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SPECIAL ISSUE ON "ANSCOMBE AND PRACTICES: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE"

ANSCOMBE AND PRACTICES: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Abstract: In this special issue, we present contributions that explore the significant influence of G.E.M. Anscombe's philosophical insights on both philosophy and social science. Anscombe, a leading 20th-century philosopher, extensively addressed topics from metaphysics to morality, playing a key role in reviving Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy. Deeply influenced by Wittgenstein, she emphasized language analysis and argued that morality should be grounded in human life and practices, rather than abstract principles. This issue highlights how her work, particularly her account of intentional action and her focus on the "grammar" of practical reasoning, offers valuable conceptual resources for analyzing social phenomena. The papers within this issue aim to bridge conceptual analysis with empirical inquiry, stimulating reflection among both philosophers and social scientists on how Anscombe's thought can inform concrete research.

Key Words: Anscombe; practices; social science; practical reason; reasons for action.

The concept of "practice" is central in contemporary social science research, offering a rich and nuanced framework for understanding the dynamics of social life. By examining how individuals, groups, and societies engage in practices, researchers can gain deeper insights into power relations, cultural change, and the interplay of agency and structure. The notion of "practice" has been of interest among philosophers as well, who have considered it more from a conceptual point of view. In this respect, after Ludwig Wittgenstein, one key figure that comes to mind is that of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe.

Anscombe was one of the leading philosophers of the 20th century, renowned for her wide-ranging intellectual pursuits, which encompassed a vast spectrum of philosophical topics, from the ancient Greeks to contemporary thinkers. Her work addressed fundamental questions in metaphysics, epistemology, language, mind, actions, morality, politics, and religion (see Anscombe 1981a, 1981b, 1981c).

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Anscombe's work has had a profound and enduring impact on a wide range of philosophical debates. Her contributions to the philosophy of action, ethics, and metaphysics continue to be central to contemporary discussions in philosophy. In particular, along with authors such, for instance, her husband Peter Geach, Anscombe played a key role in reviving Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy within the modern English-speaking philosophical tradition.

In response to the complex challenges of our time, Anscombe sought to rethink the foundations of moral philosophy. She returned to the roots of philosophical inquiry to offer more adequate answers than those provided by dominant contemporary approaches, such as deontologism and consequentialism. Influenced by the philosophical method of her teacher Wittgenstein, which emphasized language analysis, as well as her deep engagement with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, she attempted to uncover more robust and enduring principles of morality. In doing so, she diverged from the prevailing approach in contemporary analytic philosophy and reintroduced a methodology based on the interconnectedness of philosophical fields, rather than their compartmentalization.

A key theme that emerges from her writings and warrants deeper exploration is how human agency is related to *everyday practices*. We believe that focusing on practices offers a pathway to develop a deeper understanding of social phenomena. "Practice" is a concept that transcends disciplinary boundaries, appearing in fields as diverse as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. This interdisciplinary nature underscores the importance of reflecting on this topic to gain a clearer understanding of its multifaceted meaning. Indeed, a better understanding of the notion of "practice" can be put to work by providing the conceptual resources for more empirically oriented disciplines outside of philosophy.

1. Methodology and Philosophical Influences

As is well known, Anscombe's philosophical method is deeply indebted to Wittgenstein's later work, particularly the grammatical approach developed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI, 1953). Wittgenstein's project begins with a critical reading of a passage from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which he uses to exemplify the erroneous idea that language is essentially a representational system–an idea he himself had previously endorsed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961). In opposition to this view, Wittgenstein famously asserts: "For a large class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'–though not for all–this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI: §43). Wittgenstein's insight is that language is not a free-floating, abstract system, but is instead deeply embedded in concrete social practices. The use of language is governed by rules, but these rules are not imposed externally–they emerge from within the practices that constitute a form

of life (*Lebensform*).[1] Accordingly, words acquire meaning not in isolation, but through their use in diverse "language-games", each tied to specific social contexts. Meaning is thus inherently normative, conditioned by what counts as correct or incorrect usage within a given community.

Anscombe adopts this view and applies it rigorously to philosophy of action and ethics. In her landmark essay *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958b, see also 1958a), she critiques the widespread commitment to what has come to be known as "Hume's Law". According to the most widely accepted interpretation, which gained prominence, particularly through the work of Richard Hare (1952, 1954-1955), Hume's Law can be traced back to a well-known passage in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2007a, book 3, part 1, sect. 1: 302; see also 2007b), commonly referred to as the "Is-Ought Paragraph", according to which one cannot derive normative claims from descriptive premises. According to Hare, this is closely connected to G.E. Moore's (1993) critique of the "naturalistic fallacy", according to which moral properties like "good" cannot be reduced to any naturalistic or empirical terms.

Such a perspective has led to the dominance of the so-called "Fact-Value Distinction" in contemporary moral philosophy, resulting in the rejection of the classical teleological worldview inherited from Aristotle and Aquinas. According to this classical tradition, every being has an intrinsic purpose or *telos*, and human flourishing consists of realizing this purpose through deliberate action. In modernity, this view has been displaced by deontological (especially Kantian) and consequentialist frameworks. Anscombe critiques both approaches for lacking a substantive grounding in human life and practice. In contrast, Anscombe proposes a return to virtue ethics, inspired by Aristotle's *eudaimonia* and Aquinas's *beatitudo*, both of which conceive the good life in teleological terms.[2] Human flourishing, on this account, is achieved by actualizing one's inherent capacities within a form of life. Morality is not a matter of following abstract principles, but of cultivating the virtues necessary for realizing one's nature.

Anscombe's aim, therefore, is not to discard normativity but to reconfigure it. In place of the modern question, "What ought I to do?", she substitutes the classical inquiry: "What is good for me as a human being?" This shift in perspective grounds ethical reflection in practices and forms of life, enabling a richer understanding of human action.

Anscombe's work has inspired key developments in what are now referred to as "neo-Aristotelianism" and "Analytical Thomism" (Haldane 1997, 1999, 2002), terms that describe contemporary efforts to rehabilitate the philosophical insights of Aristotle and Aquinas within the analytic tradition.[3] Notably, her thought has

[1] It should be noted that one of the authors who significantly revisited and developed this concept is Thompson (2008).

[2] For Aristotle, see, in particular, Aristotle 2009 ; for Aquinas, see, in particular, Aquinas 1993, 2017.

[3] It should be highlighted that Anscombe was not the only author to propose a reconsideration of Aristotle and Aquinas in contemporary English-language philosophical debate. Special mention

shaped the work of philosophers, such as, Philippa Foot (1978, 2001, 2002) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1988, 1990, 1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2016), the latter of whom placed central importance on the notion of "practices" in his revival of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics.

2. A Possible Influence on Social Science

Building on Wittgenstein's conception of language, Anscombe develops a parallel account of human action. Actions, like words, derive their meaning from the practices in which they are embedded. Far from being arbitrary or conventional, practices are rooted in the teleological structure of human life and thus provide the normative background against which actions can be understood and evaluated (1957, 1958a, 1958b). This perspective holds significant promise for social science. In particular, it offers a powerful framework for interpretative methodologies that seek to understand human behavior by situating it within cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts, without reducing ethics to mere social convention.

A central methodological debate in social science concerns what we can dub "the continuity thesis": the idea that social reality can be studied using the same methods as natural sciences, primarily through quantitative and causal analysis. Proponents of this thesis, such as J.S. Mill (*A System of Logic*, 1843, Book VI, Ch. I), argue that the goal of social science is explanation, understood in terms of discovering regularities. Mill, following Hume, conceives of causation in terms of constant conjunctions rather than necessary connections. Anscombe, in *Causality and Determination* (1971), challenges this Humean view, thereby making her account *prima facie* incompatible with naturalist explanations of human actions. Instead, her philosophy aligns more closely with interpretative approaches, which emphasize understanding rather than explaining, that is, grasping the meanings and reasons that social actors themselves attach to their behavior.

Within interpretativist circles, however, there are tensions. On the one hand, anti-realists tend to view culture as a construct of the observer, often leading to extreme forms of relativism that threaten to collapse the distinction, for instance, between ethnography and fiction (Hammersley 1992: 43; Risjord 2022: 47-48). A more robust alternative may be found in focusing on practices as the central object of inquiry. Practices, unlike abstract beliefs or values, have a concrete social reality and normative structure. For example, Peter Winch (1964, 2008), another thinker influenced by Wittgenstein, famously argued that social science must understand the internal logic of a form of life. However, his interpretation

should also be made, for instance, of her husband Peter Geach (see, e.g., 1956), who, like Anscombe, has influenced several authors.

of Wittgenstein leads to strong relativism: rationality, for Winch, is entirely context-bound.[4]

Anscombe, by contrast, offers a middle path. Her account of practices is grounded in a conception of human nature that transcends cultural differences, but, at the same time, it doesn't ignore the differences and the role of the first-person perspective within social communities. Drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, she holds that practices are not mere conventions, but are oriented toward human flourishing. This provides a universal standard by which practices can be evaluated, without collapsing into either cultural relativism or naïve realism.

3. Why This Special Issue

The reasons considered so far are but some that have led us to explore the influence that Anscombe's account of practices could have not only on philosophy but also on social science. Following her insights, we would like to suggest that, while expressions of human life may vary, there is an underlying, universal human reality against which forms of life can ultimately be evaluated, thereby avoiding relativism.

We believe that a field particularly well suited for applying Anscombe's ideas could be, for instance, *practice theory*, an approach based on the philosophical work of Heidegger and the late Wittgenstein, and most famously developed by authors such as Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990, 1998), Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984), and Schatzky (1996, 2002, 2010). On such account, society and culture are explained not just through abstract structures or individual minds, but by focusing on routine, embodied activities and habits that people engage in daily. It emphasizes the dynamic, circular relationship in which human actions both shape and are shaped by the social environment, suggesting that what we perceive as "culture" emerges from these ongoing practices.

Focusing on practices makes it easier to account for normativity. As we have seen, according to Hume's Law, facts and values belong to sharply distinct realms. However, as Wittgenstein and Anscombe have emphasized, the notion of "practice", being strongly related to that of following a rule, has normativity built in from the very beginning, implying that normativity is to be inferred from facts inherent to our shared ways of acting and reasoning. Furthermore, drawing attention to practices makes explanations of normativity more epistemically plausible: values, on this account, are acquired through the learning of practices; participating in social life, without any need to postulate problematic non-natural properties of goodness and special "receptors" allowing us to get to know them (see Moore 1993).

Moreover, focusing on practices allows to give a more fine-grained analysis of the otherwise monolithic notion of "culture". Indeed, one could be led to think

[4] See, for example, Winch's (1964) critique of Evans-Pritchard's (1937) position regarding the Azande magic. See Hollis (1968) for a different take from Winch, especially his notion of "bridge-head".

that all individuals belonging to a given culture are somehow the same, downplaying in this way the role of disagreement and conflict within a social group. On the practice approach, instead, culture can be analyzed as a set of overlapping practices that people take part in, and, at the same time, acknowledging the dynamic, situated, and often contradictory ways in which people actually live.

In light of these considerations, we have conceived this special issue, entitled "Anscombe and Practices: Between Philosophy and Social Science", with the purpose of highlighting Anscombe's account of practices and spreading it beyond the boundaries of philosophical debates. This proposal has led to the publication of an issue featuring contributions from authors who have thoroughly examined Anscombe's account of practices, highlighting the possible influence that her thinking can have in social science. Thus, we hope that this issue will stimulate reflection not only among philosophers but also among social scientists.

We would like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue for their hard work and valuable collaboration. Their contributions are presented below.

Ana Barreira's paper, "Across Intention: How Everyday Practices Provide Meaning to Actions", explores how everyday practices, through intention, give meaning to actions, drawing on Wittgenstein and Anscombe. The article argues that intentional action cannot be reduced to a simple causal relationship between a mental intention and a physical action, nor can it be defined in isolation from the action itself. Barreira examines concepts such as "forms of life", "language-game", and "tacit normativity" to understand intentional action, its meaning, and its role. The paper concludes that intention functions as a tacit rule of action within a social context, structuring and adjusting actions within practices.

Chiara Pellegrini's paper, "Relational Practices: Remarks Starting from G.E.M. Anscombe's Philosophical Proceeding", explores the concept of relational practices through the lens of Anscombe's philosophical contributions. The paper aims to provide a clearer framework for understanding relationality and its "grammar" by drawing on Anscombe's approach. Pellegrini discusses how a relational reading of Anscombe's work offers tools to investigate relationality within the human form of life and introduces the idea of "shadow-implications" linked to relationality, such as asymmetry and abuse of power. The paper delves into Anscombe's grammatical method, her analysis of "brute facts", and how these concepts illuminate the nature of relational practices, especially concerning the relationship between different descriptions of actions and the answers to the question "Why?".

Florian Rieger's paper, "Methodological aspects of Elizabeth Anscombe's 'The Reality of the Past'", argues that Anscombe exposes philosophical confusion about the past by analyzing a specific language-game, demonstrating how our thinking can be misled by analogies. The paper aims to clarify Anscombe's methodological stance, shedding light on her conception of philosophical investigation and the role of conceptual analysis in addressing profound

problems. It emphasizes that understanding our linguistic practices and the "grammar" of our language is key to resolving such confusions, rather than seeking deeper explanations for phenomena like the past.

Allyn Fives' paper, "Whether *Akrasia* Is Simply an Error in Practical Reasoning: Elizabeth Anscombe on Brute Facts, Aristotle, and Intention", critiques Anscombe's ambivalent stance on *akrasia* (weakness of will) while acknowledging her valuable insights. Fives argues that Anscombe, despite criticizing Aristotle for not fully accounting for clear-headed akratic intention, ultimately aligns with him in concluding that akratic intentions are irrational because they do not conform to what one "regards as doing well". Fives challenges this by asserting that an intention can be rational even if it is not a conclusive reason or if it conflicts with more weighty reasons, drawing on Anscombe's own analogy of intention to an order. The paper concludes that akratic intentions are rational and a valid part of everyday practice, as long as there is a binding reason to act, even if conflicting and more important reasons exist.

Dario Compagno's paper, "A Counterfactual View of Intention", proposes a method to infer intention from observation and theoretical assumptions, grounded in counterfactual reasoning similar to contemporary causal research. The paper distinguishes between causal questions (asking for efficient mechanisms) and final questions (asking for an agent's end goal), building on Anscombe's work. Compagno introduces the concepts of "final model" and "want-operator" to formally represent interventions on causal systems by identifying their intended effects. Compagno argues that teleological inference is equally counterfactual, meaning that understanding an action involves questioning what would happen if the agent did not want a specific effect. The paper emphasizes that only a subset of an action's causal effects are intended, and that intention is not reducible to causation, as causes bring about all their effects indifferently, while intention selectively "listens to" certain effects. Ultimately, Compagno suggests that intention and causation are complementary concepts, with causal relations grounding means-ends relations, and that teleological hypotheses can be empirically tested by adopting an intentional stance.

Blandine Lagrut's paper, "Anscombe on Dignity: a Practical Turn", explores Anscombe's analysis of human dignity, particularly through a hypothetical scenario where gestation no longer occurs in the womb. Lagrut argues that Anscombe's approach, influenced by Wittgenstein, shifts the understanding of dignity to the realm of "grammar", meaning it is understood not through theoretical presuppositions but by recognizing an "impossible question" about human beings: the question of ownership. This "impossible question" highlights that a human being is always born of other human beings and cannot be reduced to property, thus establishing radical equality and inalienable dignity. The paper emphasizes that this understanding of dignity is rooted in the "natural history of humans" and the constitutive rules of procreation, which are reflected in our linguistic practices and ethical imperatives.

Yunyan Deng's paper, "Anscombe on Promising and Human Linguistic Practice", examines Anscombe's theory of promises, specifically how new obligations are generated from them. The paper addresses a seeming contradiction in Anscombe's discussion of promises, which involves two types of necessity: conventional necessity (obligations based on conventions and not naturally intelligible) and Aristotelian necessity (obligations without which some good cannot be attained). Deng argues that Anscombe resolves this by introducing the notion of "human linguistic practice", where these two seemingly contradictory kinds of necessity can harmoniously coexist, forming a complete understanding of promises. This concept demonstrates how the use of language, as a human action, is deeply intertwined with moral life, guiding conduct toward human flourishing.

Raphaël Künstler's paper, "Understanding The Actions Of Milgram's Subjects In Terms Of Anscombe's Conception Of Practices", proposes a normative interpretation of the Milgram experiment, arguing that participants' behavior is driven by their adherence to explicit and justified rules rather than simple obedience to authority. Künstler utilizes Anscombe's concept of "practice" to clarify the notion of normative necessity, suggesting that the subjects were applying rules within the experimental framework, which itself functions as a practice with rules justified by a perceived common good. The paper aims to provide a more precise, normative explanation of the subjects' behavior, moving beyond purely psychological interpretations, and frames Anscombe's philosophy of practice as a contribution to social ontology.

Diane Proudfoot and Emma Maurice's paper, "Anscombe, Practice, and Indigenous Agency: Intention in Ngāi Tahu Letters, 1850-1950", applies Anscombe's and Wittgenstein's concepts of human practices and intention to analyze letters written by members of the Ngāi Tahu tribe in colonial-era Aotearoa in New Zealand. The paper argues that these letters, often seemingly mundane, represent sophisticated intentional actions within their historical context, including the "institutions" of colonization and Indigeneity. By examining the "language-games" and "forms of life" in which these letters are embedded, Proudfoot and Maurice reveal how Ngāi Tahu writers extended traditional Māori oratory (*whaikōrero*) into new mediums like newspapers to assert cultural authority, preserve ancestral narratives (*whakapapa*), and resist colonial pressures. The analysis demonstrates that these letter-writers were performing acts of cultural resistance and preservation, adapting colonial technologies to maintain their distinctive cultural traditions and worldviews.

We think that the contributions in this special issue offer promising ways to extend Anscombe's philosophical insights into empirical social research. Her conception of intentional action, her focus on the grammar of practical reasoning, and her broader account of human practices provide useful conceptual resources for analyzing social phenomena. By translating these ideas into tools for investigating norms, institutions, and forms of life, social scientists can sharpen their methodological frameworks and enrich their interpretations of agency and

meaning. The challenge lies in clarifying how Anscombe's thought can inform concrete research and bridge the gap between conceptual analysis and empirical inquiry. With this special issue, we hope to have taken the first step in this direction.

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ACROSS INTENTION: HOW EVERYDAY PRACTICES PROVIDE MEANING TO ACTIONS

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Abstract: This article argues that everyday practices provide meaning to actions through intention. Therefore, it explores the concept of practices, analyzing how they can be identified in Wittgenstein's philosophy and how their fundamental elements are incorporated by Anscombe in the investigation of intentional actions. The nature of intentional action is discussed, emphasizing that it cannot be reduced to a causal relationship between an intention in the mind and an action in the world, nor can it be defined in isolation from action itself. Drawing on concepts such as *Lebensformen*, language games, and tacit normativity, the paper examines intentional action, its meaning, and its role in the world. Finally, it is argued that intention operates as a tacit rule of action to be followed within a social context, structuring and adjusting action within the practices.

Key Words: intentional action; practices; rule-following; causality; practical knowledge.

1. Introduction

The concept of "practice" plays a fundamental role in contemporary philosophy and social sciences, serving as a central axis for theories on action, normativity, and social structure. In this article, I will discuss the relationship between everyday practices and intentional action, according to G.E.M. Anscombe.

Anscombe was deeply engaged with the world around her and made a robust and varied contribution to the philosophy of mind, action, metaphysics, logic, epistemology, ethics, religion, and politics. She was interested in ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary philosophy. Her deep analyses and realistic practical examples continue to inspire new ideas and concepts to this day. Her thought influences other fields of knowledge beyond philosophy. Mary Geach recounts the following episode in which she was involved:

> Anscombe had recently got into the international press for opposing the degree which Oxford University gave to ex-President Harry Truman. He was notorious for having ordered the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She had risen in the ancient house of Congregation, asked permission to speak in English, and given a speech in which she compared Oxford's proposed action to that of honouring Hitler or Nero or Ghengiz Khan. However, Congregation granted the degree; men came to vote, urged on to do so by the news that 'the

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> women' were going to make trouble in Congregation. Only four people said *'non placet'*. (Geach and Gormally 2005: xiv)

Having received responses arguing that the ex-President did not kill anyone, that he merely signed his name on a piece of paper, she thought there was something she knew that they clearly did not. And she felt it was worth teaching. "This episode made her give the course of lectures which became the book *Intention*" (Geach and Gormally 2005: xiv).

Intention is the book I will mainly focus on in this paper. I will explore what practices are and what they represent in human society; how practices can be identified in Wittgenstein's philosophy; how Anscombe incorporates the fundamental traits of this philosophy into her analysis of intentional actions; and, finally, what intentional actions are and the role they play in the world in which it is inserted.

The leading question for this paper will be: *"How do everyday practices provide meaning to actions?"* and should arrive at the answer: *"Across intention"*.

2. What are Practices

We can trace the term "practice" back to antiquity, when Aristotle introduced the distinction between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiesis*). At the beginning of *Nicomachean Ethics*, when he was observing human activities – or the contingent activities in which man is the agent – he stated: "We observe a certain difference among ends: some are activities, others are distinct from the activities themselves" (*Eth. Nic.* I, 1, 1094a, 4-5). This observation refers to *praxis*, the activity that is its own end, an action that does not aim at a final product but, rather, has its end in itself as it is carried out. In *poiesis*, on the other hand, the activity is not its own end; rather, it is a transitive activity that leaves its end to subsist in the form of a product once it ceases: it is production. "Production has an end other than itself, and therefore it would not be action; good action is in itself its own end" (*Eth. Nic*. VI, 5, 1140b, 4).

For Aristotle, we act for the sake of acting and for acting well: action has an end in itself and leads to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). However, we do not produce merely for the sake of producing; rather, we produce in order to obtain a product. The teleological distinction between *being* an end, as in *praxis*, and *having* an end, as in production (*poiesis*), had a significant impact on philosophical discussions regarding the normativity of human action and the development of man as a political animal.[1]

[1] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for questioning this point, which helped me improve the development of ideas throughout the text.

From the 19th century onward, Wilhelm Dilthey and German hermeneutics explored the historicity of human actions and the importance of traditions in shaping social meaning. For Dilthey, man can only be understood within the historical flow to which he belongs, as his experiences, values, and meanings are shaped by the traditions in which he is embedded.

Max Weber, in *Economy and Society* (1922), developed a typology of social action, highlighting how individual actions are shaped by broader normative structures. For Weber, rational action in relation to values and traditional action already demonstrated the existence of structured patterns of social behavior. Social action, due to the subjective meaning attributed to it by the acting individual, takes into account the behavior of others and is thus oriented by it. It can be classified into four types: rational in relation to ends, rational in relation to values, affective, and traditional.

Another approach to patterns of human experience and their meaning is offered by Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time* (1927), he emphasized the primacy of *being-in-the-world* (*Dasein*) and the everyday interactions that constitute human experience. The notion of *Verstehen* (understanding) in Heidegger implies that human action is always guided by a pre-reflective practical context that structures our relationship with the world. Heidegger argues that *Dasein* is characterized by its *being-in-the-world* and that the interpretation of something *as* something is grounded in a pre-structure that always already orients our way of being-in-the-world.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), introduced the notions of *Sprachspiele* (language games) and *Lebensformen* (forms of life) to explain how the meaning of words emerges from their use in specific contexts. He argues that following a rule is not purely an individual or mental act but rather something that takes place within established social practices.

The modern formulation of the concept of practices was consolidated in the second half of the 20th century, primarily by Pierre Bourdieu. In *The Logic of Practice* (1980), he introduces the concept of *habitus*:

> The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu 1990: 53).

For Bourdieu, the relationship between structure and agency is dialectical: social practices not only reproduce existing structures but also have the potential to transform them over time.

The idea of practices can also be seen in other fields of knowledge. In anthropology, Clifford Geertz (1973) applies the concept of practices to the analysis of symbolic forms of interaction, such as rituals and traditions. In political theory, practices are analyzed as central elements in the institutionalization of power and authority. Michel Foucault (1975) argues that disciplinary practices shape subjectivities and behaviors.

2.1 Practices and Meaning in Wittgenstein

Philosophers in fields such as logic, epistemology, philosophy of language, and even philosophy of action may resist the idea that something truly important could lie outside the mind, beyond its rational scope. This is why a concept like *practice* may seem strange. Fortunately, Wittgenstein, the great philosopher of logic and language, helped to dispel this philosophical prejudice. This prejudice stems from the idea of a separation between body and soul (Plato), mind and body (Descartes), reason and emotion (Hume) – divisions that prioritize the mind as the key to understanding what it means to be human. The dialectical perspectives that philosophy has upheld since its origins make it difficult for us to grasp what *practice* mean for philosophers like Wittgenstein and Anscombe.

Before Wittgenstein, philosophers such as Frege and Russell sought to define language in a structural and logical manner, treating meaning as something fixed and objective (Soames 2003). Wittgenstein breaks away from this view and proposes that meaning is dynamic and practical, based on the actual use of language (Glock 1996). The introduction of concepts such as *Lebensformen* (forms of life), *Sprachspiele* (language games), and tacit normativity allows us to understand practices not only as recurring patterns of action but also as normatively structured phenomena within specific social contexts. Wittgenstein shows that practices are not upheld by abstract or individual rules but by shared forms of life that render human action intelligible.

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953: 8), the concept of forms of life (*Lebensformen)* appears. It refers to something more than just a background – it is the very fabric of human activities, not merely a (linguistic) context but the ways of living and existing that emerge within human groups. These forms of life provide meaning to individuals and groups, acting as a kind of (albeit fluid) cement that holds each action, position, and individual role intelligible, giving significance to common language and actions.

Wittgenstein argues that language and human behavior cannot be understood in isolation but only within the forms of life in which they occur. Our actions are anchored in established cultural patterns, which make certain behaviors intelligible and expected. For example, academic practices such as citing sources and peer review are sustained by a specific intellectual *Lebensform*, in which the value of knowledge is tied to shared norms. A form of life establishes the connection between language and practice, representing a set of activities, beliefs,

customs, and behaviors that sustain and make communication possible. Mathematics, law, and religion, for instance, each have their forms of life, within which certain concepts make sense.

For Wittgenstein, the meaning of words is not based on fixed essences but can only be grasped through their use: "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1953:20). Sometimes, you can only fully understand a word's meaning if it is accompanied by a gesture or act.

In §7 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, we encounter the idea of *language games* (*Sprachspiele*). Language games are systems of rules that structure communication and action. "Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Wittgenstein 1953: 11).

The connection between language games and practices lies in the idea that following rules is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also a socially embedded activity. In a game of chess, for example, the practice of moving pieces according to the rules does not rely solely on individual knowledge of those rules but on participation in a community that recognizes them as normative. The same applies to legal, scientific, or religious practices, where language games define what counts as a valid action within that context.

Language games are ways of using words and phrases that give them meaning. Giving orders ("Bring me an apple!"), reporting a fact ("It's raining today."), asking a question ("What time is it?"), expressing a feeling ("I'm sad."), telling a story ("Once upon a time, there was a king…"), or performing a mathematical calculation ("2 + 2 = 4") are all examples of word usage. Each follows different rules and objectives, and the meaning of words only makes sense within the specific game in which they are used.

Using words correctly within a game is a shared knowledge among language users. It is a tacit knowledge that functions as a rule of use. For Wittgenstein, a rule is followed in practice. The normativity of practices is not about consciously obeying explicit rules but rather operates tacitly. Following a rule means participating in a set of practices that give meaning to its use. For example, when greeting someone, we follow a socially regulated practice without needing to explicitly formulate the rules governing this behavior. "There is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases" (Wittgenstein 1953:81). Rule-following does not occur through an infinite process of interpretation but through a tacit acceptance within a language game. "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are customs (uses, institutions)" (Wittgenstein 1953: 81).

Wittgenstein's philosophy provides a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding the normative structure of practices and the idea that they are not

merely isolated activities but rather expressions deeply embedded in specific social and cultural contexts. His analysis of language implies a view of practice as something normatively structured. When he discusses what it means to follow a rule, he is essentially addressing how to act according to a recognizable pattern within a social practice. For him, human action is inseparable from meaning and normative practices. This perspective had a significant influence on the thought of his friend and student G.E.M. Anscombe, particularly in her work on intention.

3. What is Intention

It can be said that the method of study developed by Anscombe is much more analytical than Wittgenstein's (Wiseman 2017: 536-550; McGinn 2023). However, regarding the assumptions underlying this analysis, they were largely in agreement. Some key ideas can be recognized as fundamental to both thinkers, including the following:

1. The best way to understand what a word means is to see (don't think, but *look!*) its practical use shared among other users of that language, just as the best way to understand an intention is to observe the action the agent performs in the world.
2. The meaning of a word can never be separated from its use, just as intention can never be separated from action.
3. Meaning is not located in the subject's mind, just as intention is not located in the agent's mind.
4. A mistaken understanding of causality compromises the comprehension of meaning, just as the same mistaken understanding compromises the comprehension of intention.

These are some of the assumptions they shared, and, based on these ideas, I will explore what intention means for Anscombe and how this intention gains its meaning in the world by manifesting in simple actions that shape reality.

The first thing to notice is that, for the philosopher, there is no such thing as *intention* as an object or a mental state in itself[2]. What exists is *intentional action*

[2] In the Philosophy of Mind, there is a line of thought that defines intention as a propositional mental state that originates in the mind and causes an action in the world. This view is notably developed by Donald Davidson in "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963) and by Michael Bratman in *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (1987). The causal relationship between intention and action, which is central to this view, is precisely what Anscombe explicitly rejects (1957: 42) – first and foremost because we do not have a clear understanding of what we call causality. This rejection underlies the reason why everyday practices are fundamental to her account of intentional action. Throughout *Intention*, all examples are drawn from actual, concrete situations; there are no counterfactuals, no thought experiments of the kind commonly used by proponents of the causal

– that is, an action that can be described in such a way that, within that description, the agent's intention in performing that action becomes evident.

Like Wittgenstein, what Anscombe offers us is a vision of the mind and the world as an integrated whole, and of intentional action as this movement of world-mind-world. This view is unusual in philosophy, where the standard approach tends to consider the mind-world relationship as one of separation, followed by an attempt at reconciliation. However, this is not at all what Anscombe is addressing when she develops her study of intentional action.

As we have seen, she was deeply interested in real-world issues happening around her, and her study of intentional action emerged from this interest. This study, deeply analytical and based on an unconventional perspective, did not lead her to define a fixed concept of intention – one that could be neatly categorized, labeled, and stored in the cabinet of concepts for use on demand. Instead, she provides an analytical and richly illustrated observation, with everyday examples of the type of action that is intentional. She begins her book *Intention* by stating:

> Very often, when a man says 'I'm going to do sach-and-sach' we should say that this was an expression of intention. We also sometimes speak of an action as intentional, and we may also ask with what intention the thing was done. In each case we imploy a concept of 'intention'. (Anscombe 1957: 1)

She presents three different verbal forms of describing an intentional action – three distinct types of action descriptions that, although different, are equally intentional. She draws our attention to them as if to say: *"Forget everything you think you know about intention and pay attention to this".*

> Where we are tempted to speak of 'different senses' of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in fact pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents. (Anscombe 1957:1)

If intention could be captured in a single concept, these three distinct descriptions could not all be correct, since they are different. But we intuitively recognize that they *are* correct. So, for the purposes of this discussion, let's accept that we are in the dark and trust the philosopher, adopting a synthetic understanding of what she tells us. Intentional action can be described in three ways: (1) Expression of intention for the future; (2) Intentional action, and (3) Intention in acting (Anscombe 1957: III).

Expression of intention for the future (1) functions like a plan or decision. When someone expresses an intention for the future, such as *"I'm going to buy*

theory. She relies on factual, everyday practices because, for her, the action, the intention, and its meaning are located in the world, not in some hidden mental cause.

bread tomorrow", it is not merely a prediction but a commitment to a future action.

An action described through an expression of future intention should not be confused with a prediction of a future event. In an intentional action, the agent can decide what happens, whereas events simply occur – whether the agent wants them to or not. Once pointed out, this distinction between a prediction and an expression of future intention seems intuitive – and indeed, it *is* intuitive. But that does not make it any less difficult to articulate and describe.

> The distinction between an expression of intention and a prediction is generally appealed to as something intuitively clear. 'I am going to be sick' is usually a prediction; 'I am going to take a walk' is usually an expression of intention. (Anscombe 1957: 1)

Intentional action (2) occurs when someone performs an action *intentionally*, and this intention can be described by answering certain kinds of questions – particularly, *"Why are you doing this?"* The answer does not have to be a moral justification but rather an explanation that reveals the purpose or aim of the action[3]. We might ask, *"Why are you chopping these vegetables?"* and receive the answer: *"I'm making soup".*

We identify intentional action by the type of response it elicits when we ask the agent, *"Why are you doing this?"* When the question applies – that is, when the agent is moved to provide a meaningful response – the action is intentional. "Intentional actions are ones to which a certain sense of the question 'why?' has application". (Anscombe 1957: 11) If, when asked *"Why are you chopping these vegetables?",* the agent responds *"Am I? I hadn't noticed,"* then this action is clearly *not* intentional (unless they are lying, being ironic, or playing a trick).

The intention with which something was done (3) concerns the purpose that guided the action at the moment it occurred. This type of intention can be detected by asking *"With what intention was this done?"*. If it is possible to describe a (future) goal or a (prior) motive, then the action was almost always intentional. If the question can be meaningfully answered, then any response about the nature of the intention determines the action as intentional – because in order to explain the intention, that intention must exist in some form.

However, regardless of which aspect of the action we consider, determining whether it is intentional always requires particular and individual attention to each case. These traces of intention are, as Wittgenstein suggested, like signposts along a path: whether they are followed depends on each individual, and if followed,

[3] The means-end relationship understood here refers to the Aristotelian idea of *praxis* as an action that does not aim at a final product but has *Eudaimonia* – the good life – as its ultimate goal. The end of intentional action is the good action (the best means) well performed (to meet the agent's expectation).

they may lead to an intended destination. Attention to such signs is a feature of rationality: intentional agents are attentive and know what they are doing.

Anscombe also tells us that, beyond being describable in three equally intentional ways and being intuitively distinct from a mere event, the *same* action can be described in multiple ways – all of them true – depending on how it is perceived by the agent or an observer. Faced with the question: "Is there any description which is *the* description of an intentional action, given that an intentional action occurs?" (Anscombe 1957: 37), she offers a practical example: a man pumping water to fill a house's reservoir. The context in which this action takes place is as follows: The water he is pumping is poisoned. This man was hired to fill the reservoir with poisoned water, and he knows this. The person who hired him told him that the house is inhabited by a small group of party leaders and their immediate families. These men govern an important state and, in his view, practice bad governance. If they die, they could be replaced by better leaders who might establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and ensure a good life for all. So, we ask: *"By pumping water, what is this man doing? What is the description of his action?"*

> First, of course, any description of what is going on, with him as subject, which is in fact true. E.g. he is earning wages, he is supporting a family, he is wearing aways his shoe-soles, he is making a disturbance of the air. He is sweating, he is generating those substances in his nerve fibres. (Anscombe 1957: 37)

These descriptions are true and answer the question, *"What is this man doing?"* Beyond these, there are other equally true descriptions that may also indicate intention in action: "if (*a*) it is true and (*b*) there is such a thing as an answer in the range I have defined to the question 'Why are you X-ing?'" (Anscombe 1957: 38). Thus, once an action is described, if that description is true and has the agent as its subject, certain responses to the question *"Why are you doing this?"* may reveal the action as intentional, while other responses to the same question may indicate that it is not intentional. The same action can appear intentional or not, both to the agent and to an observer, depending on how *"this"* is described in the question *"Why are you doing this?"* and on the agent's response. For example, if asked, *"Why are you making that face come and go in the rockery?"* the man might reply, *"I'm just pumping water – I hadn't noticed that face, but now that you mention it, I see that I'm making it with the movement of my arms."* From this response, we understand that he intended to pump water but did not intend to produce that image. Because when an intentional action is performed, the agent **knows** what they are doing *without needing to observe themselves or have it pointed out to them.*

> But the descriptions in the questions 'Why are you making that face come and go in the rockery?', 'Why are you beating out that curious rhythm?' will be revealed as descriptions of intentional actions or not by different styles of answer, of which one would contain something signifying that the man notices that he does that, while the other would be in the range we have defined. (Anscombe 1957: 38)

Even with all these possible descriptions for the same action, and all the possible answers to the question *"Why?"*, there still remains the question *"At what point in the act of pumping is this man poisoning people?"*, and the answer depends on serious considerations. Pumping water is his regular job, something he does every day, just like the everyday act of signing documents is common for a President. The intention of an action is not located in a specific point of the isolated action, nor in the agent's mind, but can only be identified by the meaning that action holds within the context in which it is considered. The intention is in the shared practice within a *Lebensform*.

