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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