

The Intention of *Intention**

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Elizabeth Anscombe's lapidary monograph, *Intention*, is all too often experienced by its readers as an unreadable classic.¹ Not that the sentences or paragraphs are unclearly composed: the impediment is rather to making out the underlying structure of the argument. That is unfortunate, and a state of affairs I hope to remedy here; her train of thought need not be elusive provided one recognizes its organizing principle.

The book is in the first place an account of what it is to act with an intention: to do something, as we say it idiomatically, on purpose. But the book itself is an action, one that is carefully and ingeniously configured to comply with the theory it presents, and accordingly that theory explains the trajectory of the book's argument. Getting just a little ahead of our story, to understand the distinctive structure of an intentional action is, Anscombe

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¹Anscombe, 1985; I'll cite by section in the running text. Sandis, 2016, is a comparison of its various published versions.

has it, to know with what intention that action is performed.² So the task at hand is to exhibit the intention of *Intention*.

There is a surprising payoff. For action to be intelligible, Anscombe argues, it has not only to have a purpose but “to have a point” (§38). The point of the action that *Intention* is has to do with locating and making sense of freedom in human life. Once you know what an intentional action is, you see *how* it is you are free.

Now in the interests of readability to those who are not already immersed in Anscombe’s theoretical world, my organization of this essay is going to be a good deal more flat-footed than that of the work it discusses. I’ll begin by introducing the template for intentional action that serves as the centerpiece of Anscombe’s book, which I’ll refer to as the *pumping model*. Once we have that model rendered at a suitable level of abstraction, I’ll turn to exhibiting how Anscombe’s composition has been fitted to that template. To be sure, Anscombe was a remarkably dense writer, and the full commentary—the one that would show all of the pieces to fit—would itself be a book, indeed, a much longer one than its subject. That’s not the present undertaking, and here I only mean to be providing, as I clarify a few of the pivotal moves, enough in the way of traction for the structure to become visible. I hope that will enable the reader to go on and sort further pieces into place on his own.

The next step will be to turn to Anscombe’s observations and claims about what she called *desirability characterizations*, and subsequently, to the discussion of practical knowledge that occupies the latter part of her treatment. That you know what you’re doing when you do it, or this is the case I will make, is the desirability characterization being offered, not for this or that action, but for intentional action *tout court*. The *way* you know what you are doing is also the way in which you exercise a very important form of freedom—perhaps the most important. And since the subject matter of

²Launching her discussion, Anscombe distinguishes three paronyms, as it were, of the concept (§1), and it is easy to make the mistake of thinking that she is treating one rather than the others, and ruling out of order such expressions as “I intend to...”. Anscombe here is setting out an order of investigation, rather than putting any of the paronyms on a blacklist; it is worth emphasizing that the book’s very title is, not “Intentional Action,” but: *Intention*. It will be the burden of sec. 2 of the present paper to say *how* it is that when “we are tempted to speak of ‘different senses’” of “intention,” we have become confused; that discussion will show how we are licensed to move back and forth between those paronyms—and I will do so throughout.

Intention is the structure of human volition, we can say, if we like, that what the book is really about is the proper understanding of freedom of the will.

1

What is probably one of the two most widely known passages in the book illustrates the way in which the structure of an action done intentionally normally exhibits something like a logical form. In her famous example (§23), someone is raising and lowering his arm; doing that is working a pump; the pumping is replenishing the water supply for a nearby house; getting the water into the building's plumbing is poisoning the occupants of the house; that in turn is effecting what in the early 2000s came to be called 'regime change'.³

In the pumping model of intentional action, a core activity is recharacterized, in the course of being placed in progressively wider contexts, as first this further action, and yet again another larger action. . . where these actions are, so to speak, nested one inside the other like matryoshka dolls. A more narrowly construed action is, you might say, being pumped up into one with a more expansive reach—which makes the locution I've adopted a reminder not only of Anscombe's illustration, but of the pattern it exemplifies.

In the types of actions philosophers in our analytic tradition are most likely to have front of mind, the broader contexts either have to do with what will happen later (here, those people in the house are going to drink the water and die), or with other actions complementing the action in question, and together making up parts of a larger whole (as when scoring a point is

³Filling in the links, because the water is poisoned, and the people inside the house are members of the government. Notice that, on the one hand, Anscombe made a point in this book of selecting examples that would not seem to lean on anyone's moral views; "moralism," she informs us, "as Bradley remarked, is bad for thinking" (§5); she tells us she is "very glad not to be writing either ethics or literary criticism" (§12), that she "prefer[s] to leave [moral dissent] out of account" (§38), and indeed goes so far as to classify the question of whether you have to prefer the greater to the lesser good as one that "would belong to ethics, if there is such a science" (§39). On the other, *Intention* was composed in the shadow of WWII, and her example prompts us quite explicitly to imagine a member of the underground attempting to assassinate the members of the Nazi cabinet. What is more, knowing what we do about Anscombe, it is hard not to believe that part of the agenda was to clarify and underwrite the Catholic doctrine of double effect (cf., e.g., Anscombe, 2005, pp. 247f, 274–76). So maybe the illustrations are not quite as ethics-free as they purport to be.

part of winning the game). But the recharacterizations that make up one of these matryoshka dolls need not take these forms: the logical point is more general. Borrowing an illustration from a contemporary with whom Anscombe did not always agree, J. L. Austin experimented with a model of ‘speech acts’ in which merely saying something (a ‘locution’) can be, regarded in a wider context but without anything further happening subsequently, a promise (an ‘illocution’), which in turn, zooming out somewhat further, is, right then, restoring a friendship (a ‘perlocution’).⁴ And here is a similar example, offered somewhat later in her life, of the “multiplicity of levels of description of human acts”:

I put ink on paper in the form of letters. I’m writing something. I am in fact signing something with my name. And I’m thereby joining in a petition to the governor of the state—or prison—where I am an inhabitant. I am taking part in a campaign to get people tortured under interrogation. In doing this I am keeping a promise. I am avoiding trouble with some conspirators who have got me to promise to do that. (2005, p. 149)

The pattern is being picked out in a way that’s analogous to reading a pointillist painting, where “you step...back and see the *figure* that is painted” (2005, pp. 93f).

Anscombe’s followers have given a good deal of attention to some of those more concretely characterized types of context. For instance, Candace Vogler’s *Reasonably Vicious* investigates sequences of actions: first you do this, then you do that, then you do the next thing, until finally you arrive at the last of them, the place where the sequence of actions stops, that is to say, their *end*. And Michael Thompson’s exposition of what he calls ‘naive action theory’ takes up recursively structured patterns of activity reminiscent of the coding style of late-last-century functional programming languages; actions are composed of subsidiary actions in rather the way that procedures invoke subroutines.⁵ These are important special cases, but only special cases; the

⁴Austin, 1975, pp. 98–102, and why ‘experimented’? If I am reading him correctly, but contrary to popular opinion, Austin ended up dropping this classification of speech acts.

⁵Vogler, 2002, sets itself to extending and deepening the Anscombean position, while emphasizing the way it develops insights in Aquinas. I owe a qualification to that description of Thompson, 2008, pt. 2: in his view, unlike real recursion, those recursive-looking function calls never bottom out, because, he argues, there are no actions that do not have further actions as parts. See Millgram, 2020, sec. 1, for a more granular overview.

central idea, of the nesting of action within action, should not be saddled with a picture of actions in which they are like Legos, which need to be put one after or next to or inside the other.

Let's register an important qualification. Anscombe points out that sometimes an action is performed that just sits there unembedded and on its own: asked why he did it, the agent answers, "Oh, no reason."⁶ So it is not that all action conforms to the pure (as sometimes also gets said) accordion template. Rather, we should understand Anscombe to be focusing on the pumping model of action because it allows her to develop her conceptual agenda directly and elegantly.

