

Anscombe I: Background, methodology and the three heads

I intend there to be a webpage for the course:

<https://rjh221.user.srcf.net/courses/anscombe>

I. The Moral Background

Mr Truman's degree, May 1956. (Pamphlet 1957) What were Truman's intentions?

'Modern Moral Philosophy' 1958: the current bankruptcy of the top down approach; the move to bottom-up, virtue theoretic accounts. The importance of context (e.g. in deriving an ought from and is); the need for an adequate philosophy of psychology p. 169 i.e. an account that could underpin the doctrine of double effect.

In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology. For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a "virtue." This part of the subject-matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is—a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis—and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear. For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as "doing such-and-such" is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required.

Intention 1957; from lectures given in Hilary (= Lent) term 1957. So published very quickly.

2. Methodology

Depth Grammar; going beyond the merely verbal elements, identifying the 'form of life' it which it is located.

Is Anscombe interested in describing 'mental processes'? She says:

But if Aristotle's account were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd. The interest of the account is that it describes an order which is there whenever actions are done with intentions; the same order as I arrived at in discussing what 'the intentional action' was, when the man was pumping water. [§42 Speaking of Aristotle's examples of practical reasoning]

Wiseman: “When Anscombe examines and describes a human life shaped by the concept of intention, it can *appear* that she is talking about individual minds, but she is not.” (p.4) OK; but surely she *is* talking about individual actors (and about what they think) in a social context.

The three voices, according to Wiseman: The Descriptive (the constraints on any theory, that must be accepted if we are not to change the subject matter); The Intuitive (what we are likely to say about this at first blush, reflections that frequently lead us astray); the Philosophical (getting clear on the matter). Note that accommodating our first intuitions, or what we would naturally say, is not what we are about. Wiseman contrasts this with Austin, and with McDowell. (Is this fair?)

An example: §1:

Very often, when a man says ‘I am going to do such-and-such’, 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 employ a concept of ‘intention’; now if we set out to describe this concept, and took only one of these three kinds of statement as containing our whole topic, we might very likely say things about what ‘intention’ means which it would be false to say in one of the other cases. For example, we might say ‘Intention always concerns the future’. But an action can be intentional without being concerned with the future in any way. Realising this might lead us to say that there are various senses of ‘intention’, and perhaps that it is thoroughly misleading that the word ‘intentional’ should be connected with the word ‘intention’, for an action can be intentional without having any intention in it. Or alternatively we may be tempted to think that only actions done with certain further intentions ought to be called intentional. And we may be inclined to say that ‘intention’ has a different sense when we speak of a man’s intentions simpliciter—i. e. what he intends to do—and of his intention in doing or proposing something—what he aims at in it. But in fact it is implausible to say that the word is equivocal as it occurs in these different cases. 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. There is, however, nothing wrong with taking a topic piecemeal. I shall therefore begin my enquiry by considering expressions of intention.

Wittgenstein’s question:

Let us not forget this: when ‘I raise my arm’, my arm goes up. And the problem arises: What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm? (1963, §621)

Wittgenstein is probably rejecting the presuppositions of that question. Anscombe certainly is. We don’t start with the arm going up, and then add a further, independent factor, that makes it a case of my raising my arm. Rather we *start* with the

characterization of raising my arm; this entails that my arm goes up, but we cannot understand raising my arm as in terms of my arm going up + some further element.

This is now a familiar idea, but Anscombe was very much one of the first. Compare: being red \neq being coloured + a further factor. Being red entails being coloured, but can't be constructed from it by adding something else. Similarly Williamson denies that knowledge = truth + belief + some third factor.

Other prescient ideas. (i) Deviant causal chains: "If someone says 'Tremble' and I tremble I am not obeying him—even if I tremble because he said it in a terrible voice. To play it as obedience would be a kind of sophisticated joke (characteristic of the Marx Brothers)" (§20). (ii) What we would need to get clear on to say that someone was truly indifferent to an outcome. (§25)

Some other things that Anscombe doesn't seem terribly interested in but that have loomed large in subsequent discussion:

(i) whether saying that an action is done for a reason is to deny that it is caused. She doesn't talk much about causation in *Intention*. It is true that she does introduce a notion of 'mental causation', but this is a very specific usage. In general she seems too unsure of what causation is to draw any major conclusions.

(ii) insisting on the importance of the progressive aspect: 'I was (in the process of) intending to ...' etc. (see, e.g. §23); contrast the verbs with which this is not available, such as 'knows' (*'I was knowing that...'). There has been a fair bit of interesting discussion of this recently (Thompson, Lavin etc.), and we will come back to it; but although she does talk about it, it isn't something that comes up explicitly in Anscombe very much.