These descriptions are not meant to define intention as a concept. A stimulating analysis of this idea is offered by the author throughout the pages of *Intention*. For our purposes here, however, this synthetic view must be sufficient. What needs to be clear is that intention is not a mental state or cause of actions and should not be reduced to internal psychological states. What we are saying is that there is nothing within the agent's mind that can only be confined to the mind and mysteriously cause an action in the world that can only occur in the world. Regarding intentional action, according to Anscombe, there are no two distinct places, mind and world, where two distinct things – intention and action – happen, connected by a cause-and-effect relationship. This is because, as Wittgenstein concludes in his work (1921), if words had their meaning confined to the mind of the subject, certain states of affairs in the world would be unspeakable (ineffable). In the same way, Anscombe shows us that if intention were confined to the agent's mind, it would lead us to the dead-end of solipsism, and we could never know whether an action is intentional or not, since, after all, only the agent knows what goes on in their head. She gives us the clue that intention can be grasped in the context of everyday actions and discourse about them. The public space where intentional action gains its meaning is the place from which the intention of that action emerges. And that is the same place to which it returns.

3.1 Practical Knowledge

There are still two important points to consider regarding how Anscombe understands intentional action: the rejection of the idea that, since intention and action are two distinct objects, they must be connected in some way, and that this way is a cause-and-effect relationship (in fact, her argument is strongly opposed to the Humean Theory of Causality). Moreover, she considers that intentional

action is known by the agent in a way that does not require external observation, which she calls 'practical knowledge.' The existence of such a mode of knowledge is only possible by rejecting that type of causality in human actions. Therefore, the analyses of intentional action presented in her book *Intention* are Anscombe's arguments in defense of this rejection and of the proposal of practical knowledge.

To understand these arguments, we should note that the definition of causality offered by Hume does not seem adequate to explain intentional action. In fact, his definition of causality is quite imprecise. He argues that we do not have direct access to necessary causal connections in reality, but only to the experience of the regular succession of events. According to his theory, for an event to be considered the cause of another, it must *occur before the effect* and be spatially close to it.

Thus, causality is not something we directly perceive but something we infer from the repetition of events: If whenever A occurs, B also follows shortly after, we begin to associate them causally. The idea that the cause necessarily produces the effect does not come from direct observation but from a psychological habit. Our mind starts expecting certain events to always follow others due to repeated experience, but this does not guarantee that such a relationship is a necessary truth. We can never rationally justify that one event truly causes another, only that they are frequently close to each other. In the case of human action, this would imply that an intention is merely a mental state that is regularly followed by an action, without any necessary connection between them. Anscombe, of course, rejects this idea because it would reduce intention to a psychological event that we habitually associate with actions, without explaining what it means to act with intention. She considers intentional action too important to be explained in such a superficial and imprecise way.

In fact, she presents her own definition of cause and develops a rather complex analysis of how intention, cause, and motive can be considered in human action (Anscombe 1957: 9-24; 1957b: 321-332). Fortunately for us, this complex analysis does not need to be fully revisited here; we only need to take into account that intentional action is not something composed of intention and action and thus cannot be broken down into intention and action. Intention is not in itself a cause (in the Humean sense of causality) because causes (for example, a cup falling from a table) are distinct from their effects (for example, the cup breaking), whereas intentional actions are not distinct from the intentions they embody.

But she agrees that, although intention is not a mental state, it is a mental event. However, this event cannot be determined in the mind, as it derives its meaning from the action and can only be grasped there. This characteristic of intention – being in the mind and in the action at the same time – leads the author to identify a certain type of *know*.

She introduces the idea of this know when she discusses intentional actions that are involuntary and reveal a special kind of knowledge. To describe this, she tells us:

> We first point out a particular class of things which are true of a man; namely the class of things which he knows without observation. E.g. a man usually knows the position of his limbs without observation. It is without observation, because nothing shews him the position of his limbs; it is not as if he were going by a tingle in his knees, which is the sign that it is bent and not straight. (Anscombe 1957: 13)

She calls this knowing *knowledge without observation*, as opposed to the type of knowledge characteristic of philosophy, which is acquired by observing the correspondence between a name and the thing named. She states that intentional action is a subclass of things that can be known without observation: "Now the class of things known without observation is of general interest to our enquiry because the class of intentional actions is a sub-class of it" (Anscombe 1957: 14).

This means that there are things we know in a way that does not rely on inference, observation, or someone telling us – we know them intuitively. I know the position of my limbs because this is *my* body; I know that I am writing this article because *I* am doing it; I know how to interact with people, with or without words, because I live in a world with people. Actions (as well as practices) are a subclass of things known without observation. When someone acts intentionally, they know what they are doing without needing to observe their own action, without needing someone to tell them.

At this point, intentional action becomes an action that the agent performs – sometimes not on purpose – but still knows they are performing. For example, when you accidentally step on someone's foot: you *know* you are stepping on it; you can feel it, not just through your foot, but with your whole body or through some internal awareness. Then, you move your foot away and apologize, because this was an *involuntary* intentional action (Anscombe 1957: 13)[4]. This is different from projecting a face onto a rock with the shadow of your arm – you can do that without realizing it, and it would not be an intentional action. If you step on someone's foot and do not notice, the action is neither intentional nor voluntary. But this would only happen if you were highly distracted. This would be what she

[4] This example turned out to be more difficult than I had intended, due to Anscombe's development of the idea of what can be known without observation. This is an example of type (d), presented in §7, (Anscombe 1957: 13) where the action results in the opposite of the agent's intention. There was an intention (to walk as usual) and this action had an unexpected involuntary result (to bother someone) that contradicts that intention. The ordinary act of walking is endowed with practical knowledge, and when it becomes a practice, it gains the same characteristic as things that can be known without observation: this knowledge is the expertise given by use.

calls a mistake "in the man's performance", like buying margarine with the intention of buying butter. (Anscombe 1957:56)

This knowledge, inherent in the very execution of the action, is what she calls *practical knowledge*. Practical knowledge is not based on external observation but on the agent's engagement in the action. This is the *mental space* where she situates intention – not as an isolated mental object, but as a form of knowledge that exists not only in the agent's mind but also simultaneously in the body and the world in which the body acts. We know what we are doing because we know our intentions. No one needs to look at their own actions to acquire this knowledge; we know what we are doing because the action has meaning for us, and this meaning is defined within the very practice of the action, in intentional action itself.

Our behavior, and that of others, can only be intelligible if we can situate it within a given range of ideas about what can be understood as intentional. When we act with intention, our action already contains the intention within it – not as a *cause* but as part of the explanation of the action from the standpoint of reason. Intention reveals *why* the agent acts in a certain way – that is, it shows the internal logic of their action. Intention is not just a prior thought but something that *guides* the agent's practical reasoning. When someone responds with "Because..." and gives reasons that make sense within a normative and social context, we recognize that we are dealing with an intentional action. Intention *guides* and *structures* action, expressing itself within it and shaping its course.

We can say that an action is intentional by the way it unfolds within a web of meaning – that is, a *Lebensform* (form of life). This meaning is part of a normative system shared within social practices. Practices involve implicit norms that guide behavior. Thus, intention manifests not only in the agent's decision but also in the intersubjective recognition of what they are doing. By participating in a practice, the agent not only acts but also understands their action according to the shared norms of that practice. For example, driving a car involves a set of normative practices (knowing traffic rules, interpreting signs, following social conventions), and the intention to drive only makes sense within this context.

The point here is that intentional actions, like words, can only be fully understood within normative practices. "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique." (Wittgenstein 1953: 81) Just as the meaning of words depends on their use within linguistic practices, intentional action depends on its meaning within social practices.

We can say that intention functions as an implicit *tacit rule for social practice of acting*. People act in their daily lives, and their actions are shared and understood within social contexts (*Lebensformen*). If intention is embedded in actions, then it is the *way* we act – the method of action shared within a social framework. When I observe an action, I can recognize its intention, understand

its meaning, and consider appropriate responses to that action. Intention defines what it means to act within a normative context: it is a rule followed by all agents. "In fact, the term 'intentional' has reference to a form of description of events." (Anscombe 1957: 84)

When agents act, their action makes sense because it is embedded in the practices they share with others. They know what they are doing, but beyond that, other agents are also able to recognize the meaning of the action through the sense of intention present in it – an intention that is common to the members of that social group acting within that *form of life*. Practical knowledge does not exist solely in the agent's mind in a state of solipsism; rather, it is itself a tacitly shared knowledge within the group and is immediately recognized in interaction.

Asking "Why are you doing this?" serves to clarify knowledge that is already shared and whose very sharing is sufficient to give meaning to the group's interactions. Thus, while the explanatory aspect of the response may be valuable in reinforcing or modifying the social norms embedded in its meaning, it is not necessary for maintaining the relationships that emerge through the group's everyday actions and interactions.

4. Conclusion

This article aimed to argue that practices give meaning to actions through intention. We examined what practices are and what they represent in human society; how practices can be identified in Wittgenstein's philosophy; how the fundamental aspects of this philosophy are incorporated by Anscombe in her analysis of intentional actions; what intentional actions are; and the role they play in the world in which they occur. We saw that intentional action is not a causal relationship between an intention in the mind and an action in the world, and that a satisfactory definition of intention cannot be given separately from action. We explored how concepts such as *Lebensformen*, language games, and tacit normativity help us to understand intentional action and how it takes place in the world.

Following the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Anscombe, we observed that intention functions as a rule of action within a practice. The 'intentional' part of intentional action is what organizes action within a practical context – not as a separate entity, but as part of the very practical structure of the action. Intention is defined in everyday practices, even as it shapes what practices mean.

So, we asked: *How do everyday practices give meaning to agents' actions in the world?* Noting that just as words gain meaning through their use in language games, and these games are embedded in shared ways of living, an intention gains meaning in the action it manifests. The practical knowledge present in intentional action is tacit, just like knowing the meaning of words. This kind of tacit knowledge originates and unfolds in the shared public spaces of practices. Thus,

we ask again: *How do everyday practices provide meaning to actions?* And we answer: *Across intention.*

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Relational Practices. Remarks Starting from G.E.M. Anscombe's Philosophical Proceeding

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Abstract: In this paper, I will focus on the notion of *relational practices* starting from the analysis of some of G.E.M. Anscombe's contributions. The aim is to provide a broader and clearer framework of the concept of relationality and its grammar, moving from Anscombe's philosophical approach. The goal is to discuss the notion of relationality, beginning by dialoging with a selection of recent literature on the author. According to the perspective of this study, a reading of the author oriented from a relational point of view provides tools to investigate the theme of relationality and broadens its understanding within the human form of life. This proposal aims to provide an introduction to this subject and is committed to providing a conceptual framework for it to be further discussed.
Of particular interest is the introduction, starting from this Anscombean framework, of the notion of *shadow-implications* linked to that of relationality. I will start by introducing Anscombe's grammatical method, discussing a selection of recent literature (1 and 1.1), and then I will discuss it concerning Anscombe's *On Brute Facts* (2). Next, I will focus on the kind of background that is at stake (2.1), the way we learn a concept (2.2), and the context of our institutions (2.3). Following, I will attempt to examine the notion of *relational practices* (3) regarding the relationship between the different descriptions of our actions (3.1), the possible answers to the question *Why?* (3.2), and the risks related to the relational dimension, *i.e.,* its *shadow-implications* (3.3).

Key Words: G.E.M. Anscombe; grammatical method; relationality; brute facts; practice.

1. On Anscombe's Philosophical Proceeding

Looking at G.E.M. Anscombe's philosophical method is not just a purely formal matter. The *grammatical approach* is one of the points of innovation that, from the perspective of this study, the author sets in contemporary philosophical debate and that, among other things, specifically characterises her approach to the study of the so-called *philosophy of action*.

The main goal of this contribution is to discuss whether starting from Anscombe's philosophical proceeding, it would be possible to have a clearer view of how the concept of relationality plays out in our everyday practices both as a conceptual tool operating in the linguistic practice and as a dialogical practice that directly involves human beings, becoming an important element in the context of the institutions in which they act and inhabit.

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My aim is not to label Anscombe's philosophy as relational, but to provide a broader and clearer framework of the concept of relationality and its grammar within the Anscombean philosophical procedure.

When one speaks of the grammatical method, Ludwig Wittgenstein's – Anscombe's teacher – immediately comes to mind (Wittgenstein 1958). For it is from Wittgenstein's point of view that Anscombe starts and then autonomously pursues the grammatical approach that will characterise her philosophical proceeding. The relationship between the two is widely explored in the literature, both on a personal (e.g. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022; Richter 2023; Haldane 2019; Monk 1991) and philosophical level (e.g. Backström 2023; Erbacher 2023; Backström 2022; Diamond 2019). In this section, I will focus on Anscombe's philosophical method, pointing out its use in understanding concepts.

Anscombe's masterpiece *Intention* (Anscombe 2000) exemplifies the grammatical approach she engages with when discussing a concept, in this case, the one of intention. A grammatical investigation starts by acknowledging the basic capacity of human beings to grasp the use of a concept in our language. Generally speaking, one intuitively knows what a man's intentions are when dealing with him, but this does not result in being familiar with the features of the concept we normally employ: Anscombe underlines in the first paragraph of *Intention* that «we are in the dark about the character of the concept».

Still, we can operate with our language even if we do not know how it works, as Wittgenstein also shows in his work (Wittgenstein 1958; Wiseman 2016: 58). However, as Anscombe herself points out, our language is a practice in the sense that it «includes activities *other* than the production of language, into which a use of language is interwoven» (1981g, 117).

For these reasons, on a methodological level, a grammatical investigation of a concept starts by trying to understand the wider context where the practice of language *is practiced*. If one wants to investigate the role played by *relational practices* in Anscombe's picture of human actions, the focus should be on «the look of a human life containing that concept» (Wiseman 2016: 60) – as was the case for Wittgenstein.

In this sense, starting by taking a closer look at the context where human activities are placed, connotes the practices that human beings undertake in their daily lives from a *relational point of view*. By relational point of view, I refer to a framework where one engages in addressing the different ties between the acting subjects, between the context in which they live and what they do, and how their actions influence and are influenced by the environment they inhabit. From this standpoint, *relational practices* can be explained as a specific way to picture the practices that human beings undertake in their daily lives. This perspective implies a twofold level at which relationality can be understood. The former is related to the structure of the concept of relationality and how it operates in linguistic practices, while the latter concerns relationality as a dialogical practice

that directly involves human beings, becoming an important element in the context of the institutions in which they act and inhabit. The *dialogical* feature aims at emphasising the complex network of relationships that are at stake when human beings interact with each other: this complexity is articulated both in the daily encounter between human beings – in their exchange and confrontations –, and in the way their linguistic descriptions are related to each other and to the reality they aim at describing.

In this sense, one should take a step back and question the concept of *relationality* which is itself embedded in several complex activities and – as is the case for intention – «The existence of the concept will imply all sorts of facts about human physiology, environment and behaviour, and about 'the natural history of man' including his institutions, culture, and society» (Wiseman 2016: 60).

This kind of analysis means describing the *structure* of the concept of relationality to provide a clearer perspective on its role in the context of the moral life of the subject.

At the same time, this will be a chance to have an insight into what I call *shadow-implications* of the *relational practices*, namely the risks implied in any relational activity such as asymmetry, abuse of power, and any negative emotions that may be involved. I believe that by following this path, the moral life of the subject can be placed in a dynamic and dialogical context, where there is direct contact with human needs and interests.[1] Even if Anscombe does not directly engage with the analysis of relationality, she certainly gives us hints of what it means to understand the practices of our language, and thus how we grasp the structures of concepts and their use, from the *relational practices* involved in our ordinary lives.

In this way, I believe it is possible to clarify certain textual passages that I will consider in the paper and to frame the concept of relationality more clearly.

1.1 The Grammatical Method

In recent literature, there is an arising interest in Anscombe's use of the grammatical method.

[1] One should not miss that discussing what is "moral" from the Anscombean perspective means bearing in mind the project that she set in her famous essay *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Anscombe 1981a). This contribution not only sparked the revival of virtue ethics but also provided a perspective in firm opposition to the way her contemporaries approached moral philosophy. The rejection of contractualism, deontology, and moral relativism, together with the need for an adequate philosophy of psychology, brought Anscombe closer to the Aristotelian position and the reasoning on virtues and vices: «the question of what makes gluttony vicious and humility virtuous will be grounded in questions about the value and purpose of a human life, the answer to which will, for Anscombe, be located in her faith. The role of God in Anscombe's ethics is thus as telos rather than logos» (Wiseman 2016: 36).

In this paragraph, I will try to present this way of proceeding by considering some of the insights stemming from selected critical readings that look at different facets of Anscombe's perspective:

– the focus on Anscombe's – and Peter Geach (Geach 1956) – *non-purely conventionalist interpretation of Wittgenstein's late philosophical method* (De Anna 2023). This perspective underlines Anscombe's rejection of linguistic idealism (1981g), following the Wittgensteinian claim that «essence is expressed by grammar» (Wittgenstein 1958: para. 371):

> many words have meaning by having complex relations with experience, e.g., by tracking complex features of reality that cannot be reduced to a definite object or property. Of course, they do not track objects of experience, but this does not mean that they track objects behind experience either: instead, their assertability-conditions rest in complex features and relations of the contents of experience. (De Anna 2023: 416)

The conventions grounded by our practices, such as the case of promises, are deeply connected with «the needs and requirements of human life» (De Anna 2023: 417), which come out to be «the criterion that establishes what practices are viable or not » (De Anna 2023, 417; Anscombe 1981e; 1981d)

– the change of perspective of the Anscombean analysis *from an ontological approach to a grammatical one in investigating concepts* – as it is the case recently made for *sensation* (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2021; Anscombe 1981h; 1981f) – which results in the investigation of the *structure of the concept* we are dealing with.

Starting from a Wittgensteinian perspective and the refusal of naïve empiricism, the discussion around the structure of the concept «is revealed in the complex patterns of speech and action that manifest an individual's grasp of the meaning of words like 'see', 'colour', and 'appearance'» (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2021: 278). The point of interest is not the character of what we see but «to describe the character of our descriptions of what we see» (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2021: 282), and to distinguish the *material* and *intentional* object of sensation.

The goal is to give an account of the words in use in our ordinary practices, especially of their complexities: «The idea that our use of the verb 'to see' contains these layers of sophistication is not a feature special to perception, but a feature of the idea of a *practice*» (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2021: 289).

This perspective, beyond the merits of the issue, *i.e.,* the analysis of the concept of sensation, opens up a different questioning of concepts and provides

useful tools to move from a perspective that is not solely concerned with the ontology of concepts.

These views share the focus on the notion of human practice, in which Anscombe widely places her reflection. In both cases, the relationship to a complex reality is crucial to carry out a grammatical investigation that aims at explaining how we employ the concepts we are discussing.

The question on relationality is not primarily about its ontology, to use Wiseman and Mac Cumhaill's words, but about its grammar, that is, the understanding of its conceptual structure and function within our ordinary practices.

What role does relationality play? How is it intertwined with the human form of life? Is it part of the background and/or context in which human beings operate, or does it have its own status relative to the practices of our institutions?

Not all these questions can be answered in this contribution. Still, one can certainly aim, through the reading of some of Anscombe's passages, to make it clearer that the author's way of proceeding invites us to reflect on how the relations between human beings, institutions, and descriptions shape our practices. Hopefully, through Anscombe's philosophical procedure, we can begin to clarify the structure of the concept of relationality and its role in the lives of human beings.

Central to this, from the perspective of this study, is the Anscombean analysis of *brute facts* (Anscombe 1981c), which is conducted, I believe, employing the grammatical analysis of the concepts involved.

The following section aims to frame the main themes Anscombe deals with in light of what I have called *relational practices*.

2. On Brute Facts: An Outline

In her contribution *On Brute Facts* (1981c) Anscombe deals with what she defines *brute facts*, namely: «the facts which held, and in virtue of which, in a proper context, such-and-such a description is true or false, and which are more 'brute' than the alleged fact answering to that description» (1981c: 24).

This paragraph aims at framing the main themes Anscombe deals with considering *relational practices*.

Targeting Hume, Anscombe makes a comparison between the transition from *is* to *ought* and the one between *is* to *owe*, starting from an example involving her 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'. (Anscombe 1981c: 22)

The fact that I owe a certain amount of money to my grocer, Anscombe claims, can be said, quite correctly, in the context of our institutions. Still, we can be more precise in framing this analysis. Following Anscombe, one must not say: «It consists in these-facts-holding-in-the-context-of-our-institutions», but: «It consists in these facts – in the context of our institutions, or: In the context of our institutions it consists in these facts» (1981c: 22).

This is because the description of our institutions is not given by the statement which refers to my owing some money to the grocer, as it is the case that «the statement that I gave someone a shilling contains a description of the institution of money and of the currency of this country» (Anscombe 1981c: 22).

At the same time, as Anscombe underlines, to be considered as the specific kind of statement that it is, the institutions required as a background are very similar.

Even if we assume this background, it does not necessarily follow that I actually owe the grocer a certain amount of money, since

– The transaction we are referring to could have been arranged as a part of film production, so the whole procedure was a piece of acting.

– The grocer says I can keep the potatoes.

In this sense, «the fact that something is done in a society with certain institutions, in the context of which it ordinarily amounts to such-and-such a transaction, is not absolute proof that such-and-such a transaction has taken place» (Anscombe 1981c: 22). In addition, it is not the intention that makes the difference, Anscombe points out, especially if we consider it as something purely internal (2000): «What is true is this: what ordinarily amounts to such-and-such a transaction *is* such-and-such a transaction, unless a special context gives it a different character» (Anscombe 1981c: 22).

Surely, one cannot include all the unexpected happenings that can interfere with our daily lives. In fact, according to Anscombe: «deception is always possible» (1981c: 23), and it is not possible to foresee or make a specific case for every exception to the ordinary case.

What is also true is that the fact that I owe the grocer some money since he supplied me with some potatoes, ends in a description of facts that, in this order, makes sense as such only in the context of my institutions.

By the same token, the fact that some potatoes are brought to my house does not necessarily result in the grocer *supplying* me with them. Someone could steal them before I come back home. Did the grocer still supply me with the potatoes he brought me? Of course he did:

> There can be no such a thing as an exhaustive description of *all* the circumstances which theoretically could impair the description of an action of leaving a quarter of potatoes in my house as "supplying me with a quarter of potatoes" […] Every description presupposes a context of normal procedure, but that context is not even implicitly described by the description. Exceptional circumstances could always make a difference, but they do not come into consideration without reason. (Anscombe 1981c: 23)

For these reasons, Anscombe introduces the notion of *brute facts* related to the fact of the grocer supplying me with the potatoes and me owing him some money.

Following this reasoning, Anscombe sets some relations that can be considered to hold between a description A and some descriptions XYZ of facts «which are brute in relation to the fact described by A» (1981c: 24).

Briefly, I outline here the six points that Anscombe presents in her contribution, namely:

(1) The fact that there is a range of description XYZ that needs to be true if the description of A is considered to be true, even though they can be just roughly sketched by giving some examples.

(2) There is an «institution behind A» (1981c: 24) since the possibility of the description A in our language presupposes such a context, which is not necessarily presupposed for XYZ: «For example, the institution of buying and selling is presupposed to be the description 'sending a bill', as it is to 'being owed for goods received', but not to the description 'supplying potatoes'» (1981c: 24).

(3) The institution behind A is not described by A itself.

(4) «If some set holds out of the range of sets of descriptions some of which must hold if A is to hold, and if the institution behind A exists, then 'in normal circumstances' A holds» (1981c: 24). The normal circumstances can be sketched only by giving some examples of exceptional situations where A would not hold.

(5) Saying that A is true does not mean that the circumstances are normal, but if one wants to justify A, «the truth of the description XYZ is in normal circumstances an adequate justification: A is not verified by any further facts» (1981c: 24).

(6) From A entails B does not follow that the description XYZ entails B too, «but XYZ together with normality of circumstances relatively to such descriptions as A can be said to entail B». This is clear if we say that someone supplies me with potatoes: this means, in normal circumstances, that the potatoes came into my possession.

In addition, one should read *On Brute Facts* within the philosophical program Anscombe sets in her famous paper *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1981a), where she directly refers to *brute facts* (1981a: 28-29) – without forgetting the connection with her investigation of the concept of intention (Anscombe 2000).

With this brief outline in mind, I shall go on to discuss some themes that stem from the reading of Anscombe's contribution and that are revealed to be crucial in outlining *relational practices* starting from her philosophical method.

2.1 What Kind of Background?

What is the kind of background Anscombe refers to when she deals with brute facts? The context Anscombe is interested in and where she places her reflection is the *human life*. In this sense, Anscombe's proceeding does not focus on individual human beings nor on «the inner workings of an individual mind» (Wiseman 2020: 86), and this is also clear in her work on the concept of intention (Anscombe 2000; Wiseman 2016).

In addition, if one wants to grasp the kind of background where Anscombe's investigation takes place, I share the idea of following the Fregean shift from the interest from *minds* to *the mind*, which first Cora Diamond related to the work of the late Wittgenstein (Diamond 1991), and then, following her, Wiseman to the work of Anscombe (Wiseman 2020).

In fact, if one looks at Anscombe's work, it is clear that her philosophical interest concerns the study of the *character of the concept* she is investigating, and her work is not related to «the character of mental representation» but to «the sorts of patterns and abilities that make up a human life shaped by that concept, and about the social, institutional and empirical background that give those patterns their meaning and those abilities their point» (Wiseman 2020: 86).

So, to grasp the character of a concept means to be aware of the *context of human life* «within which *we employ* that concept» (Wiseman 2020: 87) – this is a similar case to the one I briefly touched on in the previous section concerning the concept of sensation.

As Wiseman underlines, what both Wittgenstein and Anscombe understood was the validity of the Fregean anti-psychologist argument in logic (Frege 1956) applied in their kind of investigation: «As Frege de-psychologised logic, Anscombe and Wittgenstein de-psychologised psychology» (Wiseman 2020: 87).

Frege was not interested in the study of the laws of thought in relation to the reasoning or thinking of an individual human being:

> to describe the laws of thought is to describe a formal order in which anything, if it is a thought, will participate. To be a thought is to stand in logical relations to other thoughts, and the character of those logical relations can be described. To describe the structure of that logical space is to give the essence of thought.

> Anything that does not fit within that structure is not a thought, whatever an individual human being feels or experiences or determines by introspection or brain scans. (Wiseman 2020: 87–88)

This means to move from the study of *minds* to the one of *The Mind*.

This perspective comes out in Anscombe's work – and in the one of the late Wittgenstein – where the language is understood as «a communicative tool, whose logic is shaped by and shapes the lives and actions of the humans who fashioned that tool for their own employment and to serve their collective ends» (Wiseman 2020: 88). The point is not linked to the mind of an individual but, one can say, to the structure of the environment we have, within we are placed and which, as Anscombe states, «belongs to the natural history of man» (Anscombe 2008).

In this framework, it is crucial to take as the object of our investigation the structure of human life, to observe how human life itself is shaped by concepts.

I believe, in this sense, the case of brute facts proves to be exemplary, since the key point of the discussion is trying to address how a series of physical happenings results in the practice where there is a legitimate transition from *is* to *owe*.

Starting from these premises, one can observe the key role played by language, because it is the *place* where we communicate and express our practices and interact with other human beings: the fact that we share the context of a world «shaped by my fellow humans» (Wiseman 2020: 90) allows me to ask: «'How shall I supply you with potatoes?' – and to draw on the tools of the language I have learnt to answer the practical problem I set myself» (Wiseman 2020: 90).

2.2 Learning the Use of a Concept: The Case of Supplying

I believe that in this contribution, Anscombe gives another example of her grammatical approach. In fact, in discussing how we learn to use a concept, she focuses on the description of the use of the one of *supply*.

As she states, the fact that I understand that the grocer is supplying me with potatoes implies an awareness and grasp of the context and the institutions behind the activity of supplying:

> The capacities that my mastery of our language encodes were shaped and reshaped by my kind: human animals with needs and interests that are characteristic of our species. Those needs and interests show up in the working of our language. 'Supplying' is not merely leaving stuff somewhere for another to find. (Wiseman 2020: 90)

This knowledge also implies my capacity to distinguish the concept of supplying from other concepts such as delivering or providing; it means to

understand it within the language game that allows us to express through language what occurs in our institution, namely: *I owe you some money in return for you providing me with something*.

Doing so means not only, as a human being, to be placed in a context that I can navigate but also being aware of the things that my fellow human beings may need or desire: «a person who can employ this concept in practical thought and in judgment is someone who has at least a partial grasp on what sort of things are good or desirable for humans» (Wiseman 2020: 91).

These are precisely the features identified by Anscombe related to good and bad human actions (2005a); she writes in the conclusion: «In all this, desires and inclinations play a great part, many of them belonging to the world of sense, and others generated by imagination and intelligence: they are not the prostitute mother of a *'moral' ought* who seduces the picture intelligible will into begetting it» (2005a: 206).

The example of *supplying* shows that using a concept and being able to grasp its meaning in the context of our life, needs, and desires is far from obvious. The analysis of ordinary and extraordinary circumstances, the possibility of deception, and the holding of our institution calls for a complex set of *relational practices* that are part of the ordinary proceedings of our daily lives.

The question I want to pose is what kind of relations are at stake in human practices and, more precisely, what is the best strategy to account for the concept of relationality without primarily starting from an ontological analysis or assuming it – this will be the goal of the next section.

The aim is to hold on to the idea that the grammar of our linguistic practices does not generate essences but expresses them. A way of questioning that follows this path as a starting point will not ask «What is the essence of relationality within our everyday practices?», but «How do we understand the use of the concept of relationality in our everyday practices?».

The first step towards attempting to provide an answer to this question is to seek a more nuanced understanding of what is involved in the context of our institutions.

2.3 The Context of Our Institutions

The context of our institutions and their legitimacy is a crucial theme in Anscombe's philosophical reflection (1981e).

This is clear in her philosophical work and is made explicit in her being determined to question choices made within institutions she herself attended (Anscombe 2005b), as in the best-known case of the honorary degree awarded to Harry Truman by Oxford University, which Anscombe did not hesitate to oppose by defining Truman a murderer (1981b).

In this sense, the reflection on the context of our institutions is far from peaceful.

In this view, what allows the exercise of authority, such as that of the state, resulting in the institution in which we live as human beings and in which our practices are placed, is, according to Anscombe, the kind of necessity stemming from the human life itself (1981e).

In the description of *brute facts*, one can observe a similar sense in which Anscombe considers institutions and the necessity linked to them, even if the order of problems is different.

The descriptions of practices carried out within our institutions retain their agreement in *meaning* and *action* only if the parties involved participate in that institution and share the order of descriptions it confers to the facts, as is the case of the grocer who brings the potatoes at my home supplying me with them, which implies agreeing and sharing the order of descriptions which led to my understanding of the notion of supplying within the context of buying and selling. The order of these descriptions shall account for the desires and needs associated with the human form of life and its specific necessities:

> just as many of our concepts have their point in the context of our institutions and social and cultural practices, so too our institutions and social and cultural practices have their point in the context of our needs and desires, and take their shape from the material conditions of our lives. These are things that in some aspects remain constant […] But our lives – human lives – and the conditions in which they are lived do change, sometimes dramatically, not least because as our use of tools – and in particular, the tools of language – become ever more sophisticated, our interests and habitat can be altered and changed. (Wiseman 2020: 93)

Hence, to preserve this commitment and this sharing, it is important to keep in mind the dynamic aspect of institutions, which does not always result in positive advancement: «once useful concepts can change from genuine capacities into dysfunctional habits or pathologies and once necessary institutions can become structures of injustice and oppression» (Wiseman 2020: 93–94).

Here, one can start to have a glimpse in the second sense I was referring to the study of the notion of relationality in Anscombe's proceedings, namely a dialogical practice that directly involves human beings, becoming an important element in the context of the institutions in which they act and inhabit. When observing these possible negative implications in human institutions – which are more frequent than one would like to admit – it is possible to see that the dialogue between fellow human beings, or between them and the institution they inhabit, is not always free of difficulties and negative results. Thus, albeit briefly, those *shadow-implications* I mentioned at the beginning of the paper are brought to light for the first time: relations of power, inefficient dialogues between those who hold and exercise power and those who are subjected to it, an asymmetry that is no longer an element indicating trust and obedience, but violence and oppression.

In this sense, the relationship between my owing money to someone and my paying off a debt is not just related to the fact that, in solving the debt, I ensure that the grocer will supply me with potatoes again, but to the fact that it would be unjust not to do otherwise (Wiseman 2020: 97): «The fact that the act would be unjust is not given as a further independent consideration, a reason for action, but is put forward as a characterisation of the action itself » (Wiseman 2020: 97).

3. Relational Practices: Some Remarks

The aim of this proposal was to see whether starting from Anscombe's philosophical proceeding, it would be possible to clarify how the concept of relationality plays out in our everyday practices. I have started from Anscombe's grammatical method, which takes its starting point from the late work of her teacher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

To try to understand what it means to undertake a philosophical analysis by questioning the structure of the concepts involved and how we use them in our practices, I have taken into account some of Anscombe's contributions, certainly not exhaustively nor definitively.

The discussion of *brute facts* has been taken as a starting point because, on the one hand, it exemplifies Anscombe's philosophical method and, on the other hand, it also shows the various facets that relationality takes on in Anscombe's philosophical procedure.

In this concluding section, I will briefly try to highlight these different aspects.

3.1 The Relation Between Different Descriptions

The role of the concept of relationality in *On Brute Facts* is not only in the interactions between human beings who move in the context of the institutions under analysis – in this case the grocer and I being provided with potatoes. Its place is, in my view, the backbone of the contribution, which investigates the relationship between descriptions and how one fact is brute in relation to another.

The understanding of how the concept of relationality operates in Anscombe's proceedings lies precisely in grasping the relationship by which one fact is brute in relation to another.

In this sense, as Wiseman points out, Anscombe sheds light on the Hume puzzle from which she started: «Anscombe's insight is that – at least part of – Hume's worry is not about the transition from "is" to "ought" but about the transition between levels of description of human action» (2020: 95). What Anscombe does in this paper and in the broader framework of *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1981a) is precisely to provide the tools so that factual descriptions can use normative concepts such as that of ought, which are, however, always anchored in «the institutions or practices in which they have their home» (Wiseman 2020: 95).