The layers of the matryoshka-doll action composite are connected by the understanding, on the part of the person performing it, of a relation it's natural to express in various ways: the arm is moving *in order to* pump the water; pumping is *how* the water is being gotten to the house; regime change is *why* the man is poisoning the occupants—and Anscombe suggests eliciting the pattern to be found in the action through a series of 'Why?'-questions, which the agent must be able to answer. "Why are you moving your arm?" "To work the pump." "Why are you doing *that*?" "To get the water to the house." Those connections must be apprehended by the agent as plausibly manners of effecting the action as further characterized; someone going upstairs to get a camera that he knows is in the basement, Anscombe informs us, will not do. But she seems to allow that a suitably ignorant country bumpkin could accept as a believable such connection a dignified authority purporting to cancel an anticipated solar eclipse (§22), so there is no very fancy causal theory being invoked. All that matters is the agent's working sense of what is a way of bringing about what.

That does set one kind of limit on how far out the nesting or accordion can be extended. In her illustration, the agent hopes that regime change will usher in a utopia, and here, Anscombe tells us, the understanding of *how* this

⁶However, at §§20f she provides an argument to the effect that while this can happen on occasion, it cannot be the last thing one has to say about one's action all the time, or even mostly. (We will shortly turn to what replies can be expected when there is no embedding action, but what one goes on to say is not, "No reason.") Since action theorists are used to thinking of Anscombe and Donald Davidson as nemeses, a comparison with Davidson's arguments against skepticism is perhaps in order: his conclusion, recall, was that, while you can be wrong about this or that, you can't be wrong about *everything*—or even, *most* things (1984, pp. 199–214, esp. at 200f). The strategies of the respective arguments have more in common than one might initially imagine.

is to happen gives out. So although moving his arm up and down *is* (when apprehended in its context) bringing about regime change, that is where the action stops; ushering in utopia is not part of it, but lies beyond a logical ‘break’.⁷ We will in due course take up what we have to look for once we arrive at that break, and so what the status of the aspiration to utopia, in the illustration, is likely to be.

Briefly recapitulating, then, in the pumping model, a core action, seen in progressively broader contexts, is represented as a nested structure of actions, where the action, as more narrowly framed or described, is taken to be a way of bringing about or effecting an action—in some sense, the *same* action—with a wider (re)description. One might be inclined to distinguish two questions to raise about actions: there’s the *why*, but of course first there’s the *what*. In Anscombe’s mode of analysis, within the course of an action, these are the *same* question: the why *is* the what.

2

The stretch of argument preceding the introduction of the pumping model addresses what Anscombe takes to be a mistaken assumption, that an intention must be some sort of add-on to a course of action; while the putative addition is almost inevitably thought of as a special sort of mental state, she is most concerned with the formal side of the presumption, that an intention, whether a state of mind or not, is something external to and distinct from the activity it governs. You should be aware that this is *still* the standard view of intention; the most prominent development of an intention-based theory of agency is due to Michael Bratman, who is a smart, thoughtful philosopher, and who has read Anscombe carefully. Apparently her argumentation on this point has not been found convincing.⁸ And when you look at it on its own, probably it shouldn’t have been. For instance, its most ambitious shorter lap wears the aspect of an attempted *reductio*, and let me give you a quick and

⁷§§23, 34; interestingly, this allows us to motivate Anscombe’s well-known resistance to consequentialism. The outer limits of a pumping-model action are set by your understanding of consequences. What you don’t understand, you can’t assess. Beyond the action, you can’t assess consequences, and so you might as well just consider the action. *Intention*, we noticed, goes out of its way to avoid ethical posturing, but it also looks to be positioning itself as a prolegomena to any future ethics. (I’m grateful to Constantine Sandis for the suggestion.)

⁸See, e.g., Bratman, 1987, Bratman, 2007, Bratman, 2014.

I trust not unfair sketch, before asking why it's not seen as compelling.⁹

Anscombe has previously emphasized that, for any course of activity, there are many ways of describing it, and that an action will be intentional under some of those descriptions, but not others; for instance, I'm chopping vegetables on my cutting board, which is what I mean to do, but I'm not aware that I left soap on it when I last rinsed it off, and so that I'm getting soap in the salad: I certainly don't intend to do *that* (§6). Evidently an intention must do the job of singling some of these descriptions out as the intentional ones. But now, if the intention is an extra *thing*, something you can glue on, from the outside as it were, we're thinking of intentional action as factoring into separate components: a course of activity that isn't yet intentional (Anscombe suggests the term "preintentional," and offers as a representative candidate muscles contracting and relaxing in someone's arm), plus the intention whose addition makes the preintentional activity into the thing I meant to do, in this case, making a salad. This entails that adding on that extra thing—the intention—must determine under *which* description such a course of activity is intentional.

Now, if it's not already built into or supervening on the course of activity, the description the intention selects doesn't have to be coordinated with what went on, or what is still going on. But *then* (again, *if* the intention is an external add-on), *any* course of preintentional activity could come out intentional under *any* available description. It's not just that I could be intending to use soap as part of the salad dressing; my chopping vegetables at my kitchen counter could be part of my commute, or my working on a paper, or for that matter my enlisting in the military. And that's not just absurd, it's socially unworkable: she considers at length the man in the pumping illustration parrying an accusation of murder by announcing that he's decided his intention was merely to get paid for doing his job.¹⁰

But now, and here we're starting to wonder whether the argument looks convincing, why should someone accept either the alleged lack of coordination, or that "but *then*"? After all, Anscombe is often enough willing to

⁹At §19, and here I'll concentrate on its second paragraph. Vogler, 2019, is a careful reconstruction of the argument; as will become clear, we agree about what its moving parts are, but not necessarily as to what the most natural way to characterize its point is.

¹⁰§§25, 27; elsewhere she makes the point about those who think that "by telling yourself and others 'I am not doing *this*, I am doing *that*'" they can pass simony off as training the natives to support the Church, or bribes to a politician as "gifts made just as a mark of friendship" (2008, pp. 242f).

impose intelligibility constraints on attitudes and descriptions of behavior.¹¹ Why can't the external add-on (and let's just accommodate the *de facto* live versions of the opposing view) be a mental state, one that is required to comply with a good many constraints, on pain of unintelligibility? Some of these will have to do with how the preintentional activity has been proceeding; others, with the wider circumstances in which it's being executed. Surely the competing view has it that an intention is a mental state that *directs* that course of action, and is not merely a label pasted onto it. Of course a mental state that could plausibly direct an action will be tightly coordinated with what has already gone on, the 'preintentional' resources, with surrounding circumstances, and so on. And so of course a philosopher like Bratman will remain unmoved.

We can supplement that complaint with one addressing an earlier round of argument (§2). You can't intend the past; intentions are as a matter of logic future directed, or at any rate—allowing for matryosha-doll structures that are packed into a present moment—directed at the from-here-on-out. Suppose intentions are some sort of mental item; if they are, how are they picked out? Nowadays, we would appeal to the ways they interact with other mental states and are tied to perceptual inputs and behavioral outputs (that is, they'll be identified by their functional role); likely in Anscombe's day the story would have been somewhat different.¹² In any case, if intentions are to be mental states, they'll be intentions in virtue of present properties that characterize their interactions and so on, and these will be present in the here and now. What's more, those properties, the ones that characterize its interactions and so on, leave the content of an intention entirely open. After all, can't a belief, identified by way of its functional role, be about *anything*, past, present or future? Likewise, isn't it possible to *want* just anything to be true, including about the past?¹³ And why should an intention be different? So if intentions *are* mental, they need not be future directed. And that's as much as to tell us that intentions aren't, after all, mental states.

As in the previous round, the move doesn't seem all that persuasive.

¹¹E.g., at §8, where a patient's behavior makes his insistence that his foot is where it hurts not so much wrong as just bewildering, or again at §§18 and 22.

¹²Different how? In §13, she complains about the dispositional analyses offered by Ryle, 1967, which were then current. And she elsewhere gives a somewhat similarly structured argument directed against identifying intentions with "brain-states" (2005, pp. 98f).

¹³This is not something that Anscombe believes herself, but she acknowledges it to be a common philosophers' view (§36).

