

Presentation

Reason, reasoning and action: puzzling out the mark of Anscombe

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1. The topic and background

Reasoning, as an exercise of the capacity of reason, is traditionally viewed as having two domains of application: theoretical and practical. The first domain, theoretical reasoning, raises intellectual questions about beliefs. These are questions about what one should believe, questions about evidence and proof. Practical reasoning is different in that it takes “praxis” itself as its subject. At stake is what the thing to do is in particular situations and contexts. Questions concerning the relationship of reasoning to motivation and intention then come to the fore, as does the specific relationship of reasoning to the nature of action.

In this special issue our first interest is in exploring the mark Elizabeth Anscombe left on the way we approach questions of reason, reasoning and action. Anscombe may in fact be considered largely responsible for the current shape of the philosophical theory of action, as R. Audi describes below:

The concepts of reasons as supporting elements, of practical reason as a capacity, and of practical reasoning as a process are central in the theory of action. (Audi, 2004: 118)¹

Yet such central issues in the theory of action are directly connected in Anscombe’s philosophy to wider issues such as the nature of practical knowledge and truth, the way moral philosophy works around a concept of virtue, or the relationships between the linguistic use of the first person and the status of self-knowledge. Also, if one wants to understand her philosophy as a whole, its relations to Wittgenstein’s thought are inescapable, as is her own interpretation of the work of a man she held as friend.

1. Of course, one could claim that Donald Davidson has such role but, precisely, we do not want to see things as such. We see the importance of the renewed interest in Anscombe’s work as countering such picture.

Elizabeth Anscombe, the person, was a puzzling character. She was a brilliant philosopher and she was an eccentric. She did not shy away from calling people ‘stupid’ (also in writing) when she did not agree with them. She was also, undoubtedly, an original thinker who was slow to gain recognition over the years given the difficulty of so much of her work², which not only needs to be read patiently and attentively but also several times in order to achieve a non-simplistic understanding of her thought. Presenting the complexity of what appears to be simple was always one of Anscombe’s goals, as well as unmasking the banality of certain theories that, hidden behind labels and gestures, are presented as sophisticated (Wiseman, 2016: 2). This comes together in the fact that unlike most academic philosophers today, Anscombe did not view philosophy as a technical discipline but rather as the task of thinking about ultimate issues and addressing the most difficult questions (see Wiseman, 2016: 17).

All things considered, the way Anscombe is received today is a complex matter. Her writings on the philosophy of mind and action are admired by many. As for some of her writings on morals, many modern-day readers politely look away. Yet her positions in those fields are not unconnected. In whatever case, not everything about Anscombe is applauded: there is also a lot of criticism and even reproach, and not only in relation to the contents of some of her writings on moral issues. For example, Simon Blackburn, who unhesitatingly describes Anscombe as one of the most influential moral philosophers of recent times, has no qualms about saying that this influence is largely unfortunate because of her particularly fierce and aggressive approach to morality and philosophy. Yet even though Blackburn rejects some of the applications of Anscombe’s ethics and in general dislikes her tone, he also recognizes that all moral theorists share with Anscombe the need to articulate the central ideas of the dignity and value of human life, and of the virtues necessary to live it well. What Blackburn cannot approve of with regard to Anscombe is the fact that she devoted much so more space in her work to justice than to “altruism, benevolence, charity, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, mercy, sympathy, or love” (Blackburn, 2005). All in all, he feels that such a difficult area as ethics requires a more delicate touch than Anscombe’s.

We are well aware of the mixed reactions aroused by Anscombe’s work; we find them thought-provoking and bore them in mind while preparing this special issue of *Enrahonar*. It was conceived to mark the centenary of Anscombe’s birth as well as the 50th anniversary of *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s*

2. In order to have a realistic historical picture of Anscombe’s career and position in 20th century academic philosophy it is worth keeping in mind that by the time she began her studies at Oxford (1938), the University had admitted women for not so long (since the late 1870s) and degrees had started being awarded much more recently (in 1920). A cohort of well known (women) moral philosophers (Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgely and Mary Warnock) were Anscombe’s contemporaries at Oxford. These were all philosophers interested in understanding this intricate world – the ‘deeply puzzling world’ (Midgely, 2013) – rather than in dialectical academic disputes centred on discourse itself.

'*Tractatus*'³ and our main goal was to promote the study of Anscombe's work as starting point for highly diverse investigations in philosophy, and not just philosophy of mind and action or Wittgenstein's interpretation thereof, but also general investigations into the nature of practical rationality as Anscombe, in her controversial way, saw it.

