

PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT HAPPENS : A READING OF §45

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A reading of the passage should explain why
it is there.

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0. Introduction

In *Intention* (1957), which marks the introduction of action as a subject of theoretical philosophy in modern times, G. E. M. Anscombe propounded the following famous thesis : If *A* is an intentional action of an agent *S*, *S* knows she is doing *A*. In direct response to Anscombe's thesis, philosophers began to focus on the agent's knowledge of her own actions. The most influential criticism of Anscombe's thesis came in 1974 from Donald Davidson. In « Intending », Davidson argued that one might act intentionally while not believing that one is succeeding. Assuming that knowledge implies belief, Davidson's argument implies a rejection of Anscombe's thesis : Contrary to Anscombe, it is possible for *S* to intentionally do *A* without knowing that she is doing *A*. Davidson's influence was great, and for a while the attempt to understand intentional action through agents' knowledge was set aside.

We are now witnessing a revival of the subject : many contemporary action theorists agree that Anscombe's thesis, with certain provisos, captures something intuitive and important about intentional action. The recent attempts to rehabilitate the topic of the agent's knowledge in action theory share a basic characteristic : they defend *more modest* versions of Anscombe's thesis : some go as far as to claim that this knowledge is non-factive¹, some claim that even if *S* does not *know* that she is doing *A*, she must have *some* true beliefs about what she is doing² ; some claim that the agent's knowledge is not the

¹ Johannes Roessler, « Intentional Action and Self-awareness », in *Agency and Self-Awareness*, J. Roessler and N.Eilan éd., New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 383-405.

² J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.

knowledge that she is doing *A*, but the knowledge of her intention³, her trying⁴, etc., – that is, the knowledge of something inner, or, at least, something short of what actually happens⁵.

I will argue that Anscombe's thesis is worth keeping in its original unapologetic form : knowledge in question is the knowledge of what happens. I will do so indirectly by removing some of the interpretive difficulties we face in reading §45 of *Intention*. Based on the fourth paragraph of this section, many thought that Anscombe's practical knowledge is in some sense independent of what actually happens. Each more modest version of Anscombe's thesis we find in the literature can be seen as a different take on what this independence comes to. This independence of what is known from what actually happens also makes Anscombe's claim that this knowledge is non-observational more palatable. Hence, limiting the scope of this knowledge, it seems, kills two birds with one stone.

I think it is a mistake to read the fourth paragraph of §45 this way. I will show that §45 is a key section where three aspects of an agent's knowledge of her own intentional actions – namely practical, non-observational, and being about what happens – come together. We need a detailed analysis of the whole section and its place in *Intention* in order to see that Anscombe is not limiting the scope of this knowledge to something short of what happens in the fourth paragraph of §45.

It is surprising that we are missing such an analysis in the literature. Anscombe opens §45 by giving an example of an agent undertaking a particular action, and then declares that the knowledge he has of what is done is what we are investigating : practical knowledge. This example works as a definition for Anscombe. She is pointing to this man to show us what she means by practical knowledge. Moreover, the example is also meant to illustrate what she means by the non-observational character of this knowledge. So we can hardly exaggerate the significance of this example. However, this example is almost

³ H. P. Grice, *Intention and Uncertainty*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972 and Sarah K. Paul, « How We Know What We're Doing », *Philosopher's Imprint* 9 (11), 2009, p. 1-24.

⁴ Brian O'Schaughnessy, « The Epistemology of Physical Action », in *Agency and Self-Awareness*, *op. cit.*, p. 345-57.

⁵ One might think that Michael Thompson's work is an exception. Nevertheless in limiting what is known to non-completed, on-going activity, he is still defending a more modest version of Anscombe's thesis. See Thompson (« Anscombe's Intention and Practical Knowledge », in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Anton Ford, Jennifer Hornsby and Frederick Stoutland éd., Cambridge, MA, 2011, p. 198-210) : « ... there is practical knowledge only when the thing is precisely NOT done, not PAST ; there is more to come, something is missing ... My so-called knowledge of my intentional action in truth exists only and precisely when there is no action, but only something I am doing ».

universally neglected in the works of Anscombe commentators. Partly due to this neglect, the fourth paragraph looks so puzzling.

Take, for example, Richard Moran's « Anscombe on Practical Knowledge ⁶ ». Although the chief aim of the paper is to elucidate Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge, there is no mention of the example by which Anscombe defines practical knowledge in it. It is no accident that Moran himself is among the contemporary philosophers who defends a more modest version of Anscombe's thesis. His version is modest in a subtle way, and his view is much more sophisticated than the ones that confine what is known by the agent non-observationally to something inner. Nevertheless, his practical knowledge is not the knowledge of what *happens*: What is known non-observationally is only the description under which the action is intentional. According to Moran an agent has practical knowledge of what happens only in the sense that when the agent acts successfully, she will have non-observational knowledge of *what* she has done, that is, the knowledge of the *descriptions* under which what she has done is her intentional doing. It is not clear how Moran's practical knowledge can have any bearing on what actually happens, that is, on an agent's efficacy in bringing about certain states of affairs.

Although we do not have a reading of §45 which makes sense of it in the light of the central claims of *Intention*, the need for such a reading has been voiced in the literature. John McDowell writes, « All I want to say about [this passage] is that we should not allow it to contradict the opposition to interiorizing what is known in intention that drives Anscombe's discussion of practical knowledge. We should insist that there is knowledge in intention only if what is happening is what one says is happening when one says what one is doing. If it is to express practical knowledge, the saying needs to be true in the ordinary way⁷ ».