Isn't the functional role of an intention to direct action, and don't actions that can still be managed have to be in the present or future, but not the past? So isn't it straightforward to account for the future-directedness of mental states that play this role? What we're seeing, or anyway this is the suggestion I mean to advance, is a sample of what an alert reader who has not yet registered the plan of Anscombe's essay will balk at, again and again: a series of arguments to which there are obvious and unmet objections.

However, the introduction of the pumping model is a self-contained action at the center of the book; recall, it introduces (some) actions as having the matryoshka-doll structure. The back and forth about whether intentions governing such actions might be merely appended to them serves as a further frame for the pumping model; in that frame, the act of exhibiting the pumping model is also a further and more ambitious step, that of contrasting what in an Aristotelian vocabulary we could call the formal cause of an action—the configuration of the elements of the action into the action as a whole—with the inapropos notion that the design of an action could be a matter of something sitting around nearby. A formal cause cannot lie outside its matter, in rather the way that, in Aristotle's picture of a substance, it's incoherent to imagine that the shape of its matter and the matter itself could be in different locations.¹⁴

Likewise, understood as a wrapper around that initial exposition of the pumping model, the observation that intentions are future-directed reframes the model to make the point that the control of the ongoing and on-board

¹⁴Vogler (2019, p. 185) puts the takeaway like so: “The general problem with the suggestion that $I+$ action = intentional action is that it fails to take into account the order of descriptions under which an action is intentional.” That will not move an opponent who construes the internal ordering of the action as necessarily represented in the content of the internal mental state, if it is to be intelligible as a state of the requisite type, one that will drive the execution of a suitably ordered action. However, it *is* compelling as an observation about the formal cause of complex actions, and their explanatory priority.

Some time afterward (2005, p. 84), objecting to Roderick Chisholm's own outside ingredient—a very special kind of causation—Anscombe put the point like so: “remember [Wittgenstein's] question: ‘What is left over, if we subtract the fact that these events occur from the fact that I make them happen?’” In an argument directed to the specifics of Chisholm's view, but evidently meant to generalize, the answer turned out to be: “Nothing”.

Ford, 2011, has a somewhat different but illuminating way of putting the point that being intentional is internal to our conception of action, and not an add-on: “intentional action” has something like the logical form of “genuine currency,” in that you don't need to add anything extra to currency to make it genuine.

performance of an action is directed toward what's left of it that is yet to do. Whereas a mere blueprint of such an action, considered perhaps ahead of time, or perhaps in retrospect, need not be so directed.

We're being offered a novel form of argumentation, and it can be tricky to follow along, all the while keeping in mind how the pieces fitting together as they do—those layers of Anscombe's matyoshka doll—are meant to do the job of argument. Once the discussion of add-on intentions is placed as additional context for the pumping model, the objections we flagged cease to seem germane. It's not, as we're noticing, that philosophers who construe intentions as mental states are unable to offer explanations of the way intentions are coordinated with the actions that effect them, or their being aimed at the future. The formal cause of an action has been made out to be its control structure; taking a first step backwards, that settles and exhibits the descriptions under which an action is intentional; that is to say, the intention is already there, within the action, as its form; so there is no room for anything extraneous to settle *that*. Stepping back slightly further, what remains as a role for the alleged mental states is implementation of that control structure. Now, maybe they're how control is managed, and maybe they aren't; but once the internal control structure of an action has been brought into view, why do we have an interest in what, recalling how quickly mentalistic explanations become complicated, looks like one or another Rube Goldberg machine alleged to produce it?

The pumping model makes intentions visible as simply the forms of their respective actions; with that in place, a philosopher (as opposed to a cognitive scientist) is meant to wonder why the apparatus, whether elegant or kludgy, that produces the form should matter; the problems those explanations are there to solve don't so much as come up. And with that (keeping in mind that *Intention* is constructed as layer upon layer of a pumping model action) we are to leave the question of whether intentions are mental states behind.

3

When I sit down at Ubu le Roi and the server asks me what I'd like, I can just say. But if my other party hasn't yet arrived, ordering for them requires me to think back on what I've seen them choose on earlier occasions, on remarks they've dropped about the food, and so on. Even before they turn up, I can give you a preview of their views about sentimentalist metaethics,

on the basis of our conversations and drafts I've read; I can tell you *my* take without having to read my drafts or listen to myself conversing. And I'm pretty sure I know what the author of the paper the two of us are reading is trying to do; it announces its objective and provides a road map at the outset. Whereas I'm quite sure I know what *I'm* doing in the paper I'm now writing, without having to go back and read the introduction.¹⁵ A substantial stretch of Anscombe's compact treatise is occupied with this topic, which in the interim has come to have its own keyphrases—"first-person authority," "self-knowledge," and "privileged access"—and a specialized literature devoted to the question: How is it that, when it's someone else, I have to investigate, if I want to know what they believe or want or intend, but when I want to know what *I'm* up to, I *just know*?

In this stretch of *Intention* what stands out is the strikingly awkward manner of proceeding, rather than what we've just discussed, that is, the neglect of obvious objections. Anscombe looks to be homing in on the practical form of first-person authority—that I *just* know what I'm doing, anyway when I mean to be doing it—by playing an old-fashioned game of Twenty Questions. (Remember how that used to start out: "Is it bigger than a bread-box?") She peels off one after another sort of thing someone might be able to say he was doing, or be able to say why he was doing it, "without adverting to observation": the startled jump at someone's "boo," the way his arms and legs are positioned, or motives such as revenge and admiration.¹⁶ But now, imagine adopting that approach to pick out, say, literary or cinematic genres. Having determined that vampire flicks are a horror subgenre, to try to make out what a vampire movie is by first putting aside zombie films, then sci-fi horror, then ghost stories, and so on would be methodologically misguided. Why expect removing one and then another superficially similar phenomenon to leave you with a unified explanandum, one for which there would be a single coherent and informative account?

¹⁵But of course, sometimes you're *not* sure: I'll circle back around to this issue as we tie up the discussion.

¹⁶§4; cf. §§6, 8; §§12–14. The usual explanation, as in McDowell, 2011, p. 130, is that she is trying to avoid introducing the notion of doing something intentionally by invoking concepts that themselves involve that notion.

Anscombe gives fairly extended treatment to some of those motives, e.g., revenge, as backward looking, and it is easy for readers to be distracted by them. Here we only need to keep in mind two points: that Anscombe is introducing them in order to put them aside; and that they will turn out to be classified not under the heading of layers of action, but rather as a subclass of desirability characterization.

However, with the pumping model in place, what looks like Twenty Questions falls into place as a way of preemptively removing putative objections and counterexamples, both to the formal-cause analysis of intention proper, and to the pending explication of the nature of practical knowledge. Given the pumping model, we just saw, it's clear that what Anscombe calls 'mental causes'—those sudden sounds that make you jump, for instance—and also proprioception don't belong in her account, and she's getting them out of the way, ahead of time. That is to say, exhibiting the formal cause of action as the action's internal control structure *is*, once other contrasting ways of knowing what you're doing are contradistinguished, sloughing them off as irrelevant to the discussion.¹⁷ As before, a lap of the exposition which occasions confusion in her readers when it's looked at on its own falls into place as a layer of a complex action that is not only built around, but designed and executed on the pumping model.

4

At the outer layer of a pumping-model action, those explanations of the form 'I'm doing this to do that; this is *how* I'm doing that'—they give out. Does that mean that, once we are past the last of the 'in order tos,' there is simply no more to be said about why someone is doing what he does? (In an older vocabulary: once we have identified the final end of the action, have we run up against the limits of evaluation and assessment?) No: accounting for action makes further demands—though we don't have to suppose that an agent will generally be as capable of being articulate about how he satisfies them as he must be about the internal structure of his intentional actions. These come under the heading of a label we have already mentioned, that of desirability characterizations.¹⁸

Changing the example, suppose I'm asked why I'm standing where I am, which happens to be in the middle of a row of people in the middle of an amusement park. I answer that I'm waiting on line. When asked why, I answer that I'm getting tickets. When asked why I'm getting tickets, I explain that I'm riding the roller coaster. (So far, so familiar: another matryoshka

¹⁷Moran, 2004, spells out both the point and the Aristotelian shorthand, while exhibiting what it looks like to try to read *Intention* starting from the beginning of the book, rather than from the action at its center.

