

# Anscombe on Acting for Reasons

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## Introduction\*

This chapter discusses some of G.E.M. Anscombe's contributions to the philosophy of practical reason. In particular, it focuses on her account of what it is to act for reasons. The major work in developing this account takes place in Anscombe's incredibly rich monograph *Intention*, though I will also draw on insights contained in her later writings.

Anscombe's *Intention* is widely considered a foundational text in contemporary philosophy of action. Frederick Stoutland writes in his introduction to a volume of essays on *Intention* that it “definitely established philosophy of action as a distinctive field” (2011, p. 5). Anscombe's work has also had some influence in the philosophy of practical reason. However, it has not received nearly as much uptake there as it has in the philosophy of action. And even when Anscombe is cited in work on practical reason, it is often only in passing.<sup>1</sup> And on the subject of acting for reasons in particular, the depth of Anscombe's contributions are often overlooked by philosophers of practical reason.<sup>2</sup> As I will discuss later, some of this may be due to the mistaken view that her contributions have been largely superseded by those of Donald Davidson and his followers.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Dancy's (2000) *Practical Reality* cites Anscombe only in passing, despite the fact that Anscombe's views are highly congenial to Dancy's rejection of Davidson's view of acting for reasons. For further evidence of such a trend, see footnotes 17 and 18. Notable exceptions, however, are Vogler (2001) and Wiland (2012, ch. 7). Wiland's chapter, in particular, is one of the few dedicated to Anscombe on reasons.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that philosophers have completely overlooked Anscombe on acting for reasons. Philosophers of action – Anscombeans especially – often discuss her views thereof in the context of her overall theory of action (see, for instance, Thompson (2008), Wiseman (2016) and Ford (2017)). My concern is that work done by philosophers of practical reason that is *in the first instance* about acting for reasons has overlooked Anscombe. This is what I will attempt to begin to remedy, and for this reason I will not focus on reconstructions of Anscombe's overall theory of action by philosophers of action. Thanks to Jack Samuel for suggesting I clarify this.

I will not attempt to address in a single short chapter all of the rich contributions made by Anscombe (in *Intention* and elsewhere) to the philosophy of practical reason. Instead, I will focus on giving an opinionated introduction to what her work says about acting for reasons, and how it can inform current theorizing on the matter. As I will show, Anscombe's views cut deeply against much of the current orthodoxy on acting for reasons, and are worth taking more seriously in the philosophy of practical reason.

For Anscombe, the question 'what is it to act for reasons?' is intimately related to the question 'what is it to act intentionally?'. I will begin by discussing that relationship. I will then further explicate Anscombe's view by discussing her rejection of two related views about acting for reasons: causalism (the view that reasons are a kind of efficient cause of actions) and psychologism (the view that reasons are mental states like desires and beliefs). In the process, I will try to show that Anscombe's rejection of these two views does not leave us with mystery, but rather sheds light on an interesting, heterodox account of acting for reasons.

## **1. Intentional Action and Acting for Reasons**

Anscombe argues in *Intention* that what distinguishes actions that are intentional from those that are not is that intentional actions are those "to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application." This is the sense in which "the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting" (1957, p. 9).<sup>3</sup> We can already see here the intimate connection between acting intentionally and acting for reasons. It is even tempting to assume, based on this remark, that acting intentionally and acting for reasons are just the same thing for Anscombe. But this would be a faulty assumption, for the

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this chapter, all quotations from Anscombe are from *Intention* unless otherwise noted.

applicability of the special sense of ‘Why?’ is broader than the set of cases where the agent acts for reasons.<sup>4</sup>

This is because Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’ applies in the relevant sense even in cases where the answer to the question is ‘no particular reason.’ As she says, “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’” (p. 25). On her view, acting intentionally is necessary but not sufficient for acting for a reason. So, acting intentionally cannot be the same thing as acting for a reason.<sup>5</sup>

In what cases, then, does the question ‘Why?’ *fail* to apply in the relevant sense? Anscombe discusses three circumstances where it fails to apply. Since these are circumstances in which one fails to act intentionally, they are also circumstances in which one fails to act for a reason. The first circumstance is when the answer is to the effect of ‘I didn’t know I was doing that.’ To respond (sincerely) as such is to refuse application to the special sense of the question ‘Why?’. For example, imagine I am spraying grass killer on my lawn, thinking it is weed killer. You, knowing that it is grass killer, ask me “Why are you spraying grass killer on your lawn?” and I respond, “This is *grass* killer!?”. My response refuses application to the question ‘Why?’ because it indicates that I was not aware I was spraying grass killer on my lawn. Correspondingly, I was not intentionally spraying grass killer on my lawn.