If I ask myself *why* I have to pay the grocer because he has supplied me with potatoes, on the one hand, the answer may be a *reason for action*, *i.e.* the fact that if I do not do it, the grocer will no longer provide me with potatoes. On the other hand, a consideration of the justice of performing such an act (Wiseman 2020: 97).

In the latter response, I do not have just a *reason for the action*, but a *logos*, which does not simply derive from what the individual does or does not want, «but rather characterises the action described in the first part of the statement as one that falls under a further description containing a vice term. The fact that the act would be unjust is not given as a further independent consideration, a reason for action, but is put forward as a characterisation of the action itself» (Wiseman 2020: 97).

Therefore, the type of answer we give to the question *Why?* not only changes the viewpoint on what we ask, but also the implication that the answer has concerning the characterisation of the action itself.

In this way, one can see the concept of relationality at work in the practice of our language, and its grammatical use can be made explicit in the analysis of the different relations between descriptions. It is possible to do a further step thanks to the dialogical structure of the Anscombean proceeding, and to address relationality as a dialogical practice itself, precisely from the question *Why?*.

3.2 The Answer to the Question "Why?"

The question *Why?* is central to Anscombe's method as is clear in *Intention* (2000). At the same time, as shown in the previous section, starting from this question when discussing *brute facts* provided interesting insights into the analysis of relationality.

Moving from *Intention*, the question *Why?* is crucial to investigate what an intentional action is:

> The answer that I shall suggest is that they are the actions to 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. But this is not a sufficient statement, because the question «What is the relevant sense of the question 'Why?'» and «What is meant by 'reason for acting?' are one and the same […] (Anscombe 2000: para. 5)

The importance of the question *Why?* is revealed when one considers it as an *a live question* (Mac Cumhaill 2022) and not as a «mere heuristic device» (Teichmann 2015: 131).

In doing so, the structural role that relationality plays in Anscombe's philosophical method becomes more explicit, and its grammar begins to be clear within the language game – among others – of asking and giving reasons. As

Roger Teichmann underlines, «the significance of an agent's reason-giving statement is tied to a certain kind of (possible) dialogue or dialogues, in which the other party is not just an ideal interlocutor, but rather a human being desiring specifically human enlightenment» (Teichmann 2015, 118).

Here, relationality finds an explanation of both its connected modes, both in its being a concept in use in the language game and in its being a feature of the dialogue in which human beings encounter each other.

These contributions help us to explicit that relationality is a feature of the background in which human practices are developed. It plays an active role not only in structurally questioning the link between our descriptions but also in our everyday practices, as one can observe in following the structure of *Intention*, where dialogues are not «mere heuristic devices but point to a crucial fact about the concept of intention and related concepts: that they are embedded in the social and linguistic life of human beings» (Teichmann 2015: 131).

3.3 The Shadow-Implications

Starting from this brief analysis of some Anscombean contributions, it is important to point out the non-naive way in which Anscombe poses the question of the impossibility of accounting for all possible special contexts in which unexpected events that may make a practice fail – such as the case when someone is arrested deprived of all his possessions so that he cannot pay the grocer back (Anscombe 1981c: 22).

As already pointed out, «is not theoretically possible to make provision in advance for the exception of extraordinary cases; for one theoretically always supposes a further special context for each special context, which puts *it* in a new light» (Anscombe 1981c: 23).

This is why Anscombe says that *deception is always possible*, and this claim highlights several implications of relationality: in the relation to the order of descriptions of action, between possible contexts and/or situations, or in the dialogue between human beings.

The implications I refer to are what I have called *shadow-implications*, *i.e*. all those risks that the concept of relationality, regardless of its guise, sets with. This applies both to an analysis that sees relationality as a part of a philosophical method – which is mainly the case I have tried to deal with in this paper – but also where relationality is seen as a content of a philosophical theory.

This is because, as we have seen, identifying relationships between different descriptions is not always straightforward nor free of possible contradictions, deceptions, and/or errors: my grocer did not supply me with potatoes, it was just a set-up. In the case of the relational dimension that is made explicit in the practice of language and, therefore, in dialogue, the risks are right in the open: games of power, lies, asymmetry, and negative attitudes.

To fully address the *shadow-implications* of relationality would need a study in itself. Therefore, in this paper, I limit myself to mentioning it and try to define with this formula the set of negative implications that concern relationality-type proceedings, such as asymmetry, tensions related to power mechanisms, and possible negative emotions, with the promise of further work. These elements are perhaps less disruptive in a discourse that has a more purely methodological character, but they cannot be forgotten in a more complex analysis of the notion of *relational practices*.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, I focused on the notion of *relational practices* from the analysis of some of Anscombe's contributions. The goal was to provide a broader and clearer framework of the concept of relationality and its grammar within the Anscombean philosophical procedure. I started with a brief introduction of a selection of recent literature that has been investigating Anscombe's grammatical method (1 and 1.1), and then I discussed it in relation to Anscombe's *On Brute Facts* (2). Then I focused on the background (2.1), the way we learn a concept (2.2), and the context of our institutions (2.3)

Following, I aimed to examine the notion of *relational practices* (3) regarding the relationship between different descriptions of actions (3.1), the possible answers to the question *Why?* (3.2), and risks related to the relational dimension, *i.e.,* its *shadow-implications* (3.3).

The goal that the contribution set itself, and which I hope to have at least partially achieved, was to put the notion of *relational practices* into discussion as practices that are present in human life and that meet the specific requirements of the human form of life. This was both from the point of view of the grammatical understanding of the concept of relationality and the understanding of its use in the practice of language, but also about its presence in the dialogical structure that characterises the Anscombean method.

The idea underlying the contribution, and which certainly should be further developed, is that starting from a grammatical analysis of the concept of relationality, one can provide effective tools for its understanding within the life of human beings. In this framework, the question on the ontology of relationality may follow, but it cannot be taken as the first move. Therefore, even in relation to the human form of life, the first question it is desirable to ask is not whether practices in the context of human life are inherently relational, but what role *relational practices* play in our ordinary lives.

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Methodological Aspects of Elizabeth Anscombe's «The Reality of the Past»

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Abstract: This paper explores the methodological aspects of Elizabeth Anscombe's *The Reality of the Past* (*RP*), arguing that her discussion exemplifies a thoroughly Wittgensteinian approach to philosophical problems. Through a close reading of Anscombe's paper, I examine how she exposes the philosophical confusion underlying questions concerning the reality of the past by drawing on a particular language-game and demonstrating how our thinking can thus become entangled in misleading analogies. I argue that understanding her methodological stance sheds light on Anscombe's conception of the nature of philosophical investigation and clarifies the role of conceptual analysis in addressing seemingly profound problems.

Key Words: philosophical problems; sense and nonsense; meaning; language-games; philosophical method.

Perhaps even those who are generally sympathetic to Elizabeth Anscombe's work will admit that her paper *The Reality of the Past* (henceforth: *RP*)[1] can appear to be truly enigmatic and perplexing. It is not entirely clear what she is trying to establish by her investigations into the reality of the past. And this is probably one of the reasons why there are almost no discussions of this early work of hers. To my knowledge, there is only one in-depth treatment of Anscombe's paper in a critical notice by Ronald Butler.[2] However, Butler does not seem to be genuinely interested in Anscombe's arguments. Instead, he primarily uses his commentary on Anscombe to polemicize against what he conceives of as the «Wittgensteinian method» of philosophy, which he finds unpersuasive.[3] It is thus no surprise that he fails, in several respects, to do justice to what Anscombe is actually concerned with in *RP*.

In what follows, I will try to show that Anscombe's paper deserves a more charitable reading and that it certainly deserves more attention than it received in

[1] Unless indicated otherwise, page numbers in citations from *RP* will refer to Anscombe 1981c.

[2] Besides the discussion in Butler 1956, there are also some remarks about *RP* in Bond 1986, which I will address below, see n. 23. Furthermore, there is a partial discussion of RP in a chapter of Teichmann's monograph on Anscombe's philosophy, see Teichmann 2008: 164-177, and some reflections about the import of *RP* on the thought of Iris Murdoch in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2022. Additionally, Müller 2022 makes a brief comment on *RP* in a footnote, see n. 6 (p. 146).

[3] Butler 1956: 304 explicitly signals this strategy himself.

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the past. I believe that it is indeed a prime example of what can be called a «Wittgensteinian method» of doing philosophy. Drawing on a simple language-game, by virtue of which a child is meant to learn the meaning of the past tense, Anscombe demonstrates how we can get caught up in a philosophical confusion and are hence confronted with a philosophical problem about the reality of the past. However, unraveling the knots in which our thinking thus becomes entangled requires us to be in a certain frame of mind–one that Butler, for instance, lacks. Through a close reading of Anscombe's text, I will first provide a detailed examination of the main parts of her arguments (sec. 1, sec. 2 & sec. 3), in order to indicate, at the end, what this frame of mind amounts to and how Anscombe's considerations might help us to reach it (sec. 4). I will thus be primarily concerned with this methodological aspect of *RP*, which is also of central importance to Anscombe herself, as she once remarked.[4] I believe that clarifying this aspect will help us to gain a better understanding of Anscombe's conception of the nature of philosophical investigations.

1. The Meaning of Statements about the Past

«I don't know my way about.» This is the characteristic form of philosophical problems, as Wittgenstein observes in his *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI* § 123).[5] And there, he also makes it clear what causes this state of «not knowing one's way about»: it results from lacking a perspicuous overview over the grammar of our language (*PI* §122). For insofar as this leads to a failure to command a clear view of the use of our words, we might thus be misled «by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language» (*PI* §90). As a consequence, we might then be tempted not only to say certain things but also to entertain thoughts that are suggested to us by this «misuse of our language» (Wittgenstein 2005: 314). And that is precisely the occasion for philosophical problems to arise.

I believe that in *RP*, Anscombe offers an illuminating example of this tendency to be misled by certain analogies and the corresponding misuse of language. And in her case, the relevant philosophical problem concerns the reality of the past, which, according to her, was first introduced by Parmenides:

> The first statement of the problem of the reality of the past is in Parmenides. «It is the same thing that can be thought and can be,» so ‹what is not and

[4] Anscombe 2022: 16: «I am engaged in preparing a paper on ‹The reality of the past› […]. I am using this relatively small topic to work out my doubts about what is called analytical philosophy, and expects the conclusions about the methods employed in that manner of philosophizing, to be of direct use for my work on my main subject» See also Mac Cumhaill/Wiseman 2022: 32-33.

[5] I will quote from the *Philosophical Investigations* in abbreviation: *PI* + paragraph.

> cannot be› cannot be thought. But the past is not and cannot be; therefore it cannot be thought, and it is a delusion that we have such a concept.
>
> The doubt raised here is not a Cartesian doubt which is meant to be a doubt about facts; the question is not «May not all our apparent information about the past be incorrect?» but «Is not our apparent concept of the past impossible?» Parmenides' remarks suggest the enquiry «How is it that statements about the past have meaning?» (*RP*, 103)

I shall ignore exegetical questions about Parmenides. My focus will be on how Anscombe presents this problem of the reality of the past. And this is, as she highlights here, not an epistemological problem. It rather concerns the question of whether the past can be thought as such. For if only what is (or exists) can be thought, how can we so much as entertain the thought of something past, since the past «is not and cannot be» (*RP*, 103)? And how is it then possible for our statements about the past to have meaning?

To clarify what is at stake here, Anscombe reminds us of the following: When we speak or think about a presently existing thing, say, about our friend *NN* in London, we certainly mean precisely this person with the name «*NN*»—not some mediating representation that steps in between this flesh-and-blood individual and our talking and thinking about them. In such cases, it is thus as if the name for such a being is like a «pointer» with which we can point to and directly reach this very individual. We simply need to follow the direction of this «pointer» sufficiently far to arrive at the intended object (*RP*, 103). And in this sense, our statements about presently existing things can be seen to have meaning. But then, how can our statements about the past have meaning? In this case, our verbal «pointers» seem to point to nothing. Or, as Anscombe puts it:

> The name or thought of something past seems to point to its object in just the same way as the name or thought of any other actual thing; yet how can it, since its object does not exist? (*RP*, 103)

Our talk about the past can thus appear rather perplexing: we mean something, point to it by using certain words, even though the object pointed to does not exist. But how, then, can we even point to the past in such a way, and mean *it*, if it does not exist? Our idea of the past might, therefore, seem inherently contradictory. And to make this more tangible, Anscombe sketches a language-game which I would now like to examine in greater detail.

Anscombe prompts us to imagine a child being first taught (1) to say «red» or «yellow» whenever the corresponding colored lights in a nearby apparatus are showing. And in the second phase (2), the child is instructed to say «red», «yellow», etc., when the respective colored lights *have been* showing but are now turned off (*RP*, 103/104). In addition, we should imagine a spectator whose first reaction to phase (2) of this game is as follows:

> Imagine a spectator who finds (2) unintelligible, since the learner is not corrected for saying «red» when there is no red light, but this is accepted. It is as if the learner were taught first to act according to a certain rule and then to break that rule. The incompatibility is only removed by our introducing the ideas of the present and the past into our formulation of the rule according to which he is taught to act: «He is taught to say ‹is red› when a red light is showing, and ‹was red› when a red light not is but has been, showing.» (*RP*, 103)

In some sense, this reaction is understandable. For there does indeed seem to be a tension between phases (1) and (2) of this game. What the child does in (2), namely, saying «red» once the red light *has been* showing, appears to *contradict* what the child learns to do in (1), namely to say «red» while the red light *is* showing—unless we assume, following the spectator, that «red» in phase (2) actually means «was red» (*RP*, 104). The spectator thus introduces the idea of the past to resolve the apparent contradiction between phases (1) and (2) of the game. But what exactly does this contradiction consist of?

We can assume that, by playing the language-game, the child is meant to learn under which conditions it is correct to say «red», and under which it is not. In phase (1), the child learns to say «red» in the presence of the red light. But is it then not necessary for the child to forget and unlearn what it has learned in (1) in order to respond correctly in (2)? After all, in phase (2) the child has to say «red» not when the red light *is* showing, but when it *has been* showing (*RP*, 104). However, speaking of «unlearning» seems inappropriate in this context, since it is certainly part of the point of the game that the child learns something in phase (1) which it then also applies in phase (2). But isn't this precisely what appears to be problematic about the transition from (1) to (2)? For although the child repeats the color names in (2) that it has learned to use in (1), it apparently does not apply them as it did in phase (1). Yet, this is not entirely accurate either, because in a certain sense the child does indeed apply the color names in the *same way* in (2), namely to the «same colors» as in (1)–only «not when these colors *are* but when they *have been* showing» (*RP*, 104).

This raises the question of how this «have been» might be explained, which is introduced here as an explanation of why the color names that the child learned to use in phase (1) are still used correctly in phase (2). And according to Anscombe, one possible explanation could be: Someone points to something red and says, «What *was* showing before *was* the same as this here.» But to whom will such an explanation be of help? Obviously, only to those who already know what is meant by «*was* red» or «*was* the same (or similar) as...» and who therefore possess the idea of the past. However, the child involved in the language-game does not belong to this group, since it is meant to acquire this idea by playing this very game. So, whatever contradiction the spectator detects between phases (1)

and (2), the child is not yet in a position to articulate it. If the child were to notice at all that something's off in the transition from (1) to (2), this would rather show, for instance, in a certain hesitation of the child to respond in phase (2) (*RP*, 104). But this would then not be a sign of a philosophical confusion; the hesitation would merely be a trivial feature of the process of learning.[6] And that is why the problem to which the consideration of this language-game gives rise–that is, the problem of the reality of the past–is really just a problem for the spectator, who is perplexed by the very possibility of playing this game, especially with regard to phase (2). And what this spectator cannot get his mind around, Anscombe describes in the following way:

> «Red» in (2), or «was red», is a new use of «red», whose outstanding feature is that «red» can be said when there is no red. It is of no use to say to someone philosophically perplexed at this that «red» is said when there has been red. For he is looking for, and cannot find, a difference between there having been red and there not having been red. We say «He is looking in the wrong place, in the present and not in the past». But what is it to look in the right place? (*RP*, 104-105)

If we wanted to teach someone the meaning of «red» as in phase (1) of the game, we can obviously direct, or at least try to direct, the learner's attention in the right direction. We can thus explain the difference between a situation in which it is and one in which it is not correct to say «red» by drawing the attention to the red light that is or is not showing. But how can this distinction be made in phase (2) of the game? And how are we supposed to teach someone what is correct to say here—that is, the meaning of «red» or «*was* red»—when there is nothing to which we can direct the learner's attention (*RP*, 105)? Hence, in order to teach the child the meaning of the past tense, or the use of «red» in (2), we need to direct its attention to the right object, namely, to the past showing of the red light. But how can we bring the child's mind to «look in the right direction unless [it] already has the idea of the past» (*RP*, 105), which the child is supposed to acquire by playing this very game?[7] Can the idea of the past then be conveyed at all? And if it cannot, how did we acquire this idea?

While the spectator introduces the idea of the past to resolve the apparent contradiction between the phases (1) and (2) of this game, it now appears that this contradiction is contained in the very idea of the past itself. Is it, therefore, not merely an illusion to believe that we have such a concept?

[6] This point is also observed by Mac Cumhaill/Wiseman 2022: 33 with regard to the second example of a learning procedure that Anscombe introduces later in her paper, see *RP*, 115.

[7] Concerning this point see also Teichmann 2008: 167-168.

2. Memory and the Reality of the Past

To summarize briefly: On the one hand, we believe we can make meaningful statements about the past; indeed, we do so when describing the language-game itself—in particular, when we say that the child in phase (2) should say «red» once the red light *has been* showing (see *RP*, 103/104). On the other hand, it is far from clear how such statements about the past can actually have meaning, because the very concept of the past appears to be illusory. But if that is the case, how can we state at all what the child must do in phase (2) of the language-game?

This may already invite one to exclaim: «I don't know my way around here!»– which suggests, as we have seen, that we are facing a philosophical problem (*PI* §123). Naturally, one will then try to find a solution to this problem. And the first approach to such a solution discussed by Anscombe seems straightforward: Doesn't the concept of *memory* provide the solution to this problem? That is, doesn't memory give us the meaning of the past tense and, thus, the meaning of our statements about the past? Regarding the language-game under consideration, we could say: When the child says «red» in phase (2), it does so because it *remembers* the past showing of the red light; and it means what it thus remembers. But if that is given, it is correct to say «red» in this phase of the game (*RP*, 105).

This putative solution is examined by Anscombe from various angles (see *RP*, 105–110). And she argues convincingly that the concept of memory ultimately cannot provide the hoped-for solution. For we can understand memory either as knowledge of past events. However, in doing so, we implicitly reintroduce the very idea that needs to be explained. After all, knowing that this or that happened in the past inherently includes the idea of the past itself (*RP*, 105/106). Alternatively, we could conceive of memory as a special kind of experience that occurs when we remember what happened and is shared by both genuine and merely apparent–i.e., potentially false–memories (*RP*, 106-107). However, while this approach avoids the circular anticipation of the idea of the past, it sacrifices the distinction between real and merely imagined past states of affairs. The special experience of remembering can be defined however we choose; but as long as no distinction can be made between genuine and merely apparent memories, every such memory experience is compatible with not remembering what actually happened. Consequently, it remains unclear what these memory experiences–and the statements based on them–have to do with past facts themselves (*RP*, 110). In addressing the question of how statements about the past can have meaning, we certainly do not advance any further along these lines. And these difficulties also pertain to other possible solutions, which is why we should, according to Anscombe, conclude:

> In general we must fail if we try to explain the sense of statements about the past by means of present memory, consciousness of meaning, quality of images, or anything else of the kind. For either we have left out all reference

> to the actual past, or we have surreptitiously introduced it into an explanation that proposed to do without it. (*RP*, 110)

Anscombe thus undermines a whole family of putative solutions to the problem of the reality of the past and the meaning of statements about it. And her argument is compelling, as even Butler concedes (Butler 1956: 304/305). But what, then, are we to think about the meaning of statements about the past? In a way, Anscombe's arguments show that it is problematic to assume the *criteria* that give us the meaning of statements about the past to lie in the past itself. After all, any criterion isn't a criterion only at a particular date. Criteria tell us quite generally, not only at particular dates, «in what circumstances we are to say a thing» (*RP*, 111) and hence, in which circumstances we can, for instance, be taken to speak about the past. But if criteria thus hold good independently of any particular date, doesn't this imply that the criteria for statements about the past are to be found in the *present*, instead of in the past?

Along these lines, we seem to be approaching an anti-realist conception of the meaning of statements about the past, according to which the meaning of these statements is dependent on what is now the case and what can be verified in the present.[8] However, this might cause some unease, especially in those who want to defend the reality of the past. Because what if there occurs a change in these present criteria? Doesn't this then also imply a change in the truth of statements about the past, and hence a change in the past itself? But this seems absurd, which is why one might be inclined, at this point, to immediately discard the idea of present criteria for statements about the past. Anscombe articulates this kind of reaction as follows:

> I am at this point tempted to say: a statement about the past cannot possibly have present criteria, it can only have present evidence. For if I think that a statement about the past has present criteria, must I not suppose that it is possible for the past to change; will not a change in the things that serve as criteria involve a change in the truth of the statement for which they are criteria? But nothing that happens now could change what has happened: this would be an absurdity [...]. (*RP*, 112)

Of course, the idea of a change in the past is absurd. It is therefore quite natural to affirm and assert the opposite view, namely, that «nothing that happens now could change what has happened» (*RP*, 112), i.e., that *the past cannot change*. If the defender of the reality of the past, however, succumbs to the temptation to respond in this way, they can also be challenged to give substance to this idea of the impossibility of a change in the past. Yet, it is far from clear whether sense

[8] On this point see Teichmann 2008: 168. For an exemplary characterization of such an anti-realist conception, see Dummett 1978: 366/367.

can be given to this idea. In fact, Anscombe demonstrates in the next stage of her argument that the senselessness of a change in the past does not, in turn, entail that it makes sense to say the past cannot change.[9] The idea of a change in the past, whose acceptance could be seen as tantamount to denying the (independent) reality of the past, thus serves Anscombe primarily to provoke this reaction of a defender of the reality of the past. Because by demonstrating that the idea of the impossibility of a change in the past equally lacks sense, Anscombe ultimately uncovers the main source of the confusion and perplexity that *RP* is about. I would now like to take a closer look at this part of her discussion.

3. The Impossibility of a Change of the Past?

What do we mean when we say that it is impossible for the past to change? Anscombe first sketches a plausible picture that could represent what we mean here (see *RP*, 112/113). We can imagine a series of pictures passing by us from right to left. The pictures on the left represent the past, those to our right the future. Once a picture has passed to our left, it is fixed in this series and cannot be removed anymore, while we can imagine that the pictures on the right are still «in a fluid state» (*RP*, 113). This image of a series of pictures passing us seems to be an adequate representation of what we mean by saying that it is impossible for the past to change. But there is one difficulty:

> In the image the impossibility of removing or altering the left-hand pictures is a fact which could be otherwise. I use the image to represent what I regard as a fact which could *not* be otherwise. But I have to admit that the force of the idea that I am stating some kind of fact when I say that the past cannot change lies in the inclination I have to draw such an analogy. In the analogy, the impossibility is empirical. I retain the analogy but say that in the original the impossibility is nonempirical. But if I dismiss such analogies, I am unable to say what is left. (*RP*, 113)

The impossibility of change in the series of pictures is a fact that could be otherwise; after all, we could imagine this differently, e.g., that a picture to the left of us is not once and for all fixed in the series, but can be removed by some mechanism. However, this image of the series of pictures is used to represent something that we consider to be a fact that *cannot* be otherwise–namely, that the past cannot be changed. Yet, our inclination to consider the latter to be a fact as well merely seems to derive from this analogy, that is, from the inclination to compare the past with pictures in a series that are fixed therein. But if we give up this analogy, what then remains of the idea that the past cannot change?

[9] And this move seems to leave even sympathetic commentators of *RP* in a certain embarrassment, leading them to largely ignore this part of Anscombe's considerations; see, e.g., Teichmann 2008: 173-174.

Anscombe suggests that nothing remains, that the idea of the changelessness of the past is equally senseless. And to bring out this senselessness, she prompts us to consider another analogy between two cases in which something irrevocable is to be brought back:

> Suppose that a child wanted a cake that it had eaten. That it cannot have it again is a mere physical fact. But suppose that it wanted a bang that it had heard, that is, that actual individual bang. [...] How could it even express such a want? «Make that bang again!» does not express what we want expressed. We can devise a highly artificial method of doing so. We know how to use proper names. Let us name a particular bang and call it «*A*». Now we are able to express the desire: «I want *A* again». And we say that it is impossible to get what is asked for. (*RP*, 113-114)

What do we mean when we say that it is *impossible* to retrieve exactly this one particular bang, named «*A*»? If «*A*» referred to a cake that had just been eaten, then the impossibility of getting it back would certainly be a different one; it would have something to do with the physical nature of the cake and our digestive process. But that is not the impossibility we mean when we say that the just-heard bang *A* cannot be brought back. Therefore, one might be inclined to say, in order to emphasize the difference between these two kinds of impossibility, that it is a consequence of the *logical* nature of the bang, as opposed to the physical nature of the cake, that the individual bang *A*–just like an event that has once disappeared into the past–cannot be brought back (*RP*, 114).

However, in this way we risk misunderstanding one case by analogy to the other: We assume that it is a consequence of the physical nature of the cake that once we have eaten it, it cannot be brought back. And so we also believe that it is a consequence of the special—in this case: logical—nature of the individual bang *A* that it cannot be retrieved. But as Anscombe points out, this is not a consequence of this special nature of the past bang. Rather, it characterizes our use of «*A*» as a proper name for an individual bang that we do not speak here of «getting *A* again» (*RP*, 114). Thus, if the child were satisfied when we produced another bang at its request to bring back *A*, this would only show that «*A*» is here not used as a proper name. In this case, we could not even say that the child was mistaken and simply confused *A* with another bang heard later. How could we make the possibility of such a confusion intelligible? How do we determine that? I.e., under what circumstances would we say that the child, or anyone else, confused the later bang with the previously heard bang *A* (*RP*, 114)?

It is not clear what we should or could say here. And that already brings us closer to the source of our confusion, which, according to Anscombe, lies in the following:

> «Getting *A* again» is an expression similar to ones which have use in other contexts, as when «*A*» is the name of a cake. When we transfer it to this context we do not transfer its use; for to describe its use we should have to describe in what circumstance we should say we had got *A* again, as we could do if «*A*» were the name of a cake. But though we do not transfer its use we think we transfer some meaning and so we think that what is meant is something impossible. We think we cannot imagine getting *A* again because of the essential character of what is denoted by the name. But the real reason is that «getting *A* again» is an expression for which we have yet to invent a use in this context; so far no use for it exists. (*RP*, 114)

So this is what is misleading here: In the analogy, we transfer the expression «getting *A* again» into a new context. However, we do not transfer the use that this expression has in the original context in which «*A*» is the name of a cake. A complete transfer, including the use, would require us to also specify the circumstances under which it would make sense to say, for example, that we have gotten the particular bang named «*A*» back; or that we have not confused A with another bang heard later. In the original context, where «*A*» is the name of a cake, we certainly can specify such circumstances in which we can say to have gotten *A* again–even though these circumstances might then be very unappetizing. In the new context, however, we seem to be at a loss; we seem generally unable to specify such circumstances in order to invent a use for the transferred expression. At least, we believe that we cannot give the expression in the new context the same use that «the form of expression suggests or reminds us of» (*RP*, 114), that is, the same use as the expression «getting *A* again» has in the original context in which «*A*» designates a cake. And this inability to specify such circumstances, and hence to invent a use, will then, of course, reinforce the impression that there is some kind of impossibility involved in saying (and thinking) that we cannot get the particular bang *A* back again.

But this is just part of our confusion. For although we do not transfer the use of the transferred expression, we believe, or are tempted to believe, that we still transfer «some meaning» (*RP*, 114) with the expression into this new context—for instance, we may believe that the expression retains at least the meaning that is characteristic of proper names, as they are used in other contexts. And then, we might be inclined to believe that what is meant by «getting A again» in this new context is something impossible; i. e. that we cannot get the particular bang *A* back «because of the essential character of what is denoted by the name» (*RP*, 114). However, this is where the analogy is misleading us. It invites us to believe that we could somehow perceive an apparent meaning in the expression «getting *A* again» of which it is then legitimate to say—because we seem unable to invent a use for it in the new context—that it «could not be embodied in a use» (*RP*,

115), and thus, that it is after all «no meaning» (*RP*, 114).[10] Yet, what sense can there be in this expression so that we can legitimately say that it cannot be embodied in a use, if it really cannot be embodied in any use? This merely shows the senselessness of saying that it is impossible to get a particular bang named «*A*» back again. And in the same manner it is thus equally senseless to speak of the impossibility of a change in the past.

4. Methodological Considerations

With this example, I believe, Anscombe illustrates aptly how we can be misled «by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of our language» (*PI* §90). She especially manages to show how we are thereby tempted to entertain certain thoughts that are really only suggested to us by a «misuse of our language» (see Wittgenstein 2005: 314). And as noted, the point of this excursus on the senselessness of saying that the past cannot change is to uncover the source of the confusion that makes us believe that there is a problem concerning the reality of the past in the first place. Anscombe traces this confusion back to the following idea:

> This idea of the past as something *there*, to which true statements about the past correspond as a description corresponds to the object that we can compare with it, is what produces the puzzlement of which this paper is a discussion; for now when I wish, as it were, to locate this object I cannot do so. My thought of past things seems like a pointer that points to nothing: and yet to say that the whole conception is a mistake seems to be like denying the reality of the past. (RP, 113)

As Anscombe notes immediately after this passage, hardly anyone would, or even could, come up with this idea in order to give an «*account* of the meaning of statements about the past» (*RP*, 113). The situation is rather that we simply have this idea and then try «to justify it, or to find out whether there is any sense in it» (*RP*, 113). And this seems also to be the situation of the spectator whose reaction to the above language-game we considered before (sec. 1). According to the spectator's understanding, by «red» in phase (1) one particular object is meant, namely, the showing of the red light at which we can direct our attention and with which our uses of «red» can be compared. What is meant by «red» thus gives us the rule according to which this game is to be played–at least in phase (1). But why shouldn't we expect this conception to be extendable to other cases as well? After all, rules are general items, covering many different cases of application.

[10] On this point, see also Anscombe 2000: §18, where she explicitly traces this idea of a sense that is senseless, or a an apparent meaning that is actually no meaning, back to some of Wittgenstein's remarks around *PI* §500. For an illuminating discussion that goes beyond what I can address here, see Diamond 2019: 71–96, esp. 90-91.

However, as we have seen, « ‹red› in (2) [...] is a new use of ‹red›, whose outstanding feature is that ‹red› can be said when there is no red» (*RP*, 104). Hence, the game can obviously not be played in phase (2) by following the rule laid down for phase (1). Being in the grip of the said idea, the spectator therefore gets entangled in their own rules.[11] Because by assuming that there is also some object that is meant by «red» in (2), they are then puzzled about not being able to locate any such object (*RP*, 113), while at the same time being nevertheless convinced–as a result of being in the grip of this idea–that this object has to be there somehow.

To avoid this puzzlement, we thus better give up this idea of the past as some kind of object and dismiss the corresponding conception of meaning as a way to understand the reality of the past. However, this may not be as easy as one might wish. For as long as we are in the grip of this idea, it may seem that we are thereby also letting go of «something essential to an understanding of the past tense» (*RP*, 113). And this worry also appears to be one of the reasons why Butler, for instance, finds Anscombe's treatment of the problem of the reality of the past unsatisfactory, as can be seen from the following objection:

> Miss Anscombe is not in the end concerned with the reality of the past at all, but with ‹the reality of the past›. The Parmenidean question, ‹Is not our apparent concept of the past impossible?› remains unanswered; and instead an attempt is made to cope with a different question, ‹How is it that statements about the past have meaning?› [*RP*, 103]. In this question the reality of the past is assumed: it is presupposed that we can make meaningful statements about it. (Butler 1956: 308)

Butler apparently assumes that there is some sense that we can give to this distinction between the reality of the past and «the reality of the past», the latter concerning merely our words, while the former concerns so to speak «the real thing» itself, the object that we mean by speaking of *the* past. But this merely shows how tenacious that idea of the past as some kind of object can be. It seems to suggest itself to us through the way we use our language here: We speak about *the* past (and its reality), and the use of the definite article seems to engender the expectation of some object which is there to be found.[12]

Clearly, it can be very hard to resist such ideas that are in this way buried deep within our language. Lacking an «*overview* of the use of our words» (*PI* §122),

[11] On this point see also *PI* §125: «Here the fundamental fact is that we lay down rules, a technique, for playing a game, and that then, when we follow the rules, things don't turn out as we had assumed. So that we are, as it were, entangled in our own rules.»

[12] This should remind us of Frege's criterion to distinguish between concepts and objects, see Frege 2002: 49/50. That Anscombe's considerations in *RP* are intimately connected with Frege's efforts to avoid confusion by, among other things, keeping the distinction between concepts and objects in mind, can be seen from the illuminating discussion of these issues by Jolley 2007.

we are thus prone to certain worries; for instance, to the worry that we are denying the reality of the past—although we are only discarding a possibly misleading idea—if we stop assuming the past to be some kind of object that is somehow there and which is, due to its «essential character» (*RP*, 114), impossible to be changed. Steering clear of philosophical confusions is therefore no easy matter, but rather a constant «struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language» (*PI* §109).[13] This is why Wittgenstein also likens the activity of philosophy to therapy (see *PI* §133). For on many occasions, it certainly has something of the process of an «intellectual purification» (Bouwsma 1982: 10), which requires of us also a willingness[14] to let go of certain ideas or to recognize something as the solution to a philosophical problem that merely looks like a preliminary step towards such a solution.[15]

For that reason, I have spoken, at the beginning, of a certain frame of mind which is necessary to appreciate the insights that Anscombe's considerations have to offer. Without this frame of mind, we may tend to remain in the grip of the idea of the past as some kind of object. And then, it may appear to us as if Anscombe were ultimately denying the reality of the past in *RP*.[16] However, she is in fact doing no such thing.[17] She is rather continuously showing us how we can speak about the reality of the past without being subject to philosophical confusions. We can do so by describing our *practice* of using the past tense, and by describing the games by virtue of which we are initiated into this practice, that is, learn how to use our words accordingly. A description of this practice and the relevant scenes of instruction will show us what it means to follow the rules of this practice and the complexity of the technique that is manifest in our following these rules.

[13] Thus, the confusion that Anscombe tries to bring out in *RP* is, in the end, based on a grammatical illusion. On this point, see also Diamond 2019: 157-158.

[14] That philosophical investigations can thus be a matter of will, not merely of the intellect, is stressed by Wittgenstein in the *Big Typescript*, see Wittgenstein 2005: 301. An illuminating discussion of this aspect of Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy can be found in Kenny 1982: 14-15.

[15] Wittgenstein 1981: 57: «Here we come up against a remarkable and characteristic phenomenon in philosophical investigation: the difficulty–I might say–is not that of finding the solution but rather that of recognizing as the solution something that looks as if it were only a preliminary to it.»

[16] To be clear, there is nothing wrong with treating past events as objects that some of our statements are about. The main point of Anscombe's discussion is that philosophical confusion arises when we try to understand the reality of the past in terms of a special kind of object.

[17] And this extends also to that part of her paper in which she shows that it is senseless to say that the past cannot change. She isn't thereby denying the reality of the past, but rather—as we have seen—pointing towards the source of confusion that is the topic of *RP*. It is therefore no inconsistency, when Anscombe is, in other passages of *RP*, admitting that counterfactual wishes, e.g., «Oh, if only I had not done that!», have sense, see *RP*, 112; or when she is defending, in other writings, the thesis of the necessity of the past (and the present) in contrast to the contingency and indeterminacy of the future; see, e.g., Anscombe 1981. For an extensive discussion of this latter topic, see Müller 2022.