I will show that the passage does not conflict with any of the following central claims of *Intention*: I do what happens; my knowledge of what I am doing is practical; I know what I am doing without observation. Therefore, it also does not conflict with the following natural conclusion from these claims: I have practical, non-observational knowledge of what happens when what happens is my intentional doing. Moreover, I will

⁶ Richard Moran, « Anscombe on "Practical Knowledge" », in *Agency and Action* (Royal Institute of Philosophy, suppl. 55), J. Hyman and H. Steward éd., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 43-68.

⁷ John McDowell, « What is the content of an intention in action ? », *Ratio* 23 (4), 2010, p. 430.

demonstrate that §45 is essential for our understanding of how practical and non-observational aspects of this knowledge come together in Anscombe's thought and how, in virtue of its efficacy, this knowledge extends all the way to what is actually done and the immediate consequences of this doing. I will conclude that Anscombe's agent does not have practical knowledge of her own actions in the sense that he can make sense of what happens without observation when what happens is his intentional doing. Rather his knowledge is practical in the sense that this knowledge is what enables him to *do* what makes sense. Hence, practical knowledge is logically prior to the particular action which is known by it. That is why any form of observational knowledge would come too late.

1. Anscombe's Interlocutor : A prelude on style

Before we start reading §45, let us take a moment to make some preliminary remarks about the text. Although Anscombe's literary style, in comparison with Wittgenstein's, is more prosaic than dialogue, it is still in the same conversational spirit. Moreover, the interlocutor with whom she is conversing is very much like Wittgenstein's : he is not a stupid or ignorant objector, but rather someone who makes understandable, but nevertheless false, moves. Silencing the interlocutor is not a matter of dismissing some totally off, crazy view ; rather, it is like resisting the temptation to go along, showing that there is a better way to proceed once we set aside this understandably tempting, yet false, view. In each case, the interlocutor voices an objection which comes readily to the mind of the author herself, and the only way to silence the worry is to diagnose exactly where she herself has been misled.

This is not an easy task, because there is always a lot of truth in what is put forward by the interlocutor, and the flow of the reasoning is misleadingly natural. The interlocutor starts with commonplaces, which Anscombe does not want to reject, and makes seemingly straightforward, simple argumentative moves. The task is to find out exactly at which of these innocent looking steps an unwarranted, philosophically loaded slip occurred without rejecting any of the commonplaces from which the argument takes off. Thus, dealing with this sort of interlocutor is a delicate matter, and so is dealing with such a text. Although the interlocutor is being mocked occasionally just as Socrates' interlocutors are, we should keep this distinctive character of a Wittgensteinian

interlocutor⁸ in mind in order to understand the dialectical dynamics of Anscombe's text, and so to demarcate where Anscombe is talking in her own voice and where she is giving voice to a tempting but unwarranted move. This is especially hard to do when the interlocutor voices one of the reader's own views. But it is especially important to be able to demarcate the interlocutor's voice in such cases, since these are the moments of the text where it comes closest to doing some work for the reader : He is about to be shown where he went wrong ! These are the moments that promise illumination.

Given the character of the interlocutor, the following phrases in the text mark the moves such an interlocutor makes : « natural idea », « it can be quite natural to think that », « someone might say », « we can understand the temptation », « would rather incline us », « disincline us », « it is natural to feel an objection », « it may be objected that », « it seems that », « all this conspires to make us think », « it can easily seem », etc.

2. What is puzzling about practical knowledge ?

The first sentence of Section 45, « We can now consider practical knowledge », announces that now we are ready to go back to the topic of practical knowledge which is the topic of §§28-32. In §29 Anscombe presents a problem for her conception of practical knowledge and introduces some unsuccessful maneuvers to deal with this problem. In §31 and §32 Anscombe sketches her own solution. But this solution is yet no more than a preliminary sketch, since, as she tells us at the very beginning of §33, a discussion of practical reasoning is a prerequisite to the understanding of practical knowledge. Accordingly, the succeeding passages up to §45 are devoted to the discussion of practical reasoning. Now, at the beginning of §45, Anscombe is returning directly to the practical knowledge discussion to solve the problem she has presented in §29. So in order to understand §45 we need to start with considering this problem.

Practical knowledge of one's own actions is characterized as non-observational as early as §8. But the examination of this knowledge as the knowledge of events which happen outside of the body of the agent starts in §28.

Now it may be e.g. that one paints a wall yellow, meaning to do so. But is it reasonable to say that one « knows without observation » that one is painting a wall yellow ? And similarly for all sorts of actions : any actions that is, that are described under any aspect beyond that of bodily movements.

⁸ I am indebted to Warren Goldfarb for my understanding of a Wittgensteinian interlocutor.

The problem is this : if agent's knowledge is non-observational as Anscombe claims, it is hard to comprehend how this knowledge extends beyond the limits of the agent's body.