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<sup>4</sup> If this is right, it raises questions about the relation between acting for no reason and *arational* action. One natural view is that if an action is done for no reason, it is thereby arational. But for Anscombe, actions done for no reason are still intentional. Moreover, insofar as the question ‘Why?’ is granted application, such actions are still in some sense intelligible. This raises the possibility that actions done for no reason are not thereby arational. While I cannot discuss this possibility at length here, it merits further explorations. Thanks for Ruth Chang for raising this possibility.

<sup>5</sup> This may not be an uncontroversial interpretation (though, to my knowledge, there is not a lot of work that directly addresses this question). Some of the remarks in Thompson (2008) suggest that, on his interpretation of Anscombe, acting for a reason and acting intentionally are coextensive. Thanks to Jack Samuel for pointing this out.

Importantly, one might know what one is doing under some descriptions but not others. If you instead ask me “why are you spraying your lawn?” I might respond, “to kill these weeds over here.” In this case, because I am aware that I am spraying my lawn, the question has application, and my response specifies a reason for my action. Correspondingly, then, I might act intentionally under some descriptions and unintentionally under others: while I am spraying my lawn intentionally, I am not spraying grass killer on my lawn intentionally.<sup>6</sup>

Although acting intentionally and acting for reasons are not the same, whether we have acted for some particular reason also seems to depend on the description of the action. It is unobjectionable to say that I sprayed my lawn for the reason that doing so would kill the weeds over there, but would strike us as quite odd to say that I sprayed grass killer on my lawn for the reason that doing so would kill the weeds over there. The latter statement makes me out to be wittingly instrumentally irrational when in reality I am just unaware of what I am doing. On the Anscombean view, the reasons for which we act stand in relation to our actions only under those descriptions under which they are intentional.

The second circumstance in which the question ‘Why?’ is refused application is when, despite the agent’s awareness of what she is doing, her action is involuntary. As Anscombe notes, it is difficult to further cash out the notion of the involuntary without presupposing an account of intention. However, she writes, there is “a class of the things that fall under the concept ‘involuntary’ which it is possible to introduce without begging any questions or assuming that we understand notions of the very type I am professing to investigate” (p. 13). This is the class of bodily movements that are described in physical terms, but that one nevertheless knows without observation. Anscombe’s own

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<sup>6</sup> This raises the question of whether this is really the very same action under different descriptions, or distinct actions. For an illuminating discussion of Anscombe’s views on this matter, see Annas (1976). See also Anscombe’s own essay “Under A Description” (1979).

example is “[t]he odd sort of jerk or jump that one’s whole body sometimes gives when one is falling asleep.” This is an important category to mention because for Anscombe, intentional actions are known without observation. However, some actions that are known without observation fail to be intentional because, being involuntary, the question ‘Why?’ fails to apply to them.

The role of the Anscombean thesis that when we act intentionally, we know what we are doing without observation, is a fraught issue in Anscombe scholarship, and is not the focus of this chapter. Nevertheless, Anscombe’s account of non-observational knowledge ends up shedding important light on what it is to act for reasons. I will return to this issue in §3, and bracket non-observational knowledge for now.

The third circumstance in which the question ‘Why?’ fails to apply is when “the answer is evidence or states a cause, including a mental cause” (p. 24). Imagine I say I will go for a run, and you ask me “Why?”. If I respond with evidence that I will run (i.e. what I take to be a reason to think I will run), then I am making a prediction instead of expressing an intention. By contrast, if I answer by giving what I take to be a reason *to run*, I am expressing an intention to run. One difficulty in interpreting Anscombe’s remarks here is the fact that she does not explicitly distinguish what we now call *normative* reasons (reasons that count in favor of doing or thinking something) from *motivating* reasons (reasons for which we act, believe, and so on). If we assume that when she writes about acting *for a reason*, the reasons she picks out best fit into the category of *motivating* reasons, then one interpretation of these remarks is that an answer to the question ‘Why?’ that specifies the agent’s motivating reason must give what is, from her perspective, a normative reason to act – that is, an answer that shows there to be something worthwhile in performing the action, rather than one that

simply counts in favor of thinking it will happen.<sup>7</sup> I will return to these issues in §2 when I discuss what makes something the reason for which one acts.