Despite the possible controversy, both editors of this special issue find immense value in Anscombe's work, although we discovered it through very different paths. For one of us (SM), Anscombe's work has often been, in recent years when teaching philosophy of mind or philosophy of action, useful for spelling out what a Wittgensteinian position might be on such topics as consciousness or agency. Where Wittgenstein makes gnomic comments or asks seemingly mysterious questions (e.g. "An inner process stands in need of outward criteria" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §580) or "What is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm raises from the fact that I raise my arm?" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §621)), Anscombe provides us with fine, explicit analyses. The study of Anscombe has also been a way to go back to the topics of former publications on the philosophy of action whose fundamental orientation was not completely satisfactory (see Mauro, Miguens and Cadilha, 2013⁴).

The other one of us (DGA) is particularly interested in epistemology and the nature of inference and justification. This led her to the study of theoretical and practical reasoning and to analyse diverse problems that each of them must overcome. Hence the interest in the idea of reasoning as a mental action: for Anscombe (Anscombe, 1981), inference is an action, like the action we perform when moving a chess piece.

Anscombe believed in the need to broaden the class of actions that depend on practice to include following a rule and speaking a language. She discusses this in "The Question of Linguistic Idealism" (1981). If a special type of action is one in which the subject knows what he/she is doing, and this is what defines it as an action and not as a mere event or occurrence, then we would have to conclude that it is in the nature of action that the subject knows that he/she is the agent of that action, and so we fall back into circularity. The problem is how to get out of the explanatory circle.

If we consider the notion of action, and which actions are relevant, as our object of study, we see that it can be claimed that intentional actions are the

3. The book was published in 1959 (2nd edition 1963) and it inaugurated a radical change in how the *Tractatus* was read.
4. This is a book of interviews with philosophers and theoreticians of action (Alfred Mele, Michael Bratman, Hugh McCann, Joshua Knobe, Daniel Hausman, George Ainslie). We used the same initial script for all interviews. The questions were the following: 1) In your view, what are the most central (or important) problems in the philosophy of action? 2) For some or all of the following problems – action, agency and agent – what do they contrast with most significantly? 3) Which of these are liable to be rational/irrational? 4) In what sense is the thing to do to be decided by what is rational? Are there limits to rationality? 5) What explains action, and how? What is the role of deliberation in rationality? 6) How is akrasia possible (if you think it is)?

relevant form of action. However, if intentional action is only one type of action, why is this form of action privileged? Such a question is usually addressed by saying that intentional action is important because it is explained with reference to rationality, since there is a close link between rationality and intention, to the extent that if an action is performed for a reason, then it is intentional. The problem then is that when we want to justify that the action is a special category of event for which we can give a reason, we fall into circularity. Anscombe describes this circularity in *Intention*: “Why is giving a start or gasp not an ‘action’, while sending for a taxi, or crossing the road, is one? The answer cannot be “Because the answer to the question ‘why?’ may give a reason in the latter cases”, for the answer may ‘give a reason’ in the former cases too; and we cannot say “Ah, but not a reason for *acting*”; we should be going round in circles” (Anscombe, 2000: §5).

For Anscombe, the problem when defining an action as an event that is performed for a reason is that the reason why we perform the action is explained either as a reason-for-action or as a reason-for-something that occurs. However, the latter is not useful. On the other hand, in the first case we count on the fact that ‘action’ is something we already understand whereas it is supposed to be that which requires explanation (see Ford, 2011: 99).

2. The contributions

This special issue of *Enrahonar* gathers a wide variety of interesting materials on Anscombe’s work. The authors that responded to our challenge are also of quite diverse geographic provenance, coming from the UK, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Turkey. We organized them around some of Anscombe’s biggest interests – modern moral philosophy, intention, interpretation of Wittgenstein and the first person. The articles concern, respectively, rationality, action, language and understanding (Roger Teichmann), modern moral philosophy before and after Anscombe (Constantine Sandis), Anscombe and Aristotelianism in moral philosophy (Susana Cadilha), the epistemology of moral prohibitions (Michael Wee), natural expression of intention according to Wittgenstein and Anscombe (Duncan Richter), the unity of ‘intention’ (Noam Melamed), voluntary action in *Intention* (Jean-Philippe Narboux), the relationships between Anscombe and Wittgenstein’s philosophies (Elisa Grimi) and finally the first person, by this meaning the relationship between first person reports and issues regarding consciousness and self-consciousness (Eylem Özaltun). We briefly describe the contents of the articles below. But first a few words about two of Anscombe’s major works, *Intention* and “Modern Moral Philosophy”.

