

Anscombe III: The intention with which

The A–B–C–D Account

Let us ask: is there any description which is the description of an intentional action, given that an intentional action occurs? And let us consider a concrete situation. A man is pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house. Someone has found a way of systematically contaminating the source with a deadly cumulative poison whose effects are unnoticeable until they can no longer be cured. The house is regularly inhabited by a small group of party chiefs, with their immediate families, who are in control of a great state; they are engaged in exterminating the Jews and perhaps plan a world war.—The man who contaminated the source has calculated that if these people are destroyed some good men will get into power who will govern well, or even institute the Kingdom of Heaven on earth and secure a good life for all the people; and he has revealed the calculation, together with the fact about the poison, to the man who is pumping.

Central idea: we keep asking the agent ‘Why are you doing this’. We may run through various descriptions (A–B–C–D), each one of which stands as instrumental to the one after it, until we reach the ‘break’. This then gives us the intention with which the thing is done:

Thus when we speak of four intentions, we are speaking of the character of being intentional that belongs to the act in each of the four descriptions; but 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. (§26)

Three natural break points:

- (i) the man didn’t know the consequences of his action;
- (ii) he knows (‘notices’) but doesn’t care: noticing the curious clicking of the pump; ‘I didn’t care about that, I wanted my pay and just did my usual job’ (§24). The tests for this. Doesn’t this just push things back to the man’s mind? No. The ‘control of the truthfulness of the answer’.
- (iii) the consequences are uncertain (this is rather different, in that it primarily affects how we describe the action before it is completed:

the break between cases where we can say ‘He is Y-ing’, when he has mentioned Y in answer to the question ‘Why are you X-ing?’, and ones where we say rather ‘He is going to Y’. I do not think it is a quite sharp break. ... But the less normal it would be to take the achievement of the objective as a matter of course, the more the objective gets expressed only by ‘in order to’.

E.g. 'I am going to London in order to make my uncle change his will'; not 'I am making my uncle change is will'. (§23)

Can what is done be known without observation?

Again, central here is the idea of knowledge without observation. To recall its introduction:

[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?

It seems that it is possible to lose proprioception. The case of Ian Waterman. (There is a good Horizon documentary, 'The Man Who Lost his Body' about Waterman that you can find on YouTube.)

Is it possible to be blind to one's intentions? Shoemaker on self-blindness, with respect to the will ('Self-Knowledge and Inner Sense' p. 279). Would we think of such a person as an agent?

Perhaps then knowledge of one's intentions is a different kind of knowledge to the proprioceptive kind. Anscombe's discussion suggests this: it is *practical knowledge* (§§32ff).

The problem though: How can I be sure of success without looking? Anscombe comes back to this several times. Here is a nice statement:

I myself formerly, in considering these problems, came out with the formula: I do what happens. That is to say, when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening. But everyone who heard this formula found it extremely paradoxical and obscure. And I think the reason is this: what happens must be given by observation; but I have argued that my knowledge of what I do is not by observation. A very clear and interesting case of this is that in which I shut my eyes and write something. I can say what I am writing. And what I say I am writing will almost always in fact appear on the

paper. Now here it is clear that my capacity to say what is written is not derived from any observation. In practice of course what I write will very likely not go on being very legible if I don't use my eyes; but isn't the role of all our observation-knowledge in knowing what we are doing like the role of the eyes in producing successful writing? That is to say, once given that we have knowledge or opinion about the matter in which we perform intentional actions, our observation is merely an aid, as the eyes are an aid in writing. Someone without eyes may go on writing with a pen that has no more ink in it; or may not realise he is going over the edge of the paper on to the table or overwriting lines already written; here is where the eyes are useful; but the essential thing he does, namely to write such-and-such, is done without the eyes. So without the eyes he knows what he writes; but the eyes help to assure him that what he writes actually gets legibly written. In face of this how can I say: I do what happens? If there are two ways of knowing there must be two different things known. (§29)

The solution:

Having raised enough difficulties, let us try to sketch a solution, and let us first ask: What is the contradictory of a description of one's own intentional action? Is it 'You aren't, in fact'?—E.g. 'You aren't replenishing the house water supply, because the water is running out of a hole in the pipe'? I suggest that it is not. To see this, consider the following story, which appeared for the pleasure of readers of the *New Statesman's* 'This England' column. A certain soldier was court-martialled (or something of the sort) for insubordinate behaviour. He had, it seems, been 'abusive' at his medical examination. The examining doctor had told him to clench his teeth; whereupon he took them out, handed them to the doctor and said 'You clench them'.

Now the statement: 'The water is running out of a pipe round the corner' stands in the same relation to the statement 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' as does 'My teeth are false' to the order 'Clench your teeth'; and so the statement (on grounds of observation) 'You are not replenishing the house water-supply' stands in the same relation to the description of intentional action 'I am replenishing the house water-supply', as does the well-founded prediction 'This man isn't going to clench his teeth, since they are false' to the order 'Clench your teeth'. And just as the contradiction of the order: 'Clench your teeth' is not 'The man, as is clear from the following evidence, is not going to do any clenching of teeth, at least of the sort you mean', but 'Do not clench your teeth', so the contradiction of 'I'm replenishing the house water-supply' is not 'You aren't, since there is a hole in the pipe', but 'Oh, no, you aren't' said by someone who thereupon sets out e.g. to make a hole in the pipe with a pick-axe. (§31)

What is going on here? A suggestion, using somewhat different vocabulary. In the court martial case, it is a *presupposition* of the command that the man has his own teeth. When that is not true the order misfires; but it is not straightforwardly contradicted. Likewise in the pumping case, it is a presupposition of the man's statement 'I am pumping water' that the apparatus for pumping is all in working order. To deny the presuppositions of a statement is not to contradict it.