Anscombe writes that the question ‘Why?’ fails to apply not only when the answer cites evidence, but also when it cites a cause. Since the question ‘Why?’ does have application when the answer cites a reason, this suggests that for Anscombe, reasons and causes are altogether different things.<sup>8</sup> Of course, everyone theorizing about the reasons for which we act makes a distinction between reasons and *mere* causes – that is, no one thinks that just any cause of an action counts as a (motivating) reason for that action. Anscombe, however, is plausibly interpreted as arguing for something much stronger: that reasons are not causes at all. If this is right, it is one of the most distinctive implications her theory has about the nature of acting for reasons. So, it is to this issue that I now turn.

## 2. Reasons and Causes

In the contemporary literature on both intentional action and acting for reasons, the standard story has come to be a causal story. This is, as Stoutland writes, largely owing to the influence of Davidson’s work on these matters:

The majority of contemporary philosophers accept what has been called the “standard story” of action. That there is a standard story is largely due to Davidson, and he is usually said to accept it. It comes in different versions, however, many of which diverge from Davidson’s own view to a greater or lesser extent. What unifies them is commitment to the claim that an agent’s acting consists of those events that are her

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<sup>7</sup> Given that Anscombe doesn’t use the terminology of motivating and normative reasons, this is not an uncontroversial interpretation. But I think it is a plausible one that helps to make sense of her views about how the reasons for which we act relate to our actions.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, this doesn’t entail that that which is a reason can never also be what happens to cause an action. But even if it did happen to cause an action, for Anscombe, this would have nothing to do with what makes it a reason. Thanks to Eric Wiland for suggesting I clarify this.

bodily movements caused (in the right way) by the beliefs and desires that are her reasons for acting (2011, p. 12).

Of course, Davidson's own account of the reasons for which we act was a response to what he saw as a mistaken attack by Anscombe and others on the "commonsense" position that the relation between our actions and the reasons for which we act is a "species of ordinary causal explanation" (1963, p. 685). Davidson thought that with some refinement, he could accommodate Anscombe's insights without departing from the causalist picture of acting for reasons.

Despite Davidson's ambitions, Anscombe's own views paint a picture of acting for reasons that is radically incompatible with causalism. As Rosalind Hursthouse writes:

[Anscombe's picture] has been obscured by the prominence of the current causal theory according to which intentions are antecedent events which explain intentional action. Indeed I have found in discussion that some people, perhaps misled by Davidson's many acknowledgments of *Intention's* insights, assume that all the book contains of value is some gropings towards the theory he has been developing since *Actions, Reasons and Causes*. But nothing could be further from the truth. *Intention* stands as an account of intentional action totally opposed to any causal account and not in need of radical development or improvement (2000, p. 83).

In light of Davidsonian dogma, Anscombe's views about acting for reasons have become deeply heterodox. And my sense is that Hursthouse was right to claim that these views have been underappreciated and underexplored by those who dismiss out of hand the possibility of a non-causal picture of acting for reasons.

For Anscombe, to act for a reason is not for one's action to be caused (in the right way) by one's beliefs and desires. In fact, acting for reasons is not a matter of mental causation at all. The reasons for which we act, on her view, are neither mental states nor causes. In later work, she chalks the Davidsonian view up to a "failure of percipience" owing to "the standard approach by which we first distinguish between 'action' and what merely happens, and then specify that we are talking about 'actions'" (2006b, p. 111). To be fair, causalism's status as dogma is due not just to the shortcomings of Davidsonians, but also the apparent opacity of the non-causalist picture. After all, Anscombe is

reluctant to give a definitive statement of what she thinks it is to act for reasons. Nevertheless, her view can be reconstructed in a way that is not only of exegetical interest, but demonstrates the seriousness of her brand of non-causalism.<sup>9</sup>

Most illuminating of her views on reasons versus causes, perhaps, is Anscombe's discussion of 'motives' (which she seems to take as interchangeable with 'reasons for action,' in the sense of motivating reasons) and the contrast she draws with mental causes. Anscombe identifies mental causes as "what someone would describe if he were asked the specific question: what produced this action or thought or feeling on your part: what did you see or hear or feel, or what ideas or images cropped up in your mind, and led up to it?" (pp. 17-18). On the causalist view, a motive just is a particular kind of mental cause – a mental state that causes our actions in right way to be potentially rationalizing. Anscombe disagrees with this view:

Motives may explain actions to us; but that is not to say that they 'determine', in the sense of causing, actions. We do say: 'His love of truth caused him to ...' and similar things, and no doubt such expressions help us to think that a motive must be what produces or brings about a choice. But this means rather 'He did this in that he loved the truth'; it interprets his action. (p. 19)

Motives, then, do not cause action. Rather, they interpret action; they make sense of it.<sup>10</sup> They need not involve what went on in my mind prior the action and issued in the action. Instead, they are features of the action itself through which one makes sense of it, as indicated by the answers one would give when asked the question 'Why?'.