And from such descriptions we will thereby also learn all there is to learn about the reality of the past. [18]

However, by giving such a description we are thereby not explaining what we really know in speaking about the past. Giving these descriptions is not providing an explanation, especially since giving the description presupposes already understanding the past tense (see *RP*, 117-118).[19] The main point of these descriptions is to give us a certain kind of *clarity*.[20] They are thus part of an activity of clarification which will help us resist the temptation to be misled by our language and hence to avoid philosophical confusions. In *RP*, Anscombe provides one example of such a philosophical clarification. However, depending on the nature of the particular confusion at issue, these clarifications might take very different forms from the one discussed here.[21] Nevertheless, what is characteristic of investigations of this kind can be summarized by the following advice from Wittgenstein, which Anscombe heeds throughout *RP*:

> Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to regard the facts as ‹protophenomena›. That is, where we ought to say: *this is the language-game that is being played*. (*PI* §654)
>
> The point is not to explain a language-game by means of our experiences, but to take account of a language-game. (*PI* §655)

[18] Concerning this point see Mac Cumhaill/Wiseman 2022: 33/34 and Teichmann 2008: 176.

[19] This is also the point where Bond 1986 seems to miss an important feature of what Anscombe is concerned with in *RP*. For in the course of his argument, against Anscombe, according to which the criteria for past-tense statements must lie in the past, he also remarks at one point, Bond 1986: 544: «This [i.e. the language-game about the red and yellow lights] is a [sic] excessively artificial example, but my suggestion is that the only way in which we can learn the use of the past tense is in circumstances similar to this, circumstances, in other words, in which we can say that it was learned by remembering. If this is true, it follows that it is only in such circumstances, when the event in question is in the very recent past, and so remembered by any normal person who has his attention fixed on the phenomenon in question, that we can say that it is necessarily true that something was the case or occurred or happened, on the grounds that this is what is meant by so saying. *And once we have mastered the use of the past tense in any one sort of case, we do not need to master a new technique for every new sort of case, since the use of the past tense has the same signification in all cases*.» (*italics in the original*) I believe that this attempt at an explanation of the language-game stands in stark contrast to an important point of Anscombe's discussion. For it is not only unclear how this could even work as an explanation; it seems also to re-invite the confusions that Anscombe is eager to avoid.

[20] See *PI* §133: «[The] clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.»

[21] An example of such a different form of clarification is provided by Anscombe herself. In *Intention*, she is continuously concerned with pointing out certain confusions to which we are prone when we try to account for, e.g., what is characteristic of intentional action or how intentional actions can be distinguished from involuntary movements; see, among other things, Anscombe 2000: 28–30 (§19). On this point, see also Wiseman 2016: 63–65.

To avoid philosophical confusions, it is crucial that we do not attempt to find deeper explanations for the language-games that we are considering, for example, the game concerning the colored lights that Anscombe examines in her paper. Instead, we should remain focused on how our words are actually used within the clear confines of such simple games. This focus on particular cases will help to remind us of our practice—for instance, our practice of using the past tense—and along the way, to reach the frame of mind that I have mentioned above. For by remaining focused on the use of our words in these particular cases, we will also be forced to practice what is, according to Wittgenstein, one of the most difficult things in philosophy, namely, knowing when and where *to stop*.[22] As can be seen from many of her mature writings,[23] I believe, Anscombe certainly knew when and where to stop in a philosophical investigation. A close reading of *RP* makes it apparent how much she owes this methodological feature of her thinking to the philosophy of Wittgenstein.

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[22] See the second part of the passage quoted above (see n. 19), Wittgenstein 1981: 57): «This is connected, I believe, with our wrongly expecting an explanation, whereas the solution of the difficulty is a description, if we give it the right place in our considerations. If we dwell upon it, and do not try to get beyond it. // The difficulty here is: to stop.»

[23] See, for instance, Anscombe 1981 or Anscombe 2000.

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WHETHER *AKRASIA* IS SIMPLY AN ERROR IN PRACTICAL REASONING: ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE ON BRUTE FACTS, ARISTOTLE, AND INTENTION

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Abstract: Elizabeth Anscombe criticizes Aristotle for his failure to account for the person who forms a perfectly clear-headed *akratic* intention, and yet she agrees with him that the weak-willed do not make what he calls a 'choice'. She concludes that *akratic* intentions are not rational, for an intention is rational only when it is conducive to or a part of what one 'regards as doing well'. Based on the 'brute facts' of practice that provide the 'context of normal procedure' for human action, *akrasia* is simply an error in practical reasoning. However, Anscombe also assumes that intentions are analogous to orders, but if they have the same mode of operation then, as I shall try to show, the intention to φ is rational insofar as there is a binding reason to φ and one is trying to get φ, regardless of whether there are more important reasons (or intentions) to ¬φ. Hence, an *akratic* intention is rational, and a valid feature of everyday practice.

Key Words: *akrasia*; Anscombe; Aristotle; intention; practice.

1. The Problem Stated

There is a marked ambivalence in how Elizabeth Anscombe, as part of her analysis of practical reason and intention, approaches the problem of *akrasia*. *Akratics* judge it would be better to ¬φ, but want to φ, and φ (Morris 2006: 195). The problem is that *akrasia* seems incompatible with prevailing assumptions about reason and intention, namely that if an agent judges it better to ¬φ, firstly, they will want to ¬φ more than φ; and secondly, if they are free to do so, and act intentionally, then when the time comes to act they will intentionally ¬φ (see Davidson 1969: 23). As a result, some have concluded that *akrasia* is a failure of rationality (Davidson 1969: 40; Foot 1995: 181; Tenenbaum 2010: 280); or even a failure of intention (Holton 1999: 255). On first viewing, it seems Anscombe rejects such *akrasia* scepticism. Regarding St Peter's denial of Christ, for instance, she observes that one can 'be as certain as possible that one will do something, and yet intend not to do it' (1957: 93). In addition, she is critical of what she sees as Aristotle's inability to account for the person who forms a 'perfectly clear-headed intention' of acting contrary to 'what he regards as doing well' (1965: 66). Despite all this, she nonetheless concludes that *akrasia* is primarily an error in practical deliberation: a mistake in 'performance' (1957: 56).

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For her, *akratics* simply get the practice wrong. And what I hope to do in this paper is show both that a close reading of Anscombe reveals a great deal about how *akrasia* should be understood, but also that what it tells us requires rejecting the tendency towards *akrasia* scepticism in her own work.

For Anscombe, we can only understand rationality and intention against the background of what she calls the 'brute facts' of practice: the 'context of normal procedure' (1958b: 23, 24). Her work, in particular *Intention* (1957), is a widely acknowledged influence on those for whom reason and intention are bound up with temporally extended and norm-based social activities (Christman 2023: 18), including those who, like her, offer a primarily Aristotelian account of practice (MacIntyre 1981: 53). Anscombe does highlight what she sees as serious flaws in Aristotle's account of *akrasia*, including that there is a gap where the concept of intention is needed (1965: 63); that we cannot assume, as he does, that *akratics* have not come to the conclusion of deliberation, simply because they have not acted on that conclusion (1957: 59; 1965: 67); and that *akratics* are moved by will (*boulêsis*), and therefore intention, and not, as he assumes, simply by desire (*epithumia*) (1965: 61, 66). Nonetheless, although Anscombe maintains that *akrasia* is intentional, she concludes that the *akratic* intention is not rational, precisely because it is the intention to act contrary to what one 'regards as doing well'. And this conclusion follows from a number of claims, about which she is in agreement with Aristotle: namely, that choice (*prohairesis*) is determined by deliberation on how to attain an object of one's will, but also that the latter must be 'wanted *qua* conducive to or part of "doing well"' (1965: 61, 69), and that *akratics* are incapable of choice, for the latter requires precisely the kind of harmony absent in cases of *akrasia*, namely where judgement says and wanting pursues the same thing (1965: 70).

Where does this leave the problem of *akrasia*? As Anscombe says, an intention can be rational even when it is ethically bad (1957: 58), but she is I think wrong to conclude that the *akratic* intention is not rational. I develop two lines of argument here. First, I try to show that an intention can be rational when it is not a conclusive reason. My argument will draw on Anscombe's own observation that an intention is analogous to an order (1957: 57), but if they have the same mode of operation as practical reasons, that entails, as I try to show, an intention need not be more weighty than conflicting reasons. My second argument is that something can be a reason for action even when it is not itself part of or conducive to what one 'regards as doing well'. I point to the facts, observable in everyday practice, that goods, and hence reasons, can be in conflict; and in some cases when a good is defeated, it still provides a binding reason for action. My conclusion is that an intention to φ is rational insofar as there is a binding reason to φ and one is trying to get φ, even when there are more important reasons (or intentions) to ¬φ. An *akratic* intention is rational, therefore, and a valid feature of everyday practice.

2. Reasons and Intentions

Before considering intentions, and the question of whether an *akratic* intention is rational, we must start with rationality, and more precisely practical rationality.

> [W]hat the agent reports in answer to the question "Why?" is a reason for acting if in treating it as a reason he conceives it as something good or bad, and his own action as doing good or harm'. (Anscombe 1957: 22)

These are practical reasons: *reasons for action*. They are distinct from epistemic reasons, reasons to believe something is the case (Anscombe 1957: 15). And it is a good (or evil) that gives one a reason for action. The good (or evil) might be in the past: e.g., 'if I am grateful to someone, it is because he has done me some good' (ibid., p. 21); or it might be in the future, as when I do something 'lest … or in order that' some evil or good should be prevented or brought about (ibid.). This account of practical reasons is one that Anscombe traces back to Aristotle. What we do, we do for 'pleasant and noble objects', Aristotle maintains: 'it is for these objects that all men do everything they do' (*NE* III. 1, 1110b9–13). And as Aristotle assumes that the person of vice takes evil to be their good (VII. 3,1146b20), then for both good and bad people acting for a reason 'involves belief that there is some good in the action' (Raz 2011: 64, 78).

Therefore, although this has come to be termed the 'guise of the good thesis' (Raz 1999: 22), it should be recalled, this is first and foremost an account of practical rationality. Hence, something can be a good, and so a reason for action, without it being a moral 'obligation', or 'duty', or what one 'ought' to do all things considered (Anscombe 1958a: 3). But it does not follow that 'the point of actions' is whatever gives one pleasure: i.e., 'some sort of internal impression' (ibid.). Rather, what matters, Anscombe contends, are what she calls 'brute facts', and the context that determines what the brute facts are for an agent, namely the practice or institution within which the individual is making decisions and acting for reasons (1958b: 24). Practical reasoning does not happen in a vacuum.

For instance, if the grocer is described as supplying me with potatoes, why does that give me a reason for action: here, a reason to pay the grocer's bill? Although there can be exceptional circumstances, Anscombe notes, 'Every description presupposes a context of normal procedure' (ibid., p. 23). She calls this 'the institution' behind that description, for example the institution 'of buying and selling' goods that is behind the description of my owing the grocer payment for the goods received (ibid., p. 24). The 'brute facts' are those in virtue of which, in a given context, a certain description is true (ibid.). Although she is not, she says, attempting to infer an ought from an is, 'there is some sort of necessary connection here', as is also the case between your thinking you need something and your wanting it (1958a: 7). Hence, something is a reason for action if it is a

good, where its being a good 'presupposes a context of normal procedure', a practice, or institution, where descriptions of 'brute facts' explain why it is that this thing is a good and so one has a reason for action.

Reasons must not be conflated with intentions, as not all reasons are intentions, and not all intentions are rational (1957: 7). Nonetheless, the two are connected. In particular, we end up employing the concept of intention when making sense of the distinction between a reason for action and a mere cause:

> it establishes something as a reason if one argues against it […] in such a way as to link it up with motives and intentions: "You did it because he told you to? But why do what he says?" Answers like "he has done a lot for me," "he is my father," "it would have been the worse for me if I hadn't" give the original answer a place among reasons. (ibid., p. 24)

More precisely, something is a reason for action when the action itself is 'described as a response to something *as having significance* that is dwelt on by the agent in his account' (ibid., p. 23). That is why, she is saying, reasons, unlike mere causes, *can* link up with intentions. Of course, the precise relationship of the two still needs to be unravelled. But first, what is an intention?

It involves 'trying to get', Anscombe says, which is the 'primitive sign of wanting' (ibid., p. 67). Hence, an intention is 'neither wishing nor hoping nor the feeling of desire, and cannot be said to exist in a man who does nothing towards getting what he wants' (ibid.). *Wanting* has two features: both 'movement towards a thing and knowledge (or at least opinion) that the thing is there' (ibid., p. 68). And, to reiterate, the thing must be wanted: it is 'fair nonsense' to want something but to 'not want it *for* anything' (ibid., p. 70). That is why 'a desirability characterization gives a final answer to the series of "What for?" questions' (ibid., p. 71). If I am asked, why do I pay the grocer's bill, I might answer by saying that I do so in order to pay my debts. If I am asked why I am paying my debts, I might reply that the virtue of justice is the disposition to give to each what they are due. But why be just? If my answer is that justice is good, this is the 'final answer' to the series of 'What for?' questions. And it also picks out my intention, which is 'wanting in virtue of the goodness […] of what is wanted' (ibid., pp. 75–6).

There are two questions about this view of intention that I will raise now: first, if an intention is 'wanting in virtue of the goodness of what is wanted', does it follow that every intention is *rational*, given that something is a reason for action when one conceives it as a good? And second, does it also follow that every intention is *ethical*, because it is wanting in virtue of the goodness of what is wanted?

Anscombe gives a negative answer to the second question. She insists one can intend to do what is ethically bad, evil even. The dying Nazi who wants to spend his final hours killing Jewish children, on the grounds that this is a fitting way for a Nazi to end their life, has, on Anscombe's view, an intention. They might say

'evil be thou my good', where 'the good of it is that it's bad', because, in contrast, the ethically good is, in their mind, 'impotent, slavish, and inglorious' (Anscombe 1957: 74; see also Raz 2011: 79; 2022: 153). The dying Nazi has an intention, because 'all that is required for our concept of "wanting" is that a man should see what he wants under the aspect of some good' (Anscombe 1957: 74). And within the practice, or institution, of Nazism, this is possible: in this 'context of normal procedure', killing Jewish children is a good. But it might be argued in reply that the use of 'good' here simply causes confusion, for it invites us to think of ethics. And, arguably, what gives the Nazi their intention is something else, like their 'care and interest' in a particular aim (Stocker 2004: 315). But Anscombe has been clear that, for the purposes of reasoning and intention, 'good' is simply what one takes to be good, and nothing follows regarding whether it is *ethically* good. Indeed, the fact that as a Nazi you take killing Jewish children to be your good will count against you when we judge your actions: for we are responsible for the bad consequences of bad actions (1958a: 12). So, ethical judgement does come in here, when we judge what the Nazi does intentionally; but such judgement plays no role in determining whether their action is intentional.

Our second question is whether every intention is rational. And again Anscombe answers in the negative. This becomes clear when she discusses *akrasia*. Anscombe insists that *akrasia* is intentional, even though in one sense of course *akrasia* is simply a failure to act as intended. St Peter, for instance, intended to avow Jesus. This is what he was 'trying to get'. And although Anscombe assumes failure to execute intentions is 'necessarily the rare exception' (1957: 86), she accepts it is possible. Despite the fact she is credited with inspiring the view that 'having an intention is the beginning of performing the intended action' (Raz 2022: 57 and n. 15), she is certainly not assuming that having an intention must result in the intended action. One can, Anscombe says, 'be as certain as possible that one will do something, and yet intend not to do it' (1957: 93). St Peter, on her view, 'did not change his mind', 'was not prevented from carrying out his resolution not to, and yet did deny him' (ibid., pp. 92–3). St Peter did not act on his original intention, but he did act. How should we understand his denial of Christ? For Anscombe, St Peter did 'what he intended not to *intentionally*' (Sultana 2009: 102). His act was weak-willed *and* intentional. But did he act from a *rational* intention?

To address that question, I want to consider another of Anscombe's examples: the 'man going around town with a shopping list in his hand' (1957: 56). The 'relation of the list to the things he actually buys is one and the same', she observes, 'whether his wife gave him the list or it is his own list' (ibid.). If it is his own list, it is 'an expression of intention; if his wife gave it to him, it has the role of an order' (ibid.). And even if the list is his own, the intention is analogous to an order. This is evident when Anscombe considers how the man might make a 'mistake', as when the list 'says butter and you have bought margarine' (ibid.).

This is an error, she says, and 'the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance' (ibid.). It is not an epistemic error, a mistake in knowledge of an objective reality (as would be the case if the man, or his wife, had wrongly thought it was margarine that was needed and put it on the list instead of butter[1]) but rather an error in practical knowledge or practical reasoning:

> It is precisely analogous to obeying an order wrong – and we ought to be struck by the fact that there is such a thing, and that it is not the same as ignoring, disregarding, or disobeying the order. (ibid., p. 57)

Anscombe is making a distinction of great importance here. When the man with the shopping list chooses the wrong means to attain his intended end this is analogous to 'obeying an order wrong' (see Stödl 2011: 221). Now, unlike the case of St Peter, the man with the shopping list is not weak-willed: he is not giving into temptation, a secret desire for margarine say. But Anscombe assumes that both the man with the shopping list and the weak-willed are guilty of a mistake in performance, analogous to 'obeying an order wrong'. As we have seen, her view is that St Peter, when he disowned Jesus, 'did not change his mind'.

Consider another example taken from *Intention*. A man is (1) moving his arm up and down, and doing so to operate a water pump; and (2) he is operating the pump in order to replenish the water supply in a house; which (3) he is doing in order to poison the inhabitants, a 'small group of party chiefs, with their immediate families, who are in control of a great state, and are engaged in exterminating the Jews and perhaps plan a world war'; and (4) he is poisoning these people in order to 'save the Jews, to put in the good men, to get the Kingdom of Heaven on earth' (1957: 37, 40). The action is broken down into a number of steps: the first three 'constitute a series of means', she says, whereas the fourth is 'treated as end' (ibid., p. 47). The action is intentional because the agent can give reasons for it that answer the 'Why?' question (e.g., 'Why are you raising and lowering your arm?) but also the 'How?' question (e.g., 'How will the people in the house be poisoned?') (see Hornsby 2011: 119). This is the means/ends structure of the practical reasoning involved in intentional action on Anscombe's account. In her version of the example, everything goes to plan. But what would be involved if the man tasked with pumping the water is *akratic*? If he fears being caught and punished, he might run away. He still judges it would be better to stay at his post, but he wants to desert, and deserts. Anscombe is saying that *akrasia* is analogous to 'obeying an order wrong'; and if this is true, then, like St Peter, if the man tasked with pumping the water is weak-willed, he does 'not change his mind'.

[1] Another example of an epistemic error is the mistake made by a detective following the man around the supermarket, where if the detective's record does not match what the man buys the mistake is in the record (Anscombe 1957, p. 56).

But is that the case? I want to consider whether it is more accurate instead to see *akrasia* as analogous to 'ignoring, disregarding, or disobeying the order'. This would be so if the weak-willed *do* change their mind: they have a new reason for action when they form their *akratic* intention. They are not simply getting the practice wrong; they are also acting for a reason.

This will have important ramifications for our understanding of moral responsibility. When one does something in ignorance (as when one picks up margarine thinking it is butter) one has not acted voluntarily, and so, all things being equal, one cannot be blamed. In contrast, the weak-willed are often blamed for giving into temptation (as when one spends the family's grocery money on whiskey) on the grounds that they have put themselves in the way of temptation (Rorty 1980, p. 270). But what if one is acting for a reason when one is weak-willed? What if the man who should be poisoning the Nazis' water supply leaves his post so as to visit his children for what might be the last time given the dangers of his mission? What if St Peter denies Christ for similar reasons? They each know they should not take that course of action, but they do, and they do it for a reason. And their acting for a reason here may go some considerable way towards excusing their conduct (Walzer 1973: 170; Marcus 1980: 130).

In addressing that point, it will be helpful to reflect on what an order is. Anscombe says that an intention is analogous to an order, but she qualifies this claim, adding that 'an order is not a piece of knowledge', and so the analogy only 'illuminates the periphery of the problem' (1957: 55). Arguably the analogy is more illuminating than she realises. For when an order has legitimacy, when it has been issued by those with the authority to do so, those with the right to rule, it is a practical reason of a distinctive kind. When the person in authority makes a decision, then, as Anscombe herself puts it, 'his decision is what makes it right for you to do what he says' (1962: 44). More formally, the order is a second-order (exclusionary) reason, a reason to $\neg\varphi$ and a reason to exclude from consideration the weight of reasons to φ and to $\neg\varphi$ (Raz 1979: 17, 18; 1986: 40). That is why an order can be less weighty than conflicting reasons: it operates by excluding rather than by out-weighing conflicting reasons. You are to obey, including when someone has blundered in issuing the order. Then, the order is not the most weighty reason. And it will be the conclusive reason only if its weight (the fact that the order is a mistake of some kind) is deemed less important than the fact it is an order. So, an order is not, as a general rule, conclusive.

By considering the kind of reason an order is, we can pose an important question for Anscombe. If an intention is analogous to an order, can an intention be rational when it is not the most weighty reason? Anscombe does come close to posing this very question, for she does insist an intention can be rational even when it is unethical. As she says, her account of practical knowledge can only be grasped if we first understand '"practical reasoning" […] or "practical syllogism," which means the same thing', and which 'was one of Aristotle's best discoveries'

(1957: 57–8). She then warns against the tendency to mis-understand Aristotle's practical syllogism as 'a form of reasoning about what one ought to do'; it is *not*, she insists, for it is not 'an ethical syllogism' (ibid., p. 58). Hence, the conclusion of a chain of practical reasoning can be valid and yet not what one ought to do all things considered. That is why the dying Nazi who wants to spend their final days targeting Jewish children can be said to have a *rational* intention. Of course, one can offer an *ethical* argument to the effect that what the Nazi wants is actually a monstrous evil, but it does not follow that it is irrational to have this Nazi commitment as one's first premise. She is adamant: '*Bonum est multiplex*: good is multiform' (ibid., p. 74).

But if the Nazi does say 'evil be thou my good', does it follow that, for him, his Nazi intention is also the *conclusive* reason? Once again, this is not the question Anscombe posed. But I want to show that a rational intention need not be conclusive, and that this matters. For a start, if an intention is analogous to an order, then an intention need not be the most weighty reason. There can be conflicting reasons for action that are more weighty; and so the intention might be defeated in the sense of out-weighed. It might be argued in response that an intention should always defeat any conflicting reasons, regardless of the latter's weight. But why should that be? We accept that an order can be defeated. Disobedience is, sometimes, justified. The same is true of a rational intention. That is, even when something is considered good withing a certain practice, and so the practice does require a certain action, nonetheless, the intention to act on that reason can be defeated. Not only that, there is one scenario where a rational intention *must* be defeated. This is where rational intentions are in conflict, as when one intends to $\neg\varphi$, and one also intends to φ. Clearly, one can do either, but one cannot do both.

The important question is whether Anscombe accepts there can be such a conflict. What she certainly does accept is that an agent can be caught between incompatible intentions:

> the weak, calculating, uncontrolled man, who disapproves of adultery but is tempted about his neighbour's wife: he gives way to the temptation and sets out to seduce her; then he calculates how best to do this and shows plenty of cleverness in his calculations. (Anscombe 1965: 63)

This man does not have bad aims. He is not suffering from the vice of self-indulgence (*akolasia*). Rather, as he knows he should not do what he is doing, we can say by analogy he accepts the 'order' not to. But he does not act on that 'order'. And although he intends to be faithful *and* intends to be unfaithful, Anscombe does not see this as a conflict of reasons: his giving into temptation is, simply, analogous to 'obeying the order wrong'. The explanation is that, when Anscombe says an intention is analogous to an order it is only rational intentions

she has in mind. In cases of *akrasia*, rational intentions have been sacrificed for non-rational ones.

3. Akrasia, Choice, and Intention

To understand where this argument comes from, we need to consider the ways in which Anscombe draws on Aristotle's account of practical deliberation. Of course, she is also a critic of his. And perhaps her most significant criticism is that he 'apparently cannot admit the case where a person forms a perfectly clear-headed intention of acting contrary to his convictions', meaning an intention to act contrary to 'what he regards as doing well' (1965: 66). And this seems to be a fair criticism. For Aristotle does assume *akratics* are incapable of action, properly understood, and that *akrasia* is an absence of practical knowledge. One of his examples is the person who knows they should eat 'dry food', for to do so would be healthy, but nonetheless in the moment of action does not have, or does not exercise, that knowledge. A passion intervenes and they enter a state of ignorance of a certain kind: 'having knowledge in a sense and yet not having it, as in the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk' (*NE* VII. 3, 1147a4–6; 1147a12). Aristotle is assuming that an action is the conclusion of practical deliberation (*De motu animalium* 701a11–16). As *akratics* do not act as practical deliberation requires, it follows, they do not have this knowledge, and their resulting behaviour is not action, properly understood (*NE* VII. 10, 1152a14).

Anscombe's first objection is that there is a conceptual gap here. Aristotle assumes the *akratic* have cleverness, and this explains how they manage to attain what they desire. However, for Anscombe, when Aristotle describes the *akratic* 'man as calculating cleverly, he says he will get what he "proposes" (*protithetai*); and this verb expresses a volition, or perhaps rather an intention' (Anscombe 1965: 63). So not only is there a gap in his conceptual scheme where intention is needed. Aristotle seems to assume something like it anyway, and he seems to attribute the capacity to form an intention (or its equivalent) to those who are *akratic*. If so, then Aristotle should also concede that when one is *akratic* one has 'a perfectly clear-headed intention', even though this is the intention 'of acting contrary to' what one 'regards as doing well'.

Anscombe's second observation is that the conclusion of practical reasoning is not, as Aristotle maintains, an action. Indeed, the only way to ensure that practical reasoning results in an action is, Anscombe says, to base it on an 'insane' first premise stipulating that all those who want a particular good must perform a particular action, the insanity arising from the fact 'there are usually a hundred different and incompatible things conducive to' any such good (1957: 59). In addition, it would require turning a practical syllogism into a proof-syllogism; and Aristotle himself was well aware that practical and theoretical reasoning are not the same (ibid.). Ultimately, Aristotle's position is based on two contentions that Anscombe rejects: the first is that if one wants a certain good one must

perform one specific action and not others (what she refers to as the 'necessity of the connexions'), and the second is that the first premise of deliberation is what one 'must' do (this is its 'compulsiveness', in her terms) (Anscombe 1965: 69). But if Aristotle is wrong to assume that practical deliberation ends in action, it is then possible the weak-willed have deliberated correctly, but have not behaved as their deliberations demand. The question remains whether what they in fact do is an action, a choice, and a rational intention.

This brings us to Anscombe's third argument. Aristotle represents *akrasia* as a conflict between reason and desire (*epithumia*), and must do so in order to explain how, in this circumstance, reason does not result in action: reason is overwhelmed. *Akrasia* is 'acting in ignorance', Aristotle says, and so it is analogous with 'the instance of a man asleep, mad, or drunk' (*NE* VII. 3, 1147a13). It differs from involuntary acts performed 'by reason of ignorance', for 'the man who is drunk or in a rage', like the *akratic* man, 'is thought to act as a result not of ignorance but of one of the causes mentioned, yet not knowingly but in ignorance' (III. 1, 1110b24–27). *Akratics* act 'as a result […] of one of the causes mentioned', for example, sexual desire, a raging temper, debilitating fear, etc. They know they should not act in this way, but while (figuratively) asleep, due to the influence of desire, they do not have (or use, exercise) this knowledge. Anscombe, however, is not happy with this account. *Akrasia*, she insists, is not simply reason being overwhelmed by desire:

> The uncontrolled man who has further intentions in doing what he does, whose actions are deliberate, although the deliberation is in the interests of a desire which conflicts with what he regards as doing well – to describe his action we need a concept (our "intention") having to do with will or appetition: not just *epithumia*, "desire," for that may be only a feeling. (1965: 66)

Anscombe's point is that this is the more accurate account of a quite common experience, namely the person who forms an intention to act contrary to what they know to be the better course of action.

Therefore, Anscombe is pointing to a serious shortcoming in Aristotle's account: he is, she says, simply in error when maintaining that *akrasia* is not intentional. And yet, as we shall now see, she agrees with him that *akrasia* is not what he calls a choice. That is vitally important as, for her, it follows that *akrasia* is not a rational intention either. Why does Anscombe reach that conclusion?

As we have noted, Aristotle does not have the concept of intention. Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that what he says about choice, or purposive choice (*prohairesis*), 'contains many elements which belong to the treatment of intentionality', that is, 'the teleology of action and its relationship to desires and goals' (Kenny 1979: viii, ix). We have already considered Aristotle's contention that deliberation results in *action*. But this is not his only position on the issue. At other points it is that deliberation results in *choice*:

> The object of choice being one of the things in our power which is desired after deliberation, choice will be deliberate desire of things in our power; for when we have reached a judgement as a result of deliberation, we desire in accordance with our deliberation. (*NE* III. 3, 1113a10–13)

Aristotle provides two lines of argument: deliberation results in action and deliberation results in choice. We know Anscombe rejects the first of these, but her point is that there is a plurality of different ways to act on one's commitment to a good. Hence, she clearly assumes that if one is committed to temperance, one will make temperate choices and act in a temperate manner (although there is a plurality of ways to do so). Concerning Aristotle's claim that practical truth is 'truth in agreement with right desire (*orexia*)' (VI. 2, 1139a30), Anscombe says not only that 'judgement' and 'wanting' must be in harmony: 'that the one must say and the other pursue the same thing if there is to be any "choice" at all, sound or unsound', but also, that practical truth is the work of 'practical judgement', and the latter is judgement 'terminating in action' (Anscombe 1965: 70; see Rödl 2011: 230). That explains how both the virtuous and the vicious are capable of choice, and how only the virtuous choice is sound. The first premise of the virtuous is true, and so they have practical knowledge of morality. The first premise of the vicious is false, and although they can still reason correctly to the conclusion, the choice (and act) will not be morally right. Hence, temperance (*sôphrosunê*) results in a 'sound' choice; and self-indulgence (*akolasia*) in an 'unsound' one. What of *akrasia*? According to Anscombe, the weak-willed make no choice at all. And this entails that theirs is not a rational intention either.

On first encountering it, this is a surprising conclusion, given her insistence that *akrasia* is intentional and also that the conclusion of deliberation is not an action. But others have followed her to much the same end point (see Davidson 1969: 41). And we can explain why she reaches that conclusion. She is assuming that judgement 'must say' and wanting 'must pursue the same thing if there is to be any "choice" at all', and that practical judgement is judgement 'terminating in action'. And this is not so, she insists, in cases of *akrasia*. An *akratic* intention cannot be rational, because this would be the case only '*if* will (*boulêsis*) is simply the type of wanting (*orexis*) that one has in relation to one's final objective *in* what one is deliberately doing at any time'; and while the weak-willed man 'has a *will* to seduce his neighbour's wife, or a will for the pleasure of it, at the time when he is cleverly reckoning how to do it', this is not, she concludes, a rational intention (1965: 61–61). *Akratics* have an intention, and act based on their will: the will to do what they take pleasure in. But 'will', she is saying, *cannot* be reduced to this type of wanting. When an intention is *rational*, 'will' is a type of wanting in relation to something more fundamental than whatever it is one happens to be deliberately doing at any one moment in time.

Anscombe is not saying that weak-willed actions are not intentional (Cf Ford 2011: 76), but that a weak-willed intention is not rational (see Landrum 2008: 504). And we can see why she reaches that conclusion by considering her ambivalence towards Aristotle. While she rejects Aristotle's assumption that practical deliberation has 'some one end', she agrees it 'must at any rate begin' (1957: 34). It is she says 'strange' to assume, as Aristotle does, that 'human beings must always act […] with some one end in view'; and this is 'strange' given that a human 'may or may not have a reason or purpose; and if he has a reason or purpose, it in turn may just be what he happens to want' (ibid.). In fact, she says,

> there appears to be an illicit transition in Aristotle, from "all chains must stop somewhere" to "there is somewhere where all chains must stop."
>
> But now we can see why *some* chains must at any rate begin. As we have seen, this does not mean that an action cannot be called voluntary or intentional unless an agent has an end in view; it means that the concept of voluntary or intentional action would not exist, if the question "Why?", with answers that gave reasons for acting, did not. (ibid.)

Rational intentions are those where the 'agent has an end in view'. Anscombe also insists 'that people generally know what they count as "doing well"' (1965: 70). Of course, we cannot assume that one specific action must result from that knowledge, for there are many ways to pursue any one good, as she says. Nonetheless, practical rationality does begin from 'an end' and does require harmony between judgement and wanting in pursuing that end. The agent's judgement must say and wanting must pursue the same thing. And of course, this harmony of judgement and appetite is precisely what *akratics* lack. What this entails is that, for Anscombe, *akrasia* is a conflict between a rational intention and a non-rational intention. While a rational intention is analogous to an order, the *akratic* intention is not rational, she insists, and that is why *akrasia* is like 'obeying an order wrong'.

The real question is whether Anscombe can maintain that *akrasia* is intentional but that the intention is not rational. Here I think she runs into difficulty because of one element of Aristotle's argument that she retains. She rejects his assumption that the conclusion of deliberation is an action. But she takes from him 'the idea of the thing wanted as the starting-point for such thought' (ibid., p. 69). At certain points, most clearly in *Intention*, she writes as if all intentional action satisfies the Aristotelian account of practical reasoning: hence, 'the interest' in Aristotle's account of the practical syllogism, she says, 'is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions' (1957: 79). But at other points, she makes clear that to be rational an intention must be part of or conducive to the overall good of one's life: i.e., it must begin from 'a first premiss to the effect that only such-and-such is doing well, is happiness or blessedness, "the good for man"' (1965: 69). But going this far

towards a reconciliation with Aristotle has serious consequences. Indeed, at one point, she speaks of *akrasia* as if it were not even intentional:

> the idea of rational wanting should be explained in terms of what is wanted being wanted *qua* conducive to or part of "doing well," or blessedness. If one admits that what one wants is no good, but still one wants it, it is, in Aristotle's conception, merely the object of a passion; when the thing that one so wants is a pleasure, though it is no good (like smoking in some people's view) then one is being led simply by "desire," *epithumia*'. (ibid.)

Clearly, there is some vacillation here between three distinct positions. (a) Anscombe's main argument is that a rational intention is wanting what is conducive to 'doing well', and hence, although there is such a thing as a clear-headed *akratic* intention, it is not rational. (b) In contrast, in the quote above, she is saying that what the *akratic* pursue is not a good and they are being led simply by desire. This would entail that *akrasia* is not even intentional. But this cannot do, as Anscombe clearly sees a real difference between the *akratic* and the merely impetuous, who 'because they have not deliberated are led by their emotion' (*NE* VII. 7, 1150b20–21). The question is whether we can say the *akratic* judge it better to φ *and yet also* judge it better to ¬φ (McDowell 2010: 427). (c) Anscombe's third position is the one outlined earlier in the last paragraph where she states that Aristotle's practical syllogism 'describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions'. This would entail that all intentions are rational. It might be tempting, for our purposes, to defend (c), but it is clearly not satisfactory, for there are some intentions that are not rational: e.g., intentionally destroying what one takes to be good, and doing so for no reason at all. What is really at issue is whether, contra (a), *akratic* intentions are rational. In order to make that argument, I must defend a certain position on moral dilemmas, which I will sketch now.

