

ANSCOMBE ON INTENTIONS AND COMMANDS

Graham Hubbs
(University of Idaho)

The title of this essay describes its topic. To see why it may be of interest, it will be helpful first to consider one of the central worries of Anscombe's *Intention* as well as her method of diffusing this worry. Approximately halfway through the essay, Anscombe asserts that modern philosophy has «an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge» (§32)¹. For one who is trapped by such a conception, she claims, it can seem impossible that an agent can have non-observational knowledge of his own actions. Anscombe has already argued at length that such knowledge is a constitutive element of action (cf. §§5-20), but for someone in the grip of the incorrigibly contemplative conception, it will seem impossible that an agent can have this knowledge under exactly the same descriptions that others can observationally know his actions. Anscombe's worry here crystalizes in her asking, «How can one speak of two different knowledges of *exactly* the same thing?» (§29, original emphasis). She answers this question by shifting her discussion from practical knowledge to practical reasoning (cf. §§33-44); it is only by first understanding the distinctive logical form of the latter, she thinks, that we properly grasp the character of practical knowledge, which allows us to cast off the blinding incorrigibly contemplative conception and the worries it pulls in its wake (cf. §§45-50).

The first part of this essay explains the two-knowledges/one-object worry. This sets the context for my main topic, viz., Anscombe's remarks in *Intention* on the similarities and differences between intentions and commands. These remarks play a key role in her argument's shift from practical knowledge to the form of practical reasoning and in its subsequent shift back to practical knowledge. The remarks should be seen as framing her account of practical reasoning's distinctive logical form: they motivate the need for the account, and they are then illuminated by the account in order to resolve the two-knowledges/one-object puzzle. I tackle these exegetical issues over the course of the essay, but my goals are not limited to exegesis². I think there are lessons both in the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all in-line citations are to Anscombe, *Intention*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1963.

² As far as exegesis goes, however, the importance of Anscombe's remarks in *Intention* on intentions and commands has gone overlooked. See, for example, the summary of *Intention* in F. Stoutland, «Summary of

philosophy of mind and in ethics to be gleaned from a close study of these remarks on intentions and commands. Intentions, we discover, must not be understood as self-commands ; once we see why, we can better understand Anscombe's rather cryptic dismissal of Kantian ethics in « Modern Moral Philosophy ». The essay closes on this last point.

1. The two-knowledges/one-object puzzle

Let us open by reviewing Anscombe's remarks on the incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge that plagues contemporary philosophy. According to such a conception, there can be no knowledge, properly speaking, of the worldly results of the performance of an intentional action prior to or during the performance of the action. On this incorrigibly contemplative conception, facts are necessarily prior to knowledge, and since one cannot know a fact that is not yet the case, one cannot know what one does through an intentional action until the action has produced its result. All one can know about one's own intentional activity prior to its completion is some psychological fact that already obtains, *viz.*, the intention, considered as a sort of plan on which one acts. Anscombe rejects this view. We learn near the text's end that she takes her arguments against this view to vindicate the Thomistic idea that « [p]ractical knowledge is "the cause of what it understands", unlike "speculative" knowledge, which "is derived from objects known" » (§48)³.

The textual road to this conception of practical knowledge takes many twists and turns. One of the first is to introduce the idea of non-observational self-knowledge, the general sort of knowledge to which practical knowledge, Anscombe thinks, belongs as a species. Assuming that such knowledge exists and practical knowledge is a species of the genus, we might ask : what is the object of practical knowledge ? Towards answering this question, Anscombe invites us to think of what such knowledge would have to be like on the incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge that she seeks to reject. Critically, she thinks that adherence to this conception commits one to the view that practical knowledge has its own sort of object, distinct from the sort of object that belongs to

Anscombe's *Intention* », in A. Ford et al. ed., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 23-32. Stoutland pays no attention to Anscombe's comments on commands in §2, §20 or §§31-32 in spite of their central place in those sections. The only mention he makes of commands is of the builder's instructions in the notorious §45. If my essay is successful, it will show that this is a nontrivial oversight on Stoutland's part.