¹⁸The term is introduced at §§37f.

doll.) But then, when asked why on earth I'm doing *that*, I explain that going up on a roller coaster is *fun*. Having fun is not a further action to which the previous nested actions are expedients (although, to be sure, in our society a good deal of misguided leisure time is indeed predicated on mistakenly taking fun for an *objective*). Rather, the explanation is a way of positioning that outermost action, and so, the whole shebang, as something that has a point. In one way, that sort of answer is a conversation stopper: if someone asks whyever I would want to have fun—that is to say, if he doesn't see how the answer *is* a conversation stopper—the least we can say is that he's not competent in our practice of trading explanations and justifications. (He would come off as, per one of Anscombe's commentators, "frivolous or uncomprehending."¹⁹) Fun is something that *of course* you want to have.

But desirability characterizations are only conversation stoppers in one way; while, as Anscombe remarks, "there is no room for a *further* question" of one kind (§37), still you normally *are* able to press a series of further questions of another sort about them, and get informative answers. You might inquire, in the scenario we were just considering, what's so much fun about going up on a roller coaster: that is, you might want to know what *sort* of fun it is. If I answer that it's thrilling, you might go on to ask what *kind* of thrill it is—"thrilling *how*?"—whereupon I might take it upon myself to fill you in on the contrasts between the roller coaster and writing a particularly dangerous op-ed. Anscombe does seem to notice that such series of questions about a desirability characterization can be extended—and as far as I can see, arbitrarily far.²⁰

¹⁹Teichmann, 2010, p. 611. In subsequent work (2005, p. 137), the notion turns up via the "distinction between what a man is up to and what he is after," where the former (her example) might be someone's role as another's subordinate, and the latter, delivering a message for him.

²⁰As per the questions she allows, "And what is the good of its being bad?" (responding to "Evil be thou my good," at §39), "But what *is* the pleasure of it?" (§40), or, at §51, "Well, at least what's pleasant or interesting about it?"

An Anscombean will quite correctly want to press yet a further question: how are we to make sense of this logical category? But he will be advised to avoid the mistake of trying to say which contentful descriptions could serve as desirability characterizations—an approach that would be confused in rather the manner of proposing to make a list of the possible premises of valid arguments. And he will also be advised not to recognize too hastily older and recently revived views to the effect that all action aims at the good; that will make it much too easy to overlook the original and idiosyncratic treatments that Anscombe gives the materials she appropriates.

In that original pumping illustration, Anscombe indicates that the agent sees the regime change he is engineering as ushering in a sociopolitical utopia, but that this cannot be construed as a further layer or shell of the action; the agent does not have the requisite sense of how the former would effect the latter. (It would be, as she puts it elsewhere, “expressive of the spirit...rather than descriptive of the end” [§12].) Presumably we should see striving toward utopia as one of those conversation-stopping, obviously desirable aspects an action might wear. She entertains Aristotelean views, to the effect that desirability characterizations are nonoptional, because tied to what it is to be a human being—to our ‘species form,’ as philosophers in that tradition would say it—and she allows that some of them (‘for the sake of health’) are like that (§37). But desirability characterizations are by no means confined to that category; in one of her examples, she invites the reader to imagine someone strutting around with a pin, with the suggestion that he is carrying it ostentatiously, rather as though it were a tiny version of a fancy cane. She does, in another of those moments that reminds an analytic philosopher of Davidson, claim that when such desirability characterizations are unavailable, activity structured on the pumping model cannot be intelligibly parsed as intentional action at all.²¹

The distinction between desirability characterizations and goals, taken together with the pumping model, puts questions on the table that as far as I know Anscombe does not address. Certainly actions can have more than one desirability characterization; if I’m taking my daughter up on the ferris wheel with me, the ride might be fun, but also can be my living up

²¹The pumping-model qualification is there to put aside the “Oh, no reason, I just thought I would” cases (§38). The supporting argument, also at §§37f, observes that an Aristotelian practical syllogism isn’t *practical* unless its major premise marks something wanted, but that it is wanted isn’t part of the syllogism; accordingly, practical reasoning requires a desirability characterization in the background or the offing. However, although this argument does not cover the excluded case, at §51 she does suggest that desirability characterizations are also in order for actions about which you might say, “Oh, I just wanted to.”

The formal contrast, between objectives and desirability characterizations, hasn’t always been attended to; taking a very early instance, what would Anscombe make of the remark of Socrates’ tutor in the *Symposium* (Plato, 1989, at 205a), to the effect that “there’s no need to ask further, ‘What’s the point of wanting happiness?’” Diotima seems to be treating happiness as an end rather than a desirability characterization, and seems oblivious to the way in which happiness, even in this very dialogue, is being argued to take a further desirability characterization: to live happily is to live beautifully. (For directing me to the passage, I’m grateful to Madeleine Parkinson.)

to being a good parent. Can they have *too many*? That is, can actions have so many points that they become unwieldy and burdensome? Can the different layers of one matryoshka-structured action have distinct desirability characterizations? If so, what are they doing there? And I'll raise a further followup question at the very end of this essay.

In our own analytic tradition, it's far too often the case that if you ask a philosopher why the problem he has set himself to solve is of philosophical interest, he will look at you blankly—or just insist that it is interesting to *him*. But failing to say is an inexcusable omission, because when you don't know why you're taking up a philosophical problem, you also don't know what counts as a better or worse solution to it. That you position yourself first to give the initial desirability characterization for what you're doing, and then to speak to those legitimate followon inquiries—these are demands that all of us need to learn to impose upon ourselves. (That is, quite generally, after explaining that, for instance, it's philosophically interesting, you should be prepared to say *how* it's philosophically interesting.) We need to learn not only to impose these demands, but to live up to them, and that's true across the board, for anyone with philosophical aspirations. In Anscombe's case, however, that requirement is in addition securely anchored in her own theoretical commitments. Putting to one side the quirky exceptions, we have to be able to elicit a desirability characterization for an action, if it's going to be intelligible as an action. But *Intention* is an action, and moreover is quite self-consciously being exhibited by its author as partaking in what it presents as the formal cause of an action.²² It follows that *Intention* must come with a desirability characterization of its own. But what is it?

Instead of trying to field that question immediately, let's add a related query to our to-do list, but one to which, so far, we have no reason to expect there to be an answer. Is there a desirability characterization to be had, not

²²At this point, the reader can attend to the frequent markers of the structure of her action found in Anscombe's text. A handful of examples: "I therefore turn to a new line of enquiry" (§4); "To clarify the proposed account...I will do the second job in two stages..." (§6); "What is required...This can be done as follows" (§8); "I have isolated this notion...because I want to distinguish it..." (§11); "Before trying to answer this...we must raise some difficulties..." (§24); "Let us now return to the question..." (§26); "Before I make an end of raising difficulties..." (§30); "Having raised enough difficulties, let us try to sketch a solution..." (§31); "The notion of 'practical knowledge' can only be understood if we first understand 'practical reasoning'" (§33); "I have completed the enquiry into intentional action and intention...and now I will return to the topic I left..." (§50), etc.

for this action or that, but for intentional action *tout court*?

5

And at this point, the extended attention given to practical first-person authority falls into place. How does one come to know, “without observation,” as Anscombe puts it, what one is doing as one does it? As the layers of the matryoshka-doll action which we’ve already reviewed have shown us, it’s managed by imposing on one’s activity the logical form of an intentional action, which equips one to answer a series of those “And why are you doing *that*?”-questions.²³ It’s a desirability characterization shared by all intentional actions that, when you do them, you know what you’re doing. The characterization is a conversation stopper, in very much the way that “it’s fun” is; if someone then turns around and asks whyever you would want to know what you’re doing, that shows him to be not on our wavelength as to what it makes sense to do. Homing in on that *how* was done in order to exhibit that desirability characterization.²⁴

²³Setiya, 2016, esp. at p. 162, highlights the way one’s knowledge of what one is doing is knowledge of its formal cause.