4. Dilemmatic conflicts

Recall Anscombe's contention that choice (*prohairesis*) is determined by deliberation on how to attain an object of one's will, but also that the latter must be 'wanted *qua* conducive to or part of "doing well"'. Why is this not the case for the *akratic*? It cannot be, according to Anscombe, for then there would be a conflict between incompatible lines of practical deliberation, which itself is a 'kind of pathological misfit between action and deliberation' (Landrum 2008: 504; see Broadie 1991: 305). However, the mere fact that one good is in conflict with another good is not in itself evidence of pathology. There can be many goods in a person's life, and they can be distinct, and at times in conflict, where a decision has to be made between them, and whatever one does one will fail to pursue one or more of them (Nussbaum 1986: 34; Williams 1993: 162). This is

referred to as a moral dilemma, a conflict that leaves a remainder when it is resolved. There is a remainder because although one reason is defeated, it remains a reason for action, a binding reason (Fives 2025: 2–3). And this is true of the weak-willed, *if* they are acting for a reason because they are pursuing a good, although it is in conflict with a more important good (see Chislenko 2020: 608, 613). Then *akrasia* is a conflict of reasons: it is analogous to 'ignoring, disregarding, or disobeying the order', rather than 'obeying an order wrong'.

However, if it is agreed that *akrasia* is a moral dilemma, it has to be admitted to be more than that. What is distinctive about *akrasia* is not just that there are competing reasons for action, but that one defeats the other, and the weak-willed act on the defeated reason. Is it rational to do so? At issue here is the mode of operation of practical reasons. Something is a practical reason, we have said, only with respect to the 'context of normal procedure'. But, in everyday practice, it is not incompatible with that context to act for the less weighty reason. It is not irrational to believe the defeated reason 'serves a concern that the better reason does not, and that can motivate one to follow it' (Raz 2011: 42). This is true of authority. As we know, an authoritative directive operates in a distinctive fashion: it defeats reasons by excluding them. And that means, in everyday practice, we can have reasons to obey an order that are in conflict with more weighty reasons (reasons to disobey). *Akrasia* is not any different. In both cases, one is faced with a moral dilemma, where a reason for action is defeated but remains binding, and so, whatever one does, one does something wrong. If that is the case, we can explain how one can act for a reason even when one acts contrary to the more weighty reason, whether or not the latter is also conducive to or part of 'doing well'.

One thing in its favour is that this line of argument is required by much of what Anscombe says about rationality. For Anscombe, φ is a reason for action insofar as φ is a good. Unlike those who contend that a reason is a fact that explains why one ought to do something, believe something, etc., all things considered (Broome 2004: 35), Anscombe's position is well placed to appreciate that one can have a reason for action even when it is not the conclusive reason. One has a reason because of the good in question. And arguably, Anscombe's approach to reasons is therefore ideally positioned to appreciate that one can have a reason for action even when it is defeated.

And yet Anscombe explicitly rejects the very idea of such a dilemma. She objects to what she sees as the manufacturing of dilemmas by poor philosophy: 'In such cases our moral philosophers seek to impose a dilemma upon us', she warns (1958a: 17). One of these 'cases' is where a philosopher thinks '*in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration' (ibid.). Her point is that the dilemma is not real because only a 'corrupt mind' would present it in this way; whereas if one 'thinks it in the concrete situation' one is 'of

course merely a normally tempted human being' (ibid., p. 17 n. 1). Being tempted to do what one had no rational intention of doing is one thing, and can be covered by her conception of *akrasia*, she is saying; but tragic dilemmas, where one ought to φ and one ought to ¬φ, are another thing altogether: the imaginative product of a corrupt mind.

But is this the case? From what we have seen regarding authority, we know that something can be a reason without being conclusive. And something can be a rational intention, Anscombe herself observes, even when it is not what ethically one ought to do all things considered. In each case, something is a reason even when it is in conflict with a more important reason. Even a defeated reason can be a reason for action. Anscombe also says that something is an intention if one is trying to get it and one wants it. And that this is true of *akratics*. However, it should also follow that the *akratic* intention is rational, because *akratics* are trying to get what they want, and doing so because they think it is good, even though they also think it better not to get it. Anscombe is saying the rational agent can answer the 'Why?' and the 'How?' questions in giving reasons for their actions. But *akratics* can answer those questions too. And we can account for the rationality of their intentions by making the following revision to Anscombe's argument.

First, we need to distinguish between two kinds of practical reason: a conclusive reason and a defeated but binding reason. *Akratics* are pursuing a good (the conclusive reason), while at the same time striving for the good they are tempted by (a defeated reason). That is why *akrasia* involves both a moral dilemma and also conflicting rational intentions. And this cannot be dismissed as a 'kind of pathological misfit' between action and deliberation. There is no pathology if there are conflicting intentions, each one is rational, and one is caught in a dilemma. Second, intentions and orders have the same mode of operation: they defeat conflicting reasons by excluding rather than by out-weighing. When the weak-willed intend to pursue an adulterous affair, they are trying to get the good involved, and so it is rational to do so, even when there are conflicting reasons that are more weighty. The *akratic* intention is rational in two senses, therefore: there is some good that gives a reason for action; and as an intention, it is an exclusionary reason. At the same time, as a case of *akrasia*, there is also a conflicting intention that has greater importance, and *akratics* do not act on that intention. Therein lies the rational costs that comes with the *akratic* intention. But this does not change the fact that the *akratic* intention is rational.

5. Conclusions

Reflecting on *akrasia* tells us a great deal about practical reason more generally. If *akratic* intentions are rational, then the conclusion of practical deliberation is not an action, and a rational intention need not be either a means to or a part of what one 'regards as doing well'. Some reasons operate by excluding rather than

out-weighing, and some remain binding as reasons even when defeated. Within the 'context of normal procedure' for practical reasoning, there are occasions where one acts rationally even while failing to act on the more important reason. This also shows that in some cases when one fails to do what one ought to do one can offer the excuse that one was forced to do some wrong no matter what one did. Indeed, the more we are aware that *akrasia* is rational, the greater the role excuses can play in everyday practice. Yes, St Peter failed to avow Christ. But if he gave way to temptation for a reason, if he was right to fear that his loyalty to Christ would pose a serious threat to other valued goods in his life, then he was caught on the horns of a genuine dilemma. And that dilemma can excuse him at least in part for the wrong he did.

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A Counterfactual View of Intention

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Abstract: This paper proposes a method to infer intention from observation and specific theoretical assumptions. This approach is grounded in counterfactual reasoning, similar to that underlying contemporary causal research. Causation is not directly observable, but empirical evidence—experimental or sometimes purely observational data—can support causal hypotheses. We propose extending this framework to formally represent interventions upon causal systems by identifying their intended effects. To achieve this, we introduce the concepts of final model and *want*-operator.

Key Words: teleological inference; causal inference; interventions; intended effects, final models.

> The basic logic of action: agents *want* certain environmental states to obtain (have goals); agents *see* the world and so can access the situation with respect to the desired goal state; and agents *do* things when they perceive that the environment is not in the desired goal state. This kind of understanding of intentional action supports a basic form of practical reasoning that enables individuals to understand and predict what others are doing and will do.
>
> M. Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication*

1. Introduction

Contemporary analytic philosophy's renewed interest in action theory begins, in large measure, with G.E.M. Anscombe's *Intention* (1957). Anscombe investigated how we talk about and understand agents' reasons, showing that attributing goals to behaviour requires a philosophical grammar that embeds what we observe within the practices giving it sense. Reviving the Aristotelian perspective, she distinguished two kinds of *why*-questions: final questions that ask for the end an agent has in view, and causal questions that ask for the efficient mechanism that brought an event about[1]. To explain an action, therefore, we must

[1] Aristotle stated that *aitíai*, that is, answers to the question *why?*, are plural in nature and notably include, alongside efficient causality, "final causes," pointing to reasons and ends (*Physics*, II, 3 and *Metaphysics*, V, 2). Conversely, many view the removal of final considerations as the key achievement of modern science, reflected, for example, in Pearl's standpoint that there is only one, causal way to ask *why*-questions in science (Pearl and Mackenzie 2018). Jacques Monod expressed the strengths and limitations of such a stance: "The cornerstone of the scientific method is the postulate that nature is objective. In other words, the *systematic* denial that 'true' knowledge can be got at by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes–that is to say, of 'purpose.' [...] But science as we understand it today could not have been developed upon those foundations alone. It

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describe it under an aspect that links a bodily movement to its intentional object—an aspect absent from a purely physical description[2]. This Anscombean perspective—criticised over the years, most famously by Donald Davidson[3]—forms our point of departure; the present paper shows how it can be rendered in counterfactual, quantifiable terms.

Despite substantial progress in causal modelling, teleological inference has yet to be formalized quantitatively. Formal decision theories—including causal decision theory, which is particularly relevant here (Hitchcock 1996; Dawid 2021; see Weirich 2024)—do not aim at answering teleological questions such as "Why did somebody do that?" Instead, they seek to define what the best choice would be given some causal constraints, presupposing actions conform to utility maximisation, and thus explaining them through a top-down rationalising approach. The same limitation characterizes efforts to define intention within formal causal research (Halpern and Kleiman-Weiner 2018)[4]. Anscombe's perspective adopts a fundamentally different, bottom-up approach, grounding teleological explanations in *observed* rather than idealized behavior. She aims to understand why people do what they do, whatever they are doing, rather than imposing normative ideals on them. Indeed, it is only after understanding the real reasons behind actions that one can evaluate whether agents have made the most rational choices. The main thesis advanced by Anscombe (1957) is that intention cannot be reduced to foreseeable, rational, moral, or optimal effects. Instead, identifying intention requires empirical criteria to discover it from mere behaviour.

Our argument unfolds as follows. Section 2 highlights parallels between intention and causation and motivates adopting the counterfactual approach central to causal inference. Section 3 explains why teleological questions resist reduction to purely causal terms. Section 4 introduces the notion of interventions on causal systems and specifies conditions under which teleological inference becomes possible. Section 5 presents our formal framework, centering on the notions of final model and *want*-operator. Section 6 contrasts causal

required the unbending stricture implicit in the postulate of objectivity–ironclad, pure, forever undemonstrable. For it is obviously impossible to imagine an experiment which could prove the *nonexistence* anywhere in nature of a purpose, of a pursued end. [...] Objectivity nevertheless obliges us to recognize the teleonomic character of living organisms, to admit that in their structure and performance they act projectively–realize and pursue a purpose. Here therefore, at least in appearance, lies a profound epistemological contradiction." (1972: 21-22)

[2] This is analogous in many ways to the *intentional stance* proposed later by Daniel Dennett (1989).

[3] According to Davidson (1963), it is indeed true that intentional descriptions of the world are required to understand action, but this does not imply, *contra* Anscombe, that intentions are not mental causes.

[4] "We assume that *ag* [the agent] is an expected utility maximizer with beliefs expressed as probabilities over causal models and preferences expressed as a utility function over outcomes" (Halpern and Kleiman-Weiner 2018: § 1) and that "among all possible values of *O* [outcome variable] that *ag* [the agent] considers possible, *o* [the chosen outcome value] gives the highest expected utility" (§ 4).

counterfactuals with the final counterfactuals appropriate for teleological explanation. Section 7 discusses some limitations.

2. Intention and Causation

Controversies about action and intention reach into central debates on free will, determinism, and rationality (De Caro 2004). A familiar dilemma runs as follows: either intentions are identified with causes, in which case human action looks mechanistic, or action is detached entirely from the natural order and rendered mysterious. Anscombe steers a third path. For her, intentions belong to the *form of description* we apply when making sense of observable behaviour directed toward ends:

> In fact the term 'intentional' has reference to a *form* of description of events. What is essential to this form is displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question 'Why?'. Events are typically described in this form when 'in order to' […] is attached to their descriptions. (Anscombe 1957, § 46)

On this view, phenomena such as *aiming*, *trying*, or *failing* have no place in a purely causal vocabulary. A boulder tumbling down a slope does not "fail" to hit a tree; it merely misses it.

Causation likewise depends on a conceptual overlay. Modern causal inference employs its own technical grammar—*confounders*, *colliders*, *mediators*—that is invisible to ordinary statistics (Pearl 2009). *Both* intention and causation are, therefore, unobservable constructs introduced to connect the same observable regularities, and there is no principled reason they cannot cooperate within a single predictive framework.

The idea that causal relations among observable events (or facts[5]) are not observable[6] originated from David Hume (*A Treatise on Human Nature*, 1739). Even when we watch events unfold in real time, we still need to connect them through reasoning, because actual succession (*post hoc*) does not imply causal consequence (*propter hoc*). Not even regular succession can give a solid foundation to causal explanation (see Laudisia 2010). There is something more to

[5] There is a terminological conflict between analytical philosophy and causal research, as the term "event" in the latter corresponds more or less to what the first calls "fact". Events represent assignments of values to variables, which are *descriptions* of the world; this is why their attribution can be said to be a fact, possibly expressed by a true descriptive statement (see Varzi 2001, § 3.7). For convenience, we prefer the term "event," but we use the term "factual" in contrast to "counterfactual".

[6] That causality is part of the content of our conscious experience is a hypothesis which can be found in Anscombe (1971) and central to the work of John Searle on intentionality (1983). Within psychological research, Albert Michotte (1963) and Fritz Heider (1958) are at the origin of the empirical study of the phenomenology of causality and agency. In this paper, however, we do not assume the directly perceivable nature of causation and intention, working instead from a Humean basis.

succession and regularity at play for producing causal explanations of phenomena.

Causal relations are today often thought of and described in terms of *counterfactuals*, following David Lewis (1973). To say that some event A is a cause of some event B means that, if event A had *not* occurred, neither would event B. One should therefore not concentrate exclusively on facts, because causal questions do not concern facts alone, that is, the ways in which we can describe the actual world. One cannot *see* causation, simply because causal links do not exist in the actual world alone. Contemporary causal research adopts a counterfactual approach to causation and recognises that factual data are never enough to ask and answer causal questions, such as "Why is the water in the pot boiling?," and that some *a priori* assumptions are always needed. Answering that the water is (factually) boiling because the stove under it is on implies (counterfactually) that it would *not* boil if the stove were off. Judea Pearl (2009) provides an effective metaphor for causation: effects *"listen to"* their causes, meaning that causes play a role in the way in which effects occur.

In this paper we suggest that teleological questions and answers are equally counterfactual. In fact, asking "Why is he turning on the stove?" means that we are questioning what would happen if the agent *did not want* a specific effect to happen—namely, for the water to boil. We believe that "there is nothing intrinsically mysterious or unempirical about teleological explanations, and that they can be tested just as well as any other kind." (Woodfield 1976: 73) Our strategy for implementing Anscombe's practical inference is as follows: we claim that one answers a teleological question by identifying the *intended effects* of an action—the set of events motivating the intervention of the agent independently of other effects brought about simultaneously (such as gas consumption or carbon dioxide production due to turning on a stove).

The main presupposition behind teleological inference is the reality of social practices, that is, the idea that one can understand another's action only by reasoning about what one would do in the same situation or, in other words, that *general models* for action explain actual behavior. To explain why you, at a certain moment, decide to turn on the stove, one must rely on general knowledge about why stoves are used. This is also how causal inference works: something meaningful can be said about a specific stove causing a particular pot of water to boil only through a general model of how stoves affect water[7]. What matters for the understanding of action is a manifest regularity giving a sense to it, and not that in some peculiar situations practical knowledge does not work[8].

[7] Regarding actual causation, and the relationship between counterfactual statements about individual events and general causal models, see Pearl's (2009) distinction between "rung two" and "rung three" on his "ladder of causation".

[8] In those extreme situations, we are simply unable to give meaning to the agent's behavior, and thus any model becomes ineffective. Davidson's examples throughout his career, intended to demonstrate that action is causation that produces effects "in the right way," lose their force if we consider means-ends relations more generally. This is the main criticism Searle directs against

Agents rely upon causal descriptions for directing their bodily movements towards some ends. Goals have to be among the expected effects of behavior (intention is not simply a vague desire, Anscombe argued), otherwise agents would not do what they do. Anyway, practical knowledge does not force a person to want all the effects of an action, and not even all the effects that are known to the agent. Obtaining something and aiming at it are two different things.

3. People Do not Smoke in Order to Get Sick

Imagine that smoking cigarettes produces two effects: a specific and observable augmentation of the presence of a certain molecule associated with pleasure in the brain, and a specific and observable augmentation of lung damage. The two effects occur *jointly* as a consequence of smoking. Based on this assumption, we can formulate two forward-looking counterfactual inferences, going from cause to effect: if someone were to quit smoking (counterfactual), that person would feel no more pleasure; if someone were to quit smoking (counterfactual), that person would no longer receive damage to their lungs. These two inferences are linked together by our causal assumptions, and in generic conditions one works if and only if the other also works[9].

Now, a teleological hypothesis built upon the causal relations we just described could add the further assumption that people smoke in order to obtain pleasure but *not* lung damage. That is, if we want to understand why people smoke, the two effects that co-occur causally must be *dissociated*: even if pleasure and lung damage happen together, we want to know which of them is the intended effect and which is the unintended price that is paid. The means-ends relationship we are assuming, linking the act of smoking to pleasure but not to lung damage, grounds two retroductive counterfactual inferences, going from effect to cause: if cigarettes did not give someone pleasure anymore (counterfactual), that person would quit smoking; conversely, if cigarettes no longer produced lung damage (counterfactual), the same person would *not* quit smoking.

This example shows a crucial trait of teleological inference: *only a subset of the events caused by an action are intended*. It is therefore not possible to give causal answers to teleological questions. Receiving lung damage is by no means

Davidson: "[all] examples I have seen of deviant causation, exhibit certain common features: either they involve some failure of the Intentional content to be the causal aspect, or they involve some *lack of plannable regularity* in the causal relations of the Intentional state." (1983: 137) From a statistical perspective, models trained on extreme outliers are often worse for prediction than models trained on regular data, because they are less prone to overfitting. Thus, if one aims to predict future behavior, it is typically better to disregard deviant past behaviors: "The primary paradox of prediction is *overfitting*. Future data will not be exactly like past data, and so any model that is unaware of this fact tends to make worse predictions than it could." (McElreath 2020:13)

[9] Two retroductive factual inferences, going from the effect to the cause, can also be drawn given the same causal assumptions: if there is (factually) no trace of the pleasure-related molecule in someone's brain, then the person does not smoke; similarly, if there is (factually) no trace of that specific damage in someone's lungs, then the person does not smoke.

intended by those who smoke, even if we can prove causally that it will occur, and that smokers are aware of this outcome. Andrew Woodfield writes about two basic assumptions for teleological inference:

> The first assumption is that there is a difference between saying that a movement is teleologically directed to a certain end and saying that the movement just happens *de facto* to go toward that end. The second is that one way, indeed the standard way, of offering a teleological explanation of why an event occurred is to say that it occurred *in order that* a second event should occur, or *in order to* produce a certain result. (1976: 15-16)

Intended effects are what turn behavior into action. Using Pearl's metaphor, we want to say that within teleological reasoning, causes seem to "listen to" some of their effects. The fundamental difference we find between causal and teleological inference is that an effect "listens" to *all* its causes, while a cause seems to "listen" only to *some* of its effects. In fact, it is easy to grasp that no one can ever conceive of all the effects of their action, as the causal chains initiated by it go on indefinitely into the future. Gavrilo Princip could not have known that World War I would end with the Treaty of Versailles. And if no one can conceive of all the effects of their action, even less so can anyone intend to bring about all of these effects. These considerations have two important consequences: proving that teleological inference cannot be reduced to causal inference, and that intention is not causation.

First, the influence studied by causal research can only go forward, from causes to effects, following the arrow of time; therefore, effects cannot influence their causes. This consideration is at the very core of causal research, and it found its most influential contemporary expression in the work of Hans Reichenbach (1956). Causation cannot move backwards (see Faye 2024), and so the kind of inference needed for intention appears impossible from a causal perspective.

Second, causes bring about indifferently all their effects, and not just a subset of them. If intention were a cause, how could it select only some of its effects? It is not possible to model such "anomalous" causes within the theoretical framework of standard causal research. Physics does not know about intended and unintended effects, so intentions "go beyond physics," to use Anscombe's expression (1957, § 47). In fact, agents do not choose which effects occur—this is a matter of causation—and yet they act to obtain only some of the effects of their bodily movements.

This last sentence gives us the key to solving the dilemma and connecting causal and teleological inference. While causal relations relate variables *within* a causal system, means-ends relations operate *among* causal systems. This is why teleological counterfactuals are of a higher order compared to causal ones, as we will see later (§ 6). Someone turns on a stove only if they expect that some change in the world will causally follow. To realize teleological inference, it is therefore crucial to distinguish the *fact* that the stove is on, with all its causal consequences, from the *act* of turning on the stove, with its intended and unintended effects.

4. No Intervention without Intention

Following the arguments of Georg von Wright (1971), action can be conceived as an *intervention* into a causal system. Causes and effects happen within causal structures, while actions "break," for an instant, a part of these structures, allowing humans to make use of them. The stove in the kitchen stays off indefinitely, until someone intervenes to switch it on. Interventions are extremely important in scientific research because they are the only way to study causal systems. *No causation without manipulation* is a well-known foundational principle in causal research, attributed today to Paul Holland and Don Rubin, stating that (at least theoretical) interventions into a system are needed in order to understand how the system itself behaves when left alone. This idea was effectively expressed by von Wright:

> I now propose the following way of distinguishing between cause and effect by means of the notion of action: p is a cause relative to q, and q an effect relative to p, if and only if by doing p we could bring about q or by suppressing p we could remove q or prevent it from happening. (von Wright 1971: 70)

This implies that (intentional) action is not the same as (caused) behaviour. An event upon which an agent intervened, by definition, would not have happened as such if the causal system was left alone:

> When I observe, I *let* things happen. When I act, I *make* them happen. It is a contradiction in terms both to let and to make the same thing happen on the same occasion. (von Wright 1971: 130)

We will see later on, in § 5, how Pearl (2009) builds his formal apparatus for studying causation on the opposition between *seeing* and *doing*, strictly analogous to that proposed by von Wright in the passage above[10]. What interests us here is not that action is needed to study causation, but rather that causation is needed to study action. Von Wright explains how manipulative and counterfactual intuitions about action are connected:

> What is it to act? [...] To act is to interfere with the course of the world, thereby making true something which would not otherwise (i.e. had it not been for this interference) come to be true of the world at that stage of its history. To say that an action has taken place, for example that a man has been murdered, is to say, explicitly, that, thanks to an agent, something has come true of the world, viz. that a man is now dead, and to contrast this, implicitly, with something which would otherwise have been the case, viz. that this man is

[10] These oppositions undoubtedly have a wittgensteinian flavor. "And the problem arises: what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm rises from the fact that I raise my arm?" (Wittgenstein 1953: § 621) "Is there any difference between letting one's arm drop and lowering one's arm at the speed at which it would fall?" (Anscombe 1957: § 30) See Hornsby (1980).

> still alive. The object of this implicit reference I shall call the counterfactual element involved in action. (1972: 39)

Today, thanks to the work of Spirtes, Glymour, and Scheines (1993) and Pearl (2009) among others, these considerations have made their way into mathematical modeling. However, the single most important aspect of action has been almost completely ignored by scientists working on causal systems and models: if agents *did not want* to produce certain intended effects, interventions would not occur. Interventions do not happen spontaneously, but instead must meet certain conditions, which are the object of teleological inquiry[11]. Somehow emphatically, we could call this idea the "principle of Anscombe," as it states that there is *no action without intention*. When describing the connection between action and intention, Anscombe formulates what it means to answer a teleological question:

> All that it is necessary to understand is that to say, in one form or another: "But Q won't happen, even if you do P", or "but it will happen whether you do P or not" is, in some way, to contradict the intention. (Anscombe 1957, § 22)

One does something if and only if it serves as a means to obtain something else that the person aimed at, meaning that the conditions of an intervention are strictly related to the conditions for its intention. Intention manifests empirically in social practices and can be studied by looking at the different situations in which some intervention is performed or not performed. Thus, we need to build mathematical models capable of "contradicting intentions," as Anscombe wrote—that is, interpreting evidence for or against teleological hypotheses.

Do people turn on the heating systems in their houses during summer? No, even though heaters remain perfectly functional all year long and could be turned on anytime. The fact that they are turned on only when the temperature is cold gives us the information we need to understand why agents do so. That rooms are always warm—both in summer and in winter—is problematic to explain from a purely causal perspective.[12]

To make teleological inference empirical, one needs to clearly state the hypotheses to be tested, one at a time. "Did that person want to kill me by hitting me with his car?" is a teleological hypothesis that can, in principle, find an empirical answer by estimating its probability. At first sight, one might think that the correct question to ask about intention is an open one ("Why did that person hit me with his car?"), but this is wrong. One of the main methodological strengths of causal research is the understanding that one cannot state generically which

[11] Even when scientists assign random values to variables, their interventions aim to uncover causal relations.

[12] In fact, by keeping the room temperature constant, people "control for a collider" (that is, a common effect) and thereby generate a spurious dependency between the season and the status of the heaters—two variables that should evidently be independent of each other. See Compagno and Zennaro (in preparation).

events are the causes of some outcome; instead, one can state particularly whether or not a specific event causes another—that is, one can only assess the validity of one hypothesis at a time. Thus, "Why do people die?" can only find an instrumental answer in "Do car collisions kill people?" We argue that the same is true for teleological questions.

"Why does that happen?" and "Why do I make that happen?" are not the same kind of question, as Anscombe has shown, and answering the first is not enough to answer the second. Of course, by collecting evidence about car collisions and deaths of pedestrians, we can learn something about why people die (causally), but by collecting the exact same evidence, we can also learn something about how people are murdered (intentionally). *The difference lies simply in the assumptions through which evidence is interpreted.* From a causal perspective, one would be looking for the impact of A (the *fact* of hitting someone with a car) on B (death), while from a teleological perspective one would look for the impact of B (death) on A, or more correctly on *do*(A), as Pearl would write, that is, the *act* of hitting someone with a car.

5. A Grammar of Intervention

To sum up, we propose to think of intention and causation as complementary concepts, which exist only in relation to each other. Without causal relations grounding means-ends relations, it would be impossible to act, because we would not know how bodily movements are connected to the effects agents wish to achieve through them. In formal terms, an intervention must be defined over a causal model. This means that a certain understanding of the world as it would evolve without interventions is needed to grasp what happens during interventions and why interventions are performed. Answering a teleological question means describing what is observed by assuming it results from an intervention, and then stating what would have happened if the agent did not want to obtain a certain observed effect, and so did not perform any intervention. *Intended effects are those events that causes "listen to" because they trigger interventions on them*. Let us now attempt a formalization of this idea.

Extremely succinctly, a causal model can be constructed formally from a set of variables and their oriented relations[13]. Each value of a variable represents an event, which can be observable or not, and their relationships represent causal relations, which are never observable and constitute the main assumptions of the model. A causal model is a hypothesis about how its variables are causally related. The toy model Fireplace may be constituted by the variables Oxygen, Wood, Fire, Heat and Light. Let us imagine them as binary variables, taking only the values "yes" and "no" for simplification (for example, Fire = yes means we observe fire in the fireplace). It could connect them as shown in Figure 1.

[13] For a conceptual and historical introduction to causal modeling as systematized by Pearl, see Pearl and Mackenzie 2018; for a mathematical introduction, see Pearl, Glymour, and Jewell 2016; for a philosophical discussion see Hitchcock 2024.

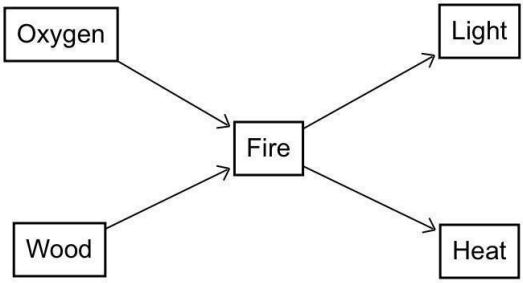

Figure 1: A very simple causal model

The figure can be read as follows: Oxygen and Wood are both causes of Fire, in the sense that, in their absence, there is no Fire, and in their presence, there is Fire; Heat and Light are both effects of Fire, in the sense that, in the absence of Fire, there is neither Light nor Heat, and in its presence, there are both Light and Heat. A causal model is therefore an effective way to unite several counterfactual statements and to study their interactions.

By observation alone, one can gather plenty of data from many actual fireplaces to empirically test this general Fireplace model. Pearl (2009) uses the verb *to see* to express how the values of some variables, their co-occurrence and their conditional probability can be gathered by empirical observation. For example, I can observe that every time I *see*(Fire = yes), I also *see*(Light = yes) and *see*(Heat = yes). I can therefore easily find a positive correlation between Fire and Light, as well as between Light and Heat, since they always occur together. The Fireplace model above explains these factual correlations counterfactually: Fire correlates with Light because it is its cause, while the correlation between Light and Heat is spurious due to their common cause (Fire). This explanation is counterfactual, as it goes beyond what can be observed; therefore, to test the model, one needs to intervene.

Pearl uses the verb *to do* to express the fact of intervening in a causal model, assigning arbitrary values to variables and "breaking" all the incoming causal relations linking them to other variables. If I *do*(Fire = yes), this means evaluating what happens to the effects of Fire when its causes are removed from consideration. Such thought experiments can often correspond to real experiments or can sometimes be simulated simply by collecting observational data under relevant conditions. For instance, suppose I could *do*(Light = yes) without lighting a fire; in this scenario, I would not *see*(Heat = yes), because Heat comes from Fire. Hence, I could conclude that the model correctly expresses the spurious correlation between Light and Heat. This is an extremely schematic example of how counterfactual models can be empirically tested and how interventions function in the discovery of causal systems.

To see and *to do* are very different operators: *to see* something is to attribute a value to a variable by looking at the world (world-to-model direction of fit,

Searle 1983; Anscombe 1975: § 2), while *to do* something is to attribute a value to a variable by changing the world (model-to-world direction of fit). Either we allow the world to assign values to all its variables, seeing what nature does, or we arbitrarily assign some values, doing something beyond nature. The verbs *to see* and *to do* thus express the idea that actions are not events and cannot be reduced to them.[14]

In addition to Pearl's two verbs, we may introduce here the new verb *to want* in order to highlight in a causal model those effects of an intervention which are intended by the agent. We define a *final model* as a causal model in which one variable is tagged with *do* and at least one of its effects is tagged with *want*[15]. The model represents the assumptions that what we observe in the world is the result of an intervention performed on the variable tagged with *do* in order to obtain the event tagged with *want*. For example, I may make the hypothesis that fireplaces are used only for heat, not for light[16]. This means that agents *do*(Fire = yes) when they *want*(Heat = yes). Figure 2 shows the final model representing this hypothesis.

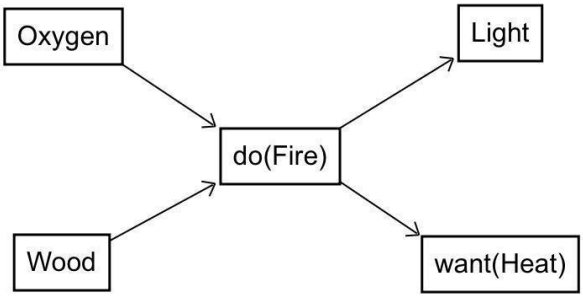

Figure 2: A very simple final model

This model is not a causal one, as no variable in a causal model is ever tagged with *do*. Variables are events, and causal researchers focus on their causal

[14] Causal models require some more assumptions. The most important of these is known as Reichenbach's principle: *no correlation without causation*, which has been expressed mathematically in several ways (notably by the so-called Markov condition). See Hitchcock (2024); Zhang and Spirtes (2011).

[15] Other ways of formalising the relationship between *want* and *do* are possible. Compagno and Zennaro (in preparation) use so-called twin models (Balke and Pearl 1994) to represent teleological models.

[16] There is no reason to assume that only one effect can be intended. This contradicts Davidson's idea (1963) that agents must have exactly one primary reason for action, causally effective in explaining their behavior—otherwise multiple reasons would overdetermine it. Davidson's requirement stems from the assumption that intentions are causes. In our view, *intention is distributed among effects*, much as causation is distributed among causes. However, causation must be distributed across all causes, whereas intention applies only to some effects.

relations. But from a teleological perspective, we study actions, what agents *do*, and specifically what they *want* to obtain. Hence, we must qualify some causally connected events as means and ends: it is not enough to say that fire is a cause of heat; one needs to state that fire is used as a means to obtain heat. This latter relationship cannot be captured purely causally. Final models are a form of description interpreting observable events as entering into intentional relations, and do not introduce intention as a further unobservable variable (*res*) to be found in the head of agents or elsewhere. Under appropriate assumptions, we infer intentions just as we infer causes— from experiments or from observation.

How do we test the hypothesis that people light fires in their homes in order to produce heat? Ideally, we need data from an experiment: we must interfere with the effects of Fire we assume to be intended and then observe what happens. Concretely, we may observe people in front of their unlit fireplaces during summer, when we already *see*(Heat = yes). Do they *do*(Fire = yes)? If they do, our toy model is wrong. Our model claims people light fires because they *want*(Heat = yes). Thus, if they already have the desired outcome (Heat), they should not light a fire and instead let nature run its course.

Testing for the intended effect tagged with want is not enough. We need to verify that the effects we assume as unintentional are really so, as incorrectly identifying them could undermine our teleological explanation. For example, we may believe people light fires for Heat, but perhaps another effect (Light), co-occurring with Heat, is actually what motivates them[17]. To test our toy model, we may observe if people use fireplaces under various light conditions. When we *see*(Light = yes), do agents *do*(Fire = yes)? What about when we *see*(Light = no)? Our model predicts illumination is not an intended effect of lighting fires; thus, we expect no significant difference in lighting practices based solely on variations in ambient light, independent of room temperature.

We claim here that this procedure is enough to prove the counterfactual statement "If someone does not want to obtain heat, they do not light a fire," corresponding to the idea that heat is amongst the reasons for lighting a fire (while light is not).

6. Counterfactuals for Causes and for Intentions

We have argued that teleological inference should be expressed with a counterfactual of this kind: "If the agent did not want to obtain B, they would not have done A."[18] Finding a way to validate this statement corresponds to providing a teleological explanation—that is, to connect observable behavior to its intended observable effects, thus turning behavior into action. Above, we have given a formal definition of the two verbs *to do* and *to want*, within the conceptual

[17] Light would therefore be a confounding factor, more precisely a *confounding effect*, as it would explain why our teleological inference fails.

[18] Or, as Halpern and Kleiman-Weiner write: "an agent who performs action a intends outcome φ if he would not have done a if a had no impact on whether φ occurred" (2018: 1).

framework of causal research, and argued that they cannot be eliminated from statements employing them, nor reduced to causal relations alone.

Causation runs from A to B, while intention goes from *want*(B) to *do*(A), that is, backwards relative to causation. Eating well causes good health, and this statement cannot be read causally in reverse: being in good health does not cause one to eat well. Generally, if causation runs from A to B, then B cannot play any role in the causal assignment of values to A. This is the basic principle behind causal research. However, causal statements can correctly be interpreted backwards when adopting a teleological perspective: it is the (wanting of the) effect that produces the (doing of the) cause. Being in good health may very well be the goal of eating well.

If we want causation only to go forward, then we *need* to model intention as something distinct from causation. It is not sufficient to add more variables to a causal model, representing intentions as causes. In fact, these supposed mental causes are inherently contradictory: they must be defined by "listening" to their effects, but their effects cannot play any role in attributing values back to them, as this would produce a causal loop—a form of backward causation (see Compagno and Zennaro, in preparation).