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<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it demonstrates that non-causalists about reasons for action themselves should take Anscombe more seriously than they do, not least because she is in some sense on their side. See footnote 18 for some evidence that even non-causalists have not paid enough attention to Anscombe's view of acting for reasons, despite its congeniality.

<sup>10</sup> Importantly, however, this should not suggest a picture where interpretation is something we 'add' to a prior distinct existence. For Anscombe, that would raise the same problems as causalism. The interpretation is not something we add to an action, but rather part and parcel of it. Thanks to Eric Wiland for suggesting I clarify this.



Anscombe's discussion of three kinds of motives sheds further light on how motives relate to actions. The three kinds of motives are backward-looking motives, motives-in-general, and forward-looking motives. Backward-looking motives are things like revenge, gratitude, pity, and remorse. In the context of explaining such motives, Anscombe addresses the question "why is it that in revenge and gratitude, pity and remorse, the past event (or present situation) is a reason for acting, not just a mental cause?" (p. 21). Of course, the causalist would claim that such motives are the reason for which we act in virtue of being mental causes of a certain sort. But Anscombe wants to show how they are reasons *not* in virtue of being mental causes of any sort. She contends that backward-looking motives are distinct from mental causes because they consist in the agent's conceiving of them "as something good or bad, and his own action as doing good or harm" (p. 22).

Here we finally get something close to a statement of a condition on something's being a (motivating) reason for action, because what Anscombe actually says is that an agent's answer to the question 'Why?' is a reason for acting if in treating it as a reason he conceives of it as described in the quote above. This suggests that, though reasons are neither mental states nor causes, acting for reasons does involve the mental states of the agent.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it would be difficult to see how an agent could act for reasons without her mental states being involved in some way. Nevertheless, some consideration does not become one's motivating reason by being the right kind of mental state, that causes in the right way, one's action. Instead, for Anscombe, some consideration becomes one's motivating reason by being represented by the agent as standing in some kind of relation to the action that makes sense of the action from her perspective. To answer the question 'Why?' by providing a motive-in-general, Anscombe writes, "is to say something like 'See the action in this light' (p. 21).

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth flagging that Anscombe has qualms about the language of mental *states* in this context. But for my purposes here, it won't be problematic to stick to that language while noting her reservations.

Forward-looking motives, of course, simply specify future ends to which the action would be a means. All three kinds of motives *make sense* of the action from the agent's perspective.

Anscombe's discussion of motives is helpful partly because it shows us what kind of answers to the question 'Why?' reasons are supposed to be. While causalists also think of reasons as answers to the question 'Why?', they conceive of reasons as causal explainers of action, so they consider the question "Why?" a request for a particular kind of causal explanation. Anscombe, by contrast, conceives of reasons as that which, from the agent's own perspective, make sense of what she is doing. For Anscombe, the question 'Why?' is a request not for a causal explanation at all, but a *sui generis* kind of explanation (what we might call an interpretive explanation). Of course, the causalists think we can give an interpretive explanation just by giving the right kind of causal explanation. As Davidson writes, "A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable" (1967, p. 685). One way of casting the disagreement between Anscombe and the causalists, then, is that Anscombe is an anti-reductionist about interpretive explanations of action. By contrast, causalists are reductionists; they think interpretive explanations can be reduced to a species of ordinary causal explanation.

Here is what we have so far. On Anscombe's view, a reason for action is an answer to the question 'Why?' that explains her action by showing what made sense of the action from her perspective, whether that be a means-end relation, an interpretation of the action in some larger light, or some backwards-looking motive like revenge. Importantly, reasons *do not* explain actions by causing them. For Anscombe, reasons and causes stand in stark opposition. In the next section, I will try to say a little bit more about why she takes her view to be unassimilable to the causalist picture, as well as what she takes the non-causal relation between reasons and actions to be.

### 3. Reasons as Constituents of Action

Anscombe is clear that on her view, neither intentions nor reasons are causes of actions. Part of why she is so insistent on this is that for either to be causes, they would have to be separable from the actions they caused. But this, in her view, leads to all sorts of problems. This is why she criticizes Davidson for conceiving of intentional actions as events to which we affix certain additional, extrinsic features, like their being caused by certain mental states. She thinks this aspect of the causal view subjects it to at least one fatal problem: the problem of deviant causal chains.