Perhaps, when the agent does what she does, all the agent knows is what she is doing, but *not* what happens. At the beginning of §29, Anscombe rejects this way out :

« The difficulty however is this : what can opening the window be except making such-and-such movements with such-and-such a result ? And in that case what can *knowing* one is opening the window be except knowing that that is taking place ? Now if there are two *ways* of knowing here, one of which I call knowledge of one's intentional action and the other of which I call knowledge by observation of what takes place, then must there not be two *objects* of knowledge ? How can one speak of two different knowledges of *exactly* the same thing ? »

She puts her rejection in the question form to emphasize that the following is a commonplace : knowing what one is doing *is* knowing what is taking place. The description of an agent's intentional doing under which she knows what she does is the description of what happens. But then, we have an object, that is, what takes place, which can be known in two different ways : one by observation and the other as the knowledge of one's intentional action. Moreover, these two knowledges represent the object under the very same description « opening the window ».

When we see that we are positing two knowledges of the same event, apparently we are to be puzzled. But why ? Do we not often know exactly the same thing in various ways, say by testimony, memory or perception⁹ ? There are two features which are crucial to the case at hand. First, both ways of knowing are claimed to be *primary* and *irreducible* to the other. That is, my non-observational knowledge does not depend on my or somebody else's observational knowledge. It is a primary and direct way of knowing in its own right. Second, what is known is outside and away from the body of the agent. Once the thing known is located in inter-subjective space, out and away from the agent's body, do we not cut down all possible information links except observation ? How can there be direct, primary and yet non-observational knowledge of something away from the agent's body ? This is what is puzzling.

The rest of §29 nicely brings forth what is at stake in insisting that the agent's knowledge of his actions must extend all the way out to what happens. The main idea here is that if we divorce the knowledge of what is done from the knowledge of what happens,

⁹ For a statement of the difficulty of making sense of the puzzlement here, see Moran, « Anscombe on "Practical Knowledge" », *art. cit.*, p. 50, n. 3.

we are also divorcing what is done from what happens, and so losing our grip on how certain events are our intentional doings, and not just accidental consequences of our bodily movements. If acting is bringing about certain changes in the world in accordance with one's will, then the knowledge of one's actions is the knowledge of what happens. Hence, Anscombe's formula « I *do* what *happens* » and her thesis « an agent has non-observational knowledge of what happens when what happens is her intentional doing » are two faces of the same coin. The agent's power of making things happen and her power of knowing what she does without observation are intimately related. But this relation is far from obvious : isn't *doing* one thing and *knowing* another ? No, it isn't, but we can appreciate this fact only if we recognize a distinctively practical reasoning that makes both the intentional acting and the knowledge in it possible, that is, a kind of reasoning that produces actions, not just prescriptions for or thoughts about actions. After devoting §§33-44 to differentiating practical reasoning from the contemplative thought and the mode of reasoning that goes with it, now in §45 Anscombe is ready to tackle the problem she introduced in section 29 : how can there be non-observational knowledge of what happens ?

3. Paragraph I : Practical knowledge as the knowledge of the agent

« We can now consider “practical knowledge”. Imagine someone directing a project, like the erection of a building which he cannot see and does not get reports on, purely by giving orders. His imagination (evidently a superhuman one) takes the place of the perception that would ordinarily be employed by the director of such a project. He is not like a man merely considering speculatively how a thing might be done ; such a man can leave many points unsettled, but this man must settle everything in *a* right order. *His* knowledge of what is done is practical knowledge. »

The paragraph gives an example of an agent undertaking a particular action, and the knowledge he has of what is done is what we are investigating : practical knowledge. This example works as a definition for Anscombe. *She is pointing to this man to show us what she means by practical knowledge.* In this example, the non-observational character of the knowledge is already built into the setup : the agent gives orders without observing the building of the house or relying on the testimony of others' observation. His knowledge of what is taking place, if he has such knowledge, cannot be based on observation directly or indirectly.

The very next sentence indicates that this example is meant to be a thought

experiment and not a description of an actual or even a probable case. In order to decide what to do next, the builder has to know at what stage the building is so that he can see what is required to be done to move forward with the project. Now since perception and perceptual reports are denied to him, he has to use his imagination as his guide. For a complex project like the erection of a building, an imagination, which can represent all the relevant particulars of the situation in deciding what the next step is, would indeed be superhuman. By acknowledging this, Anscombe wants to block any discussion of the empirical possibility of the case she is considering. That would be missing her point¹⁰.

But it is important to imagine this superhuman imagination, since without such imagination he could not give the kind of orders we are interested in : the kind of orders that would make this man a builder of this building, the agent. That is, orders such that if they are obeyed, the building will come to existence. So he cannot first talk about the roof and then talk a little bit about doors, then windows, and then the foundation. Such talking, as informative as it may be, would not make its speaker an agent. Rather, we would like these orders to amount to *the step-by-step activity that takes place at a construction site by settling each practical question of what-to-do-next as it arises*. There might be more than one way of proceeding at each step but what is important is that the orders settle what to do next in such a way that it guides the construction of this particular house¹¹. In order to be guiding in this way, the orders must be sensitive to the particulars of the situation. So they must be orders to be obeyed here and now for this house, not the statements of some general speculative thoughts about what to do in such and such a case. Such sensitivity to the situation at hand requires knowledge of the situation in its particularity and this is what is provided by the superhuman imagination here. Ordinarily, perception would do this job.