²⁴David Velleman has made his adaptation of this move the centerpiece of his own position, so this is a good place to mark some of the ways in which he departs from Anscombe’s version of it (1989; 2006; 2000). He takes knowing what you’re doing to be one of your objectives, when you decide what to do, and so, to be the object of a desire that figures into the means-end reasoning that launches any of your actions. As we’ve noticed, Anscombe’s desirability characterizations are contrasted with objectives. What is more, although we haven’t taken time out to discuss this, it should by now be apparent that Anscombe is resolutely antipsychologistic (cf. e.g. the tail end of §18, or again, Anscombe, 2005, pp. 132, 139), and is not about to reify the logical requirement into a mental state such as a desire.

Velleman’s failure to track Anscombe’s central logical distinction, between intentions and desirability characterizations, gets him in trouble: if your objective is to understand what you’re doing, then when you’re doing something, aren’t you *always* successful? (Setiya, 2007, p. 111, though the objection needs to distinguish dimensions of success: on Velleman’s view, actions have more than one objective, and you can succeed at one, while failing at others.) Keep in mind that you succeed at what you’re trying to do, not at why what you’re trying to do looks to you like a good idea.

I’ll contrast the views further below, in n. 36; we can be critical on our own behalf, however. Let’s also remind ourselves that what is and isn’t a conversation stopper can itself be the occasion for a conversation, and I’ll work my way around to one of these in sec. 7. In the meantime, if you ask someone why he goes to funerals, and he tells you that

We noticed that to be this sort of conversation stopper doesn't cut off questions of a different kind. Here you can still inquire *how* knowing what you're doing—in the specific manner Anscombe has shown we do, when we do what we mean to do—is desirable. This brings us to yet another lap of Anscombe's discussion, which its readers find hard to integrate into their picture of what the book is doing. As before, if I'm seeing things correctly, the main obstacle is failing to place it as a further layer of *Intention's* matryoshka-doll construction, but there are additional sources for the confusion: first and foremost, a sudden shift from Anscombe's proprietary terminology—intentional actions, desirability characterizations and so on—into the register of the Aristotelian practical syllogism.²⁵

Here we do also encounter what on the face of it reads as yet more obliviousness to obvious objections. If you try to construe practical syllogisms on the model of their theoretical cousins, you need a universal “major premise”. (One of her illustrations is “Do whatever will prevent my getting into a car accident.”) But such premises are wildly unreasonable, and Anscombe seems to be pointing out that you normally can't blindly go ahead and draw the conclusion of a purported practical inference, because it might be overridden by some further and competing consideration. Moreover, she seems to be contrasting practical inferences with theoretical reasoning, where you *do* have to go ahead and draw the conclusion. Running with her example, maybe the governing consideration of a pending practical inference is that I should avoid getting into a car accident; giving up my car and sticking to public transit would go a long way toward keeping me out of accidents; so I should get rid of my car—except that, living in a medium-sized American city, that would be tantamount to giving up on most of the urban amenities and most of my social life. (There is a competing syllogism sitting right there: Take advantage of urban amenities, and go out with your friends; where I live, that requires driving; so. . .) That consideration is a “defeater” for the infer-

they're *fun*, isn't that rather a different kind of conversation stopper?

²⁵She does take them to be equivalent, adding a disclaimer: “I did not realise the identity until I had reached my results” (§42). In case the concept is unfamiliar, here's what practical syllogisms look like (and I'll stick with an example Anscombe invokes):

1. Dry food is good for men. [the ‘major premise’]
2. Here's some dry food. [the ‘minor premise’]
3. I'll have some. [expressing the determination to act, or maybe an utterance that might accompany actual action]

ence, whence such inference patterns get called “defeasible”. Defeasibility is a logical feature of much reasoning, theoretical as well as practical; deductive reasoning, where the conclusion follows from the premises *no matter what*, is out of place in most situations anyone encounters in real life. Offhand, it looks like Anscombe has stumbled into an error she should have known better than to overlook.²⁶

With the series of reframings of the pumping model in place, however, we are able to see what the discussion of Aristotelian practical syllogisms is there to do. Suppose what you’re after is avoiding car accidents. There are, Anscombe observes, many ways to do that, and leave aside whether they take into account reasons to rethink some conclusion you might have drawn—a good many of them are incompatible. You could give up driving; you could resolve to drive defensively. (You can’t do both.) You could adopt a policy of getting behind the wheel only in countries that drive on the right—or alternatively, on the left. (You can’t do both.) Once you appreciate that the logical form of an action is something you’re responsible for, that it arises from managing a course of activity so that you know what you’re doing—that is, once the layers of the matryoshka-doll structure of the book at which we have already gestured are in place—pointing out that there are many ways to do so is making it plain that *which* action you produce is discretionary. Normally there are many ways to configure activity into action—even, many ways that are directed to the same objective, or that take the same desirability characterization. *A fortiori*, there will be even more ways which address themselves to different objectives or respects in which they might be choiceworthy. Long story short, when you act, you have options.²⁷

In *Notes from the Underground*, Dostoyevsky’s protagonist rages at the facticity of the world: two and two are four, there’s nothing he can do about it, and so what he believes isn’t up to him. In Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather*,

²⁶Indeed, elsewhere (1981, p. 28), explaining her notion of ‘relative bruteness,’ she states that “if xyz is a set of facts brute relative to a description A . . . the holding [of facts in the category to which xyz belongs] does not necessarily entail A, because exceptional circumstances can always make a difference”; that is, she is showing that she knows perfectly well that constitutive theoretical inferences are generally defeasible.

²⁷Options, we are told, is the “most common situation for anyone pursuing an objective” (§44); what you are looking for is “a right order” for the steps of a project (§45, her emphasis).

the mobsters make people offers they can't refuse.²⁸ Theoretical reasoning—reasoning about how the facts stand—is often, indeed typically, defeasible; but it *is* responsible to the facts. The burden of the second of those two best-known passages is that your actions are not like that: they are responsible, not to the facts, but to what you have set yourself to do.²⁹

You might have thought that if the way the facts stand forces you to believe just one thing, and if practical reasoning works like theoretical reasoning, your reasons for your choices are bound to be equally coercive. But action, Anscombe is demonstrating for us, is not like that. Reasons for acting trace the structure of your intentional action, and *you* produce that action. So which way you produce it is up to you: you are not compelled by your practical reasons in the way you are compelled by facts. This is, if I've correctly represented the design of *Intention*, what the work is there to show you: that action is the locus of freedom.³⁰ Your choices are *logically free*. That is to put our finger not just on a further desirability characterization for intentional action generally, but on the primary desirability characterization of the argumentative exercise that makes up the book: when you see how, and so, why it is you know what you're doing, it's *liberating*.

6

To fathom the intention of *Intention*, all the way to the very end, we need to take up Anscombe's understanding of freedom of the will. But here I have to acknowledge that what's on offer is somewhat more speculative than my reconstructions of the layers of her matryoshka doll hitherto.

Does free will consist in logical freedom, with the consequence that determinism, the view that what you end up doing, you were going to do *anyway*, is irrelevant to freedom of the will? Or does free will also require causal freedom, the ability, in *that* sense of 'ability,' to opt for any of various configurations of your activities into intentional action? Would determinism mean,

²⁸Dostoevsky, 2008, pp. 15f, 34; Puzo, 2016.

²⁹§32; this passage has, following Searle, 1983, pp. 7f, been appropriated as an explication of the distinction between belief and desire, in terms of 'direction of fit'. As Vogler, 2001, carefully makes out, that goes against the grain of Anscombe's discussion.