³ Anscombe cites Aquinas here at *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae, Q3, art. 5, obj. I.

observational knowledge. This, in turn, commits one to rejecting that a person could ever know by observation what another person knows non-observationally.

To see how one could arrive at such a view, consider her famous example of the man pumping water (§§23-31). The man is pumping water with the aim of replenishing the house water-supply. Imagine an observer who watches the man and who can see whether there are any holes in the pipe between the pump and the house. In the good case, there are no holes, and the pumper succeeds in his task. It might seem in this case that the observer can know through observation what the pumper knows by acting, viz., that the pumper is replenishing the house water-supply. If this is right, then we have two distinct ways of knowing of one and the same fact. Perhaps, however, the apparent identity here is illusory. If there is a hole in the pipe, then the observer may know that the house water-supply is not being replenished even though the pumper believes that it is. If the pumper has non-observational knowledge of what he does here – and, at this point in the text, Anscombe takes herself to be entitled to say that he non-observationally knows something about his action – then it seems his knowledge cannot be that he is replenishing the water supply, for the supply is not being replenished.

Maybe, then, what he non-observationally knows is only that he is *trying* to replenish the house water-supply ; maybe that one is *trying* to do something is all one can ever know non-observationally about one's actions. If that is so, however, then the observer and the pumper do not know the same sort of fact : the observer knows, in Anscombe's words, « what happens » (§29), whereas the object of the pumper's non-observational knowledge is merely the psychological datum that accords with his attempt. This is not Anscombe's view ; as Michael Thompson puts it, « Anscombe's practical knowledge is precisely self-knowledge in respect of what might in principle be observed⁴ ». She insists that, in spite of what the water pumper example might seem to demonstrate, at least in the good case, the observer and the pumper do indeed have knowledge of one and the same fact, viz., that the pumper is replenishing the house water-supply⁵.

⁴ M. Thompson, « Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge », in A. Ford et al. ed., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

⁵ The good case is the one in which the house water-supply is successfully replenished. I want presently to remain neutral about the bad case, in which there is a hole in the pipe. I will take up that matter at the end of section 3.

2. Intentions and Commands

To understand Anscombe's insistence here, we must, I think, understand why she endorses the Thomistic analysis of practical knowledge as « the cause of what it understands » (§48), which she gives in §§45-49. Anscombe thinks that bringing this into view requires first understanding the distinctive logical form of practical reasoning ; « [t]he notion of "practical knowledge" », she says, « can only be understood if we first understand "practical reasoning" » (§33). She gives her account of practical reasoning in §§33-44. Now if we look at the sections that frame this account, §32 and §45, we find some striking commonalities. In each of these, she aims to get explanatory work out of Theophrastus's remark concerning mistakes of performance, and in each of these she compares intentions to commands. My goal in this and the following section will be to explain the importance of this frame to answering the two-knowledges/one-object puzzle. The frame itself, however, is best understood in terms of Anscombe's broader thoughts on intentions and commands, so we will do well to start by analyzing these.

One does not have to get very far in *Intention* to find remarks on the topic. In §2, Anscombe entertains the idea that expressions of intentions might be a species of prediction, alongside estimates, prophecies, and, importantly, commands. We are not told much about estimates or prophecies, but we do learn quite a bit about commands. Anscombe says that a command is « a description of a future action, addressed to the prospective agent, and cast in a form whose point in the language is to make the person do what is described ». « An order will usually be given with some intention or another », she claims, « but is not as such the expression of a volition ; it is simply a description of an action cast in a special form ». She also tells us that « [e]xecution-conditions for commands correspond to truth-conditions for propositions ». Finally, we learn that « [t]he reasons justifying an order are not ones suggesting what is probable, or likely to happen, but e.g. ones suggesting what it would be good to make happen with a view to an objective, or with a view to a sound objective. In this regard, commands and expressions of intentions are similar ».

