I have said «ping» creates a kind of necessity or obligation for you to say pong. This framework provides Anscombe an explanation of the meaning of «I promise that I will *ψ*»:

[7] «Die Bedeutung eines Wortes ist sein Gebrauch in der Sprache» (Wittgenstein 1953: §43).

[8] In «Rules, Rights and Promises» she makes the same move, using the sound «blip».

[9] In «Rules, Rights and Promises» she stresses the need to separate the semantic question of what 'I promise' means from the normative question of how such a statement can give rise to an obligation, explicitly acknowledging her philosophical debt to Hume.

[10] It might be useful to distinguish the second and the third problem in terms of 'normative' vs. 'motivational reasons', defined as follows: «A normative reason is a consideration that counts in favor of or against doing something, whereas a motivating reason is an answer to the question, 'why did she do it?'» (Finlay & Schroeder 2017).

[11] «Returning to the suggested form "Bump! I will do so-and-so", let us ask how this could be learnt as an utterance having something of the same force as "I promise to do so-and-so". It will be characteristic that the learner is induced to say "Bump! I will…" and is then told "Now you've got to do it" and is then made to do the thing or reproached if he does not, and that the theme of the reproach is not merely that he did not do it after it was required of him, but that he failed to do it after saying "Bump! I will". He also learns to extract the utterance from others in connection with what he wants them to do and to use their having made it as a weapon in making them do what they have said they would, and as a ground of reproach if they do not. The one thing that gives "Bump" the significance of a promise is that the receiver wants the thing to be done. What I have sketched here is what Wittgenstein usefully and intelligibly called a "language-game", and we may say that it is a fact of nature that human beings very readily take to it» (Anscombe 1981: 16).

«Bump I will ψ has the same meaning as «I promise that I will ψ» in the background of language game where, if I have said «Bump I will ψ» and if I have not done ψ, you have the right to address reproaches to me.[12] Conceiving promising as a language game implies that a promise holds only if it is addressed to someone who has an interest in its fulfillment (Anscombe, 1981: 15). Moreover, this conception grounds Hume's explanation of the motivational force of promising: if broken promises yield reproaches and if reproaches yield social effects, this creates a prudential motivation to keep my promises (Hume 1969 [1740]: 574).

However, Anscombe's conception of practices does not reduce them to language games.[13] For the obligation created by an action within the game does not imply that one must play this game. Thus the question: «But why not break the spell?» (Anscombe 1981: 17). In other word, why should I care about reproaches? If my son reproaches me «you did not say pong», I can just respond that I am not playing anymore. Therefore, the game conception of necessity is not sufficient to ground our inference from the utterance of a promise to its fulfillment. The problem is then to understand the difference between a language game which is only a game – where breaking the spell is neither good or bad – and a language game which is a valuable social practice – where breaking the spell would count as a bad behavior. The solution to the second problem relies on the mechanism of the practical syllogism that she had uncovered in *Intention*:

> Such a procedure as that language-game is an instrument whose use is part and parcel of an enormous amount of human activity and hence of human good; of the supplying both of human needs and of human wants so far as the satisfactions of these are compossible. It is scarcely possible to live in a society without encountering it and even actually being involved in it. Then not to 'go along with it,' in the sense of accepting the necessity expressed by 'Now you've got to...' after one has given the sign, will tend to hamper the attainment of the advantages that the procedure serves. (Anscombe 1981: 18)

The existence of the institution of promising is a human good. It is evaluated from a functionalist perspective by asking how one can get another to do something. If we didn't have the practice of promising, the only ways of getting someone to do something would be through coercion or subordination. It is therefore clear that this practice is a collective treasure that must be cherished. – It is the conviction that the absence of this practice would be detrimental to the collective that turns this language game into a practice.

The rational and teleological link between human goods and some language

[12] There might be other rules, but for sake of simplicity, I will only consider this one.

[13] «It is at this point that I cease to use the notion of a language-game, since I should find further application of it useless and unintelligible» (Anscombe 1981: 17).

game is necessary but not sufficient to account to our inference. For I could very well recognize the human value of keeping promises without holding that *I* should keep *my* promises: normative reasons are not motivational reasons. To provide a solution to this third problem, Anscombe introduces the concept of virtue. In order to complete the inference from 'doing ψ is good' to «I will do ψ», the agent must subscribe to the normative rule: «if an action is good, then I ought to do it». As Anscombe puts it, such rule is not a premise, but a «principle of inference»:

> […]it is necessary to do what is good and avoid what is bad" is required as a premise only by someone with a purpose which can be served by acting ill. However, one constantly has such purposes. Then only a man for whom such purposes are subsidiary to a main purpose which cannot be so served will not need the principle; for him it will be nothing but a principle of inference, which is not a premise. (Anscombe 1981: 20)

The social entity that Anscombe calls a «practice» can be thus described as a temporally, logically and ontologically layered structure, whose nodes are designated by three concepts: human good, language games and virtue. At the highest level is an objective grounded in the common good of a society – or even in human nature itself. This human good derives not only from human biology but also from sociology: for Anscombe, as for Aristotle, man is by nature a social animal. This common good associated with the causal structures of natural as well as human world produces a teleological reasoning justifying the existence of a language game and of its rules.[14] These rules themselves govern actions situated in an environment that can be described in either physicalist or psychological terms. And finally, agents are motived to follow these rules provided that they are virtuous.

