

Anscombe II: Intentional Action

I. The topic under the three heads

Contents §1:

The subject introduced under three heads: expression of intention for the future, intentional action, and intention in acting.

(i) The geography of the discussion:

1. The expression of intention. §§ 2–4; 50–2
2. Intentional action Explicit focus, §§ 5–20; but occurs frequently thereafter.
3. The intention with which a thing is done.

Wiseman takes the discussion of the intention with which a thing is done to start at §22, presumably in the light of this passage:

In all this discussion, when I have spoken of the answer to the question ‘Why?’ as mentioning an intention, the intention in question has been of course the intention with which a man does what he does. We must now turn to the closer examination of this. (§22)

I think it is clear from this quotation that the discussion was at least implicit long before. The question ‘Why?’ is first raised in §5; the discussion of intention relevant to it is raised in §12; it comes back in §16; and is very much in focus from §20 onwards. It’s not really obvious when it ends. Wiseman says §40; I’m not sure why. In §50 Anscombe says that she has completed her enquiry into intentional action and the intention with which an action is done, so that looks like a more plausible place.

(ii) How are these three heads to fit together?

Standard approaches: make one basic, and analyze the others in terms of it: prioritize intentionally acting (Ryle?); prioritize intention with which (early—1963—Davidson); prioritize intentions (Bratman).

Alternatively Anscombe’s approach:

To a certain extent the three divisions of the subject made in §1, are simply equivalent. That is to say, where the answers ‘I am going to fetch my camera’, ‘I am fetching my camera’ and ‘in order to fetch my camera’ are interchangeable as answers to the question ‘Why?’ asked when I go upstairs. (§23)

But that is the conclusion of her inquiry; and it is only true ‘to a certain extent’. Her aim is to show why it true, and this involves looking into the point of the concept, why we have it, what we do with it, etc, all within a social context. Sometimes this is done explicitly, as when Anscombe imagines, in some rather convoluted passages, that we had concepts that only applied to one of the heads (e.g. §20); but constantly shifting between the different heads provides much of the fabric of the book. This discussion will reveal that there are some cases where the three divisions can come apart. But, they cannot come apart *in general*. Anscombe is very interested in how things work in general, and why that is so: what are the reasons why things tend to hang together. She can be as prone as most Anglophone philosophers at coming up with (often somewhat outlandish) counterexamples. But her focus isn’t there. Her focus is on the *core* of the practice.

2. Expression of intention

Why *expressions* rather than the corresponding mental states—intentions—themselves? Is Anscombe a behaviourist? Surely not. Is there something really significant here, or is she just following a familiar Wittgenstenian practice? Are expressions of intention very different to expressions of other mental states? Perhaps different to desires — but to beliefs, which also have their characteristic expression in expressions about the world? It is red/I’m going to the shops; I believe it is red/I intend to go to the shops. The English form for intention takes the progressive (I am intending), unlike belief, but that does seem to be local to English. (See Moran and Stone for lengthy discussion.)

[Wittgenstein:

Ich beabsichtige (könnte man sagen) heißt nicht: “Ich bin dabei, zu beabsichtigen”, oder “Ich bin beim Beabsichtigen” (wie man sagt, ich bin beim Zeitunglesen) . Wohl aber : “Ich bin dabei, meine Reise zu planen” etc.

(*Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie* I §598)

Google translate: I intend (one could say) does not mean: "I am in the process of accomplishing," or "I am in the process of intending" (as one might say, I am in the process of reading the newspaper). But it does mean: "I am in the process of planning my trip," etc.]

Intuitive distinction between expression of intention and prediction. We get to the idea that the former involve a reason to act, but then there is the odd passage from Wittgenstein about leaves being blown about. Then talk about reasons is postponed to the discussion of intentional action.

Instead: how can we tell someone’s intentions? This does seem to have moved away from expression (although again it soon gets verbal: ‘what kinds of true statements about intentions can we certainly make, and how do we know that they are true?’ p. 7). Basic thought: look to their actions.