One of Anscombe’s biggest interests was ‘intention’. It is perhaps the topic her name is more intimately connected with, so it is well worth remembering the context in which *Intention* appeared. As Anscombe herself states in her introduction, *Intention* contains mostly the lectures she gave at Oxford University in 1957. A year earlier, the university had proposed the award of an honorary degree to the president of the United States, Harry S.

Truman⁵. Truman was appointed president after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1945 and it was he who gave the order to drop the atomic bombs on Japan that killed more than 80,000 civilians on impact and a similar number over the next few months. In 1956, Anscombe published the pamphlet “Mr. Truman’s Degree” (1957b) in which she gave her reasons for opposing the proposition. She claimed Truman had done something that was clearly immoral in terms of traditional casuistry, i.e. had directly and deliberately used civilians as targets for a military attack. In the conclusion to her pamphlet, Anscombe wondered whether the ethics taught at Oxford were the cause or a symptom of the lack of moral sensitivity demonstrated by members of its academic body on this occasion. In a way, she was calling for open rational argumentation in ethics, beyond meta-ethics, and made it clear such argumentation applied very directly to practical real-world issues.

Intention came to light as a development of certain pages of “Mr. Truman’s Degree”, as did an article published two years later, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, which expanded on the last two pages of the pamphlet. One of the debates raised by the case analysed in “Mr. Truman’s Degree” was the distinction between murder and causing death, a distinction which is very often discussed from an ethical and legal standpoint. In “Modern Moral Philosophy” Anscombe claimed that moral philosophy cannot be productive without an adequate and prior philosophy of psychology. Three of the terms that required conceptual clarification before any ethical analysis were the three concepts that Anscombe introduces in *Intention*: “(...) ‘expression of intention for the future, intentional action, and intention in acting’ (contents, §1, p. i)” (Wiseman, 2016: 27). Some of the most relevant questions raised in *Intention* occur precisely in the light of this clarification and this special issue shows why they are still as relevant as ever.

One of the ideas that Anscombe analyzes in “Modern Moral Philosophy” is the virtue of justice and what it is to be a “fair person”. As Teichmann (2018) underlines, this investigation covers a number of issues. In this context it is especially worth exploring and analyzing the relevance of ideas such as moral bedrock, moral ‘hinge propositions’ and connatural knowledge, among others. The first articles in this special issue are dedicated to this.

In his article, Roger Teichmann assumes that the criterion for knowing whether someone understands the words of a language includes acting accord-

5. When Oxford University proposed to give an honorary degree to then ex- president Harry Truman, who had ordered the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Anscombe opposed it in a speech delivered to her colleagues in which she argued that one may as well honor Genghis Khan, Nero, or Hitler. In Truman’s defense, she heard it said that all he actually *did* was to sign his name on a piece of paper, that it wasn’t his *aim* to kill innocent civilians, and that his only *intention* was to end the war.

This led her to think that it was worth a philosopher’s time to explain what it is to intend to do something, and so she decided to give a series of lectures on that topic, which grew into her *Intention*. (See “Mr. Truman’s Degree”, in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*, and Mary Geach’s “Introduction”, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*) (Stoutland, 2011: 4).

ingly. If we accept that understanding is manifested in the use of language, then by teaching a person the meanings of words, we are trying to instil in him or her an ability, and an inclination, to use those words correctly.

He focuses on the use of modals as seen by Anscombe, for example, “you have to ϕ ” (e.g. you have to collaborate). Actions include what is specified in the modal’s statements (ϕ -ing, solidarity). In the specific case of stopping and forcing modals, we also aim to instil the inclination to do (or not do) what is mentioned as what we “have to” or “cannot” do.

According to Teichmann, we assume by default certain linguistic competence in people who do not learn and this explains why there are people who say they understand “to have to collaborate” (you have to ϕ) while they are not willing to respond in an adequate way, that is, collaborating-solidarity (ϕ -ing)

From here Teichmann argues that it becomes normal for members of some social group not to respond adequately to detention and/or forced modals of one kind or another. This situation gives rise to a certain conceptual and practical confusion that Anscombe already highlighted when she wrote about moral duty and ‘moral obligation’.

Hence, Teichmann concludes that if we assume that the understanding of modal statements is manifested in forms of voluntary action, the internalist approach according to which one only has reason to obey a rule if doing so favours the satisfaction of one’s desires is inconsistent. For Teichmann, an internalist on reasons for action adheres to the erroneous notion of logical independence, that is, he/she considers thought, will and understanding to be logically independent of action because they are based on the idea that an action is performed in view of a reason for it and reason is found when one first seeks to satisfy one’s desires. Desires, for the internalist, are independent of actions. In contrast, Teichmann holds that understanding, meaning, and action are closely intertwined and the desire that seeks the reason for action is subsequent to that action.