As a consequence, Anscombe's philosophical provides us with a clarification of the confusion regarding the necessity produced by the utterance «I promise that I will *ψ*»:

> This necessity produced by the utterance «I promise that I will ψ» should be broken down into three different kinds of necessities:
>
> - Language-Game necessity
> - Instrumental necessity
> - Dispositional necessity.

[14] These rules govern particular forms of human conduct, which introduces an ambiguity in the notion of practice: the universal good to which Anscombe refers can denote a set of activities or social actions that together form a harmonious whole.

5. Results

It is time to apply Anscombe's social ontology to the situation of Milgram's subjects in order to specify the normative interpretation of the experiment. This application first requires showing that, in constructing his experimental protocol, Milgram developed a practice corresponding to Anscombe's model. This coincidence will allow us to apply the consequences of Anscombe's model to the situation of the subjects of the experiment.

5.1 Application of Anscombe's social ontology to Milgram's experimental design

First, we must verify whether the Milgram experiment indeed contains a structure that matches what Anscombe's model predicts. This yields a guiding set of questions:

- Does the Milgram experiment invoke a reference to the common good?
- Are there rules involved which are instrumentally justified by appealing to the common good?
- Are Milgram's subject virtuous?

In the interaction devised by Milgram, the experiment does indeed invoke the common good – namely, the education of children and future generations. The reference to the human good appears at the very outset of the experiment, in the experimenter's preliminary speech:

> Psychologists have developed several theories to explain how people learn various types of material. Some of the better-known theories are treated in this book. (The subject was shown a book on the teaching-learning process.) One theory is that people learn things correctly whenever they get punished for making a mistake. A common application of this theory would be when parents spank a child if he does something wrong. The expectation is that spanking, a form of punishment, will teach the child to remember better, will teach him to learn more effectively. But actually, we know very little about the effect of punishment on learning, because almost no truly scientific studies have been made of it in human beings. For instance, we don't know how much punishment is best for learning—and we don't know how much difference it makes as to who is giving the punishment, whether an adult learns best from a younger or an older person than himself – or many things of that sort. So in this study we are bringing together a number of adults of different occupations and ages. And we're asking some of them to be teachers and some of them to be learners. We want to find out just what effect different people have on each other as teachers and learners, and also what effect «punishment will have on learning in this situation. Therefore, I'm going to ask one of you to be the teacher here tonight and the other one to be the learner. (Milgram 1975: 18)

Here, the memory experiment is presented as a way to improve education, and to revise the practice and the rules that govern how we educate children. The question raised is essential, and evoke both past generations' experiences and future generations' hopes: is it legitimate to administer a punishment to children. Scientific practice is intended to provide such knowledge, connecting the future of humanity with the historically and culturally variable social rules of educational practices. Knowledge, in this case, has value insofar as it contributes to the broader goal of building a better humanity. Not all knowledge is valorized in this way, only the knowledge the experiment specifically aims to produce.

As we have already seen, the procedures of the experiment are then presented by the experimenter in the form of rules or instructions the subject must follow. In the experiment's speech, the relationship between these rules and the common good is mediated by a reasoning. This reasoning is introduced only briefly—it does not need to be fully intelligible in order to function. The idea being tested is whether pain might help with memory retention. More precisely, the hypothesis being tested is whether pain—or the fear of increased pain—could serve as a motivation to improve memorization. Thus, the rule that prescribes administering a shock is presented as a rule that serves a common good and is, for that reason, morally legitimate.

Finally, Milgram's subjects are, at least minimally, virtuous: the fact that, after announcing that they would arrive at the laboratory at a certain time, they show up indicates that they are reliable, i.e., that keeping their word is a reason for them to act. Furthermore, the willingness to participate in a scientific experiment may indicate a desire to contribute to the advancement of knowledge. There is therefore a selection bias at work in the experimental protocol, since the parameters that determine the sample of participants also determine their behavior in the experimental setting.

5.2 Theoretical and empirical consequences

I have now reconstructed the conceptual framework that, from the subject's point of view, structures the interaction – and that the subject believes the other participants are also assuming. Now let us consider the implications.