When the orders are specific in the sense I explicated in the previous paragraph, the builder settles everything that needs to be settled for the building's coming to be. Therefore, his orders constitute the very activity of building, and so is he the agent in this case. Here we see another peculiarity of the example : the physical involvement of the agent's body is rendered irrelevant. This is not just because Anscombe wants to consider a case in which the agent does not know what is happening by perception, as mentioned

¹⁰ See also §48 : « Naturally, my imaginary case, in which a man directs operations which he does not see and of which he gets no information, is a very improbable one ».

¹¹ See bottom of §44 where Anscombe makes this point that practical reason does not need to determine the choice uniquely.

above. Here she also wants to emphasize that whoever settles what to do next is the agent. The agent in this case is not the workmen in the construction site who actually carry and locate the doors and pillars, but the builder who decides the specific order in which each task is carried out. His orders constitute the specific structure the building activity and the building itself have. So what Anscombe claims here is this : whoever gives the specific in-order-to structure¹² to the activity is the one who makes this activity a building of a specific house and not some other thing. So insofar as what is happening is the building of the house, *he* is the agent.

To summarize : I take the role of this very first paragraph to be the characterization of the agent as such. The builder is denied physical involvement and perception not because there could be an agent without body or capacity for perception. Our physical makeup and perceptual capacities are highly relevant to the specific shape our practical reasoning, and so our agency, takes. Anscombe would not even deny the impossibility of such a builder. The point is that what makes the agent an agent is not his bodily involvement in the action or the perceptual inputs he receives. This is so even though without a body or perception he would not be able to act. She is trying to strip off all the enabling surrounding factors of agency in imagination, so that we can clearly see what it is to be an agent. What makes the builder the agent of the action of building this house is the specific way in which he settles the question of what-to-do-next at each step. He would not be able to do so if he did not have a body or if he did not employ the bodies of the workers, or if he did not get perceptual reports from the construction site. But these do not constitute his agency ; they are prerequisites of his agency. Once Anscombe specifies what the agent is by describing the builder, she defines practical knowledge to be his knowledge : « *His* knowledge of what is done is practical knowledge ». That brings us to the end of the first paragraph.

4. Paragraph II & III : The object of the builder's knowledge

« But what is this “knowledge of what is done” ? First and foremost, he can say what the house is like. But it may be objected that he can only say “This is what the house is like, if my orders have been obeyed”. But isn't he then like someone saying “This – namely, what my imagination suggests – is what is the case if what I have imagined is

¹² This structure and the kind of reasoning which brings it about is the topic of the preceding twelve sections devoted to practical reasoning. A full treatment of Anscombe's account of practical knowledge requires a discussion of these passages. Such a discussion would shed light on why the giver of the in-order-to structure is the agent for Anscombe. But here I simply assume that it is so.

true” ?

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

As we see in the previous section, the first paragraph characterized practical knowledge in terms of whose knowledge it is. Now we are moving on to the characterization of such knowledge in terms of its content. Hence the first sentence of the second paragraph : « But what is this *knowledge of what is done* » ?

The answer locates the object of practical knowledge out there – in the observable, inter-subjective world – without hesitation : « First and foremost, he can say *what the house is like* ». So the knowledge of the agent is not short of what actually happens : he does not know merely what he wants to build, what his orders were, or the activity of building. He knows what the building is like. Notice that this is what everybody can know by observing the building. What the house is like is, *par excellence*, the type of thing that can be known by observation. Furthermore, notice that the builder does not know what the house is like on the basis of or besides other things he knows : « *First and foremost*, he can say what the house is like ». So practical knowledge of what is done has the same object as knowledge by observation and its object is known immediately without mediation of inference. The way in which the agent knows what happens when what happens is his intentional doing is an *independent* and *direct* way of knowing what happens.

This conclusion, namely that there is a non-observational way of knowing what can be known by observation, is established by the builder example because the example is set up in such a way that the builder could not know what happens, namely what the house is like, by observation. Therefore, if he knows what the house is like, surely he must know in some *other* way. But here comes the objection : is it reasonable to take him to *know* what the house is like ? What he can claim to know is rather the following conditional : this is what the house is like, if my orders have been obeyed.

This objection takes off by acknowledging that there might be a gap between orders and what happens. When there is such a gap, the builder would not be the agent, that is, he would not be the one who determines what happens and of course he would fail to know what happens. So much is common sense. But when his orders are obeyed, is all that he knows the conditional ? Is the only sense in which he knows what happens the sense

that his knowledge of the conditional plus the fact that orders are obeyed amount to what actually happens ?

If this is the only sense in which he knows, then he is like someone who merely imagines what the house is like. After all, imagination provides us with representations without making any claim to their reality, although the imagination's representations might very well be the representation of what is the case. What is crucial about the imagination case is that whether the representations of imagination are in fact the true descriptions of reality has to be established *independently*. What Anscombe is trying to show us here is that if we adopt the perspective implicit in the objection as a way of looking at the knowledge of the builder of the house, the agent becomes an ineffectual bystander. My imagination might give the picture of reality but surely it can have no effect on what the reality is like. Since the orders might not be obeyed, we should not think that the builder has no more claim to know what the house is like than someone who is just imagining it. After all, when the orders are obeyed, he is the cause of the house, that is, the house is the way it is because he ordered so. Ordering is a form of agency but imagination is not. Imaginings' turning out to be true is a pure grace of fate. While acknowledging that orders might not be obeyed, we should at the same time resist any view that implies that an agent's representation of what he brought about agrees with how things are only by pure grace of fate.