The *want*-operator we introduce in this paper concerns instead a causal model in its entirety; it does not add any special event representing intention, nor invert causal relations, but relates normal, potentially observable events in a special way. This is why final models are a way of implementing Anscombe's perspective on action. There is a "red thread" connecting the events tagged with a *do* and with a *want* in a final model, and this connection is surely not causal, given that its (measurable) influence runs backwards from the effect to the cause. This "red thread" is as real as causation itself, and hypotheses about it can be tested empirically, without either needing to ask the agents what they believe they are doing or calculating the most rational or moral action at any given time.

Let us finally compare counterfactuals describing causes with counterfactuals describing intentions. A causal counterfactual could state:

> If I did not eat well, I would not be in good health.

This counterfactual effectively expresses everything implied by the idea that eating well is a cause of good health. An intentional counterfactual, built upon the causal one, would state:

> If I did not want to be in good health, I would not eat well.

This counterfactual effectively expresses everything there is behind the idea that being in good health is an aim (intended effect) of eating well. Both counterfactuals go, by definition, beyond anything that could be observed as a fact in the actual world. Many more causal and teleological hypotheses could be

made to explain what we see, and any such hypothesis can be expressed counterfactually. Let us formulate the two counterfactuals above in general terms:

1*) If not A then not B
2*) If not *want*(B) then not *do*(A)

These two general statements correspond respectively to saying that A is a cause of B, and that B is an intended effect of A. Note that A and B are *the same variable* in both statements; intention is not introduced as a further event distinct from A and B. This shows that, as Anscombe proposed, intention emerges as a form of description complementary to the causal one. Both are relationships among events, expressed by counterfactuals: causation "pushes" events, while intention "pulls" (interventions on) them. There is no reason why these two perspectives should be mutually exclusive[19].

Whenever correlations in data are interpreted with respect to 1* or 2*, they acquire meaning. Suppose I see that I am in good health and that I eat well. It is not by chance that I am in good health; its cause is that I eat well. Similarly, it is not by chance that I eat well; the reason is that I want to be in good health. We have argued here that in order to use empirical evidence for or against the teleological counterfactual 2*, one must rely on the truth of the causal counterfactual 1*. In fact, if 1* did not hold, intention would leave no trace in the actual world (for example, if I performed magical rites in order to stay healthy, my intention would not be observable, as my action would have no real-world effect).

7. Conclusion

The aim of final models is to make use of empirical evidence and causal assumptions to validate further teleological assumptions. These latter assumptions must be sought through intentional descriptions (Anscombe 1957)—that is, by adopting an intentional stance (Dennett 1989). When this stance is adopted, hypotheses about intentions can be empirically tested. If one instead decides to remain within an exclusively causal stance, intentions cannot be discovered. However, we should not forget that adopting a causal stance itself involves a choice, as causes also cannot be directly observed, and their detection relies on assumptions that are not more empirically grounded than those required for detecting intentions. Moreover, the study of causal relations needs interventions. The only truly empirical perspective on the world is a model-free, Humean one, which allows neither for causation nor intention.

Final models, as defined here, permit us to discover the intended effects of actions. However, they cannot establish on their own whether some event constitutes an action. Researchers must independently decide that an event A

[19] Unless the observed system could be treated as entirely closed from a causal perspective using a finite set of variables.

should be considered an action *do*(A). Therefore, teleological explanations can be constructed even in situations lacking intention in the biological sense defined by Searle (1983)—as a phenomenon existing only in certain species (notably humans). Final models apply whenever one decides to adopt an intentional stance. This does not imply that such a stance must be universally applied; rather, it should be reserved for situations that cannot be explained more simply, as Dennett (1989) argues. It is true that final models, in themselves, could lead to producing what von Wright (1971) called quasi-causal explanations of phenomena—causal systems described in teleological terms, such as explaining room temperature as the intended effect of a thermostat. Nevertheless, adding final models to the research toolkit reduces the risk of producing quasi-teleological interpretations of human action: causal explanations that claim to capture intention but inevitably fail, for the reasons outlined above.

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ANSCOMBE ON DIGNITY: A PRACTICAL TURN

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Abstract: Anscombe's article «The Dignity of the Human Being» raises a question typical of science fiction: what would happen if the stage of gestation in the womb were to disappear? According to her, the fact that procreation is no longer organically anchored would mean that the question « to whom does this human belong?» could then be asked in a meaningful way. This article intends to show that the treatment of the hypothesis is exemplary of Anscombe's reinterpretation of the Wittgensteinian principle that «essence is expressed in grammar». By shifting the question of dignity onto the terrain of grammar, Anscombe outlines what might be called a «practical turn» for dignity. *Dignity* is understood not by exhibiting theoretical presuppositions, but by knowing that there is an impossible question about the human, a question we should never be able to ask of each other.

Keywords: ethics; E. Anscombe; essence; grammar; dignity; practices.

1. Introduction

The Dignity of the Human Being (Anscombe 2005b: 67-75) raises, *comme en passant*, a question typical of science fiction: what would happen if the stage of gestation in the womb were to disappear? The hypothesis is just three lines long, and yet the point is decisive. The fact that procreation is no longer organically anchored will make it necessary to introduce new legislation to establish legal parents as distinct from the technician in charge of ensuring that the artificial uterus functions properly. In other words, gestation outside the mother's womb would mean that the question «to whom does this human belong?» could be asked in a meaningful way, and only legislation could provide an answer. Anscombe makes no secret of her astonishment: «People have hardly considered what will be the status of such babies» (Anscombe 2005b: 71). They have not anticipated the fact that the human being would *de facto* become an alienable asset whose ownership could be disputed. Although gestation outside the womb could be seen as an apparently insignificant change in the process of human procreation, Anscombe points to an unnoticed yet crucial consequence: this modification would have the effect of legitimising a senseless question. Before being ethical or even legal, the problem is first and foremost grammatical. As we shall see, this change of perspective brings with it new possibilities for philosophical analysis.

On the question of dignity, Anscombe defends a traditional philosophical view that is also consistent with her Christian convictions: dignity arises because

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of the kind of being we are. It is not a function of some degree of autonomy, but an intrinsic value that we possess *qua human*. While this is a classic position, its elaboration takes a completely original form. Anscombe does not rely on a transcendent metaphysical principle capable of transferring its dignity to the creature, nor on a capacity for autonomy that humans possess in their own right. Borrowing from both Aristotle and Wittgenstein, she suggests another path that articulates being, language and value in an original way.

The first section examines the hypothesis in detail, showing how the very fact of maternal gestation is the bearer of a specific rule, namely that the human being is the being about whom the question of ownership does not arise. We show that this impossible question is at the heart of practices relating to filiation and respect for human dignity.

The second section positions the hypothesis within the Wittgensteinian intertext and reviews Anscombe's reinterpretation of the principle that «essence expresses itself in grammar».

The third section addresses the question of normativity, showing that Anscombe's proposal avoids the criticism of pure linguistic idealism. *The impossible question* is not a contextual creation that can be revised over and over again, but is based on «very general facts» typical of our «natural history», over which we have no control. Therefore, dignity can take the form of linguistic practices without lacking an objective foundation. It is in this sense that we can speak of a practical turn for dignity.

2. What if gestation in the maternal womb were to disappear?

Even if we accept that human beings have immense dignity by virtue of their nature, we could still ask ourselves: what aspect of human nature forms the basis of this dignity? Some of Anscombe's most interesting comments on this question come from her discussion of the typical form of human procreation.

When she examines what makes us human in the first place, a question arises: «What if the human being were to develop in an artificial womb?» Behind the anecdote worthy of science fiction, the question is an anthropological one: «Does the fact of having been conceived and carried in the womb of a member of our species add anything to the concept of dignity?» «Do the very general parameters of conception, gestation, and childbirth, and the relations of necessity that connect them, have anything to tell us?» Anscombe intends to show that these biological and physiological aspects are more significant than they seem. By drawing out the semantic, conceptual, and logical implicits that underlie them, we can see that they shape our very concept of the human being.

The line developed in *The Dignity of the Human Being* is straightforward: «"Human life" means the human course of life, not just a human's being alive» (Anscombe 2005b: 71). The philosopher takes up the Aristotelian idea that the pattern of unfolding is an integral part of the identity of what is. If we want to

grasp the nature of a living being, we must consider not only what it is *hic et nunc*, but also the process by which it became what it is. Far from being secondary, the pattern of growth provides information about form or *eidos*.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the course of human life is that a child conceived by a mother and a father «is not unequal to them» (Anscombe 2005b: 71). Not in the sense that the child and its parents are a single and numerical entity, but in the sense that they share the same specific identity, that they are members of the same species. This is an implicit but inescapable meaning of maternal gestation, and this alone explains Anscombe's concern about the hypothesis of non-maternal gestation. A little further on, she continues: «Suppose these experimenters succeed with artificial placentas (…) suppose they produce children who reach the stage of separation from the placenta». Her perplexity increases: «It will take legislation for those children not to be mere scientific property» (Anscombe 2005b: 71). In fact, removing the organic anchor of procreation will make certain legal provisions necessary in order to institute legal parents and distinguish them from the technician in charge. Gestation outside the mother's womb would therefore mean that the question of ownership – «to whom does this human being belong?» – could become a meaningful one. This way of posing the problem provides a decisive breakthrough by making us understand that the malaise is to be found in the dislocation of the logical grammar of the concept of the human being.

This hypothesis gives rise to several observations that build on Anscombe's ideas. The idea that the rule of *the impossible question* plays a decisive role in anthropology is not particularly original. This rule reminds us that, rather than a relationship of ownership, a relationship of descent is established between living beings, within which each occupies a specific position. In human beings, this position has the additional characteristic of being permanent: we are «daughter of…» or «father of…» not just during childhood, but forever. The situation is different for animals, where the end of a biological function also brings an end to the specific relationship that unites progenitors and offspring. After weaning, the relationship between offspring dissolves, reverting to that of one congener to another. For humans, however, kinship relationships form a system of symbolic coordinates that structure the entire human group. Studies on the incest taboo have emphasised this point (Lévi-Strauss 1955): by preventing certain alliances, the symbolic permanence of kinship relations protects personal singularity. The rule of *the impossible question* reminds us that we are related to each other through descent and that these relationships have a logical and symbolic meaning and are not transitory. This differentiates us from both inanimate objects and non-human animals. It therefore structures all practices related to filiation, i.e., it enables us to situate ourselves within a kinship structure, declare our personal identity, and even make adoption possible. If filiation cannot be summarised as merely a biological process of procreation, but rather as a set of relational positions with

symbolic value extending beyond childhood, then it is conceivable that the individuals occupying these positions could be replaced under certain circumstances. If filiation is not merely a biological process of procreation, but rather a set of relational positions with biological roots and extended symbolic value, then it is conceivable that the individuals occupying these positions can be replaced under certain circumstances. In countries such as those in the European Union, the adoption process is primarily a legal one. It consists of three stages: recognizing the original filiation, severing it symbolically, and reinscribing the person into a new filiation. The purpose of the legislation is not to answer an impossible question, but rather to modify the original filiation, which is possible precisely because the roles of father and mother are recognized as having biological and symbolic significance.

The article's (Anscombe 2005b) aim can now be clarified. It seeks to demonstrate that the rule of *the impossible question* not only structures practices linked to filiation, but also those of recognising equal dignity between people. The latter are conditioned by the former. The *non-question of ownership* is in fact the transcription into a grammatical rule of the radical equality of human beings. A human being is one who is born of other human beings. They, therefore, cannot be reduced to a good or converted into value, since they are in themselves the source of values. Yet the meanings of preciousness and inalienability attached to their being and visible in the very mode of procreation find expression in the rule of *the impossible question*. Dignity condenses into a concept the rule of the impossible attribution of value. To put it another way, the very mode of procreation, by neutralising the question of ownership, is enough to establish the incredible value and radical equality of human beings.

There is one aspect worth highlighting. Dignity does not arise as the conclusion of a reasoning process based on principles, but is the ethical reflection of a grammatical fact. There is no dispute or discussion about the ownership of a human being, since a human being is never *produced by* but always *born of* someone.

In the same article, a few lines earlier, Anscombe introduces another distinction, namely that dignity can be *violated* but never *alienated*. Slavery, the murder of innocents, and murder for convenience are violations of dignity (Anscombe 2005b: 67). But whatever the degree of violation, dignity cannot be taken away. The point of emphasising the inalienability of dignity is not to mitigate or minimise its outrages, but to situate dignity on a more original plane than that of life events. It is inalienable precisely because it is not dependent on what happens to us; rather, it is dependent on the simple fact of being born human, that is, of *being born human of humans*. The mode of procreation is the organic instantiation of a truth of major ethical significance: from birth to birth, from generation to generation, it is our co-membership of the human species that is affirmed, and with it our equal dignity.

Of course, today, as in the past, people can adopt attitudes of profound contempt towards their fellow human beings. In particular, they do so by establishing relations of ownership that should not even be conceivable. The sale of slaves and human trafficking are among the festering wounds of human history. Human beings are treated as living tools, at the disposal of others. But even before we brandish a moral standard, a value, or a virtue, it would seem that we can judge these actions as degrading actions simply by considering grammar. The use of the word *human* implies that *it is that being about which the question of ownership does not arise*. The non-question is the expression, in the rules of a grammar, of the essential equality of humans among themselves.

Anscombe makes a similar point when she states, in another article entitled *Human Essence*, that the definition «man = rational animal» is not refuted by «the considerations like men are often irrational; that there is no *not* or *if* in the mind of a young baby» (Anscombe 2005a: 28). Whether actualised or not, rationality is an essential disposition of human nature. To understand that it cannot be refuted by invoking counterexamples is to understand the grammar of *what it is to be human*.

Having made these initial observations, we can continue our reflection. Could we envisage a context in which *the impossible question* is made necessary? In Anscombe's hypothesis, the answer is «yes». Reproductive practice involving an artificial womb would mean that *the impossible question could* and perhaps even *should* arise. It would no longer be a pseudo-use. Given the changed circumstances, it would be a perfectly legitimate use. But if we were to ask it sensibly, what conceptual embarrassment would then become inevitable? As we have seen, the way in which a human being is typically born means that there is no question as to who owns it. This non-questioning reflects an essential feature of human procreation. It is not an *empirical regularity* – Anscombe was well aware of the technical advances of her time and knew that assisted reproduction techniques were evolving rapidly; it is a *constitutive rule* of the concept of the human being. Why constitutive? Because it makes an irreplaceable contribution on two points: the inalienable dignity of the person and the equal dignity of all persons. And without these two elements, we cannot claim to truly understand what a human being is.

The fact that the concept of child correlates not with the idea of ownership, but with that of descent, can be understood by looking at how humans propagate life. Humans are beings engendered by the sexual union of two humans, carried for around nine months by their mothers before being brought into the world. This mode of procreation is the means by which human life is propagated in new individuals. Not that other means are not imaginable or even real. But it is the «means belonging to our life as life of the kind we are» (Anscombe 2005b: 71). In other words, it is a means that makes us members of the same species. In the

world as it is, then, *nobody owns anybody, but everybody is somebody's descendant*.

Anscombe is also quick to point out that as soon as the notion of parent becomes confused with that of owner, scandal rears its ugly head. The article goes on to describe three sordid situations: an experimenter ordering gynaecological clinics to supply him with human eggs so that he can fertilise them with his own sperm, a tennis player terminating her pregnancy so that she can take part in a championship, and a woman planning to become pregnant only to abort the pregnancy and sell the foetus (Anscombe 2005b: 72). In each of these situations, notions of descent and filiation merge with those of production and consumption. Those who have mastered the use of the concept of human being should spontaneously perceive these actions as degrading, dishonouring, and demeaning. There is nothing idiosyncratic about the reactions of disgust they provoke. Irreverence is obvious because it shows the respect we lack for ourselves. The person who would compromise themself in such acts shows that they fail to revere the dignity of their own humanity, that is to say the dignity of that very human nature within them (Anscombe 2005b: 72). If a person cannot master the use of the concept of the human for others, how can they master it for themself?

As we said earlier, in the world as it is, *nobody owns anybody, but everybody is somebody's descendant*. Anscombe draws two major conceptual conclusions from this. The first relates to filiation practices; the second, to practices of respect for dignity. Firstly, this form of propagation of human life (and the related non-questioning) shows that the child is no different from the parents in the sense that it comes from them, shares the same nature, and therefore has the same dignity as them. This leads to a second consequence, this time relating to the human community. If our birth makes us members of the human species, then we are equals. The only inalienable equality that humans enjoy is that of sharing «the value and the dignity of being a human being» (Anscombe 2005b: 67). Contrary to a view that Anscombe believed to be widespread within the Anglo-American philosophical world, the formal dependence of ethics on biological and physiological facts is here explicitly assumed (Anscombe 2008a: 67).

It is important to note that, if the use of the artificial placenta is called into question, it is not because of the status of the foetus, or the selection of embryos, or the future of any supernumeraries – bioethical arguments often used by religious believers, Catholics, and others. Anscombe's criticism does not even relate to the psychological well-being of the unborn child. The gravity of the issue is conceptual. This technical development is controversial because it undermines the rule of *the impossible question*, where the concept of human dignity is formed and expressed. The artificial placenta legitimises *the impossible question*, simultaneously suggesting the idea of ownership where one would expect descent. The very fact that this suggestion can be made shakes the grammar at the level of its structure, since it attacks it at the point where the two meanings of

dignity meet. The vertical one, in which personal dignity is conferred from parents to children, and the horizontal one, in which we all recognise ourselves as equal in that each of us is born of other human beings.

This is not to say that practices and concepts relating to human life cannot evolve. Nor that concepts that are relevant in one socio-historical context must necessarily be relevant in another. The Anscombean conception of essence is not fixist, but is based on the identification of ahistorical traits that transcend the contingency of context and the vagaries of cultures. These often unnoticed traits profoundly structure our understanding of what it is to be human. Because of our concrete nature and the parameters linked to the transmission of life, the question of *who owns a human being is*, from this point of view, pure nonsense. If new conditions were to make this question intelligible and therefore legitimate, then this modification of the norms of procreation (not just any modification, but *this precise modification*, namely the replacement of gestation in the maternal womb by incubation in an artificial environment) would not just be a local modification, affecting only one aspect of the concept, but a global alteration of what it means to be human. This would be an alteration likely to cause us to lose the factual roots of the concept of dignity, namely that a being born of humans *is* human.

In just a few lines, Anscombe suggests that we fundamentally reconfigure the way we think about dignity. The concept of dignity is expressed in the practices of filiation and respect for dignity, which are themselves regulated by *the impossible question* rule. Instead of looking for a mysterious property of consciousness or a reflexive capacity, she understands it by examining the logical order in which the concepts of human being, filiation, maternity, and paternity relate to each other. This logical order precludes applying the concept of property to the human being. The very general fact of procreation in the womb, therefore, generates a practice which itself is the bearer of a conceptual asset of major ethical significance. To understand dignity is to know that there is an impossible question about the human, a question that we should never be able to ask of each other. Another way of philosophising about ethics emerges: *an impossible question* can function as an ethical imperative.

3. The essence is expressed in grammar

To understand the originality of Anscombe's philosophical approach, we need to place it in the context of the reception of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Traditionally, there are three strategies available to a philosopher who wants to determine the essence of a thing or a being, such as the human essence, for example. They can begin by looking for equivalents, pointing out that the human is understood in terms of the notions of *person*, *individual*, and *member* of the human species. They can then develop a definition and describe the human being as a rational animal. Finally, they can give examples, pointing to particular individuals. The problem is that, in this particular case, these answers are

insufficient. The procedures that philosophy usually uses to explain what something is – translation, definition or exemplification – prove incapable of capturing the full meaning of the concept of human (Hlobil and Nieswand 2019: 42). To convey the meaning of such a rich concept, Wittgenstein and Anscombe, following in his footsteps, suggest a different approach. For them, the essence of the human is not contained in a definition, but circulates along infinitely complex chains of practices. This chain of practices forms the logical grammar of the concept.

The term «practice» is worth considering. In the most common sense, it refers to a pattern of intentional behaviour that a person acquires within a community. Generally, acquiring a practice improves an individual's ability to perform the same action again, thereby strengthening their capacity to achieve their goals. It is in this sense that *praxis* plays a central role in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, since it is the means by which individuals can undergo ethical transformation. However, it's Wittgenstein's philosophy that gives the term its meaning here. He demonstrates that, if practices influence the development of our personalities, as Aristotle suggested, it's because they play a key role in forming our very concepts. Wittgenstein broke with a Platonic-inspired tradition of assuming that meaning was « ready-made » in the concept itself; a tradition that did not sufficiently examine our actual use of language (Anscombe 2011b; Laugier and Chauviré 2006: 131-133). Through his careful exploration of uses and actions, he shows that meanings do not exist in isolation, but are embedded in the practices that convey and express them. We benefit from considering the interrelated aspects of *what is said*, *the context in which it is said*, and the elements of reality that are brought into relation through the act of speaking or acting. Let's take one example. Imagine we want to explain the meanings of the words «regular» and «uniform» to someone unfamiliar with these concepts. According to Wittgenstein, this would be achieved through examples and serial exercises. The connection between the meaning of the words «continues in this way» and the concept of regularity is therefore established through practice. By proceeding in this way, the teacher communicates to the learner no less than what he himself knows about these concepts (Wittgenstein 1969: §208). It is practice that leads to meaning. And all practice has a normative underpinning, with things to do and things to avoid. The difficulty is that these norms are not formally instituted laws that can be examined in a detached way, rather they are a rough ground whose bearing capacity we only understand when we start walking on it (Wittgenstein 1969: §107). The metaphor of grammar is very helpful here. In the most common sense, grammar refers to the set of necessary links between phrasal elements in a language. Contrary to what some poor textbooks might suggest, it is not a set of rules that can be considered *a priori*, before applying it. On the contrary, speakers understand grammar through immersion, by speaking in a concrete historical context. Wittgenstein's breakthrough was to show that, by within the realm of

immanence formed by practices, we are not merely dealing with contingent, culturally determined data, but with norms that inform us about the essence of things. Wittgenstein sums it up in one sentence: «Essence is deciphered as grammar» (Wittgenstein 1968: §371).

Wittgenstein's position on the link between logical grammar and essence is a shifting one (Pouivet 2014: 50). Unlike other interpreters, Anscombe claims that Wittgenstein did not dismiss the notion of essence. Roger Pouivet puts forward a similar idea, pointing out that Wittgenstein did not so much plan to renounce essence as to break with its mythical representation, the one that would make it an ideal or a mental object that speakers [would] have in mind when they talk about something, or that philosophers would be experts at discovering. This is a point that Anscombe has studied with great attention, and her work can be said to shed new light on what has been called Wittgenstein's « conventionalism » (Anscombe 1981a: 115; 2005a: 29; 2011a: 130; 2011b: 220).

In her view, the principle that essence is expressed in grammar (Anscombe 2005a: 28) means above all that it is futile to claim access to the essence of the human without examining how we speak about humans, what we can say about them, how they address each other. The internal logic of a word is revealed by the practices in which it is used. It is therefore in the philosopher's interest to study practices because they are rich in semantic implications and conceptual connections that can deliver knowledge about what humans are.

In *The Dignity of the Human Being*, as in her work as a whole, Anscombe's ethical argument is very often based on uncovering the norms that constitute the meaning of the concept of the human being. In this respect, it should be emphasised that the way in which she considers human behaviour in relation to what it is to be human is largely influenced by the Wittgensteinian notion of the «natural history of humans». The expression appeared in Wittgenstein's writings from the early 1930s and was to remain central to them (Wittgenstein 1968: §415). Anscombe revisits the idea, arguing that certain practices are unique in that they are underpinned by unavoidable necessities, such as those associated with gestation. Anscombe (2008b: 224) refers to these necessities as our «natural history».

In the usual sense, natural history aims to describe species according to what, from their birth, constitutes their specific deployment, their type of locomotion, their habitat, their diet, and their mode of reproduction. It includes a host of other observations on how members organise themselves, establish themselves in a territory, or migrate according to the seasons (Thompson 2008: 63). For Wittgenstein, the natural history of humans refers to the system of descriptions common to all members of the species. In other words, everything that happens to them under normal, ordinary conditions. According to Wittgenstein, our ways of living are shaped by very general facts «which no one has ever doubted, and which escape our attention only because we have them constantly before our

eyes» (Wittgenstein 1968: §415). Whether we are talking about physiological rhythms, the course of procreation, or the limitation of the earth's resources, a whole host of parameters or very general facts inform our practices and concepts. We always think and act within them. They are characterised by a certain timelessness. In a sense, they are ahistorical and form the basis of conventions that, paradoxically, we cannot modify. In the article where she discusses Wittgenstein's conventionalism, she states:

> It is an illusion to think that, because something is a convention and because we could imagine a different one, it must therefore be in human power to alter it, as it is presumably in human power to adopt a fixed date for Easter or a phonetic system of spelling for English. Altering a convention may be beyond our power. (Anscombe 2011b: 226)

4. Dignity, a practical turn

The Wittgensteinian principle that «essence can be deciphered as grammar» means that we access essence by reflecting on the questions we can intelligibly ask each other and on the appropriate answers. Essence is thus revealed through the logical grammar that organises our practices. In particular, we have seen the importance of the rule of *the impossible question* for our understanding of the equal dignity of human beings. If we take the constitutive rules of our primary relationships seriously, it seems that we have the means to understand how dignity is phenomenalised within human interactions. But can we go one step further and speak of a practical turn of dignity?

The suggestion soon provokes an objection, which, following Anscombe, is termed «linguistic idealism». If we assume that dignity emerges from reciprocal interactions, does that mean we can create dignity through our actions? The objection can take slightly different form: by associating dignity with an ordered set of linguistic practices, are we not weakening dignity by making it dependent on a given social context? These questions raise thorny issues of interpretation in Wittgenstein's work, issues which Anscombe has not failed to address (Anscombe, 1981a).

Let's look at the problem once again. If dignity is essential, it must escape all dependence on practices that would condition its reality. It is *inalienable* (even if it can be *violated*) because it is absolutely independent of the *diktat* of facts. The reality of dignity does not depend on any implementation, theoretical or practical. If dignity is attached to essence, then nothing that happens to us, no action or omission, can ever prevent us from being what we are: human beings endowed with dignity.

If we want to talk about a practical turning point of dignity, we have to show how a reality of essence is embodied in a relational paradigm without this making it dependent on a contingent environment. This is precisely what we are aiming

at when we say that *the impossible question* is an aspect of the logical grammar of the concept: impossibility is not a rule laid down by a particularly generous individual, nor the fruit of a particularly egalitarian culture. It is a constitutive usage, a usage that guarantees that we know what we are talking about. To put it in one sentence: we can only understand what kind of being we are dealing with – a human being – if we understand that there is *an impossible question* about it. This practice is constitutive in the sense that it is through it that we succeed in naming what is. Any deviation from usage would take us outside the common conceptual world in which we find ourselves. If dignity is the other name for the human being, then *the impossible question* is the practical transcription, i.e., in the rules of a grammar, of this other name.

For now, we have established that *the impossible question* plays the role of a *constitutive rule* rather than an *empirical statement*. But what prevents this constitutive rule from being *a pure creation*? How can we escape the reproach of linguistic idealism? After all, just as the promise creates a bond of fidelity through its very grammar, what prevents us from saying that the impossible question generates *by itself* a bond of respect called dignity? The nature of the bond of obligation generated by the promise has been discussed at length (Anscombe, 1981b; 1981c). It is not necessary to go into detail to understand the difference. In the case of dignity, Anscombe manages to escape the reproach of linguistic idealism by reinscribing grammatical analysis within a specific form of naturalism – a philosophical step previously identified by H.-J. Glock in Wittgenstein and termed «anthropological naturalism» (Glock 2003: 253-256). Anscombe takes up the idea that while essence is woven into our linguistic practices, the latter are weighed down by certain imponderables linked to our pattern of development. The constitutive rule is not created, rather it is imposed by general parameters over which we have no control – in this case, procreation through a mother's womb. In line with Anscombe's thinking, our aim was to unearth the conceptual properties inherent in these « natural » parameters. These conceptual goods are reflected in practices, which themselves carry ethical significance. Our physical experiences, therefore, generate models for understanding our relationships. They imply certain values: born human of humans, we know that we are equal in dignity. This radical equality is reflected in an *impossible question* that is, in a way, the linguistic face of our embodied condition. It reminds us that we are bodies carried and given birth to by a member of the same species, and that this fact, in its absolute simplicity, is endowed with an ultimate moral coefficient. Value is, so to speak, incorporated in the language game of filiation.

The transition from fact to value, from the ontological to the ethical, is thus conceivable, and constitutive practices play a pivotal role in this transition. Rachael Wiseman has masterfully described this Anscombean breakthrough by speaking of a *partial linguistic idealism*: a certain number of norms that are

expressed in our linguistic usage do not depend on it for their existence (Wiseman 2022: 345). Values can therefore take the form of linguistic practices without lacking an objective foundation.

What would happen if the stage of gestation in the womb were to disappear? Through an almost anecdotal remark, Anscombe drew our attention to *the impossible question* and its role in structuring practices related to filiation and dignity. This article aims to demonstrate how the Wittgensteinian intertext illuminates her unique interpretation of human essence and paves the way for a practical turn of dignity. We have extended the analysis beyond Anscombe's remarks in a way that seems true to her intuitions. The idea that human dignity is attested to in fundamental linguistic practices without this diminishing its inalienable character is, in our view, a major contribution that in itself justifies this extension. *The impossible question* is a form of practical recognition of our common dignity. From the moment we are capable of asking ourselves questions, we are all guardians of a conceptual boundary, which could be formulated as follows: Act in such a way that certain questions about human beings are never legitimate.[1]

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ANSCOMBE ON PROMISING AND HUMAN LINGUISTIC PRACTICE

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Abstract: This paper examines Anscombe's theory of promises, especially the new obligation generated from promises. Firstly, I introduce a possible challenge that there are two seemingly contradictory kinds of necessity in her discussion of promises (Section 1). Then, I analyze these two kinds of necessity: the conventional necessity which indicates that the obligation is based on conventions and not naturally intelligible (Section 2); the Aristotelian necessity without which some good cannot be attained (Section 3). At last, I present Anscombe's notion of "human linguistic practice" and related practical necessity as her answer to this seeming contradiction (Section 4). My aim is to demonstrate how the notion of "human linguistic practice" can be employed to defend the consistency of Anscombe's theory of promises.

Key Words: promise; language game; Aristotelian necessity; human linguistic practice; practical necessity.

1. Introduction

In "Rules, Rights and Promises" (henceforth RRP), Elizabeth Anscombe describes a dialog: "I'll help you today; will you help me tomorrow?" and "Yes!". She claims that, in this dialog, promises are given and received. This dialog shows that promising as a social practice that includes the promise-giver and the promise-receiver is characterized by containing a future-tense description. Anscombe emphasizes that the future-tense description here is not a mere prediction or an expression of intention but an obligation. Here, the obligation constitutes a kind of necessity that the promise-giver must make the description come true; otherwise, he should be guilty of breaking the promise.

How can promises generate obligations? Anscombe starts her discussion in RRP with David Hume's discovery of "natural unintelligibility", which states: "a promise is not intelligible naturally, nor antecedent to human conventions; and that a man, unacquainted with society, could never enter into any engagements with another, even though they could perceive each other's thoughts by intuition" (T 3.2.5.2). Therefore, it seems that the obligation generated from promises is a kind of conventional necessity that is not understood by people naturally at birth but is learned in social practice. However, in some other passages of her discussion, Anscombe mentions another kind of necessity included in the obligation generated from promises that "without which some good will not be attained or some evil avoided" (RRP: 100). Anscombe regards this as a typical

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Aristotelian necessity. It is also interpreted by Philippa Foot as a natural necessity; as she claims, what human beings should do to achieve the good or to flourish is naturally determined by human nature. (Foot 2001: 15)

Conventional necessity and natural necessity seem contradictory. The obligation from conventional necessity is created by the convention, which is naturally unintelligible, while the obligation from natural necessity is generated from human nature. It seems impossible to have both kinds of necessity in a theory of promises.

This paper will explore Anscombe's theory of promises and attempt to demonstrate how Anscombe answers this challenge of the consistency and coherency of her theory. Her discussion is mainly in two articles: RRP and "On Promising and its Justice" (henceforth PJ). Section 2 and Section 3 will analyze Anscombe's discussion of these two kinds of necessity respectively. Section 4 will first introduce the notion of "human linguistic practice" and then discuss how the obligation generated from it connects the two seemingly contradictory kinds of necessity.

2. The Conventional Necessity

As we mentioned in the introduction, Anscombe starts her discussion with Hume's ideas. The dialog she describes is also a case from Hume, as he introduces an example with two farmers having different harvest times. Farmer A's corn is ripe today, and farmer B's corn will be ripe tomorrow. So, farmer B suggests that "I should labour with you today, and you should aid me tomorrow." Hume explains that because the natural and inherent principles and passions of human nature, this aid is not done out of kindness but self-interested commerce. In other words, we help another person because we can foresee that he will return that help in expectation that he will receive the same kind of help. Hume argues that *a certain form of words* is invented to sustain this self-interested commerce between people, and this form of words constitutes what we call a "promise". When a person says, "I promise …", by using this form of words, she expresses her knowledge of the obligation behind these words, namely, he must make that thing come true, otherwise she will be subjected to the penalty of never being trusted again. Therefore, we can summarize Hume's ideas as follows: promises are conventions of people, as people find that the institution of certain signs could create a new obligation that restricts people's conduct and achieves mutual advantage (see T 3.2.5.8 – T 3.2.5.10).

Anscombe continues to follow Hume's argument and comments that his discussion about promises sees one crucial part that the obligation generated from promises is not natural but conventional in human society. This means that, before human society, the concept of "promise" cannot exist; and within a society, a man, unacquainted with his social surroundings, could never be engaged with others and could never know what promises mean. However, Anscombe thinks that

Hume does not go deep enough into the idea. She comments that Hume's argument on "promise" is closely related to his philosophical psychology and ethics, but the rightness of his conclusion is independent of the intrinsic connection between obligation and sentiment (see RRP: 99). It causes him to ignore the crucial part of his ideas: the signs, *the certain form of words*, that indicate promises and create a new obligation, and that is the real analysis Anscombe thinks should take place about promises, which Hume begins but does not finish.

In PJ, Anscombe also characterizes promises, saying that promises appear to be making a sign, together with a description of a future state of affairs, where the consequence of doing so is that the promise-giver has to bring that state of affairs about. Here, too, the point is that a person uses a sign, and that sign creates an obligation on him. Anscombe also explains that "Bump! I will do so-and-so" could have the same force as "I promise to do so-and-so", if the utterance of "Bump!" is instituted as a sign which creates an obligation as what promises do. In other words, if a person says, "Bump! I will …", she must complete the task presented after "Bump!"; otherwise, she will be reproached. Anscombe concludes, "What I have sketched here is what Wittgenstein usefully and intelligibly called a 'language-game'…" (PJ: 16). The notion of language-game is exactly what Anscombe believes is the best way to explain the obligation created by giving a sign.

Anscombe firstly describes "playing a game" as "you are acquainted with the game and have an appropriate background, and also appropriate *expectations and calculations* in connection with, e.g., moving this piece from point A to point B." (PJ: 17, emphasis in original) Accordingly, all the uses of language can be called language-games. It means that we can think of the use of language as game-playing, and the users of language are the players. Players of a game know the rules of the game when they participate in it, and their participation indicates their agreement to obey the rules. Similarly, users of a language are familiar with word meanings and grammar rules when they use the language, and their use of the language indicates their agreement to follow these meanings and rules. Anscombe's understanding of language-game comes from *Philosophical Investigations*, where Wittgenstein demonstrates that language is not some isolated and static set of symbols, and it is rather a set of dynamic human activities; in the same social background, people always share the identical understanding of the rules of language, and they know both the meanings of the words they use and the consequences which might be caused by this use.