The problem of deviant causal chains is a challenge to the causalist's ability to give an account of what it is for the relevant mental states to cause an action 'in the right way.' Consider Davidson's (1973) famous example of a climber who wants to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and believes that loosening his grip on the rope will accomplish this. This belief-desire pair so unnerves the climber that he inadvertently loosens his grip on the rope. In this case, the belief-desire pair causes the climber's action, but does not seem to cause it the right way to be his reason for action. Here is what Anscombe has to say about such examples:

Davidson indeed realized that even identity of description of *act done* with *act specified in the belief*, together with causality by the belief and desire, isn't enough to guarantee the act's being done *in pursuit of the end* and *on grounds of the belief*. He speaks of the possibility of 'wrong' or 'freak' causal connexions. I say that any recognizable causal connexions would be 'wrong', and that he can do no more than postulate a 'right' causal connexion in the happy security that none such can be found. If a causal connexion were found we could always still ask: 'But was the act done for the sake of the end and in view of the thing believed?' (2006b, p. 110)

So, clearly Anscombe is pessimistic about the possibility of identifying the 'right' causal connection, because in her view, *no* causal connection could establish that the agent acted for the sake of a particular end. And indeed, Davidson and his successors in the causalist tradition have struggled to

find a satisfying solution to the problem of deviant causal chains, providing some inductive support for Anscombe's pessimism.<sup>12</sup>

Since Anscombe rejects the causal story, we need an alternative picture of how the agent's own understanding of why she is doing what she is doing makes it the case that she is acting for particular reasons. For the causalist, the agent has some mental states that at once cause her action and encapsulate what she takes to favor of performing it. Thus, the problem of deviant causal chains notwithstanding, causalists have a picture of how the agent's outlook on her action relates to the action itself. For her position to be plausible, Anscombe must have her own story about how these two things relate, and it must not fall prey to the very same problem that she takes to be fatal for the causalist.

Again, Anscombe is loath to offer a single, succinct statement that can be used to pin down her views on this matter. But her views can be reconstructed in a way that shows her non-causalism to be backed by a coherent metaphysics. Some of what she says in *Intention* may give the impression that she denies wholesale that any mental states or events could be relevant to a genuine interpretive explanation of an action, leaving it mysterious what actually renders the action intelligible from the agent's perspective. But this would be a misunderstanding of her view, as some of her remarks in later work clarify. In "The Causation of Action," she writes that "the teleology of conscious action is not to be explained as *efficient* causality by a condition, or state, of desire [my emphasis]" (2006a, p. 96). She then considers the objection that there must have been something in the agent's mind that "suffused" it with intentional-ness. She responds, "Was that then a separable mental experience which you want to say *caused* the action? ...in this conception a cause has to be thought of as a distinct thing,

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<sup>12</sup> Even Davidson himself became a kind of defeatist about the problem (see Davidson 1973). Recently, some causalists have attempted to solve the problem by appealing to dispositions. For example, see Wedgwood (2006), Hyman (2014), and Lord (2018).

which is found to have this effect.” The answer must be ‘no’ because the mental state must be “intrinsic to an action when it is intentional; or rather, definable only by the description of the intentional action. But such is not a cause of the action” (pp. 96-97).

The foregoing makes it clear that what Anscombe objects to is not the involvement of the agent’s mental life in any form in her action. That would be patently absurd. Instead, what she objects to is the reification of that mentality into a distinct existence that is then said to cause the action. And the problem of deviant causal chains provides principled grounds for her objection.<sup>13</sup> So, the first thing that has been clarified here is that Anscombe’s rejection of the causal picture does not commit her to some occult view on which the agent somehow makes sense of her action without her mental life playing any role in explaining it.

Now we can finally ask: how, for Anscombe, does the agent’s mental life contribute to her action? And how does the agent’s understanding of why she does what she does contribute to the reasons for which she acts? The answers to these questions can be found in *Intention* itself. Here the role of non-observational knowledge in Anscombe’s theory of intentional action becomes relevant. Quoting Aquinas, Anscombe writes that we have non-observational knowledge of what we are doing because such knowledge is “the cause of what it understands. This stands in contrast to observational knowledge, which is “derived from the objects known” (p. 87). The invocation of cause in the current context may seem strange, since we have just recounted Anscombe’s hostility to the idea that causation by any mental states of the agent could be what separates intentional action from mere happenings.