What is at stake here is that if all claims to knowledge of what is the case have to come after and be by depiction of what is the case, our relation to reality must always be of a bystander's. If our thoughts about what we are doing can have no more claim to reality than imaginings which happen to be true most of the time, then the danger we are facing is impotency. If I can *only* know the results of my doings by observation, where does this leave me about the efficacy of my doings in bringing about those results ?

In order to demonstrate this, we should consider a much simpler task. When the possibility of things' going wrong is diminished, we can see more clearly that my knowledge of what happens is not an inference from my doing something plus things' proceeding as I wish. I imagine here that Anscombe is picking up a chalk, closing her eyes and writing « I am a fool » while saying « I am writing "I am a fool" » Then she opens her eyes and asks : « Now when I said what I wrote, ought I to have said : this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed ; instead of simply : this is what I am writing ? » The point is not that most of us would say, « this is what I am writing ». It is rather that

« this is what I am writing » is not an elliptical for « this is what I am writing, if my intention is getting executed ». If I am the agent then my doing *is* something's getting done. There are not two distinct things here : my doing something and things' getting done. If there were, the agency should have been attributed to whatever makes it the case that these two things go together. By being the agent, and so potent, I am the one who gets things done and I do this simply by doing what happens. The fact that what I want to do and what happens might come apart does not turn my claims of knowledge of what I have done into the knowledge of conditionals, antecedents of which await the help of some other power to make my wishes come true.

To summarize : the object of practical knowledge is what *can* be known by observation : that is, what happens. The danger of confining practical knowledge to what I do, which sometimes amounts to what happens and sometimes does not, is that once we divorce what I do from what happens in this way, the knowledge of our doings becomes the knowledge of intentions whose relation to what happens comes to nothing more than highly probable imaginings. The absurdity of this is revealed by taking a case – writing, « I am a fool » – which is simple enough that it can be performed without the aid of the senses. Here it seems obvious that practical knowledge of what I do is the knowledge of what happens. In the following paragraph Anscombe will address the objection to this claim, which she first considered in §§28-29.

5. Paragraph IV & V : The interpretive challenge

I claim, in the last two paragraphs of §45, Anscombe is arguing against a challenge to her view that we can know without observation what happens, or equivalently, that practical knowledge has the same object as contemplative knowledge, or equivalently, that practical knowledge is not confined to the knowledge of things in the mind but extends all the way out. The best way to see this is to make explicit the voice of the interlocutor, whose nature I exposed in Section 1 above. Let us look closely at how the challenge is motivated.

« **[Interlocutor : Premise 1]** Orders, however, can be disobeyed and intentions fail to get executed. That intention for example would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so the words did not appear. **[Interlocutor : Premise 2]** And my knowledge would have been the same even if this had happened. **[Interlocutor : Challenge]** If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens, how can it be the knowledge of what does happen ? **[Anscombe : Reply]** Someone might say that this was a funny sort of knowledge that

was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case ! On the other hand Theophrastus' remark holds good : "the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment"¹³. »

The interlocutor is asking, rightly, how someone can know what happens if he would still know even if what he takes to be happening does not happen. One can know what happens only if what one takes to be happening really happens. So the challenge is a legitimate one. But how did we end up here ? Why does the interlocutor think that in order for non-observational knowledge to be the knowledge of what happens, Anscombe has to show that there can be knowledge of what happens independent of whether it happens or not ?

To see why, let us look at the premises on which the challenge rests. The interlocutor, as a typical Wittgensteinian interlocutor does, starts with a commonplace : of course, orders may be disobeyed, and something may go wrong with the chalk, and in that case nothing would be written. So we need to question the second premise of the interlocutor. Knowledge of *what* would be *the same* if something goes wrong with the chalk ? If something went wrong with the chalk, then I did not write, so I cannot have knowledge of what I wrote – simply because I did not write. So my knowledge, which is supposed to be the same, cannot be the knowledge of what happens ; but it cannot be the knowledge of what I do, either. What, then, is this knowledge, which is the same, the knowledge of ?

What is behind the second premise is the thought that there is something I still have a claim to know even when my orders are not obeyed or my intentions are not executed. This is of piece with the thought that orders' being obeyed and intentions' getting executed are not epistemic acts. Hence whether the orders are carried out or not cannot make a difference to the epistemic act, whatever it might be, by which the agent is supposed to know her actions. But whether the orders are being obeyed or not makes a difference to what happens. Therefore, the object of this epistemic act by which the agent is supposed to know her actions cannot be what happens. Hence, the interlocutor concludes, the agent's knowledge, if it is not observational, if it does not derive from what happens, then it must be independent of what happens and so cannot be the knowledge of what happens. Hence this second premise is where a seemingly natural but an

¹³ Throughout the paper, the bold square brackets in the quotes are my additions to the original text to make explicit how I read those paragraphs as a dialogue between Anscombe and the interlocutor.

unwarranted move is being made.

Anscombe's way of blocking the challenge is by revealing the absurdity of this unwarranted move : « Someone might say that this was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case » ! Here, the word « funny » and the punctuation, namely an exclamation mark, are signs of ridicule. Also, the phrase « someone might say » indicates that Anscombe is not talking in her own voice here. So she is ridiculing the claim that there can be knowledge of *what* was written when nothing is getting written. We can have knowledge of only what is the case, and when the orders are not obeyed or intentions are not executed there is nothing we know as one cannot have knowledge of what is not the case.