All this conspires to make us think that if we want to know a man’s intentions it is into the contents of his mind, and only into these, that we must enquire; and hence, that if we wish to understand what intention is, we must be investigating something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind;

and that although intention issues in actions, and the way this happens also presents interesting questions, still what physically takes place, i.e. what a man actually does, is the very last thing we need consider in our enquiry. Whereas I wish to say that it is the first. (§4, end)

But still:

a man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing. (§4, just before)

3. Intentional Action: a feast of distinctions (some perhaps more important than others)

Intentional actions defined as those to which a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’ [i.e. ‘Why are you doing/did you do that?’] is given application. Difficulty of defining the relevant sense and danger of moving in a circle in our explanations of ‘reason for acting’ and ‘action’. [Contents §5]

To avoid the risk of circularity Anscombe starts with the negative: she tries to get a take on those cases where ‘Why?’ *fails* to get application. Note, the *relata* here are not actions *per se*, but actions under descriptions:

Since a single action can have many different descriptions, e.g. ‘sawing a plank’, ‘sawing oak’, ‘sawing one of Smith’s planks’, ‘making a squeaky noise with the saw’, ‘making a great deal of sawdust’ and so on and so on, it is important to notice that a man may know that he is doing a thing under one description, and not under another. [§6]

(A) *Fails to get application (only causal explanations available)*

(i) Ignorance (I didn’t know I was making a noise) §6

(ii) Known but mere observational knowledge; e.g. the peristaltic movement of the gut) §8

(iii) Known without observation, but still non-intentional since *the cause* is not known without observation e.g. the odd sort of jerk when going off to sleep. Contrast the jump backwards at the leap and bark of the crocodile, where the cause is known without observation. §8. Compare: ‘the cause itself *qua* cause (or perhaps one should rather say the causation itself) is in the class of things known without observation.’ (§9, end)

This then trades on the idea of that which is known without observation, and this is introduced by means of an example:

[W]e 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 knee, which is the sign that it is bent and not straight. Where we can speak of separately describable sensations, having which is in some sense our criterion for saying something, then we can speak of observing that thing; but that is not generally so when we know the position of our limbs. [§8]

How successful is this? Many want to class proprioception as a distinct mode of perception. If so, isn't that a form of observation? And how generally appropriate is the 'separately describable sensation' criterion for observation? Even with vision we have blindsight, and, less dramatically and less contentiously, peripheral vision. Moreover, is it true that proprioception comes without sensation?

(b) *the question gets application (so involves a reason for action, an answer to the 'Why?' question; not a mere cause of action)*

(i) Mental Cause: the action is known without observation; the cause is known without observation; the 'Why?' question gets application; but this is a *mere* cause (a 'mental cause'). For example, the child is caused to fear the red stuff on the stair by the nurse's remark which she mishears. In some cases, the action not sensitive to whether the agent thought it was doing good or harm (p. 22); e.g. 'I saw such and such and it made me jump' p. 16 (sometimes we think of these causes as reasons, sometimes not; not; reason and cause are not 'everywhere sharply distinct notions' p. 24).

(ii) Intentional acts (at last!)

Anscombe's summary (§16):

It will be useful at this stage to summarize conclusions reached so far. Intentional actions are a sub-class of the events in a man's history which are known to him not just because he observes them. In this wider class is included one type of involuntary actions, which is marked off by the fact that mental causality is excluded from it; and mental causality is itself characterized by being known without observation. But intentional actions are not marked off just by being subject to mental causality, since there are involuntary actions from which mental causality is not excluded. Intentional actions, then, are the ones to which the question 'Why?' is given application, in a special sense which is so far explained as follows: 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. In cases (b) and (c) the answer is already characterised as a reason for acting, i.e. as an answer to the question 'Why?' in the requisite sense; and in case (a) it is an answer to that question if the ideas of good or harm are involved in its meaning as an answer; or again if further enquiry elicits that it is connected with 'interpretative' motive, or intention with which.

Then to complete the account §17:

Now of course a possible answer to the question 'Why?' is one like 'I just thought I would' or 'It was an impulse' or 'For no particular reason' or 'It was an idle action—I was just doodling'. I do not call an answer of this sort a rejection of the question. The question is not refused application because the answer to it says that there is no reason, any more than the question how much money I have in my pocket is refused application by the answer 'None'.