³⁰Does Anscombe's treatment of freedom—which gives us its locus rather than a conceptual analysis—match the mode of resolving philosophical problems attributed to her by Hlobil and Nieswandt, 2016? It strikes me as an interesting test case.

in that case, that the apparent freedom to choose to do differently is some sort of illusion?³¹

On the one hand, Anscombe tells us elsewhere that

My actions are mostly physical movements; if these physical movements are physically predetermined by processes which I do not control, then my freedom is perfectly illusory. The truth of physical indeterminism is thus indispensable if we are to make anything of the claim to freedom.³²

And one can see why. Intention is, as we put it earlier, the formal cause of action—it is not a matter of an external “choice,” “here thought of as an event”—and if there’s no action, there’s no shape for it to take. “If [someone] is tied up, he has no ‘freedom of will’ to walk.”³³ We can now see how these claims are connected: your intention—in that archaic vocabulary, your ‘will’—is something like the logical form of your action; so preventing you from producing an action with that structure, or preventing you from realistically embarking on it, is to block not just the doing, but the will. That certainly gives the impression of someone who thinks that the possibility that determinism is true is a threat to free will, and it seems that Anscombe’s way of handling the problem, once it’s firmed up that way, is to argue at some length that being caused is not being predetermined.³⁴

³¹Would your actions themselves, Anscombe ponders, be “comparable to shadows” (2005, p. 104)? Bok, 1998, ch. 1, is a very clear exposition of the traditional worry.

³²Anscombe, 1998, p. 146, and similarly: “I have never thought that freedom was compatible with physical impossibility” (172).

³³Not a “choice”: at 172; the latter fragment at 166, and the point is reiterated more than once shortly thereafter: “Everyone will allow that ‘*A* can walk, i.e., *A* has freedom of the will in respect of walking’ would be gainsaid by *A*’s being chained up”; “if... you physically can’t commit suttee because ‘they won’t let you’, you aren’t free to do it” (167f).

Not everyone *will* allow; Albritton, 1985, complains that Anscombe shouldn’t conclude from the fact that, if you can’t leave the locked room, you’re not free to leave, that your *will* isn’t completely free (because you can’t will to leave the room). But compare MacIntyre, 1988, p. 139, recapitulating a back and forth among Aristotle’s interpreters, which arrives at the view that if you can’t leave the room, announcing that this is the thing to do has been rendered a theoretical rather than practical conclusion.

³⁴The claim that “Causation = necessitation, and is universal: so determinism is true” turns up on a list of “opinions... inimical to the Christian religion,” about which she adds that “each of them is a philosophical error and can be argued to be such on purely philosophical grounds” (2008, p. 68). Indeed, her take on the apparent threat ultimately became diagnostic, as when she came to remark on “what [she] believe[d] to be an itch for

On the other hand, she seems to be preparing to show that determinism *doesn't* preempt freedom. The threat of determinism is usually made out by invoking the in-principle possibility of predicting what you will do, ahead of time, and *Intention* allocates a good deal of effort to an argument that predictions and intentions are only obliquely connected.³⁵

That argument is positioned as the outermost layer of the matryoshka-doll construction we're examining. The book's initial round of discussion broaches the question of how to distinguish predictions from expressions of intention, where I rather suppose the linguistic-analysis accent in the opening phase of the book was a concession to the now-dated intellectual habits of Anscombe's audience. As per usual, seen as a standalone, rather than as a further layer of the onion that has the exposition of the pumping model as its core, the takeaway is disappointing: merely that it's harder to spell out the intuitive distinction than it looks. Then the book concludes by returning to that question, which is managed by sketching a practical variation on Moore's Paradox.³⁶

determinism which exists in the human mind" (2005, p. 105). Quite possibly her rejection of determinism arose out of engaging a theological puzzle that was apparently her point of entry into philosophy: whether "God has knowledge of what sins dead people would have committed if they had lived longer." She concluded, her daughter tells us, "that there was not in general any such thing to be known" (Geach, 2008, p. xv).

³⁵Is Anscombe conflating epistemological and metaphysical claims? That is, is determinism a thesis about what is bound to happen, rather than about what you can know ahead of time? What matters for now, as we're about to see, is that statements of future fact—predictions—are not the contradictories of expressions of intention. But for what it is worth, it's not clear to me that the distinction that was just invoked is viable; my own experience is that attempts to articulate determinism as a metaphysically purified claim collapse (after a few laps) into claims about predictability.

³⁶On her way into the discussion, Anscombe considers and dismisses the possibility that intentions just *are* predictions—to be sure, of a special kind. And remarkably, Velleman adopted the rejected view as his own (1989). The train of thought she explored as supporting that view seems to have been this (§2). A prediction is a statement that's made true (or not) by how things turn out. But now, if you say, "I'm going for a walk," that's a statement. And if you say, "I'm going for a walk," where that's an expression of intention, and you do, that statement was made true by how things turned out. So an intention is, after all, a kind of prediction. Presumably, it's a *special* kind of prediction, and what kind would that be? Well, if you intended to do something, and then you did it, the intention *caused* the action. So an intention is a prediction of an action that causes the action—as philosophers came to say, 'in the right way'. Indeed, in his *Practical Reflection*, Velleman treats Anscombe's "Nurse will take you to the operating theatre" example—to the patient, it is information, but to the nurse, an order—as the illuminating paradigm case.

In the interim, Anscombe has addressed the further issue of what it is to contradict an intention (§31). You might have thought that pointing out a broken link between the layers of an intentional action would be that contradiction: you *think* that by pumping, you're forcing the poisoned water into the plumbing and the taps, but actually there's a hole in the pipe, the water is running out onto the hillside—and *that's* the contradiction. Anscombe replies that the contradictory of your intention, which you perhaps expressed by announcing "I'm going to do it," is not a proposition, but another intention: "Oh, no, you're not!" (where that's said by someone setting out to foil you). It's easy to take the point merely to turn on the mismatch between what R. M. Hare used to call "neustics": a statement can only be contradicted by a statement, an imperative by another imperative, and so on. But one of her commentators has, it seems to me correctly, spelled out the underlying thought: Yes, the *failure of a precondition* for completing an intentional action preempts a means or strategy for arriving at the intended objective; if there's a hole in the pipe, the pumping isn't going to get the water up to the house. But except in very artificial cases there are many pathways, that is, means or strategies, leading to a given objective. So, normally, preempting a means or strategy to an objective leaves indefinitely many more: you could plug the hole, or carry the water in a bucket, or for that matter walk up to the house and pour some more poison into the milk bottles on the front porch. . . there are all sorts of workarounds. Now, the contradictory of an intention would be fully, 100% incompatible with arriving at its objective. So the failure of a precondition for arriving at an intended objective isn't the contradictory of the intention, though it may make the particular course of action, as Anscombe puts it, 'fall to the ground'.³⁷ And notice that the reason intentions are not neatly blocked by blocking an expedient is the freedom in configuring them, which we identified as the primary desirability characterization for intentional action in general to which we're being pointed.

What about the flat assertion that your action is simply not going to succeed? Surely *that* contradicts your intention? And here Anscombe invokes Moore's Paradox. Quickly reminding you of what that was, G. E. Moore observed that if I say, "It's raining, but I don't believe it," it certainly seems that I've contradicted myself. However, if you say of me "It's raining, but he doesn't believe it," there's obviously no inconsistency. Moore thought

³⁷Small, 2012, pp. 11f.

the juxtaposition to demand an explanation, and we have in the meantime accumulated many attempts to get to the bottom of it. What matters for now is the lesson Anscombe is seeing in it, namely, that p and “I don’t believe that p ” are not actually contradictories.³⁸ Now if you say, “I intend to pump the water to the house,³⁹ but I confidently predict I will fail to do so,” that does *sound* like you are contradicting yourself (§52). Nonetheless, someone saying of a third party that he intends to pump the water to the house, but he’s not going to succeed: like the third-person Moore’s Paradox sentence, that obviously involves no inconsistency. (And think how natural it is to say of someone else, “He’s pumping water to the house, but not successfully—it’s not working for him.”) The analogy informs us that, our initial impulses to the contrary, the expression of intent and the counterprediction are not actually contradictories; as she puts it, “this is not, so to speak, a head-on contradiction, like that of pairs of contradictory orders, contradictory hypotheses, or opposed intentions.”⁴⁰

The analysis of intentional action at the center of the book’s matryoshka-doll structure *is* what, with the additional framing we’ve gestured at, makes it clear that intentions and predictions are not contradictories. An intention is a matter of the logical form of your action; knowing what you are doing is managing the action you are executing so as to bear that logical form. That it’s not going to work out as intended is not the same thing as your not being engaged in so managing it.