On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that something different and interesting is going on here : the reason that we do not know in this case is not that we misjudged what is getting written. We failed to know because we failed to *do* what we *said* we were doing. So it is significant that we failed to know *because* our orders were disobeyed or something went wrong with the chalk. Since there is a different way of knowing the same thing, by the same token there is a different way of failing to know. If knowledge without observation is not knowledge by judging how things are, then when such knowledge fails, it does not fail because of a failure in judgment. So in order to understand what is going on here, we should take the commonplace starting points of the interlocutor seriously. What is this knowledge that fails because something goes wrong in doing things and not in observing, judging, inferring, or inquiring things ? To answer this question we need to look at other passages related to Theophrastus' remark : « the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment ». But before we proceed to the detailed discussion of this remark, let us summarize what we said on the fourth paragraph so far and also read the fifth.

In the fourth paragraph Anscombe deals with a challenge to the claim that practical knowledge is the knowledge of what happens. The challenge relies on the premise that we could have practical knowledge independent of what actually happens. Since this knowledge is not derived from what happens, we thought we could conclude that it is independent of what happens. Since we did not make a judgment mistake about *what* we are doing, we thought we could still take ourselves to know something. But now this knowledge cannot be of what happens. Hence Anscombe must be wrong in claiming that the object of practical knowledge is what happens. The way to block the challenge is to

show that we can fail to know without making a judgment mistake, because when we know practically, we do not know by judging. So the interlocutor is right in pointing out that in these cases, something went wrong in the performance, and not in judgment. But he is wrong in thinking that knowledge can fail only when we misjudge. That is, he is wrong in thinking that all knowledge has to derive from its object and has to be a form of judging how things are.

To show that we can resist the interlocutor, in the fifth paragraph, Anscombe considers a case where a performance mistake is not possible.

« Hence we can understand the temptation to make the real object of willing just an idea, like William James. For that certainly comes into being ; or if it does not, then there was no willing and so no problem. But we can in fact produce a case where someone effects something just by saying it is so, thus fulfilling the ideal for an act of will as perfectly as possible. This happens if someone admires a possession of mine and I say "It's yours !", thereby giving it him. But of course this is possible only because property is conventional. »

If we accept the premises of the challenge and do not see the underlying view of knowledge driving it, then we have to accept the conclusion : an agent's practical knowledge cannot be knowledge of what happens. After all, when there is a mistake in performance nothing happens, or something else happens. Were that the case, what would be the object of this knowledge ? Something which comes into being no matter what happens : an idea. Normally, we cannot effect what happens by merely saying something. When I say, « I am writing », I am not writing by saying. So what I say and what happens can come apart : if I cannot write, what I said cannot be true. But since I did not misspeak or lie, I must have got something right, and what could that be other than the idea of writing ? This is how we are tempted to make the object of practical knowledge an idea.

The only cases in which I can know what happens by just saying what I do are the ones in which I do things by saying. In those cases, once I say what I do, I thereby do it, so there is no room for performance mistake. When I say about a possession of mine, « It is yours ! », I also make it yours. In this case what I say is true of what happens because it effects what happens. So it is the knowledge of what happens. Anscombe's point is that in every case when I tell you what I do, I do mean to talk about what happens. But of course what I told you would happen, only if I can perform well ; and in most cases we do not perform with words. So for what I said to be true, I must bring about what happens, and this generally requires my doing several other things. This opens the possibility of

performance failure and the possibility of what I said to turn out to be false without any judgment failure or dishonesty on my part. Therefore, since there is no mistake in judgment, we should not be tempted to think that the real object of practical knowledge is an idea or something in the sphere of mind. Instead we should see that there are other sources of mistake.

6. Theophrastus' Remark : The other source of mistake

Theophrastus' remark appears in two other places than §45 : one is at the end of the discussion in §28-§32, and the other is in §2, where Anscombe discusses expression of intention. Since §2 is not about practical knowledge, one might think that here Anscombe uses the remark to make a different point. But I claim that the remark is used to undo a similar move to the one made by the interlocutor in §45. Although in §§2-3 Anscombe deals with the expression of intention, the underlying topic is the same : whether intention can be a purely interior thing and the nature of the relation of intention to what actually happens. Here, the questions are not « What is practical knowledge the knowledge of ? », « Is practical knowledge independent of what happens ? », « How can practical knowledge extend all the way to what happens without observation ? » ; but their linguistic correlates, « What is an expression of intention an expression of ? », « Is the truth of an expression of intention independent of the execution of intention ? », « How can expression of intention be the description of something in the future if it is not formed on the basis of evidence that it will come true ? »

In §2 Anscombe considers two objections to thinking of expressions of intention as predictions, that is, as statements about the future. These objections are parallel to the objections we have seen in the fourth and fifth paragraph of §45. We will look closely at the first one :

« [Interlocutor, commonplace starting points] If I do not do what I said I would, I am not supposed to have made a mistake, or even necessarily to have lied ; [Interlocutor, unwarranted move] so it seems that the truth of a statement of intention is not a matter of my doing what I said. [Anscombe] But why should we not say : this only shows that there are other ways of saying what is not true, besides lying and being mistaken ? »