If we apply the notion of language-game to promises, we will see that all people living in the same social background would be acquainted with the meaning of the utterance of "I promise" and all of them would know that saying "I promise" is giving the sign, by which one generates an obligation on himself. How does a game generate an obligation for its player? The answer is convention.

As Wittgenstein says, the grammar of language consists of conventions (see Wittgenstein 1974: §138; 2007: §335).

We must note here that this conventional necessity is created by the rules of language rather than by its users. It means that, when the word "promise" is only written in the dictionary but not used by someone, the obligation is already created but in a state of potentiality and not activated yet. When someone says "I promise", which is the giving of a sign, the obligation is activated; it is the very moment that the obligation is generated for the promise-giver. Therefore, the obligation is not created at the moment of the use of the sign but is always latent in the life in which this language is used. In Anscombe's own words, the answer to the question "What is the necessity?" is given only by describing the procedure, the language-game – which as far as concerns the "necessity" expressed in it does not differ from this one: "I say 'ping' and you have to say 'pong'." (PJ: 18)

In her article "Anscombe on Promising", Candace Vogler finds that Anscombe's examples such as "Bump!", "Ping" and "Pong", "I have to do because I green-inked it!", and "I must do it because I blipped it!" are funny (Vogler 2016: 127). Vogler thinks that these *idiosyncratic* procedures, in her own words, show that there is a language game at play. The word "promise" is not the most important element, but rather merely a sign, an instituted linguistic instrument. It is the institution or practice that creates a new obligation and binds people's future conduct. "Institution" and "practice" are the words of Vogler, as she comments that this Anscombean investigation of promises that both promise-giver and promise-receiver are operating from a single convention is common in discussions of promises, but researchers usually develop this idea from the perspective of John Rawls' work than Anscombe's, using the concept of "practices" and "institutions" to characterize promises (Vogler 2016: 119-120).

3. The Natural Necessity

So far, we have seen that Anscombe regards the necessity generated from promises as conventionally created. At the same time, though, Anscombe thinks that this kind of conventional necessity is not sufficient to account for the necessity generated from promises. In PJ, she also mentions the insufficiency of the notion of language-game. In her own words, "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" (PJ: 17). "This point" here refers to Anscombe's question "how the restriction on the possibilities of acting *well* can arise from giving a promise" (PJ: 17, emphasis in original). If I understand Anscombe well, this question means that Anscombe thinks she has already demonstrated that the institution of promises, as a human invention, can restrict our conduct to act in certain ways to avoid reproach, but can it also restrict our conduct to act well?

In the section "Promising and Practical Necessity" of his book *The Philosophy of Anscombe*, Roger Teichmann presents a comparison between "playing chess"

and "promising", which can illustrate the insufficiency of the notion of language-game in the case of promises. Like promises, there are human-invented rules in chess games that restrict the movement of players in the game. For example, we may learn that we have to move the king following from various facts. However, there are different kinds of human actions, just as there are different games. Compared with the chess-playing game, promising is of a different kind, an ethical one. The reason of human action to ethics seems to be different from that of human action to chess. Therefore, the necessity behind obligations applicable to chess games should not be the same as the one applying to ethical actions. Teichmann suggests that a special sense of "moral" should be posited to "ought", "have to", "must", and so on, when it comes to promises (Teichmann, 2008: 99).

Vogler also comments about this insufficiency that "Although careful discussion of a practice or a language-game might explain how many different people can be of one mind on the occasion of an undertaking, it cannot explain why any of them *should* do her word" (Vogler 2016: 130, emphasis in original). Vogler re-visits Hume's two problems that Anscombe sets for herself at the beginning of RRP: one, what a promise is; two, how it can generate an obligation, in other words, how a promise can restrict people's conduct (see RRP: 97; Vogler 2016: 119,130). Drawing on an analysis of Tim Scanlon's discussion of promises, Vogler would agree that the previous discussion of convention provides an answer to the first problem. But we mistakenly assume that the definition of promise simultaneously answers the second problem (Vogler 2016: 120-131; Scanlon 1998). To be precise, the institution of promising teaches us that if we act as what we promised, we will not incur reproach, which is in the definition of promises; but it does not address why we *should* act as such, and why we *should* incur reproach if we fail to do our word. In other words, conventions do restrict human conduct, but this restriction is purely external and does not involve our moral judgement. Then, if we see promising as a different kind of human action than playing chess games, we must consider how the obligation arises in games related to ethics.

In her article "Modern Moral Philosophy again: Isolating the Promulgation Problem", Vogler discusses a similar topic. In this article, Vogler discusses the question of "what is in the will and can be expressed in intentional action?", or what Anscombe calls the "source of interaction". Vogler thinks the answer involves two aspects: first, "how people can act from a single source"; second, "why any of those people should act from that source". These two questions are exactly the two problems Anscombe inherits from Hume about promises. As for the first question, Vogler claims that both Anscombe and Rawls would agree that this source could partly be found in social practices. The difference between them is that Rawls explains its occurrence with the theory of social practices, while Anscombe explains it with Wittgensteinian language-games. Meanwhile, language-games and social practices could answer the first question but not the

second one: in Vogler's words, "although careful discussion of a practice or a language-game might explain how many different people can act from a single source, it cannot explain why any of them should act from that source" (Vogler 2006: 356). She explains that language-games and social practices are not enough to distinguish actions for the sake of justice and for the sake of activities such as playing games of baseball. We therefore need to complete the shift to a virtue-centered ethics.

Following her discussion of the insufficiency of language-game in PJ, Anscombe asks "what ways are there of getting human beings to do things?" (PJ: 18) She then introduces the following possible situations: first, if someone is in a position of authority, he can order others to do things and others would obey; second, if someone is being loved, his admirer would do as he wants in order to please him; third, if someone has the power to hurt others and is therefore feared, people would do what he wants to protect themselves. She thinks, however, that few people have authority over everyone, few people have the power to hurt or help others, and few people could command affection from others. Compared with all the previous means, Anscombe comes to the idea of "promise" by saying:

> …though physical force seems a more certain way of producing desired physical results than any other, and authority and power to hurt or help and sometimes affection too, more potent than the feeble procedure of such a language-game as the one with "Bump!" that I described, yet in default of the possibility or utility of exerting physical force, and of the possibility of exercising authority or power to hurt and help, or of commanding affection, this feeble means is at least a means of getting people to do things. (PJ: 18)

Even though it seems that there is a good deal of power in physical forces, authority, and affection, at least compared with the restriction from "I promise", Anscombe still believes it is highly possible that all these apparent benefits would fail to bring enough force. Meanwhile, "promise" – the seeming feeble means – is more reliable and effective in getting people to do things (see Teichmann 2008: 100). Furthermore, Anscombe not only states that "promise" is a better means than the forces of authority, fear, and affection; she also takes "promise" as a useful way for human beings to interact and an important means to the achievement of human good. She writes, "getting one another to do things without the application of physical force is a necessity for human life, and that far beyond what could be secured by those other means." (PJ: 18) Therefore, "promise" is a good way to maintain trust between social members and to guarantee the smooth operation of all mutual activities. Because of the benefits it brings to human life, "promise" is taken as a good way for human beings to be, and as good for human life.

Anscombe argues that in this case, the obligation generated from promises implies the kind of necessity "without which some good will not be attained or

some evil avoided" (see PJ: 18-20; RRP: 100). Anscombe regards this as a necessity typical of Aristotle, because "Aristotle in his dictionary says that in one sense of 'necessary' the necessary is that without which good cannot be or come to be" (PJ: 15).[1] It has been briefly mentioned in the introduction of this paper that Foot also interprets this necessity as natural necessity. In *Natural Goodness*, Foot writes that, when Anscombe writes about the necessity for human life to get others to do things without the application of physical force, she is indicating what she elsewhere calls "Aristotelian necessity". Foot thinks the same notion is involved in talk about plants and animals. For example, "it is necessary for plants to have water, for birds to build nests, for wolves to hunt in packs, and for lionesses to teach their cubs to kill." This necessity depends on the need of particular species of plants and animals, based on their natural habitat and their ways of giving full play to their repertoire. All of these elements together determine what a particular species should be. Correspondingly, the differences between the life of humans and that of plants or animals show us what human beings naturally are. Therefore, what human beings should do to achieve the good or to flourish is naturally determined by human nature, and it can be taken as a "natural necessity" (Foot 2001: 15). It is this kind of necessity that distinguishes promising from playing chess games.

4. Human Linguistic Practice and Practical Necessity

In the introduction of this paper, I mentioned that conventional and natural necessity seem contradictory, and it seems impossible to have both of them in a theory of promises. But Anscombe does not see a contradiction here, as she never denies the significance of either of the two kinds of necessity. In turning her focus from conventional necessity to natural necessity, her exact words are about the insufficiency in interpreting the obligation generated from promises stemming from the aspect of the language-game only. She does not say that this aspect is wrong.

Instead, Anscombe encourages us to interpret promises as a unique kind of practice called "human linguistic practice", within which the conventional necessity and natural necessity can co-exist harmoniously. Anscombe's discussions about "human linguistic practice" are mainly in her articles RRP, "On the Source of the Authority of the State" (henceforth SAS), and "The Question of Linguistic Idealism" (henceforth QLI). "Human linguistic practice" means the words themselves become an action by actions (of modals) into which words were

[1]In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle mentions different forms of necessity, the second one corresponding to "The conditions without which good cannot be or come to be, or without which we cannot get rid or be freed of evil, e.g. drinking the medicine is necessary in order that we may be cured of disease, and sailing to Aegina is necessary in order that we may get our money." (1015a20–25) He also says the second form of necessity is "Of things that are called one in virtue of their own nature". (1015b35–36)

inserted. Among all human linguistic practices, the most philosophical examples given by Anscombe are "rule", "right", and "promise" (see SAS: 141; QLI: 117-118). From her perspective, only by putting "promise" in the background of human linguistic practice we can understand the coexistence of the conventional feature and the natural feature of promises, which together form the complete meaning of promises.

This new necessity is interpreted by Roger Teichmann as "practical necessity", which is "stopping modals plus Aristotelian necessity". In his own words, "The necessity expressed by 'You have to, since you promised to' is that of a forcing modal, internal to the practice of promising; but the necessity of going for promising, and so of sticking to the rules internal to the practice – this is an Aristotelian necessity. Without promising, an enormous amount of human good would be impossible" (Teichmann 2008: 98 (footnote 19) and 100).

Rachael Wiseman offers an alternative view of promises as the "human linguistic practice" in her article "Linguistic Idealism and Human Essence". Wiseman claims that the "use of modal notions" that is characteristic of a statement of a rule, right, or promise is exactly the "moral obligation" or "moral duty" that Anscombe urges us to reject in "Modern Moral Philosophy" (henceforth MMP). Wiseman argues that rules, rights, and promises are associated with certain kinds of modal notions, such as "You mustn't…", "You can't…", You ought…", etc., which are connected with the existence of a prohibition. As rules, rights, and promises are all human linguistic practices, the existence of these prohibitions is based on human linguistic practices in general. In Anscombe's words, the use of these modal notions is not expressed but created by human linguistic practices. In this way, the necessity expressed in these modal notions is brought about not by any practical reason but by the practical use of these modal notions as the expression of rules, rights, and promises.

Wiseman argues that this kind of necessity gives no space for any examination of practical reason, and therefore, many moral philosophers choose to exclude it from consideration. This is also why Anscombe suggests to jettison "the concepts of obligation and duty … and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of 'ought'" in MMP. I agree with Wiseman's criticism of the kind of necessity that derives exclusively from linguistic expressions, and I think that this is precisely where Anscombe sees the deficiency of using Hume and Wittgenstein's ideas to explain the theory of promises. But I do not think that is what Anscombe is trying to say in the second thesis in MMP. The "moral ought" that Anscombe argues against in that second thesis is specifically the special sense of "moral" derived from the Christian law conception of ethics.

Anselm Winfried Müller analyzes different meanings of "ought" in his article "Anscombe on *Ought*", where one of these meanings is the "ought" from the second thesis in MMP. Müller explains the force of this "ought" as a "chimerical law" because the Christian law conception of ethics is already an empty idea with

mere mesmeric force. Müller's explanation here helps to prove my point. In the introduction of the article, Müller briefly mentions the kind of "ought" related to rules, rights, and promises, which is a kind of practical necessity "relying on conventions" and "without which human life would be impossible or ghastly". This explanation echoes Roger Teichmann's interpretation we mentioned a few paragraphs ago.

At the same time, Rachael Wiseman's criticism inspires us to think about the natural necessity discussed in the previous section. She says that the limitation of a convention shaped by linguistic expression is that it stops us from asking "Why?". It assumes that the rules are fixed and cannot be adjusted, and that all we have to do is follow them; hence, it prevents us from deliberating about important concepts in the context of human life (see Wiseman 2022: 356). Wiseman suggests we instead start from everyday "ought", such as "a pregnant woman ought to watch her weight", "a ballerina ought to point her toes"; "a wolf must stay downwind of a deer", etc. It may seem that there is nothing moral in these "oughts", but when we describe a world in which humans participate in activities that they can be said to do well or badly at, we already have the beginning of ethics. Wiseman thinks that this suggestion is what Anscombe recommends in MMP, "when she says that we should look for the norms of ethics where we find statements such as 'that a man ought to have so many teeth'" (see Wiseman 2022: 345; MMP: 14).

Now we need more explanation about this new kind of "practical necessity". I would like to introduce Katharina Nieswandt's research in her paper "Anscombe on the Sources of Normativity", where she also firstly notices that Anscombe distinguishes two kinds of necessity:

> First, there is practice-internal or "conventional" necessity:
> It is *conventionally* necessary for N to do A *if*: a certain practice P exists in N's community and P allows someone to use "N must do A" as a forcing modal.
>
> Second, there is practice-external or "Aristotelian" necessity:
> It is *Aristotelianally* necessary for a community C to have a practice P and for P to contain rule R *if*: an important good G will otherwise not be realized (*or* a grave evil E not be prevented) in an adequate way. (Nieswandt 2017: 154, emphasis in original)

Nieswandt claims that while Anscombe stays mostly silent about the relation between these two kinds of necessity, there are clues about it in her article "On Brute Facts" (henceforth BF). According to Nieswandt, "Anscombe argues that certain institutions form the necessary background of certain facts, in the sense that some facts might not exist if the respective institution does not exist. As she points out, such a metaphysical dependence of a fact on its background does not

entail that a description of this fact must (or even may) mention the background". Accordingly, Nieswandt argues that "the existence of certain duties – viz. those imposed by rules, rights and promises – requires the good purpose of the practice as a background. That, however, does not entail that a justification of these duties must (or even may) mention the practice" (Nieswandt 2017: 157; BF: 22). She concludes with a suggestion regarding the necessity of the practice as a precondition of any practice-internal duty, and then she arrives at a new necessity claim:

> It is necessary for N to do A *if*: a certain practice P exists in N's community C and P allows someone to use "N must do A" as a forcing modal – provided that it is Aristotelianally necessary for C to have P. (Nieswandt 2017: 157, emphasis in original)

Nieswandt explains that, in other words, "it is necessary to respect a conventional necessity if the practice within which that conventional necessity exists is necessary in Aristotle's sense" (Nieswandt 2017: 157). We may now try to describe this practical necessity, that is a combination of two interrelated kinds of necessity: the first is conventional – it concerns "what is right", in the sense of a right movement within the social practice; while the second is natural and concerns "what is good", in the sense of good for human beings and human flourishing; and in a human linguistic practice, the conventional necessity can only be justified when the natural necessity is a precondition.

5. Conclusion

In this introduction and analysis of Anscombe's theory of promises, I have attempted to show how Anscombe uses the notion of "human linguistic practice" to defuse a possible challenge about the consistency and coherence of her theory. I first introduced the possible objection that Anscombe mentions two seemingly contradictory kinds of necessity in her discussion of the obligation generated from promises.

Then, I analyzed the first kind of necessity, the conventional necessity, which indicates that the obligation generated from promises is based on conventions and cannot be naturally understood. Anscombe's argument about it starts with Hume's theory that "I promise", as a certain form of words, is created by people to restrict each other's conduct and thereby gain benefits. Anscombe also presents that this certain form of words is similar to Wittgenstein's notion of language-game, as they both argue that the meanings and rules of language consist of conventions, and that people living in the same society would understand the meaning of the utterance of "I promise" and the obligation it creates.

I next analyzed the insufficiency of convention following Anscombe's line of thought, namely, it cannot explain the ethical part of human actions, which is why

Anscombe turns to the second kind of necessity, the Aristotelian necessity, also called natural necessity. In this section, by responding to the question "what ways are there of getting human beings to do things?", Anscombe argues that promising is a good way to guarantee the smooth operation of mutual activities and to achieve a good human life. It means that the obligation generated from promises is not necessarily created by conventions, but can also be the result of human nature that wishes to achieve a good human life.

At last, I introduced Anscombe's notion of "human linguistic practice" as her answer to this challenge. This notion of practice does not merely refer to actions of uttering words in a particular context, but rather to the insertion of particular words into actions that contain restrictions such as "ought" or "cannot", so that these particular words themselves become such actions. The obligation generated from such practices involves a new kind of practical necessity, characterized by a combination of convention and nature. I demonstrated that the introduction of the notion of "human linguistic practice" provided us with a complete understanding of promises, and that the related two kinds of necessity are no longer a contradiction, but an important feature of human linguistic practices.

Overall, I find Anscombe's discussion of promises and human linguistic practices particularly interesting, because it seems to be an important perspective from which to examine her moral philosophy, especially the relation between language and morality. Anscombe believes that the use of language as a human action is closely related to human moral life. Our invention of particular forms of words and the obligations they generate is based on our common understanding of how human beings can live better together; meanwhile, our learning and use of these particular forms of words also guide and restrict our conduct in order to achieve a good human life and human flourishing.

I think that Anscombe's theory of promises is also a good example to investigate her methodology for moral philosophy. The conventional aspect of her argument is Wittgenstein-influenced; the natural aspect is Aristotle-influenced. Accordingly, the idea of "human linguistic practice" and related "practical necessity" presents a complete image of Anscombe's moral philosophy, a combination of social constructivism and Aristotelian naturalism.

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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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ANSCOMBE, PRACTICE, AND INDIGENOUS AGENCY: INTENTION IN NGĀI TAHU LETTERS, 1850–1950

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Abstract: In this paper we apply Anscombe's account of human linguistic practices and of intentional action in a novel way—to the acts, by members of the Ngāi Tahu tribe in colonial-era Aotearoa New Zealand, of writing Letters to the Editor of local and regional newspapers. We identify the salient contexts of those acts and then draw on Anscombe's work to identify intentional and moral actions that otherwise risk going unnoticed. Our analysis exemplifies Anscombe's and Wittgenstein's view that we can read off intentional action from behaviour in context and also yields a rich historical and conceptual account of the letter-writers. We argue that this approach has theoretical advantages for Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies.

Key Words: Anscombe; colonisation; Indigeneity; intentional action; Ngāi Tahu letters; Wittgenstein.

1. Introduction

Can Anscombe's account of human linguistic practices and intentional actions be usefully applied to historical documents, in particular to historical documents of Indigenous people? The documents to be investigated are newspaper Letters to the Editor written by Māori in colonial-era New Zealand (Maurice 2024).[1] In this paper, we ask three questions: Can we draw on Anscombe's and Wittgenstein's remarks on language-games and intentional actions in order to identify the intentional actions of letter-writers from the Ngāi Tahu tribe? If so, does this application yield any new insight, historical or philosophical? And does employing Anscombe's account in this way have theoretical advantages for Indigenous Studies? We argue that in each case the answer is *Yes*.

[1] These letters were collected and explored by Maurice (Ngāti Kahungunu), as part of her PhD research (Maurice 2024), using mostly the online historical newspaper archive, *Papers Past* (as part of Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa National Library of New Zealand), https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/. The framework and analysis in the current paper are wholly different from that in the PhD.

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Our starting-point is Wittgenstein's and Anscombe's view that the *context* of an action—i.e., the language game or form of life in which the action is embedded—determines the significance of the action. Given this, we argue that, first, Māori oratory in this period can plausibly be understood as involving distinct language-games, and; second, members of Ngāi Tahu, in writing letters to local and regional newspapers, were extending and adapting these language-games. The letters provided a space for both individual and collective voices of Māori during the cultural upheaval in Aotearoa New Zealand in the period between 1850 and 1950. Next, we employ Anscombe's famous explication of the concept of intention in order to hypothesise *which* intentional actions were performed by the letter-writers—i.e., under which forms of description it is appropriate to conceive their acts. We then widen the context of the letter-writers to include the «institutions» (Anscombe's term) of colonisation and Indigeneity. In sum, we argue, the «bustle of life» (to quote Wittgenstein) in which these Letters to the Editor were constructed and delivered makes it the case that the writers were performing complex intentional actions—even when their overt subject-matter could be construed as mundane.

There is a small but growing recent literature on Wittgenstein and concepts related to Indigeneity. Some of this research adds to already familiar themes in Wittgenstein scholarship: applying Wittgenstein's conception of a language-game to the translation of Indigenous languages (especially regarding legal contracts, e.g. Turner 2021) and scrutinising the implications of Wittgenstein's approach to religious discourse for Indigenous religion and spirituality (especially to aid in decolonising philosophy of religion, e.g. Haynes 2023, or in understanding religiosity, e.g. Burley 2012). Some recent research makes only minimal reference to Wittgensteinian concepts such as family resemblance or form of life (e.g. Dueck and Marossy 2021). Other recent research makes diverse and extensive use of Wittgenstein's ideas. The latter includes using Wittgenstein's methodology to clarify different uses of the term «indigenous religion» (Tafjord 2017), to understand Indigenous connections to place via his requirement that we «know our way about» a language-game (RC §33; Stickney 2024), and to highlight the geopolitical significance of Indigenous utterances (Medby 2023). In contrast to this recent literature, we focus on Wittgenstein's concept of context solely to introduce Anscombe's concept of an institution.

So far as we are aware, this is the first study to apply Anscombe's philosophical machinery directly to historical documents, let alone to documents by Indigenous people. In the flourishing recent literature on Anscombe, there is extensive research on her accounts of intentional action and practice (a very few examples, only to indicate the diversity here, are Chik 2024 on religious practice, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 2021 on linguistic practice involving perceptual verbs, and Capps 2022 on the «intention with which» as fundamental). To our knowledge, however, there is almost no research, recently or earlier, related to

Indigeneity—Bendik-Keymer (2021) briefly mentions elements in Anscombe's moral philosophy in a paper on Indigenous decolonisation, and Hamilton (2022) refers to Indigenous languages in discussing Anscombe's stance on Wittgenstein's supposed linguistic idealism, but these are unconnected to the topics we discuss in this paper.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the historical context of Māori in colonial-era Aotearoa New Zealand. In Section 3, we set out Wittgenstein's and Anscombe's understanding of practice, as represented in their discussions of language-games, forms of life, and institutions; we also briefly compare this understanding with Gadamer's account, to motivate our choice of the Anscombe-Wittgenstein approach. In Section 4, we investigate applying this approach to Ngāi Tahu oratorical practices and by extension to the Letters to the Editor written by members of Ngāi Tahu. Next, we test applying Anscombe's account of *chains of reasons for acting* to the letter-writers, to hypothesise their intentional actions (Section 5). In Section 6, we propose the institutions of colonisation and Indigeneity as part of the letter-writers' context and additional intentional actions. Section 7 considers two test cases for our proposal. Can we identify sizable intentional actions even in letter-writing on an apparently modest and mundane subject-matter? Also, using Anscombe's account of *moral action-descriptions*, can we identify moral actions in the letter-writing? Section 8 investigates whether we can expand the context of the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers to include the global struggle of Indigenous peoples. Last, we argue that Anscombe's approach has theoretical virtues for the field of Indigenous Studies (Section 9).

2. The historical setting of the Letters

The Ngāi Tahu Letters to the Editor (henceforth LE) form a crucial part of identifying Māori agency during colonisation. The relatively short history of colonial New Zealand begins roughly 300 years ago with the arrival of people from various parts of the globe, seeking a rich bounty of whales and seals (Ballantyne 2011: 239). Ngāi Tahu introductions to Pākehā (European settlers and their descendants) were primarily with whalers and sealers who were dropped off for seasonal hunting expeditions, and also with penal colony stowaways who were jumping ship to freedom. This slow and steady building of the relationship between Ngāi Tahu and Pākehā had the result that Ngāi Tahu incorporated Pākehā forms of life in their own time and on their own terms. From the 1790s to the 1840s, the influx of both ex-convicts and wealthy shipowners paved the way for organised immigration to the new settler colony in the South Pacific. For Ngāi Tahu, during the 50-years prior to the signing in 1840 of Te Tiriti o Waitangi—The Treaty of Waitangi, a treaty between Māori chiefs and the British Crown, and Aotearoa New Zealand's founding document—relationships with Pākehā were on a case-by-case basis. These interactions between Pākehā individuals and small

groups of Ngāi Tahu preceded the colonial introduction of literacy and a Pākehā language; they informed how Ngāi Tahu spoke of themselves and led Ngāi Tahu to form an unique relationship with Pākehā (O'Regan 2001; Stevens 2010). These initial encounters developed through mutual respect and were markedly different from those that occurred later with the first missionaries.

When the missionaries arrived in December 1814, they brought literacy, but this was indelibly bound up with religious conversion (Binney 1968). The missionaries' priority, unlike that of the traders, was to convert the «natives» from «heathen» spirituality to a more «civilised» monotheistic order.[2] The arrival of literacy, once widespread, had a profound impact on Māori; literacy enabled individuals to form «individual views» and «private communications»—people could «act in their own interests without reference to the group or fear of attracting its sanctions» (Head 2001: 25). The uptake of literacy amongst Māori was also the «democratisation of Māori society», enabling everyone to participate in socio-political life, by means of the colonial newspapers (Head 2001: 99).[3]

The shift from oral to written history is a large transition for any culture but took only 25 years in Aotearoa. In fact, during the 1840s–1850s, literate Māori outnumbered literate Pākehā (Derby 2021). Not only did Māori gain literacy in their own language, they also learned to read and write in English, again by means of the early 19th century missionaries. This is evident in the number of LE written by Māori and in the broad range of topics that these letters addressed. Since Māori had recently been an oral language society, newspapers were among the few available sources of non-biblical literary knowledge and bicultural fluency.

Several theorists have looked specifically at the emergence of print and literacy in New Zealand during the 1800s and 1900s (Binney 2001; Curnow et al. 2002; Jenkins 1993; Orbell 2002; Paterson 2010). These authors focus, however, on the pan-Māori experience, looking at Māoridom generally, as opposed to the tribal or local experience. Whilst this may serve to identify issues that face a particular ethnic grouping, it can obscure distinct tribal identities: for example, the forms of life of coastal-dwelling Māori differed significantly from those of inland-dwelling Māori. Different tribal identities informed the content of waiata and mōteatea (songs and chants), and other oral traditions passed down across generations. These oral forms worked alongside the whakairo (carvings) found in the carved meeting-houses throughout the country, with both serving as a vital

[2] The terms «native", «heathen», and «civilised» were used by Rev. A. N. Brown in 1837, Henry Williams in 1833, and Samuel Marsden in 1817, reaffirming references by Thomas Kendall in 1820 to «the Native Heart with its blind connections to barbarous customs» and by Bishop Pompallier in 1888 to the «infidel New Zealanders who were warriors and cannibals» (Elsmore 2011: 19–24).

[3] This included, in addition to LE by Māori, transcripts of hui (meetings) held in Town Halls and Marae throughout New Zealand, attended by Churchmen, politicians, and esteemed Māori leaders, and of Native Court Hearings.

means of transmitting whakapapa (genealogy) and tribal knowledge. In this paper, therefore, we focus solely on the letter-writers of Ngāi Tahu.

Next, we introduce Wittgenstein's and Anscombe's understanding of practice.

3. Language-games, forms of life, and institutions

Anscombe (1976: 193) wrote of «human linguistic practice», saying:

> «Linguistic practice» here does not mean merely the production of words properly arranged into sentences on occasions which we vaguely call «suitable». It is important that it includes activities *other* than the production of language, into which a use of language is interwoven. (1976: 194)[4]

We can flesh out Anscombe's position by returning to Wittgenstein. Acquiring a language, Wittgenstein said, «presupposes a surrounding of particular circumstances» (RFM: 26). In his view, the context in which a language is learned is itself part of the *meaning* of the signs in the language.[5] Context determines representational content: we react to a word «in a certain context» and the significance of the word «depends on the surroundings in which it is located» (LW I §366).

Linguistic practices are, to use Wittgenstein's term, language-games.[6] «Words have meaning only in the stream of life», he claimed, and this stream is a continuous whole, from which we only artificially distinguish individual language-games (LW I §913). In addition, for Wittgenstein, a word or other sign takes its meaning from multiple language-games; acquiring a language presupposes forms of life—that is, numerous overlapping and embedded language-games (RPP I §433; RFM: 26). Wittgenstein's stance implies that, to understand a speaker, we must see her behaviour in the context of her other actions, history, and social and natural environment—in short, in the «bustle of life» or «weave of life» (RPP I §625, LW I §862).

If we come into «a strange country with entirely strange traditions», we «do not *understand* the people», Wittgenstein said—that is, we do not know the context of their behaviour and so cannot identify the language-game(s) being played (PI: 223). That mostly we *can* come to understand unfamiliar traditions is due in part to the fact that humans largely share what Wittgenstein called the

[4] In quoted text—including in-text and displayed quotations from the LE—we follow the journal's style, e.g. by inserting double low quotations marks where the original has single or double high quotation marks. We have not otherwise altered the spelling or punctuation of the original letters (e.g. by inserting macrons in Māori words).

[5] We use the term «context» in place of various terms used by Wittgenstein, for example «Umwelt», «Umgebung» and «Umständen» and their cognates. See further Proudfoot in press.

[6] Wittgenstein said that language games are «ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language»: discussion of the language-game of (say) lying or promising is an abstraction from actual human behaviour (BB: 17).

«subtle shades» of human behaviour (RPP II §616). It is also due to evolved human psychology, according to Wittgenstein; «[c]ommanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of [human] natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing» (PI §25).[7] Anscombe takes the same approach, claiming that all sorts of behaviours, such as «greeting people», «giving gifts», «cleaning things», «hiding, storing, throwing away», and «dancing», are included in the «natural history» of humans (n.d./2008: 269).[8]

According to Anscombe, it is «obvious that whether a certain description is true of some event (or of some object) may depend on what happens at other times and places» (1979: 226). In her view, every description of an action presupposes the «institutions» that are required as «background» for our actions to *be* the actions that they are (1958: 69).[9] For example, the description «sending a bill» presupposes «the institution of buying and selling» (1958: 72). In Anscombe's terminology, the grocer's «carting a quarter of potatoes to my house and leaving them there» is a «brute fact» relative to the grocer's «supplying me with a quarter of potatoes» (1958: 71). The «institution of buying and selling» is the context against which the brute fact suffices for the grocer's having supplied me with the potatoes. In short, context determines not only representational content but also intentional action.

In this paper, our concern is to apply Anscombe's concept of an institution in a new domain and to assess that application, rather than to consider the concept in itself in any detail.[10] Nevertheless, in our view, the Anscombe-Wittgenstein approach to practice has merits in comparison with similar approaches by other philosophers—for example, Gadamer. Gadamer's claim that «*Being that can be understood is language*» is in respects analogous to Wittgenstein's claim that «It is *in language* that it's all done» (Gadamer 2004: 470; PG: 143).[11] According to Gadamer, «It is in language games … that the child becomes acquainted with the world. Indeed, everything we learn takes place in language games» (Gadamer 1976: 56). He claims that humans are «always situated» within «traditions», which act as background to these games (Gadamer 2004: 283). So far, the

[7] In addition, underlying human language-games are «very general facts of nature», which are part of the context in which we acquire concepts (LW I §209).

[8] According to Anscombe, «to have such-and-such linguistic practices is to have such-and-such concepts», but she rejects the view that this notion of a practice commits Wittgenstein to saying that, if there were no language-game involving the word «pain», there would be no pain (Anscombe 1976: 194, 190). In her view, although it is «enormously difficult to … avoid the falsehoods of idealism and the stupidities of realism», Wittgenstein does manage to achieve (as he said) «realism without empiricism». (Anscombe 1976: 192, 213).

[9] Henceforth, we use the term «institution» only in Anscombe's sense.

[10] This holds too for Anscombe's account of intentional action; our aim in this paper is solely to apply the account and judge its application for Indigenous Studies.

[11] For recent comparisons of Wittgenstein and Gadamer, see Lawn 2005; Horn 2017; Arnswald 2011.

Anscombe-Wittgenstein and Gadamer approaches are similar. However, an advantage of the former approach is that it carries a much lower epistemic cost than the latter. In Gadamer's view, all understanding is interpretation: an agent is playing «the game of *interpretation* that we all are engaged in every day», and—despite the agent's aim being to understand other speakers—«each person also speaks *his own* language» (Gadamer 1976: 32; 1976: 56, emphases added).[12] These views, which in older versions Wittgenstein explicitly rejected, encourage scepticism. They also, we shall suggest in Section 9, have an unwelcome result for Indigenous Studies. These problems do not arise for the Anscombe-Wittgenstein approach.

Our first question, then is, is: can we apply Anscombe's account of institutions to the Ngāi Tahu LE?

4. Whakapapa and whaikōrero

In this section, we propose two key institutions in the background of the LE written by Ngāi Tahu (but *not* those written by Pākehā) in colonial-era New Zealand. The first institution is the role of *whakapapa* in te ao Māori (the Māori worldview). Whakapapa links genealogical lines of descent back in time to the creation of the universe, establishing deep connections between people, places, and the natural environment. Whakapapa is both temporal and spatial: one can recall ancestors and trace lineage while walking among named landscapes that are represented in creation narratives. Against the background of whakapapa, the brute fact of beginning a letter with a genealogical reference becomes the intentional action of establishing authority and connection to place. For example, George Williams Metehau's letter begins with these words: «Kaiapoi was the place of all our forefathers: of Turangautahi, who left it to his offspring, who left it to our father, who lived at Kaiapoi» (Metehau 1852). Naming the environment emphasises the connection to the land: this letter continues, «When they reached Te Tuahiwi, Tane stood up and said, "Thou art come to thy place; for thee is all this place and land, all Tuahiwi"» (Metehau 1852).

Whakapapa locates individuals within a collective. Individuals reaffirm the connections of whakapapa through deliberate use of language and narrative structures, including metaphor and pepeha (tribal sayings). An agent's actions are judged not merely by the current interests of relevant parties, but by the many demands of ancestral whakapapa. Given this background institution, the brute fact of invoking an ancestral obligation becomes the intentional action of

[12] Wittgenstein's account of language games, which can plausibly be seen as deflationary, also carries a lower ontological cost than Gadamer's approach, which can be seen as inflationary. For example, according to Gadamer, with respect to language-games, it is «the game itself that plays», rather than the agent; «the play of language itself … addresses us, proposes and withdraws, asks and fulfills itself in the answer» (Gadamer 2004: 484).

demonstrating legitimate authority. For example, Tāre Wī Teihoka's letter (with others) says: «Here reads the request of the chiefs of Whanganui for Pita Te Hori to come to the gathering at Pūtiki-Wharanui. Pita's position is obliged by his whole Rūnanga [tribal area]» (Teihoka et al. 1872). The institution of whakapapa makes the letter-writers' behaviour itself part of the origin story that their descendants will recount. Thus Metehau's letter reads: «The fathers of our grandfathers were patriarchs; and to them descended the chieftainship, it had yielded to their forefathers; they yielded it to us,— to me and my brother, so that we are still chiefs» (Metehau 1852). Acting deliberately is seen as embodying whakapapa—that is, acting with honour and respect—and as enhancing mana (integrity and dignity), uplifting both the individual and the collective.