Our theoretical question is whether Milgram's agents believe that they are obeying when they continue the experiment after Milgram utters what he calls a 'prod'. The reasons the experimenter gives in favor of the rules of the experiment provide a sufficient reason for subject to have the impression that their prima facie duty is to continue the experiment. According to Occam's principle, no additional explanation is required. However, it should not be concluded from the fact that the experimenter's statements are not orders that they lack modal force, that they do not produce an obligation to act in accordance with the request made.

Let us now turn to our empirical questions: What does the subject think the

utterance «please continue» refers to? What does the subject think the utterance «the experiment requires that you continue» refers to? What does the subject think the utterance «it is absolutely essential that you continue» refers to? Why do these three «prods» seem different, and gradually sound more pressing? Anscombe's social ontology provides the tools to produce a fine-grained analysis of the status and modal force of each prod (cf. *Table 1*).

«Please continue» refers to the agent's past and future action. The verb «continue» functions somewhat like a pronoun: one can only understand what «continue» means if one knows what preceded it. This is precisely why «continue» is such an effective term when someone is distracted or inattentive. If I didn't hear what the other person just said, or wasn't paying attention, I can still jump in and say, «Go on». By referring to the prior action, the experimenter implicitly suggests that if the preceding action was justified, then the next one must be as well. I cannot suspend or abandon the action without thereby admitting that the previous action was illegitimate. Or more precisely, I cannot stop what I am doing on the grounds that it is wrong without simultaneously conceding that I have already acted wrongly.

The second prod – «The experiment requires that you continue» is ambiguous. On the one hand, «requires» may imply an institutional or normative necessity: it is a reminder of the rules of the experiment. On the other hand, it may also be interpreted instrumentally, meaning that the agent's action is necessary for the collective endeavor to achieve its objective.

«It is absolutely essential that you continue» refers either to the *value of the subject's contribution* to the experiment – *i.e*., their participation is necessary for the experiment to reach its goal – or to a broader idea: a reference to the overarching common good that the experiment itself aims to serve. In this sense, the third prod becomes a direct appeal to the moral worth of the research project and its potential social benefits.

Let us now consider the different kinds of obligations generated by these different types of references. The first reference («please continue») creates an obligation through coherence with the justification – whatever it may have been – of the subject's previous actions. To stop would be to contradict what has already been accepted or done. The second reference («the experiment requires…») is ambiguous: it may imply a deontological justification (the subject is obeying a rule for its own sake) or a collective instrumental justification (following the rule serves a shared goal). The third reference («it is absolutely essential…») may be interpreted either axiologically (referring to values) or instrumentally (the subject's action is necessary for the desired outcome).

What follows from this is that the experimenter's rhetoric does not relieve subjects of responsibility, but rather reinforces it. Far from encouraging moral disengagement, the experimenter increases the subject's sense of responsibility – by making them accountable both to future generations and to their scientific

peers for the success or failure of the experiment.

Prod	Linguistic Form	Type of Obligation / Justification	Interpretation / Intended Effect
'Please continue.'	Indirect request / suggestion	Obligation through coherence with prior actions (implicit commitment)	Reminds the subject they've already begun — continuing seems the logical next step
'The experiment requires that you continue.'	Assertion of a rule	Obligation grounded in an institutional norm or procedural commitment	The subject is reminded of the rules of the experiment they agreed to follow
'It is absolutely essential that you continue.'	Axiological assertion	Obligation based on the moral or social value of the goal (common good)	The subject is made morally responsible for the value of the collective project

Table 1: Result of the interpretation of Milgram's prods in terms of Anscombe's conception of practices

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to develop a normative approach to Stanley Milgram's experiment, both in terms of theoretical specification and empirical precision. I have assumed that Anscombe's conception of practice could help advance the normative approach, both theoretically and empirically. This inquiry has proved fruitful: it allows for a distinction between obligation and obedience, and more importantly, for a differentiation of the types of obligation produced by each of the experimenter's utterances. However, there are several limits of this result. First, alternative models of ordinary experience remain possible. Second, the existence of explicit rules does not preclude the presence of implicit ones. Wittgenstein has shown that implicit rules presuppose practical abilities that cannot themselves be fully formalized through other explicit rules. At some point, one must return to the implicit—whether this is interpreted in terms of nature or of normativity. From this perspective, a conversation analysis approach does not appear to be at odds with an analysis based on explicit rules. Third, highlighting that Prods 2 and 3 aim to make the subject feel responsible casts doubt on the agentic state theory. This calls into question the discrepancy between the means Milgram employed to persuade participants to continue the experiment and the theoretical framework he used to interpret their behavior.[15]

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