The reader familiar with *Intention* will note a number of important elements from Anscombe's overall view articulated in these early remarks. She starts by characterizing commands in terms of actions, going so far as to suggest that they are simply a special form of action-description. The latter point might seem odd, but the characterization of commands in terms of actions should seem intuitive, if not obvious. Note, however, that

this suggests that a proper account of commands presupposes an adequate account of action ; this order of explanation turns out to be the correct one for intentions as well. Next, commands have execution-conditions, not truth-conditions. The fact that commands have something other than truth-conditions also might seem intuitive, if not obvious⁶. By noting this, though, our attention is drawn to the very idea of success being a matter, not of truth, but of execution ; intentions too are successful if they are successfully executed. This connects with the last point, where Anscombe explicitly compares commands with expressions of intentions. Both, she notes, are justified by appealing to the goodness of what they aim to bring about, not by citing evidence. This fact about the way that practical reasons justify plays a central role throughout *Intention* (cf., inter alia, §§3, 5, 9, and 20).

There is one more point to make before leaving §2. In its antepenultimate paragraph, Anscombe says that « [i]n some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*. This is sometimes so when I change my mind ; but another case occurs when e.g. I write something other than I think I am writing : as Theophrastus says (*Magna Moralia*, 1189b 22), the mistake here is one of performance, not of judgment ». As I have already noted, and as we shall presently investigate, this quip from Aristotle's pupil frames Anscombe's discussion of the form of practical reasoning. Indeed, it appears to be her final answer to the most pressing version of the two-knowledges/one-object puzzle. The other two occasions she cites the quip come on the heels of comparing intentions and commands ; it should not be a surprise, then, that this is likewise true of the first time she invokes the phrase.

Having reviewed these early remarks on intentions and commands, let us turn now to her comments on the topic from the middle of the text, which arise in the context of the two-knowledges/one-object puzzle⁷. In §31 Anscombe suggests that we can « try to

⁶ Obvious though it might seem, several attempts to analyze imperatives (and so, in turn, commands) truth-conditionally exist. See, e.g., D. Lewis, « General Semantics », *Synthese*, 22, 1970, p. 18-67 and M. Kaufmann, *Interpreting Imperatives*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2012. For a critical review of these and other accounts of imperatives, as well as a positive view inspired by H.-N. Castañeda (*Thinking and Doing*, Dordrecht Reidel Publishing Company, 1975), see M. Chrisman and G. Hubbs, « The Practitional Approach to Imperatives » (unpublished).

⁷ There is one other extended treatment of commands in *Intention*, which occurs at §20. Thompson calls this section, along with §19, « all important » (M. Thompson, « Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge », art. cit., p. 207). Her topic in §20 is whether « intentional actions would still have the characteristic 'intentional', if there were no such thing as expression of intention for the future, or as further intention in acting ? » She entertains some ways in which one might try to answer this question in the affirmative ; one of these is to imagine that the only answer to her famous question « Why ? » is « I just am, that's all ». Under this presumption, « Why ? » cannot distinguish between intentional actions and « such

sketch a solution » to it by reflection on the contradictory to a description of one's own intentional action. Her goal is to show that we do not contradict a person's description of his intentional action in the same way that we contradict an observer's description of that intentional action, even when the two descriptions do not differ in sense and are of one and the same action. It should be obvious how one contradicts an observational report of someone else's activity : one mentions some fact(s) that demonstrate the report to be false. Consider the pumper again : if I see a man pumping water and tell you, « That man is replenishing the house water-supply », you can contradict my report by saying, « No he is not ; there is a hole in the pipe ». When we reflect on commands, we see that contradiction requires something other than a conflicting observational report. Anscombe shows this with her entertaining example of the court-martialed soldier. The soldier has false teeth, and upon being ordered by a doctor to clench his teeth, he takes them out, hands them to the doctor, and tells the doctor to clench them. An observer with adequate knowledge of the soldier might have correctly predicted, after hearing the doctor's order, that the soldier would not clench his teeth ; such a prediction is justified by the fact that conditions are not such that the order can be successfully executed. A description of this fact, however, is not the contradiction of an order. Anscombe says that the contradiction of the order is the order, « Do not clench your teeth » ; consistent with all else she says in this section we may take the disobedient refusal, « I will not clench my teeth », when offered by a normally-toothed person, also to be a contradiction of the order. These both are contradictions to the order because they deny that there will be teeth-clenching, not because there are no teeth to clench, but by rejecting the end of teeth-clenching. In one case the end is rejected by making an order whose end (non-teeth-clenching) is incompatible with teeth-clenching ; in the other case the end is rejected by disobediendly refusing the order.