The key here is that the term ‘cause’ in this context does not refer to the efficient causation we have been discussing so far. It refers instead to something like Aristotelian formal causation. As

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<sup>13</sup> Anscombe also makes some interesting remarks about regresses created by the causal picture, which I don’t have space to discuss here.

John Schwenkler puts it, “at the core of Anscombe’s account of action is the idea that practical thought is not an *efficient* cause that sets the visible parts of our body into motion, but the *formal* principle that *unifies* an action, or that in virtue of which certain physical happenings are constituted as parts of a person’s intentional activity” (2015, p. 6). So, for Anscombe, we have non-observational knowledge of what we are doing because the agent’s own understanding of what she is doing is what constitutes it as her action. It is in this sense that non-observational knowledge of intentional action is the (formal) cause of what it understands.

The Aristotelian distinction between efficient and formal causation has as a rough analogue in contemporary theorizing the distinction between causation and constitution. As such, in what follows, it will be helpful to contrast causation with constitution. On Anscombe’s view, our mental lives contribute to our actions very differently from how they contribute on the causalist picture. Our actions are not intentional in virtue of being caused by mental states like belief and desire. Rather, they are intentional in virtue of having a certain structure (of which the paradigm is a teleological structure) that is constituted by our very representation of it as having that structure. For example, imagine I wave my hand in the air in order to get your attention. What makes it the case that I wave my hand for the sake of this particular end? For the causalist, it is that I desired to get your attention, and believed that waving my hand would do so, and this belief-desire pair causes me, in right way, to wave my hand. For Anscombe, it is simply that in waving my hand, I understood myself as getting your attention.

Now, in such a case, we can say that my reason for waving my hand was that it would get your attention. This makes it clear that for Anscombe, the reason for which one acts is not a distinct existence from the action itself. Instead, it is part of the structure of that action. Reasons, then, are related to our mental states in an important way – just not in the way causalists think they are. Causalists think they are the mental states that cause our actions. For Anscombe, they are the contents

of mental states through which our actions are structured. In the paradigm case of a teleologically structured action, the agent constitutes a particular consideration as the reason for which she acts by giving her action a structure where she understands it under a particular description (waving my hand) as a means to the end described by that very consideration (that it will get your attention).

This identification of means and ends with reasons and actions extends throughout series of multiple means and ends. For example, Anscombe's famous case where the man moves his arm, to operate the pump, to replenish the water supply, to poison the inhabitants. In each case, the end serves as the motivating reason for the action under the description of the means. And the final, non-instrumental motivating reason in the series is the final end: to poison the inhabitants. Of course, the finality of the end of poisoning the inhabitants doesn't entail that the man does it for no reason. It is just that we must identify his reason for poisoning the inhabitants as something outside of the teleological structure – perhaps by providing some general or backwards-looking motive.<sup>14</sup>

Anscombe rejects the causalist picture partly on the basis of the problem of deviant causal chains. She takes this problem to arise because on the causalist picture, actions and the reasons for which we perform them are distinct existences, and the fact that we perform an action for some particular reason is extrinsic to that action. On her view, by contrast, the reasons for which we perform an action are intrinsic to that action, and not distinct existences. This is supposed to immunize her view from the problem of deviant causal chains, giving it a distinct advantage over the causalist view.<sup>15</sup> If reasons and actions are related constitutively, not causally, there is no mystery of how the reason

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<sup>14</sup> For more on this, see Stoutland (2011) on reasons that are internal to the teleological structure of an action versus those that are external to it.

<sup>15</sup> However, for an argument that non-causalists face an analogous problem, see Paul (2011) on 'deviant formal causation.'

and action relate in the right way to provide the relevant kind of explanation of the action in terms of the reason.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Anscombe's View in Context

As we have seen, Anscombe's view of acting for reasons differs dramatically from what has become the Davidsonian orthodoxy. On Anscombe's view, the reasons for which we act are answers to the question 'Why?' in the special sense that calls not for the causes of the action, but for the agent's own interpretation of what she is doing. Furthermore, Anscombe's discussion of motives makes clear that reasons for actions are not mental states, but rather those considerations that make sense of the action from the agent's perspective.