Here, Anscombe reveals that we are tempted to think that the truth of a statement of intention is not a matter of doing what I said, because we assume that the only ways in which I can say something false are by lying or by being mistaken about something at the

moment of utterance. But if there are other ways of saying something not true, then we do not have to divorce the truth of a statement of intention from the happening of things as stated in the statement of intention. The interlocutor's conclusion is forced on us only if we cannot find other ways of going wrong. Therefore, Anscombe goes on to show that there are other ways of going wrong :

« ... if I don't do what I said, what I said was not true (though there might not be a question of *truthfulness* in saying it). But ... this falsehood does not necessarily impugn what I *said*. In some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with words, rather than *vice versa*. This is sometimes so when I changed my mind ; but another case it occurs when e.g. I write something other than I think I am writing : as Theophrastus says ... the mistake here is one of performance not of judgment. »

By providing a way of going wrong, namely, performance failure, which is not considered by the interlocutor, Theophrastus' remark is used to block the interlocutor's move, which, if successful, is meant to show that expressions of intentions are not statements about something in the future. The upshot would be, then, that expression of intention is about something present and within the agent, *something which is divorced from what will happen outside afterwards*¹⁴.

The moral of this discussion is quite general. When someone tells us what she is doing now, we do not call it an expression of intention. But we might as well call it so. We can call each intentional action an expression of intention, in the sense that it shows us what the agent's intentions are¹⁵. I can narrate what I have done, what I am doing and what I will do. These will be descriptions of something that happened in the past, something happening now, and something that will happen in the future, respectively. They will all be descriptions of what happens, and expressions of my intentions in case I can give those descriptions *not* on the basis of evidence that they are true (nevertheless they will be true most of the time). I walked yesterday, I am walking now, and I will walk

¹⁴ The second objection takes off by pointing to the difference of commands as signs and intention as not necessarily requiring signs (*Intention* §2 page 5). In order to examine the objection, we need to differentiate the expressions of intention from other predictions. It is important to make the difference clear. (For the same distinction between the two species of prediction see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1953, §630) If we overlook the difference, then the expressions of intentions will be nothing but estimations of the future, that is, judgments about what the future will be on the basis of evidence. And in that case, the only possible mistake here would be one of judgment, and we would be blind to the possibility of mistake given by Theophrastus' remark in the previous paragraph even if we manage to block the interiorizing move of the second objection, where expressions of intentions are taken to be expressions of something inner which is independent of their being expressed. Due to space limitations, I will not discuss this objection.

¹⁵ Cf. *Intention* §4 page 8.

tomorrow. Each of these is a description of something out there, happening in the world. So what is at stake in showing that there are other sources of mistake than judgment mistake which explains how these reports can be false, is to insist that these reports, when they are true, are about what happens. Hence what is at stake is to specify the object of practical knowledge in general, the knowledge which is not based on evidence.

As I said in the Introduction, the reading of the fourth paragraph of §45 poses interpretive challenges ; some read the fourth paragraph very differently. According to this other family of readings Anscombe endorses the view expressed in the sentence « And my knowledge would have been the same even if [orders are not obeyed, intentions are not executed] this happened¹⁶ ». One might defend such a reading in the following way. Since practical knowledge is not derived from facts, one might think, facts cannot challenge practical knowledge claims. Similarly, according to such a reading, in the above quote from §2 the figurative talk « ... the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with words, rather than *vice versa* » is meant to make the point that we can hold on to our claim to knowledge in spite of facts. Since we do not change what was said in the light of facts, what was said is knowledge. Hence, practical knowledge must be independent of facts and cannot be about what happens¹⁷. As we have seen, according to my reading, the point is about the existence of other sources of mistake, not that there can be knowledge independent of facts.

To support my reading I will now examine the third place where Theophrastus' remark is mentioned, that is §32, which is also the place where Anscombe mentions that sometimes the facts must be in accordance with words, and not *vice versa* again. She explains what she means by this with the famous shopping list example. We will consider

¹⁶ For example, Judith Jarvis, Review of *Intention*, by G. E. M. Anscombe, *Journal of Philosophy* 56 (1), 1959, p. 31- 41 and Adrian Haddock, « The Knowledge That a Man Has of His Intentional Actions », in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, *op. cit.*, p. 147-169).

¹⁷ Haddock after rejecting *some* interlocutor's voice readings (he is not considering the present reading), claims that Anscombe speaks in her own voice when she writes, « And my knowledge would have been the same even if this happened », but his reading does not lead to the non-factive practical knowledge view (« The Knowledge That a Man Has of His Intentional Actions », *art. cit.*, p. 167-69). That is, he does not think that we should conclude that Anscombe defends the view that practical knowledge is independent of facts. In fact, he thinks that Anscombe is rejecting an implicit inference from the claim that my knowledge would have been the same to the claim that my knowledge is independent of what actually happens. His basic idea is that here Anscombe is talking about a-yet-to-be-completed action, which is not yet successful due to a hiccup. Only in these cases, knowledge would have been the same. In the cases of complete failure of performance, knowledge would not have been the same. Pace Michael Thompson (« Anscombe's Intention and Practical Knowledge », *art. cit.*), Haddock claims that Anscombe is simply acknowledging the broadness of the progressive here. I find this reading far more strained than the reading I gave above. I think it is not convincing that Anscombe was rejecting an implicit inference which she did not make explicit at any later point.

another one.