Constantine Sandis’ article is a in-depth survey of the state of moral philosophy and philosophy of action before and after Anscombe’s 1958 “Modern Moral Philosophy”. A gallery of moral philosophers – “after 1958” and “before 1957” – are put into perspective in the light of Anscombe’s controversial claims in “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Many of this philosophers disagreed with Anscombe. Sandis’ conclusions are not very optimistic – in fact he speaks of tragic irony. A great deal happened in moral philosophy and theory of action from 1958 that was neither predicted nor intended by Anscombe and which actually went against her way of seeing how things should be. Her views gave rise to virtue ethics as simply one more option in normative ethics and to a strand of moral psychology with an eye on cognitive science. The general diagnosis of our times is that we have moral philosophy replete with consequentialist thinking obsessed with trolley-cases, a “philosophy of psychology” that has replaced conceptual explorations with cognitive science, an empirical moral psychology that is sceptical about character traits, the re-branding of psychology as cognitive science, and virtue ethics as a theory of ‘morally right action’. None of this was

intended by Anscombe. In fact, Sandis claims that, by comparison, things were better before her. Moral philosophy was in a much better shape between the beginning of the 20th century and the publication of “Modern Moral Philosophy” (two good examples being Ross and Prichard). The increased specialisation of academic philosophy led to an offshoot that went against both the spirit and the letter of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Anyway, regardless of how one judges the accounts of action that Anscombe criticized, and the account she favoured in their place, Sandis last word is that “Modern Moral Philosophy” seems to have inadvertently created a wedge between ethics and action theory.

In her article, Susana Cadilha looks at Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Theory” as a founding text in the revival of virtue ethics. Anscombe believed it is possible to do ethics without using concepts such as ‘moral ought’ or ‘moral obligation’ and the perfect example of this is Aristotelian ethics. On the other hand, Anscombe claims that moral philosophy is not useful at present, since she finds that philosophically there is a huge gap that needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action and human ‘flourishing’. The gap Anscombe refers to appears where there should be “proof that an unjust man is a bad man”. Cadilha’s aim in her paper is to discuss the various ways in which Anscombe’s theses can be interpreted. For that she brings in two other philosophers for whom Aristotelian virtue ethics was also essential – Philippa Foot and John McDowell. Cadilha finally argues that Anscombe did not expect Aristotelian ethics to answer the problems that modern ethics poses.

Michael Wee’s article deals with an issue in ethics: absolute prohibition. Anscombe is well-known for her insistence that there are absolutely prohibited actions, yet she is somewhat obscure about why this is so. Wee claims that Anscombe’s view of connatural moral knowledge (which resembles moral intuition) is key to understanding her thoughts on moral prohibitions. He identifies key features of Anscombe’s moral epistemology before going on to investigate its sources. He examines the roots of connaturality in Aquinas and compares it with rationalist ethical intuitionism (which Anscombe differs from by rejecting ‘good’ as a simple, non-natural property). Wee then produces a two-stage argument about absolute prohibition: the first stage is loosely Thomistic, while the second suggests how Anscombe’s absolute prohibitions can be seen as a continuation of Wittgenstein’s anti-scepticism in *On Certainty*. He presents an account of absolute prohibitions as a form of Wittgensteinian hinge propositions – they are not the conclusions of deductive arguments, but rather the foundations for intelligibility in action.

Noam Melamed’s article starts from the conviction that ‘intention’ does not change in meaning across various contexts but must represent a single and distinctive concept that frames the argument of Anscombe’s *Intention*. The problem is that there is barely any recognizable account of this concept or the schema of its overall unity in her book. One reason for this is that *Intention* starts from a threefold manifestation of the concept in our natural language and proceeds to develop their accounts piecemeal. Another is that the notion of practical knowledge it introduces is too obscure to shed the light that is

precisely required to make the topic perspicuous as a whole. His article tries to address such obscurity, first by recapturing the features of Anscombe's philosophical logic and then by using them to account for the threefold division and its co-constitution in a wider context of rational conduct. Having done this, the investigation turns away from the epistemology of action and towards Anscombe's view of its logic, where it becomes clearer that this broader context displays a distinct form of thinking.