Isn’t that, a reader is going to wonder, elaborately putting in place the centerpiece of a next round of argument? And we can anticipate more than one way of assembling it. On a first approach to cobbling an argument together, the point would be that logic is driven by inconsistencies: by what is the contradictory of what. Anscombe has told us what freedom we have: that logic doesn’t compel your choice of any one action. To show that predictions don’t contradict intentions is just to show that determinism is irrelevant to

³⁸Not that she’s always precise about it; elsewhere she says that “‘such-and-such is the case, but I do not believe it’ is notoriously a contradiction, even though of a rather curious sort” (2008, p. 94).

³⁹Or for that matter, permissible variants such as, “I’m currently pumping water to the house,” or “I’m going to pump water to the house.”

⁴⁰§52; however, we owe a textual caveat: to point out a failure of a precondition, or that the intended outcome will not be achieved, or even that the outcome is going to occur regardless of whether you proceed “is, in some way, to contradict the intention” (§22). Here we’re distinguishing those ‘some ways’ from a flat contradictory.

(*that*) freedom: determinism and logical freedom pass each other by like, as the cliché has it, ships in the night.

On another way of approaching such an argument, this untangling of concepts would be the most important move in a genuinely Wittgensteinian response to a skeptical insistence that freedom of the will and determinism are incompatible. There is an inarticulate proto-thought being expressed as philosophical theorizing, something along the lines of: if someone knows—or even *could* know—that you’re going to do it, willy-nilly, it’s been taken out of your hands, and your decision or intention has been preempted. But that proto-thought shows you’ve become confused about how your words work. Once you see how predictions and intentions are in fact deployed in the ways we talk through what we do, you’ll let go of the idea that a counterprediction doesn’t just require you to rethink your course of action, but stymies—because it directly contradicts—your attempt to do it.

Anscombe has done, it seems to me, most of the necessary footwork for either of these, and although not a Wittgensteinian, her deep intellectual engagement with Wittgenstein would certainly have made her aware of the latter option.⁴¹ But then, reminding ourselves of the stance we remarked on one lap back, she has announced that

I am at liberty [logical liberty, evidently] to say that I believe a
“‘can’ of freedom” which holds in face of physical impossibility is
pure nonsense. (172)

In *Intention*, with the liberty to assemble the components of argument in both these and perhaps other ways, Anscombe has, quite surprisingly, exercised her liberty to do neither.

Keeping in mind my earlier caveat—that this is a more speculative round of interpretation—I am inclined to the following spin on where she means to leave things. Notice that the way I’ve posed the alternatives, and quite typically too, assumes that there is such a thing as *the* problem of free will, and of course that’s how the topic is set up in all those introductory readers. For my own part, I’m not so sure there is. If you dive into the more muscular philosophers who discuss it, you will find that they take a literally nonsensical phrase, “free will,” and *make it mean* one thing after another.

⁴¹She addresses his views regularly enough in this book (§§18, 25, 27, 29), and I take it that those numbered sections are a stylistic nod to the *Philosophical Investigations*, of which she was editor and translator.

For instance, not that long ago, Harry Frankfurt deviated from a tradition of construing free will as a matter of ‘agent causation’—as being a matter of abruptly initiated courses of action that somehow come out of nowhere—to make it out to have to do with personality integration. Again for instance, somewhat farther back, John Stuart Mill made “moral freedom” out to have to do with *not* having an overly integrated personality, and the concern with determinism to be a vestige of animistic superstition.⁴² Freudians talk about infantile not-quite-thought being shaped up and interpreted into articulated, conceptually regimented and inferentially controlled “secondary-process” thought, and what strong philosophers do here is rather like that. Don’t ask what freedom of the will *is*; don’t ask what kind of thing it is; rather, ask what’s at stake in giving the notion one definite content or another.⁴³ Anscombe, as we’ve been seeing, is very much a muscular philosopher; in *Intention*, by locating freedom in the choice of the structure of an action, she is giving the notion a new sense, one that serves her own philosophical interests. Perhaps the most sympathetic way to take what look like those abortive arguments is to see them as setting off her version of freedom from what is to be found in those freshman textbooks.

Her point is not that determinism does not matter, because, as we’ve noticed, on her view it does; rather, it’s that whether there was only one way it could have come out isn’t what freedom of the will is *about*. If you eat to live, but don’t live to eat, eating is likewise a precondition of living, but not what living is about. Someone might respond to an administrator who thinks that ‘research’ consists in publications, conference presentations, and

⁴²Frankfurt, 1988, ch. 2, which kicked off a lengthy series of ever-more-elaborate attempts to specify the relevant form of integration; of the endeavors in this camp, the one that perhaps ties the lengthy discussion together and wraps it up is Lehrer, 2023. Mill’s discussion (1967–1991, vol. VIII, pp. 836–43) is reconstructed at Millgram, 2009, and Millgram, 2011. Dewey, 1988, ch. 25, can serve as a further example of a philosopher playing Humpty Dumpty with the phrase “free will”—that is, making the words mean what he wants them to mean.

⁴³And why *not* ask what kind? It used to be a well-known position, associated especially with Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke, that even thousands of years ago the referent of the word “gold” (or rather, of its ancestors or equivalents in older languages) was an element with a particular atomic number: gold is a natural kind, and that was its essence, even back then. However, Laura Schroeter has pointed out to me that words like “gold” and “silver,” in earlier languages, can also be translated as “money”; early on, it hadn’t been folded into the content of the concept whether it was a *natural* kind, or an *economic* (or *fiscal*) kind. The pretheoretical concept, “free will,” is, it seems to me, rather like *that*.

grants by observing that people publish even when they don't have anything to say. Even if publishing, grant applications, and so on are necessary in order to make headway in your research, publishing and so on is not what research is about.

That is, if I'm seeing that last layer of the book correctly, the outermost matryoshka doll is providing one last desirability characterization of freedom, and so, indirectly, of intentional action. What is the implicit desirability characterization of free will, when it is construed as agent-causation? Maybe forensic convenience: there is always a patsy, set up to be blamed? Or maybe the sense that everything one does is a sudden lurch and a New Beginning? What is the implicit desirability characterization of free will, when it is construed as personality integration? Maybe that the self-endorsing, principled agent, who takes ownership of what he does, is *responsible*—though not in the first place in the forensic sense?⁴⁴ But to the sort of theorists of free will who argue about determinism, compatibilism, and all the rest of it, Anscombe is saying: *my* conception of freedom, the one I have located for you in human action, is not desirable in the *way* you've been imagining: not, that is, by exempting one from immersion in the causal flow of the world (even though, if causation were *too* rigid, you would lose the freedom), and not by awkwardly positioning your actions downstream from your decisions in that causal flow, and not even (we can add on her behalf) by making one less spontaneous and more serious.

But if not any of that, how *is* free will—her version of it—desirable? As I have mentioned earlier, Anscombe had been deeply engaged with Wittgenstein's intellectual projects, and had paid a great deal of attention to his distinction, in the *Tractatus*, between saying something and showing it.⁴⁵ And rather than saying that final desirability characterization out loud, she has given us her book, *Intention*. *This*—this self-consciously, elaborately structured action: this very essay—is what you can do with *my* kind of freedom.

7

Earlier on, I laid down the law: philosophers owe desirability characterizations for what they do. If the dictum applies to everyone, the demand sticks

⁴⁴For that contrast, see Anderson, 2022.