In the pumping case then, we might think that the actor's knowledge of what they are doing has certain presuppositions. And plausibly provided that those are in fact met, the actor does know what they are doing. Does the actor have to *know* that those presuppositions are met in order to know what they are doing? Presumably Anscombe thinks not, since we can only know that those are met by observation. So on this interpretation Anscombe thinks you can know something whose presuppositions are met, even though you don't know that they are met. That is a kind of 'open knowledge' to use Nozick's term. He argued for something similar in the case of known entailment: you can know you are here in the lecture room, you know that being in the lecture room entails that you are not a brain in a vat, but you don't know that you are not a brain in a vat. Nozick's particular formulation of the argument has had a bit of a rough time of it at the hand of Kripke and others. But it has recently had something of a revival. See Sharon & Spectre, 'Evidence and the Openness of Knowledge'; Yablo, 'Open Knowledge and Changing the Subject' (Both *Phil Studies* 2017). Yablo's approach is particularly sympathetic to Anscombe I think: the idea is, very roughly, that knowledge should be closed within the subject matter, but not beyond it. When the man says he is pumping water he is talking about what he is doing, not about the condition of the pipes.

People haven't attributed anything like this to Anscombe though, and I think the reason is that they have rather assumed that she denies that knowledge is a factive. The idea goes that if the pipe is broken, the man can know that he is pumping the water even though he is not. The grounds for attributing this to Anscombe come from the following passage:

I wrote 'I am a fool' on the blackboard with my eyes shut. Now when I said what I wrote, ought I to have said: this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed; instead of simply: this is what I am writing?

Orders, however, can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed. That intention for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so that the words did not appear. And my knowledge would have been the same even if this had happened. If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens, how can it be knowledge of what does happen? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case! On the other hand Theophrastus' remark holds good: 'the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment'. (§45)

It would indeed be a funny sort of knowledge that was false. That is exactly not the kind of thing that you would expect Anscombe to have any truck with. So how should we understand this passage?

Start by asking why she invokes the Theophrastus passage here.¹ We need to go back to where that passage is introduced, in §2. There, in discussing cases where we don't do what we say, she writes:

¹ The text she has in mind is from the *Magna Moralia*, which she attributes to Theophrastus. It reads 'For no one deliberates how he ought to write the name Archicles, because it is a settled matter how one ought to write the name Archicles. The error, then, does not arise in the thought, but in the act of writing.' 1189b 19

[I]f I don't do what I said, what I said was not true ...[but] ... this falsehood does not necessarily impugn what I said. In some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, and not vice versa.

So she doesn't deny that what is said is a falsehood; she says that it is. She is rather concerned with where the responsibility for this falsehood lies. It lies with the facts, and not the judgment. So in that sense the judgment is not impugned; it is just wrong from bad luck. I think that she means to draw the same lesson in citing Theophrastus in §45: not that we have knowledge, but that the lack of knowledge is not the fault of the judgment. The importance of this comes out in the next few sections: where there is no bad luck, i.e. where condition (b) of §48 holds, so that 'the event is actually the execution of an intention' there is practical knowledge. But the knowledge is not conditional knowledge as the objector contends; rather, when the condition holds, we have categorical knowledge.

Still, how can we understand the passage in §45 in which she appears to say that we can have knowledge of what is not the case? Well, she doesn't actually say this; only that my knowledge "would have been the same" if it had been false. And though that is a rather misleading thing to say, there is a way of reading it on which it is clearly correct. Compare it to:

The intention to get married for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the ceremony, if the celebrant had been a penguin. And my wife would have been the same even if I had not married her. If then my wife is independent of whom she actually marries, how can she be my wife, the wife of whom she does marry? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of wife who was still my wife if I had not married her!

The someone would clearly be right in saying that the last idea is funny, wrong in suggesting that it is entailed by what went before. My wife is independent of me. She would have been the same (i.e. the same person) if she had not married me, but she would not have been my wife. Likewise, if my knowledge had not been true, then it would still have been the same mental state (i.e. it would have had the same content), even if it had not been knowledge, if it had merely been a false belief.

It might be thought that this points us back in the direction of a common-factor view: there is something that the knowledge state (where I do write) and the non-knowledge state (where I don't write) have in common; and that is the belief about the intention. That isn't quite right. Anscombe isn't comparing different states. She is rather making the modal claim that a given state might have had different properties: what I know might have been false. Still, the familiar arguments given against common-factor views might seem to tell even against such a modal claim; and they certainly tell against the externalist account that I have been attributing to Anscombe.

However, there is an important difference between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge that makes the kind of modal claim that I am attributing to Anscombe more plausible than the parallel modal claim for theoretical knowledge. With a piece of theoretical knowledge the thought that this very bit of knowledge might have been false

is highly suspect: the identity of the mental state is so intimately connected with its aetiology (for familiar externalist reasons) that, had the state of affairs not obtained, the knower could not have been in that mental state. Practical knowledge is different. Here the state of the world that makes the knowledge true is causally subsequent to the knowledge itself. So it makes perfect sense to think that I might have been in this very mental state, and yet the blackboard might not have taken chalk; in which case what is actually knowledge would have been mere false belief.