The second salient institution is the use of *whaikōrero* (oratory) in Ngāi Tahu society and communication.[13] Elements of whaikōrero, such as the use of metaphor and narrative storytelling, are evident in Māori literature of the 1800s, demonstrating the reach of literacy into a previously exclusively oral culture. Given the background of whaikōrero, the brute fact of employing metaphorical language in a letter becomes the intentional action of extending ceremonial oratory into the colonial public sphere. For example, John Patterson Tamanuiarangi's letter reads: «You heard our words in the meeting of days gone by. Our thoughts are still the same. We are a few people, the Maoris of this Island, and cleave to you the great people as a reliance for us all. This is all» (Tamanuiarangi 1863).

Prior to literacy, the recital of whakapapa had relied upon individuals with impeccable memories, trained to be the tribe's knowledge keepers. With the advent of writing and over the following century, writing significantly displaced the prestige of memory. Despite this, the oral methods persisted and many Māori continued to hold the oral tradition in high regard, as evidenced in ceremonial practices (Paterson 2010). This tie to an older form of rhetoric is evidenced in the distinctive style of Māori-authored letters in the late 1800s to early 1900s.[14] Seen in the context of whaikōrero, the brute fact of Ngāi Tahu writers employing traditional rhetorical forms in newspapers becomes the intentional action of extending the usual locations for ceremonial oratory to include other te reo Māori speakers, other members of Ngāi Tahu, members of other tribes, and also European settlers.

[13] Whakapapa and whaikōrero are related: the Māori love of metaphor in speech acts and narrative storytelling is thought to uphold the whakapapa of master orators, making skilful whaikōrero a significant social accomplishment.

[14] These letters include, not only the Ngāi Tahu LE, but also the near 3,000 Māori-authored letters during the 19th century to Donald McLean (The Papers of Sir Donald McLean, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa, MS-Group-1551, https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.9538).

The language of letters written along well-established whakapapa lines and employing whaikōrero was new to the pages of the newspapers and was a means of protecting and nurturing ancestral knowledge. We conclude that the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers were playing distinctive language-games, despite superficial similarities to the letters written by Pākehā—regardless of whether their letters were in te reo Māori or English.[15]

Assuming that we can properly describe the Ngāi Tahu LE in terms of these institutions, can we also apply Anscombe's account of intentional actions to the letter-writers?

5. Anscombe's Intention as a guide to the Letters

Anscombe's account of intentional action aligns with Wittgenstein's moral that «[i]t is *in language* that it's all done». She remarks, «I have defined intentional action in terms of language—the special question «Why?"» (1963/2000 §47):

> What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer that I shall suggest is that they are the actions to 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. (1963/2000 §5)[16]

According to Anscombe, «to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it» (1963/2000 §19).

For Anscombe (and Wittgenstein), what makes an action intentional is not some «interior act of intention» or «something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind»; an «introspective explanation» of intention is, she claims, useless and «leads us into inextricable confusions» (1963/2000 §27, 4, iii, 19). More generally, «an action is not called "intentional" in virtue of any extra feature which exists when it is performed» (1963/2000 §19). That one action is intentional and another not is a matter of «circumstances» rather than of «anything that is going on *then*» inside the agent (1963/2000 §24).[17]

[15] Where the letters were originally written in te reo Māori and then translated into English for publication, the meanings of the words in the published English version are in part determined by the roles that the original Māori words had in the bustle of *Māori* life. The complications arising from translation are apparent today in arguments around the Māori and English versions of He Whakaputanga/the Declaration of Independence and Te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi. Debates during discussion of Waitangi Tribunal claims centre on the precise meanings of English words such as «sovereignty» and Māori words such as «kāwanatanga» and «tino rangatiratanga».

[16] The question «Why?» is applied in a «special» sense, namely where «the question has not that sense if the answer is evidence or states a cause, including a mental cause; positively, the answer may (*a*) simply mention past history, (*b*) give an interpretation of the action, or (*c*) mention something future» (1963/2000 §16).

[17] Given the context, «*very* roughly speaking», Anscombe states, a man «intends to do what he does» (1963/2000 §25).

Anscombe poses a series of «Why?» questions to a hypothetical man who, knowing that the water is poisoned, is «pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house» (1963/2000 §23):

> «Why are you moving your arm up and down?»—«I'm pumping». «Why are you pumping?»—«I'm pumping the water-supply for the house». «Why are you beating out that curious rhythm?»,—«Oh, I found out how to do it, as the pump does click anyway, and I do it just for fun». «Why are you pumping the water?»—«Because it's needed up at the house» and (*sotto voce*) «To polish that lot off». «Why are you poisoning these people?»—«If we can get rid of them, the other lot will get in and…» (1963/2000 §23)[18]

This series begins with the question «Why are you moving your arm up and down» rather than (say) «Why are you generating those substances in your nerve fibres?», since the latter is *not* a question to which the question «Why?» applies in the relevant sense (1963/2000 §23). The man's answers constitute «chains of reasons for acting», and the chain of «Why?» questions can come to an end, if the speaker provides an «adequate answer» (1963/2000: vi, §40).[19]

Anscombe gives another example of a chain of reasons for action that is well-suited to our investigation. She writes:

> I put ink on paper in the form of letters. I'm writing something. I am in fact signing something with my name. And I'm thereby joining in a petition to the governor of the state—or prison—where I am an inhabitant. I am taking part in a campaign to get people tortured under interrogation. In doing this I am keeping a promise. I am avoiding trouble with some conspirators who have got me to promise to do that. (1993/1999: 68)

This example serves as a model for our account, in this and following sections, of the intentional actions of the Ngāi Tahu writers of LE.

Our first illustration is a letter from George Robinson to the Editor of the *Lyttelton Times*, published on 17 March 1891:

TO THE EDITOR.

[18] According to Anscombe, here «we can speak equally well of *four* … intentions, or of *one* intention—the last term that we have brought in in the series» (1963/2000 §26). She continues: «when we speak of one intention, we are speaking of intention *with which*; the last term we give in such a series gives the intention *with* which the act in each of its other descriptions was done, and this intention so to speak swallows up all the preceding intentions *with* which earlier members of the series were done.» (1963/2000 §26).

[19] As an example of an «inadequate description» of a human action, Anscombe suggests saying «he didn't "merely write his name on a bit of paper", he was signing such-and such a contract» (1982/2005: 214).

> Sir,—Having seen an advertisement in the *Akaroa Mail*, *re* Maori festival to be held at Onawe to celebrate the anniversary of the defeat of the Ngaitahu by the Rauparaha, I wish the public to know that the Ngaitahu suffered a reverse only at Onawe through the treachery of the Rauparaha, who were defeated at Tuturau, and again near Blenheim, when they had to take to their canoes and return to the North Island. As the Ngaitahu can hardly be expected to celebrate their defeat, as stated in the advertisement, they look upon it as an insult to them, and refuse to take any part in the «proceedings». Trusting you can find space in your widely read paper for the above.—I am, &c.,
>
> GEO. ROBINSON. (Robinson 1891)

The «defeat» that Robinson alludes to was a devastating raid against Ngāi Tahu by Te Rauparaha and his followers, who killed hundreds of people at Kaiapoi and Ōnawe in 1832. The proposal by the settlers to hold a «Maori Festival» on Ōnawe Peninsula represented profound disrespect—comparable to organising festivities at Monte Sole or Gallipoli. Still within living memory for tribal elders, in the 1890s these traumatic events remained deeply painful. The festival plan demonstrated colonial disregard for Māori cultural protocols and for historical trauma.

The readership of the *Lyttelton Times* was predominantly settler colonials, of European descent and most likely male, who were landowners.[20] Robinson had been approached by the festival promoters (he was a well-known local Māori[21] in the Pākehā community, through work affiliations in surveying and through his wrestling prowess). Robinson initially agreed, on behalf of local Māori, to orchestrate and deliver a «Māori demonstration» for the festival;[22] the «Maori demonstration» was reported in newspapers as «under the management of Mr George Robinson».[23] However, the naming of Robinson, over the course of several months, was never directly confirmed by Robinson himself until the day of the festival, when his letter (quoted in full above) was published, rescinding all prior commitments.

[20] The 1890s saw Banks Peninsula become a region focused on agriculture and tourism, predominantly sheep and beef farming (Mackay 2004: 30–32). In the time preceding the festival, several narratives concerning Te Rauparaha's successful raids at Kaiapoi and Ōnawe were published in local and national newspapers. These narratives provided the public with a colonial lens reaffirming the savage nature of Māori whilst also denying Ngāi Tahu agency in telling their own stories.

[21] On the following Monday evening, Robinson met with Mr Callaghan, a local landowner, and his associates to discuss plans for a festival to be held in Ōnawe; this meeting was documented by the *Akaroa Mail* on February 27th, 1891 (Cowan, J., Research papers relating to Ngai Tahu history (1830–1923), catalogue reference no. MS-Papers-11310-94, National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Matauranga o Aotearoa, https://natlib.govt.nz/records/32044345).

[22] Reported in «Peninsula News: the Feast at Onawe», *Akaroa Mail and Banks Peninsula Advertiser* XX(1526), 2. 27 February 1891.

[23] For example, in «Akaroa News: the O[n]awe Fete», *Lyttelton Times* LXXV(9351), 3. 2 March 1891.

Given the historical setting of Robinson's letter, and using as models the two passages from Anscombe above, a hypothetical conversation with Robinson, based on a chain of «Why?» questions, might begin as follows:

> «Why did you write your name on that bit of paper?»—«I'm writing something. I am in fact signing something with my name. And I'm thereby sending a letter to the Editor». «Why are you writing a letter to the Editor?»—«I'm presenting some historical facts about the events at Ōnawe». «Why are you presenting those facts?»—«Because the advertisement misrepresents our history by suggesting that Ngāi Tahu would celebrate their own defeat». «Why are you concerned with this misrepresentation?»— «To protect the mana and history of Ngāi Tahu, as Te Rauparaha succeeded only through treachery, and Ngāi Tahu later defeated them at Tuturau and near Blenheim». «Why is protecting historical truth important?»—«Because the festival organisers are asking Ngāi Tahu to participate in something that dishonours our ancestors and our whakapapa». «Why are you making this public rather than just declining privately?»— «To ensure the wider Pākehā community understands that what they are proposing is offensive to Ngāi Tahu and to correct the public record».

If we now set the letter against the institutions of whakapapa and whaikōrero, we can develop the chain differently, as follows:

> … «Why are you presenting those facts?»—«Because I am upholding the whakapapa of Ngāi Tahu, which connects us to Ōnawe and our ancestors who fought Te Rauparaha». «Why are you upholding this whakapapa?»—«Because as a descendant, I carry the responsibility to ensure our ancestral narratives are accurately preserved and communicated to both our people and the wider community». «Why are you speaking in this formal way through a newspaper?»—«I am engaging in whaikōrero through this new medium, extending our oratory tradition beyond traditional spaces to reach those who would otherwise not hear our voices». «Why do you care about communicating with the Pākehā readers?»—«Because the land itself carries our stories, and when others misrepresent those stories, they disrespect not only our history but our very connection to place».

Robinson's act of writing to a newspaper is now a brute fact relative to an intentional act of cultural guardianship. Here the descriptions «upholding whakapapa» and «engaging in whaikōrero» point to the institutions that enable the letter-writer to assert Ngāi Tahu authority. The chain of intentional actions stops where, given these institutions, Robinson provides an adequate answer. For example, if asked «Why do you feel personally responsible for correcting these misrepresentations about Ngāi Tahu history?», Robinson might reply as follows: «because I have kaitiakitanga [guardianship] responsibilities to uphold the mana of Ngāi Tahu and our tūpuna [ancestors] in the public sphere».

Several different chains of reasons for acting are possible in reconstructing Robinson's intentional actions. For example, we might have begun with «Why are you writing a letter to the Editor of the *Lyttelton Times*?», and received the reason «Because this newspaper is widely read» or «Because another newspaper had an advertisement about a Māori festival»—the chains would bifurcate at this point. In all cases, however, when set against the background institutions of whakapapa and whaikōrero, Robinson would have been asserting Ngāi Tahu's continued cultural authority over their own narratives. He was also acting as a knowledge keeper in a new medium, maintaining the mana of his ancestors by correcting misrepresentations, and extending traditional Māori oratory practices into the colonial public sphere.

Assuming, then, that we can properly apply Anscombe's account of institutions and intentional actions to the letter-writers, does doing so yield historical insight? In the next two sections we expand the set of salient institutions and corresponding intentional actions—this in itself, we propose, increases our understanding of colonial-era Aotearoa New Zealand.

6. Colonisation and Indigeneity

Colonisation and Indigeneity can be viewed as two further institutions, or as a single institution with two aspects.

Colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand operated not only through physical occupation of land but through the strategic control of language, media, and cultural representation. The missionaries' agenda for newspapers was to change Māori thought and behaviour (Paterson 2010).[24] Europeans viewed Māori in subordinate roles (as domestic workers, deferential labourers, or church attendees), characterising them as «docile» if not yet «civilised» (Moon 2009: 54). These demeaning perceptions were widespread because New Zealand's economic success relied on maintaining the fiction of the «acquiescent native»: land acquisition from submissive Māori was seen as essential to guarantee the success of the colonial economy and the prosperity of European traders, bankers, farmers, officials and politicians (Moon 2009: 54). The imposition of a foreign language by colonial authorities and settlers also contributed to the continuing success of the colonial agenda, which also introduced specialised religious and legal languages. By introducing and implementing new languages for Māori, assimilation into European forms of life could more easily be effected: Europeans had a long history of settler colonialism, and so colonial ways of thinking were deeply ingrained in the European lexicon.

[24] The homogenisation of Māori tribes was a colonial tool used to deny the role that tribal agency plays in individual Māori identities: it was easier for government bureaucracy to deal with one entity, rather than multiple regional tribal agents.

Indigeneity exists only within the colonial framework of identity politics: to be Indigenous is to be (a member of) an oppressed people under a colonial regime. The very act of writing letters to colonial newspapers involves asserting tribal authority while operating within colonial institutions. To show this, the hypothetical conversation with George Robinson depicted in Section 5 might continue as follows:

> …«Why are you presenting those facts?»—«Because the colonial newspaper's advertisement misrepresents the historical events at Ōnawe by suggesting Ngāi Tahu would celebrate what was essentially their own defeat». «Why are you concerned with this misrepresentation?»—«Because as an Indigenous person under colonisation, I must contest when our tribal history is distorted in ways that dishonour our ancestors». «Why contest this particular representation?»—«Because Ōnawe is not simply a historical location but a place embedded in our whakapapa, and allowing a celebration of our defeat there would damage our continuing relationship to that place». «Why use their newspaper to contest this?»—«Because I must navigate colonial institutions while maintaining my Indigenous identity; and also their newspaper reaches the colonial audience, who need correcting».

Here the description «contesting colonial narratives» presupposes the institution of Indigeneity: in this context, the brute fact of putting pen to paper suffices for the letter-writer to assert tribal autonomy despite colonial pressures—that is, to negotiate colonial spaces while maintaining an Indigenous identity. Robinson was reasserting tribal sovereignty over colonial narratives, and also demonstrating how Indigenous peoples could appropriate colonial technologies such as newspapers in order to maintain cultural integrity.

Our second illustration of reading the LE with the aid of Anscombe's *Intention* is a letter from multiple authors to the Editor of *The Wananga* (*The Forum*), published on 5 January 1878:

> TO THE EDITOR OF THE WANANGA,
> And to Colonel McDonnell and Mr. Commissioner Parris, to Karaitiana Takamoana, and all those Europeans who are captains (managers) of TE WANANGA.
>
> Will you and your Europeans give your clear thoughts to this our letter of request to the chief (editor) of TE WANANGA, that he endeavor to find an European who is a thorough Maori scholar, to take charge of the work of our paper (newspaper). As there is not any such European here at Otakau or at Tautahi, hence our request to Colonel McDonnell that he endeavor to find some European who thoroughly understands the Maori language, to take charge of the work of our printing press. That is all.

> We have sent a letter to the Honorable John Sheehan, and to Governor Grey, of which this is a copy for all of us from
> MATIHA TIRAMOREHU
> RAWIRI T'EMAMARU
> HAMIORA WEKA
> TEONE MAMARU
> HEREWINI IOA
> TEONE REHU
> HEMARA NAKI
> (Tiramōrehu et al. 1878)

In this case, the chain of «Why?» questions might go as follows:

> «Why are you writing a letter collectively to the Editor?»—«We're making a formal request to the editor of *Te Wananga*». «Why are you making this request to *Te Wananga*?»—«Because we need a European who thoroughly understands te reo Māori to manage our printing press». «Why do you need such a person?»—«Because we lack such expertise at Otakau and Tautahi, yet we wish to maintain our own newspaper». «Why do you want your own newspaper?»—«To ensure our voices and perspectives are represented accurately in print media». «Why is having your own newspaper important?»—«Because within colonial society, newspapers are powerful institutions that shape public discourse, and we must participate in this discourse on our own terms». «Why address Europeans who manage *Te Wananga*?»—«Because we are navigating the colonial power structures while asserting our right to self-representation through print».[25]

In context, the letter-writers were acknowledging that, while maintaining Māori content control, they required European technical expertise. In requesting a «thorough Maori scholar», they were committing to accuracy in translation across cultural boundaries, and affirming that authentic communication requires a deep understanding of language beyond mere technical competence. They were also challenging the colonial tendency to homogenise Māori identity and language, and were striving to maintain autonomous Indigenous communication channels while operating within colonial structures.

The institutions so far discussed in this paper are not salient only for the 19th century. By the early twentieth century, certainly much had changed politically in Aotearoa; nevertheless, the same institutions remain important if we are to understand Ngāi Tahu letter-writers of this period. Our third illustration is a letter from Hilda Traill to the Editor of *The Press*, published on 3 October 1938. At this time, New Zealand had a Labour government and socialism was central to Māori

[25] We can also see in this letter the other institutions so far discussed: given the institution of *whakapapa*, collective authorship demonstrates tribal unity, and the formal public nature of the request reflects *whaikōrero* adapted to written form.

concerns. Intergenerational differences between older and younger Māori showed how Māori had adapted to colonial society. A part of Traill's letter reads as follows:

> TO THE EDITOR OF THE PRESS
> … The Maori, as «Wiremu Teira» says, is truly worthy of better status.[26] The pick, shovel, and axe jobs are only blind alley jobs, and the young Maori and pakeha men now on public works, will (if the present state of affairs continues) be old men long before their time. I have not as yet noticed where Mr Savage [Michael Joseph Savage, the Prime Minister] has made provision for «burnt out labourers» in his fancy Social Security Act. Perhaps he realises that within a few years' time there will not be any need, as the men will by then, have become like the tool itself, «just mere slaves». As I see it that is the fate from which Sir Apirana Ngata [Minister for Native Affairs in the previous Liberal government] is trying to save the Maori race.[27] Hence his appeal to the Maori.[28]
> (Mrs) HILDA M. TRAILL.
> Kaiapoi, September 30, 1938.
> (Traill 1938)

In this case, the chain of «Why?» questions might proceed as follows:

> «Why are you writing a letter to the Editor?»—«I'm endorsing Wiremu Teira's views on Native Affairs and supporting Sir Apirana Ngata's position». «Why are you supporting Sir Apirana Ngata? »—«Because he is trying to save the Māori race from becoming "mere slaves" through manual labour». «Why is this important to you?»—«Because our whakapapa is threatened when young Māori are limited to "blind alley jobs" that offer no future». «Why oppose the Labour Government's approach?»—«Because their policies treat Māori as merely votes to be won, ignoring our distinctive cultural identity and

[26] Between 1892 and 1949, 44 LE were written by or mention Wiremu Teira, primarily in *The* [Christchurch] *Press*, and several of these appeared in the same period as Traill's letters. However, it is unclear whether Teira is one person or multiple people with the same name.

[27] Sir Āpirana Turupa Ngata was a prominent Māori politician, lawyer, and scholar who served as Minister of Native Affairs, 1928–1934. He advocated for Māori economic development through land consolidation schemes and cultural preservation, claiming that Māori could adapt to modern systems while maintaining their identity (see Walker 2001).

[28] In her published letter, Traill also recommended that young Māori engage with contemporary political philosophy, saying: «As for Socialism, I would rather every Maori study it for himself. They will find Herbert Spencer's works and Bertrand Russell's most helpful, and will go a long way towards getting a clear insight into pakeha politics, and a better understand of life as it really is». We can then ask: why did Traill recommend reading Spencer and Russell? Her answer might be: «Because navigating our Indigeneity in 1938 requires understanding Pākehā politics and philosophy, in order effectively to resist assimilation while adapting to modern realities». Traill was advocating for the development of analytical tools that would allow Māori to assess colonial political systems from a position of intellectual autonomy, rather than passively adopting Pākehā ideologies.

needs». «Why advocate for Māori to wield the pen rather than the pick and shovel?»—«Because education and intellectual engagement allow us to resist colonial economic subordination while maintaining our cultural autonomy».

Behind Traill's letter stand whakapapa, whaikōrero, colonisation, and Indigeneity. In appealing to Wiremu Teira and Sir Āpirana Ngata, Traill was connecting past and present leadership, creating a whakapapa of Māori political thought, and establishing her authority to speak on contemporary issues. In structuring the letter to build from specific economic critique to broader philosophical recommendations and in advocating for critical engagement with Pākehā political theory, Traill was following whaikōrero patterns and positioning herself as an intermediary between ancestral wisdom and future Māori intellectual development. At a time when colonisation had progressed from territorial to economic and political domination, Traill was identifying herself as part of «the Maori race» needing to be «save[d]» from economic exploitation. She was also asserting her Indigenous identity by demonstrating insider knowledge of Māori political leadership and objectives, thereby positioning herself as understanding and interpreting Ngata's political strategy and «appeal to Maori».

7. Enlarging the set of intentional actions

In this section, we suggest two further examples where presupposed institutions suffice to expand the range of actions of the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers: the case of a letter that might seem to have little content and the case of moral actions.

7.1. The price of potatoes

Could we, using Anscombe's account, derive similar results even where the explicit subject-matter of a letter is extremely modest? Our final letter addresses this question. It was written by Hone Wetere to the Editor of *The Star* and published on 28 November 1874:

> TO THE EDITOR OF THE STAR.
>
> SIR,—This is my thought about the prices of various articles. For instance, potatoes are not easily grown; there is much trouble, and there are many contingencies. At first, when new, the price may be 1s for a certain quantity, then it falls to 6d and to 4d.
>
> Other things—mutton, for instance—go up rapidly; 6d is charged for a single pound, and there are many consumers.
>
> Why do not the papers publish the market prices of produce, that we all may know to sell and how to buy.
>
> Your obedient servant,
> HONE WETERE.
> Rapaki, Nov. 24.
> (Wetere 1874)

Hone Wetere was a member of Ngāti Wheke, a hapū (subtribe) of Ngāi Tahu, from Rāpaki, a settlement on Banks Peninsula. Rāpaki was established as a Māori reserve following the 1848 land purchases by the Crown (Fisher 2023). In 1874, Māori communities were economically marginalised: despite being significant producers of potatoes and other crops, they were often disadvantaged by price fluctuations and limited access to market information (Barnes et al. 2018).

Why did Wetere write this letter, which the newspaper published under the title «A MAORI'S NOTION»?[29] Until the arrival of newspapers, knowledge sharing could only take place kanohi ki te kanohi (face to face). Literacy and print enabled Māori writing to be published on an unprecedented scale, with LE making Ngāi Tahu early social media influencers. This is clear if we compare the relative lack of active participation by Pākehā in te ao Māori during the period 1850–1950, when Pākehā were largely deficient in te reo Māori, with the greater participation of Māori in te ao Pākehā (the Pākehā worldview). During the same time-frame, Māori were actively participating in te ao Pākehā and embracing literacy, not only in their own language but also in English. In this brief letter, then, Wetere would have been a key opinion leader.

If in addition we set Wetere's letter in the context of the institutions discussed in this paper, we can identify additional intentional actions. In structuring the letter, Wetere was acknowledging the mana of the community, giving evidence of systematic disadvantage, and confronting the colonial system—and thereby following traditional oratorical principles. He was advocating for economic transparency that would benefit Māori producers, challenging systemic inequities in market access and information, demanding equal participation by Māori in colonial trading systems—and in so doing, carrying out a whakapapa obligation to nurture collective wellbeing. He was also using colonial media to speak to the public. In sum, writing a letter about the market price of potatoes is resisting colonisation and asserting an Indigenous voice in economic matters.

7.2. Moral action-descriptions

In Anscombe's view, all human action is either (morally) good or bad: «[a]ll human action is moral action» (1982/2005: 209).[30] Her account of the concept of moral value in general parallels her account of the concept of intention. The moral quality of an action is not an «extra ingredient» which some human actions have; in particular, an agent's purposes are not a matter of an «inner act» (1982/2005: 209, 223). Instead, for Anscombe, what is primary are «moral action-

[29] The editorial choice to racially mark Wetere's straightforward economic analysis—rather than titling it simply «Market Prices» or «Produce Pricing»—reveals contemporaneous attitudes toward Māori participation in economic discourse.

[30] A «human action» here is not limited to an *intentional* human action (Anscombe 1982/2005: 213).

descriptions»—those descriptions «which suggest, at least suggest, good or bad», and where we are concerned with «*specific* goodness or badness» (1982/2005: 213–214). In determining the appropriate descriptions, context is again crucial: Anscombe claims that «[c]ircumstances, and the immediate facts about the means you are choosing to your ends, dictate what descriptions of your intention you must admit» (1982/2005: 223).[31] In short, just as we read off an agent's intentional actions from her behaviour in context, so we read off the moral value of those actions.

In Sections 5 and 6, we described George Robinson as protecting the mana and history of Ngai Tahu and correcting misrepresentations. We also described Matiaha Tiramōrehu and his co-authors as asserting their right to self-representation; and Hilda Traill as advocating for treating Māori as (in effect) ends in themselves, rather than as a means to the colonists' ends. These descriptions of the authors' actions are not, to use Anscombe's term, «neutral or indifferent» action-descriptions (Anscombe 1982/2005: 213). Rather, these action-descriptions suggest some «specific goodness» about the actions, and so are also *moral* action-descriptions. Unless further «circumstances» rule otherwise, these are good actions.

Given the institutions of whakapapa and whaikōrero, there are likely additional descriptions of the letter-writers' actions that are also moral action-descriptions. For example, for Māori, the letter-writers are *honouring* the past, present, and future and *aiming to uplift* the collective, through making oratorical connections to their ancestors and descendants. They are also *fulfilling a duty* (to embody whakapapa) and thereby *respecting* their ancestors and their descendants. More generally, the letter-writers are *acting so as to be the ancestors that their descendants deserve*—the intention with which they act is that future generations will judge them to have fulfilled their whakapapa obligations honourably.

We conclude that using Anscombe's account of institutions and intentional action to investigate the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers does generate historical insight into colonial-era Aotearoa. But does our experiment of applying Anscombe's account to historical documents offer any specifically philosophical benefit?

8. Testing philosophical intuitions

In contributing to public debates, the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers were plainly *challenging and resisting oppression* by the settler colonists. Using this moral action-description raises an intriguing question: would it be appropriate to set the letter-writers in the global environment in which numerous other Indigenous

[31] We might ask, for example, if the agent's «purposes» in performing the action are specifically good, or are there surrounding «circumstances» that might «put a different complexion on it»? (Anscombe 1982/2005: 214).

peoples—at very different times and places from the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers—strive for autonomy and self-determination? And could we use this context to extend the chains of reasons for acting?

These questions point to further aspects of Anscombe's account. How far is it legitimate to expand the set of institutions (and corresponding intentional and moral actions) before there is a «break in the series of answers that one may get» to the repeated question «Why?» (1963/2000 §23). Specifically, at what point would introducing more distant background institutions constitute an excessively «sentimental characterisation» of an agent's actions (1963/2000 §20)? These are important questions to pursue, as part of either an application or a theoretical investigation of Anscombe's account. The Ngāi Tahu letter-writers constitute a real-world example with which to test our philosophical intuitions in addressing these questions.

We lack space here to address these questions in any detail. However, we suggest one example. Contemporary theorists speak of Indigenous peoples demonstrating, empowering, and asserting self-determination or *Indigenous agency*. Does Anscombe's approach permit us to say that the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers were also demonstrating Indigenous agency—even though they would not have described themselves in those exact terms? In Sections 5–7, we have described Robinson, Tiramōrehu and his co-authors, Traill, and Wetere as, for example, protecting the mana and history of Ngāi Tahu, asserting Ngāi Tahu's continued cultural authority, contesting colonial narratives, asserting tribal autonomy, challenging the colonial tendency to homogenise Māori, maintaining autonomous Indigenous communication channels, and appropriating colonial technologies. It is plausible that the modern description «demonstrating Indigenous agency» is simply a shorthand for the intentional actions already attributed to the letter-writers. If so, we *can* conclude that Robinson, Tiramōrehu and his co-authors, Traill, and Wetere were all *demonstrating Indigenous agency*. If persuasive, this example shows that seemingly anachronistic descriptions of historical agents can be proper once background institutions are recognized.

Next, our third question: does employing Anscombe's account as we do in this paper have theoretical advantages for Indigenous Studies

9. Significance for Indigenous Studies

The fields of Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies have rapidly expanded and in the 21st century continue to grow in scope and influence (canonical and more recent texts include Deloria Jr. 1969; Grande 2015; Said 1985; Bhaba 1994; and Spivak 2023). Work done in Aotearoa, by Māori and Pākehā researchers, has contributed to these fields (e.g., Smith 1999/2021; Jackson 2007; Belich 2002; Spoonley 2017; and Bell 2014). Much of the research in these fields stresses the importance of specific cultural contexts and the imperative to understand Indigenous peoples' own accounts of their lives and actions, and it also highlights

numerous examples of Indigenous agency that are typically obscured by traditional histories. Our investigation in this paper, therefore, fits into this space. However, Anscombe's philosophical machinery has distinctive features, which yield a novel contribution to current research.

First, using Anscombe's account requires us to ask what Indigenous agents *were doing* rather than how power *operated upon them* or how they *were represented.* This differentiates our investigation from explorations within political theory, which typically address colonial legal and political power structures and settler-Indigenous power relations (e.g., Coulthard 2014 examines how colonial state recognition policies constrain Indigenous political action within settler-colonial frameworks). It also differentiates our investigation from discussions within discourse studies, which typically focuses on settlers' representations of Indigenous people (e.g., Said 1985 analyses how Western orientalist discourse constructed colonised peoples as passive objects of knowledge and control). In the Ngāi Tahu LE, the political theorist might see Indigenous peoples' subjugation to colonial legal frameworks and their forced participation in settler-colonial discourse; the discourse analyst might see Indigenous voices being filtered through colonial media structures. Anscombe's approach, however, concentrates attention on Indigenous people's reasons for acting.

Second, using Anscombe's account focuses inquiry on *Indigenous* institutions (whakapapa and whaikōrero) when identifying contexts that in part determine the intentional and moral actions of Indigenous people. This differentiates our investigation from typical discussions within cultural studies, which may treat Indigenous cultural practices as static traditions or as responses to colonial disruption (e.g., Bhabha's (1994) concept of *mimicry* analyses Indigenous cultural practices as hybrid responses to colonial encounters, emphasising how colonialism disrupted and transformed traditional practices). The cultural studies theorist might say that the Ngāi Tahu LE demonstrate the persistence of traditional cultural forms within colonial contexts, or show how Indigenous cultures adapt to colonial pressures. This approach, however, overlooks the living Indigenous institutions that turn the brute facts of the letter-writers' putting pen to paper into specific intentional and moral actions.

These features of Anscombe's approach have a theoretical advantage for Indigenous Studies. Several accounts in the extant literature, while sophisticated, frame Indigenous responses to colonialism in terms of (only one of) resistance or accommodation. In our view, the Ngāi Tahu letter-writers were performing *multiple* intentional actions; these actions, moreover, were in part determined by *Indigenous* institutions. The letter-writers were using colonial technologies and forums in order to perform actions determined by background Indigenous institutions—this is to resist *and* to accommodate. Sometimes too the extant literature, in order to focus on Indigenous perspectives, risks romanticising the

actions of Indigenous peoples—that is, presenting these actions as somehow outside of, or immune to, colonial power relations. Using the approach in this paper, the letter-writers were not autonomous agents operating outside of colonial power structures, but neither were they merely products of colonial representations or power structures.

Employing Anscombe's approach has a third distinctive feature. The chain of «Why?» questions constitutes a *practical procedure* for disentangling complex and iterated intentional actions of individuals and groups. For example, in Section 4 we quoted from Tāre Wī Teihoka's letter (with others), requesting Pita Te Hori to attend an important gathering at Pūtiki-Wharanui. A political theorist might say that Teihoka and his co-signatories were responding to competing political pressures between emerging Indigenous political movements and the colonial authorities, or that they were negotiating Indigenous participation in settler-colonial forums. Using Anscombe's approach, we can also say that, in writing the letter, Teihoka and his co-signatories were following whaikōrero conventions of formal collective address, fulfilling their rūnanga (tribal area) obligations to ensure proper tribal representation at competing hui,[32] and asking for legitimate tribal authority to mediate a process of mutual evaluation. Anscombe's approach makes central, not broad (and pre-determined) theoretical themes, but the *specific* actions of *individual* Indigenous agents. This too has merit for Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies.

In addition, Anscombe's approach does not give rise to the problems associated with Gadamer's and similar hermeneutic accounts of practice. It is central to Gadamer's account that understanding a text or person always involves «a fusion of horizons»: «the interpreter's own meaning enters in as well» (Gadamer 2004: 578). There is always «dialogue between tradition and its interpreter», Gadamer claims, and so the interpreter cannot «speak of an original meaning of the work» without acknowledging the part that their own understanding plays (Gadamer 2004: 457, 578). This is the «universal hermeneutic process of horizon-formation and fusion» (Gadamer 2004: 578). This approach creates conceptual problems—for example, in making sense of the concept of communication or the distinction between author and interpreter. Also, the approach is particularly hazardous when applied to Indigenous agents or texts. In the case of the Ngāi Tahu letters, a Gadamerian would examine how current scholarly understanding fuses with that of the original letter-writers, claiming that cultural positioning shapes interpretation and that the investigation is one of creative meaning-making (rather than identifying original semantic content or intentional action). The limitation of this hermeneutical approach, even when culturally sensitive, is that it risks perpetuating (what we shall call) *interpretive*

[32] They were ensuring representation because their rūnanga had identified «transgressions committed by Māori and by Pākehā» and this required accountability from both sides (Teihoka et al. 1872).

colonization—that is, the interpreter's prioritising their cultural positioning over Indigenous ways of understanding and relating to their own texts.

10. Conclusion

Our investigation demonstrates that Anscombe's account of institutions and intention can be usefully employed in order to identify the intentional actions of Ngāi Tahu letter-writers in colonial-era Aotearoa. The investigation generates historical insight, showing that the letter-writers were extending traditional knowledge-sharing practices to new domains and converting the European format of newspaper correspondence into a vehicle for upholding tikanga Māori (Māori lore, practices, and customs). The investigation also generates real-world examples with which to test philosophical intuitions regarding Anscombe's account and demonstrates the merits of Anscombe's account for the fields of Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies.

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