Suppose I said « I will visit a friend » and on my way there I got lost and could not get there. Since I did not visit the friend, I did not do what I said, so what I said is not true. But the problem is not my truthfulness, my honesty or my command of language. So I did not make a mistake in *saying* what I said. Therefore, when I tell you next day that actually I did not visit my friend, the response would not be, « Then why did you tell me that you would visit a friend ? » or « What a lie ! » ; rather something like, « You should have printed a Google map before you left ». Similarly, when I think about the matter, I would blame myself not because of what I said, but because I did not make sure that I knew where I was going. If I were to go back in time, I would *say* the same thing but I would *act* differently. I would fix the mistake, and what I am fixing shows where the mistake lies. I would fix things in such a way that I visit my friend. Consequently, I would change what happens, not my utterance. That's all Anscombe means here by « impugning facts ». Nevertheless, what I said was not true, so it does not contain the information about what I was doing and therefore you did not *know* what I was doing yesterday when you thought that I was visiting a friend. And similarly I did not *know* that I would visit a friend.

And, then, she mentions Theophrastus' remark again :

« I say to myself "Now I press Button A" – pressing Button B – a thing which can certainly happen. This I will call the *direct* falsification of what I say. And here, to use Theophrastus' expression again, the mistake is not one of judgment but of performance. That is, we do *not* say : What you *said* was a mistake, because it was supposed to describe what you did and did not describe it, but : What you *did* was a mistake, because it was not in accordance with what you said. »

Here it is clear that what happens *falsifies* what is said, hence the utterance of « Now I press Button A » does *not* express knowledge although the mistake is not in the act of saying it, but in the performance of pressing.

What is the significance of seeing that there are several sources of mistake ? In particular, what is the point of seeing that practical knowledge fails when the agent fails to perform ? I think it is to point out that when the agent knows practically, she knows by doing. If practical knowledge is knowing by doing, naturally performance failure would be a source of mistake. That we can fail to know by performance mistake hints at how we know practically when we know : by performing well. Hence the upshot of seeing that performance failure is a source of mistake is to establish that acting is an independent form of knowing. Like any other form of knowledge, this knowledge must be in

accordance with facts, even though it is not derived from facts. In this form of knowing, one knows not by judging how things are but by bringing about how things are¹⁸.

7. Conclusion

« Practical knowledge », just like « theoretical knowledge », is a success phrase. The aim of thinking in both its practical and theoretical forms is truth. Practical or theoretical thought fails, that is, falls short of knowledge, when it does not get at the truth. This is not to say that practical thought and truth are related in the same way that theoretical thought and truth are. Unlike theoretical thought, practical thought¹⁹ gets at the truth not by depicting, describing it, but by producing it²⁰. So when practical thinking fails, it fails in a totally different manner. So the fix will require a different sort of adjustment. As Moran nicely puts it²¹, the fallback positions and conditions of total withdrawal from a claim to knowledge are different for theoretical and practical thought. But all the same, the aim of thought is truth. One can know neither practically nor by observation that she is writing on a blackboard if nothing is getting written eventually. Practical knowledge, while being non-observational, is the knowledge of particular things that happen. In §45 Anscombe does not settle for anything less than this.

In giving this reading of §45, I aim to show that in spite of the pervasive influence of Anscombe on contemporary study of intentional action, in making progress in the current debates we are still far from fully exploiting her conception of agent and the knowledge such an agent possess. Now that we have seen the unapologetic form of Anscombe's claims, we can focus on the possibility of the knowledge she characterizes, that is, knowledge by being an efficacious agent, or equivalently, the possibility of acting being a

¹⁸ The very last paragraph of §32 flows nicely if my reading is accurate : here Anscombe denies that all knowledge of the facts is had by judging/observing/depicting/infering how things are, *not* that practical knowledge is in accordance with facts. But in order to give a positive account of the possibility of knowledge of facts which is not had by judging/observing/depicting/infering how things are, she needs to show that there is a distinct sort of reasoning that produces this knowledge. This is the task of §§33-44, and discussion of it is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁹ Here I use the phrase « practical thought » to name the faculty and « practical thinking » to name the exercise of this faculty, and reserve « practical knowledge » for the successful exercise of the faculty. Anscombe uses « practical knowledge » in all these senses in different passages. I differentiate each sense with a different term for the sake of clarity.

²⁰ Here is how Anscombe defines practical truth : « Finally, we may note that we have given an explanation of “practical truth”. This is truth that one produces in acting according to choice and decision » (« Practical Truth », in *Human Life, Action, and Ethics : Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, Mary Geach and Luke Gormally éd., Exeter, Imprint Academic, 2005, p. 155). In this paper Anscombe gives an interpretation of Aristotle, but she gives the interpretation as a view she endorses. Also she adds : « We ... can have theoretical knowledge of what our present practical knowledge is of » (*Ibid.*, p. 156).

²¹ R. Moran (« Anscombe on “Practical Knowledge” », *art. cit.*).

distinct form of knowing what happens²².

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²² Special thanks to John McDowell, Richard Moran, Matthew Boyle, and Douglas Lavin for very helpful discussions of §45. Thanks also to Charles Travis for comments on the final draft.

***Klesis* - 2016 : 35 - Lectures contemporaines de Elisabeth Anscombe**

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