As such, Anscombe rejects two commonly held views about motivating reasons. The first is a view about their ontology: the view that they are mental states, which has come to be called psychologism.<sup>17</sup> The second is a view about their relation to action: the view that they are causes of action, which I have been calling causalism. Following Davidson, almost everyone who accepts psychologism accepts causalism, though there is no inconsistency in accepting the former without the

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<sup>16</sup> The idea that the reasons for which we act are related constitutively to our actions themselves evokes some prominent interpretations of Kant that also deny that reasons and actions are distinct existences. On this, see especially Korsgaard (2008, pp. 227-229), who writes that a reason for which one acts "is not a mental state that precedes the action and causes it," but is rather "embodied in the action itself." To my knowledge, this parallel between Kant and Anscombe has not been explored in depth. While it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, it certainly merits further exploration. Thanks to Ruth Chang for bringing it to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> Aside from Davidson, the most prominent defender of psychologism is Smith (1994, 2003). In a similar vein, Turri (2009) defends psychologism about *believing* for reasons. For arguments against psychologism that are separate from Anscombe's, see Dancy (2000), Alvarez (2010, 2016), and Singh (forthcoming). O'Brien (2015) also defends a non-psychologistic account of reasons explanations. Strikingly, however, though O'Brien engages substantially with Davidson, she does not even mention Anscombe.



latter. And even those who reject psychologism often maintain causalism as the default position, perhaps in part because they cannot envision any plausible alternative to it.<sup>18,19</sup>

Relatedly, epistemologists writing about the epistemic basing relation (the relation between a belief and the reasons for which it is held) also tend to be causalists.<sup>20</sup> The dominance of causalism among both philosophers of action and epistemologists is naturally traced back to the Davidsonian thought that this is the only plausible way of understanding how reasons explain.<sup>21</sup> Part of the importance of reconstructing Anscombe's view, then, has been to show that this is false. Anscombe's non-causalism is a contender when it comes to reasons explanations just as much as when it comes to intentional action. But this is something even recent non-causalists (such as Dancy and Ginet) have tended to overlook. Anscombe's views thus have implications for current work not just on acting for reasons in particular, but on related work on the epistemic basing relation, and on the more general subject of reasons explanations.

There is much more to be said about how Anscombe's views on acting for reasons can inform our current theorizing; unfortunately, much of it is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, there is one issue I would like to discuss before concluding, and that is the issue of whether we can be ignorant of or mistaken about the reasons for which we act. Partly in light of recent work in psychology that purports to show our limited grasp of our own motivations, it has become a common view among

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<sup>18</sup> For dissent, however, see Dancy (2000) and Ginet (2002). For a defense of causalism from such dissent, see Davis (2005). As further evidence that Anscombe's contributions have recently been underexplored in comparison to Davidson's, all of the writings just mentioned engage substantially with Davidson but cite Anscombe only in passing.

<sup>19</sup> Some accounts don't take a stand on whether the explanatory relation between reasons and actions is causal. Such accounts, as long as they reject psychologism, are in principle compatible with Anscombe's view. For examples, see Alvarez (2010, 2016) and Singh (forthcoming), the latter of which is particularly congenial to Anscombe.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Wedgwood (2006) and Boghossian (2014).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Wedgwood cites Davidson as providing "[t]he principal argument for regarding the basing relation as a causal relation" (p. 661).

philosophers that the reasons for which we act are often not transparent to us.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, some philosophers reject the idea that we have *any* privileged access to our motivating reasons.

Given her views about non-observational knowledge of what we are doing, Anscombe tends to be on the side of thinking that we have a very strong privileged access to facts about our actions, including the reasons for which we act. Anscombe's views, then, might be accused by current theorists of painting an unrealistic picture of human psychology and the transparency of motivation. In light of this, it is worth briefly examining Anscombe's views in light of the current consensus that our motivations are often opaque to us, even when we act for reasons (as opposed to mere causes).

Anscombe addresses this issue in a passage that is less commonly discussed, but that seems to me to be of great interest:

An answer of rather peculiar interest is: 'I don't know why I did it'. This can have a sense in which it does not mean that perhaps there is a causal explanation that one does not know. It goes with 'I found myself doing it,' 'I heard myself say...,' but is appropriate to actions in which some special reason seems to be demanded, and one has none... I myself have never wished to use these words in this way, but that does not make me suppose them to be senseless. They are a curious intermediary case: the question 'Why?' has and yet has not application; it has application in the sense that it is admitted as an appropriate question; it lacks it in the sense that the answer is that there is no answer. I shall later be discussing the difference between the intentional and the voluntary; and once that distinction is made we shall be able to say: an action of this sort is voluntary, rather than intentional. (pp. 25-26).