In his article, Duncan Richter takes up the fact that Anscombe criticizes Wittgenstein for discussing the "natural expression of an intention" in *Philosophical Investigations*. He considers recent responses to this dispute, especially those by Richard Moran and Martin Stone (writing together) and by Martin Gustafsson. Moran and Stone explain why Anscombe rejects talk of non-human animals expressing intention but emphasize the importance of language so much that it becomes hard to see on what basis intentions can ever be non-arbitrarily attributed to animals. Gustafsson notices this problem, and offers a solution based on biology and, in particular, knowledge of what is and is not conducive to the flourishing of members of each species. However, this goes beyond what Anscombe says and introduces new problems. Richter proposes that we can sometimes simply see what an individual intends to do by observing its behaviour, without reference to what is good or bad for members of its species. He claims that this is true to what Anscombe says and appears to get around the problems with the other views considered.

In his article, Jean-Philippe Narboux deals with an issue that is surprisingly often left unaddressed in discussions around Anscombe: voluntary action. He acknowledges that *Intention* might seem to dismiss the concept of the voluntary as being of philosophical significance. However, he believes that the impression is misconceived. It stems from a misunderstanding of Anscombe's philosophy of action in general and of the contribution of *Intention* in particular. The main contention of his article is that to understand the scope and nature of *Intention's* contribution to an understanding of the voluntary, we must come to terms not only with the positive account that the book presents on the basis of its methods, but also the nature of the problems that, on the basis of these same methods, it deliberately shuns, on the ground that they involve considerations pertaining to ethics. The article is divided into seven sections, starting by placing section §49 within *Intention* as a whole. It seeks to explain why a systematic account of the voluntary is deferred until such a late stage of the inquiry. The author then proceeds to offer a commentary on section §49, with the aim of unfolding and defending the various insights into the topic of the voluntary which he systematically brings together against the background of the pivotal distinction between the intentional and the voluntary. Sections 3 to 6 constitute the main bulk of the essay and are respectively devoted to the four headings under which Anscombe successively apprehends the distinction between the intentional and the voluntary in §49. Finally, in the last section, Narboux tries to bring out the underlying unity of the account of the voluntary given in §49 as well as the deliberateness of the limitations of this account.

Elisa Grimi enriches this volume with her article focusing on Anscombe and Wittgenstein. Her homage to Anscombe extends to her teacher, for the philosophical closeness between Wittgenstein and Anscombe is indisputable and left a deep mark on her work. Yet Anscombe was able to develop her own philosophy and to distance herself from her master. In her study, Grimi shows both common points and discrepancies between the two philosophers. Mostly by going back to Anscombe's *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's "Tractatus"*, first published in 1959, Grimi points out how Wittgenstein's writings connected with the *Tractatus* are decisive for understanding the maturation of Anscombe's thought. In particular, she focuses on two topics: the critique of mentalism and the distinction between causes and reasons found in *Intention*. Grimi shows the complex way in which Wittgenstein's work and the development of Anscombe's thought are related, and dwells on some of the main points of Wittgenstein's philosophy. This is needed to understand Anscombe's thought, as well as the book she wrote on Wittgenstein which changed the way the *Tractatus* is interpreted.

In her article, Eylem Özaltun starts from Anscombe's *The First Person* to arrive at conclusions concerning subjectivity and consciousness. The study of first-person reports of intentional actions, happenings, thoughts, and sensations as revealing of the structure of self-consciousness was a central theme of Anscombe's work on philosophy of mind; Özaltun believes this has not been sufficiently registered in the literature. She aims to show that this theme animated many of Anscombe's works throughout her career and that "The First Person" (1974) is best understood as one among these and in the light of others.

In this essay, Anscombe discusses some of the peculiar features of the first-person pronoun. She defends, according to many commentators (e.g. McDowell, Campbell, Stainton), a notoriously false view that "I" does not refer. Even for Anscombe's most sympathetic readers, the conclusion is this is at best a confusion or a special, narrow, use of the notion of reference. The commentators mostly draw this conclusion by focusing on two arguments they take Anscombe to give, and show that they are not good arguments. Özaltun calls them "Argument from Immunity to Error Through Misidentification" and "Anti-Cartesian Argument". She claims that if we see "The First Person" as part of a project of understanding self-consciousness and its structural distinctness from consciousness, and the role of "I" in expressing self-consciousness and its peculiarities as revealing the structure of the thoughts it is used to express, this change of focus will provide a much better reading of Anscombe's article, whereby the passages in which the commentators found those arguments take on a different meaning and turn out not to be intended as direct arguments for her claim that "I" does not refer. Once we understand what is at stake in Anscombe's insistence that "I" does not refer in the light of her other works, the conclusion starts to look much more palatable.

These are the articles in this special issue. We hope the collection will be of some value to anyone involved in philosophical research, and that they will find inspiration in Anscombe for future work. We would like to thank the

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