⁴⁵You will recall that she had also authored a commentary (1971).

to me as well, and so it is time to say what I take to be the point of the exegetical exercise we're now wrapping up. To be sure, if I have helped to make a difficult work readable, that's a service, but only if we have a take on why it would matter to be able to read *Intention* in the first place.

The anticipated benefit is not that of promulgating views I happen to endorse. I hope it is not necessary to remind my readers that one does not have to be an acolyte in order to find it worthwhile to think with and through a philosopher. Although I have been trying to read Anscombe as sympathetically as I can, please do not mistake me for an Anscombean; I have occasionally signalled places where I think it useful to push back against her views, and be assured that these are by no means the only issues on which I disagree with her.

I have been highlighting the quite original mode of argumentation in her essay, and how its form is derived from and mirrors the conception of practical logic Anscombe is developing in it. This, I suggested, makes the book hard to read; we philosophers hopscotch gracefully through an argument when we are already fluent in the pattern it follows. But it also invites using the work as a case study, one from which I anticipate philosophical payoffs—even if, as with the utopia envisioned by Anscombe's poisoner, I cannot yet see clearly how to get there from here.

At the respective centers of the various philosophical traditions, we characteristically find distinctive conceptions of what counts as a good philosophical argument. Viewing her work in retrospect, Anscombe is already starting to take on the appearance of the founding figure of a new tradition, and indeed, we have had several occasions to notice the existence of a school of Anscombeans. Although it is still too early to judge how successful the launch has been, in *Intention* we see her attempting the sort of logical innovation one ought to expect of such a founder. Examining such attempts is likely, or anyway this is the hunch I'm guided by, not only to give us a better understanding of how philosophical traditions arise, but even of what it is to do philosophy in the first place.

As we've seen, an action—and even purposive action-in-general—can have more than one desirability characterization. In the case at hand, there are those turning on the form of Anscombe's argument, but also others, having to do with the insights (if they are correct and that is what they are) and more broadly the position we have put on display. For instance, her analysis of action offers a shift in perspective, away from the prejudice that you put yourself on the line in your choice of ends, whereas selecting means to

them is a far less fraught mop-up operation. (If that is how you see things, Anscombe's logical freedom, whose ambit is *how* you do something, will come off as, or so it has been put to me, weak tea.) Actions are chosen as *wholes*; their ends are just their outer rims, and fall into place as part of how you have proceeded with *all* of what you are doing. Best not to be fixated on ends to the exclusion of, as you might have been thinking, steps on the way to them.

More ambitiously, to my mind, one of the chief benefits of articulating a philosophical thesis is putting you in a position to ask what it is good for, especially because, once you have it clearly spelled out, you can begin entertaining alternatives to it. When you have done so, you are well placed to ask: Why this, rather than that?

So let's conclude by turning to two closely related open questions. To act intentionally is to act with purpose. We tend to have a great deal of respect for purposiveness, and we have seen what Anscombe took to be the primary points of purpose.⁴⁶ Because we *make* the purposiveness, by folding our activities together to exhibit some version or another of the formal structure of purpose, it really *can* be: one version or another. That is what we experience and recognize as our built-in freedom, whose phenomenology we too easily confuse with being excused from the causal order of the universe. The experience of freedom is at the same time the experience of knowing what we're doing. Both of these are great goods.

I remarked earlier on that desirability characterizations work as a certain sort of conversation stopper. But they don't always: to a Puritan killjoy, "It's fun" is the opposite of a recommendation. With that sort of departure in mind, we can see where someone might most want to step away from the desirability characterizations that Anscombe ended up offering. *Sometimes* knowing what you're doing is of course the way you hope it would be, but not nearly always. Matthew Mosdell has pointed out that learning a new how-to constitutively includes a phase where you don't know what you're doing, and that it's also characteristic of the production of artworks; in such activities,

⁴⁶At this stage, we can see that meaningfulness is not the same as purpose. But you can see how they would be run together; we see things as meaningful when they're intelligible to us, in a way that lets us see them to have a point. Anscombe's treatment is helpful in this regard also; as we've discussed, she is careful to distinguish having a purpose from having a point. But here she has only taken the steps she required to get clear on intention, and as we have noted in passing, there is much more about being meaningful that still needs to be thought through.

you might well think of knowing what you're doing as, precisely, *undesirable*. Talbott Brewer delineates a class of “dialectical activities”; an essential aspect of such an activity is being always in the course of coming to a clearer understanding of what it consists in and what you're aiming at. (Writing a paper, for some of us, can be like this.) Çisil Vardar has noticed that human beings are often clumsy, in a way that derails Anscombean practical knowledge, but also that people sometimes choose that sort of clumsiness, as when they play video games meant to induce that experience.⁴⁷

And here you might balk at what I have been claiming was Anscombe's invitation. When you're groping your way through a zone of activity you don't understand very well, where you can't control the shape of your actions, where your tentative grip on what it is you're doing has to be revised or abandoned, again and again—can't that be the home of a *different* kind of freedom, and one that we might take to be as or more worthy than the other?

As Anscombe observes, there's just as much intellectually unmanageable complexity in the world of human activity as there is in the natural world (§43; cf. also §46). Boundedly rational humans are able to navigate that activity due to a particular kind of order that we introduce into it, as when (her illustration) we see someone hand two pieces of paper to a clerk and understand that he's paying his gas bill. This is how we know what we're doing, by doing it, and because others also know what they're doing, in just that way, often we can discern what they're doing—the order of intention or purpose in their activity—as well.

So we can ask, why *this* kind of order, rather than some other? Other

⁴⁷Mosdell, 2012, pp. 116–119; Brewer, 2009; Vardar, 2024; and it emerges from Bronk, 2011, that youth may manage less crisply formulated actions than adults, especially at larger scales.

At the outset, I observed that *Intention* was elaborately crafted to exhibit the way it complies with its own theory of action, and you might have wondered why that would be necessary: wouldn't the structure of an action take care of itself? Now that we are reminding ourselves of the ways in which actions not only can fail to be Anscombean, but of when we might not want them to be, we can see that it doesn't. *We* give our actions their shapes, in the course of performing them; they do not magically come to have their shapes on their own.

But over and above that, we can see Anscombe as engaging in what developmental psychologists call “motionese” (Brand *et al.*, 2002): the extension of motherese to actions, where the structure and stages of an action are displayed in exaggerated form to infants. Rather as I emphasize the articulated structure of arguments in the classroom, in ways I need not do for my peers, Anscombe is not just producing an action but making a show of it.

sorts of formal structure are in principle possible: children chant, as they prance down the sidewalk, “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,” and avoiding cracks in the sidewalk patterns activity also. (Even small children do not really think that they are managing an effective in-order-to relation, and keeping their parent out of the spinal injury unit; rather, they have simply adopted a nonstandard patterning constraint on some of their activities.) Narrative provides another and much-discussed way in which activities can be shaped.⁴⁸ As I remarked earlier, Anscombe is antipsychologistic, and so doesn’t say, but we can speculate.⁴⁹ Presumably intentional action is exapt-ing evolutionarily old control mechanisms, which would have coevolved with action recognition mechanisms. Were there other pathways natural history might have gone down that would have produced an alternative hardwired default mode of structuring activities—a different sort of order in the way living things move about?⁵⁰ This is not a question we can take up here, but answers to it would allow us to investigate ways in which it proves desirable to organize activities in the mode in which we do—rather than in other, hitherto un contemplated and so far unimaginable ways.

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⁴⁸It would be a mistake to think, with Brooks, 1984, that narrative structure reduces to means-end sequencing.

⁴⁹The term is no longer familiar, which means I owe a gloss, but since the two sides of the psychologism debate didn’t agree on what it meant, let me volunteer what I intend as a neutral characterization: psychologism is the view, in philosophy of logic, that to investigate the question of what the right logic is, you have to bring to bear facts about how minds work. For historical backstory, see Kusch, 1995.

⁵⁰I’m grateful to Eric Hutton for prompting me to think about the evolutionary history of action.

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