I cannot undertake a discussion of Anscombe's distinction between the voluntary and the intentional here. But one thing is clear: on her view, an action fails to be intentional when the agent's answer to the question 'Why?' is 'I don't know why I did it.' For Anscombe, while this does not straightforwardly refuse application to the question 'Why?' it is not a genuine answer because it does not shed light on

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<sup>22</sup> Much of this influence comes from Nisbett and Wilson (1977) and the following literature, which purports to show that people are prone to confabulating the reasons for which they act, and in such cases are unable to provide the 'true' explanations of their actions. For examples of such influence, see Nichols and Stich (2003), Gertler (2012), Carruthers (2013), and Cassam (2014). For criticism of the way Nisbett and Wilson's results are interpreted, see Sandis (2015).

the agent's action from her own perspective. Given that the reasons for which one acts must be answers that shed such light on one's action, it seems that on Anscombe's view, the agent cannot have acted for reasons in such cases.

This is compatible, as she says, with there being some causal explanation of his action that he does not know. However, she denies that in such cases, it is possible that there is "a reason, if only he knew it." Indeed, she denies that this is possible "even if psychoanalysis persuades him to accept something as his reason" (p. 26). This suggests that Anscombe's view radically diverges from current orthodoxy on the opacity of our reasons. The case of psychoanalysis is one that many current theorists would view as a paradigmatic case in which one might, through self-examination, discover the reasons for which one performed past actions. For Anscombe, such discovery is impossible. To act for a reason is to act in light of a consideration that makes sense of one's action from one's own perspective; this is impossible without having access to what that consideration is. Thus, we cannot be alienated from our reasons in the way that it is often thought we can.

The divergence between Anscombe and current orthodoxy on the transparency of our reasons is not unrelated to the divergence between them on causalism and psychologism. On the Davidsonian view, the reason is not only a distinct existence from the action, but can be pulled apart from the agent's own perspective. Of course, Davidson grants that the agent see something good or worthwhile in the action. But this too can be divorced from her perspective, for on Davidson's view, this is just a matter of her beliefs and desires. So, we can be just as alienated from our reasons as we can from our

beliefs and desires.<sup>23</sup> To see what an agent's reasons are, we need only discover which mental states caused her action, whether or not she knows what they are.<sup>24</sup> This is not possible for Anscombe.

One kind of case Anscombe does not explicitly discuss – one with which theorizing about transparency and alienation is concerned – is a case in which an agent cites what from her perspective is the reason for which she acted, but from a third-personal perspective there is evidence that she is mistaken about why she acted. Most current theorists would want to hold that in such a case, the agent is indeed mistaken about the reasons for which she acted, and that it is possible that what moved her was some unconscious motive rather than what she cited as her reason. It seems Anscombe must deny the possibility of this case as well. For Anscombe, while there may be some mental cause of which the agent is unaware, this is irrelevant to the question of the reason for which she acts. Only the agent's own understanding of her action matters. Perhaps Anscombe would attribute the claim that there are cases of being mistaken about one's reasons to the erroneous assumption of causalism.<sup>25</sup>

Anscombe's rejections of causalism, psychologism, and the opacity of reasons cut deeply against the grain of current theorizing about acting for reasons. The dominance of causalism in particular seems only to have strengthened since her time, perhaps in part due to the growing influence of empirical psychology on the philosophy of practical reason. Some will doubtless see this as further evidence that we should dismiss Anscombe's views on acting for reasons as mysterious and

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<sup>23</sup> It's generally accepted that our desires can be non-transparent to us. If motivating reasons are desires or desire-belief complexes, then it follows that our motivating reasons can be non-transparent to us. For an example of this view, see Smith (1987).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, given Davidson's interpretationism, it should be possible for others to know an agent's reasons for acting better than she herself does. See Davidson (1984) for more on his interpretationism.

<sup>25</sup> Many readers will probably find this part of Anscombe's view harder to swallow than her rejections of causalism and psychologism. While I cannot undertake a full exploration of its plausibility in this paper, it is worth noting that its plausibility depends partly on whether recent work in psychology really has the upshot philosophers have thought it to have.

unscientific. But this would be too quick. In reconstructing Anscombe's account of acting for reasons, I hope to have shown that she had deep and interesting reasons for holding it. Whether or not we ultimately accept a view like hers, it is worth treating it as a serious alternative to the views that have become current orthodoxy.

In particular, Anscombe's insights about acting for reasons far outstrip what Davidson took from them, and so we do not do her justice when we theorize about acting for reasons solely through a Davidsonian lens. Among other things, we risk underrating the work of one of the most important woman philosophers of all time in favor of the contributions of one of her male peers. Contemporary work in the philosophy of action takes Anscombe's work very seriously. If I have shown anything in exploring Anscombe's account of acting for reasons, I hope it is that the philosophy of practical reason should do the same.

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