Analogously, to contradict someone's description of what he is doing, Anscombe claims, we do not offer contradicting facts but rather act so as to thwart his end. If I ask the man pumping the water what he is doing and he says, « Replenishing the house water-supply », then if I tell him he is wrong because there is a hole in the pipe, then I do not

things as starts and gasps ». But might there still be, she wonders, some other way of marking the necessary distinction ? It is at this point that she notes that « [a] voluntary action can be commanded ». So, she says, « we can suppose that human actions, which are not distinguished by the way their agents know them, are or are not subject to command. If they are subject to command they can be distinguished as a separate class ». This is not illuminating, however : « the distinction seems to be an idle one, just made for its own sake ».

thereby contradict his description of his intentional activity, any more than the soldier contradicts the doctor by indicating that there cannot be teeth-clenching. What I do in offering such a response is tell him that conditions are such that his intentional activity cannot be successfully executed. To contradict the water-pumper's description of his intentional activity I must do something to deny his end ; Anscombe's specific example is, to the man's saying, « I am replenishing the house water-supply », the response, « "Oh, no, you aren't" said by someone who thereupon sets out e.g. to make a hole in the pipe with a pick-axe » (§31).

In a recent discussion of these examples, Adrian Haddock says that, if we want to put Anscombe's point here « rather grandly », it is that « contradictories must be of the same *logical order*⁸ ». The invocation of a logical order gets right to the heart of the matter. Anscombe's goal is to respond to the person who thinks that the object of the pumper's non-observational knowledge cannot be « what happens ». This person thinks that if the pipe is busted, then the pumper cannot non-observationally know that he is replenishing the house water-supply, because the supply is not being replenished. This complaint can only get a grip, however, if the observationally-grounded statement « The house water-supply is not being replenished » contradicts the pumper's non-observational description of what he is doing. In general, if one statement does not contradict another, then the truth of the former does not entail the falsity of the latter, even if the two statements are in some other way at odds. Anscombe is claiming here that the truth of the observation sentence about the pipe cannot contradict the pumper's non-observational self-description, not because the two sentences lack conflicting contents – indeed, the contents are at odds with one another – but because of their differing logical orders or, put another way, forms. If this is correct, then from observation claims about the pipe, nothing immediately follows regarding the pumper's non-observational self-knowledge. Specifically, it does not follow that the only non-observational self-knowledge he can have is of some non-observable psychological fact ; the possibility that the self-knowledge is not merely psychological remains live. If the possibility is live in the bad cases, then it is in the good ones as well, and the two-knowledges/one-object view is plausible, if only, perhaps, in the good cases.

Although the comparison between intentions and commands makes the two-

⁸ A. Haddock, « The Knowledge that a Man Has, in A. Ford et al. ed., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, *op. cit.*, p. 158 (original emphasis).

knowledge/one-object view plausible, it does not establish it. Establishing the view requires explicating the logical form of practical reasoning and practical knowledge. In preparation for this explication, Anscombe again draws comparisons between intentions and commands. As she has already noted (and we have already observed) in §2, both intentions and commands specify ends to be brought about ; both the formation of an intention and the expression of a command determine correctness conditions that are execution-based rather than truth-based. Intentions, however, are not a species of command – they are not a sort of self-produced self-obligating command. Anscombe explains why at the end of §31 when, speaking of an agent's description of his intentional action, she says, « we say that the agent's description is a piece of knowledge, but an order is not a piece of knowledge ». Anscombe builds on these remarks in the next section, turning her attention to the ways in which intentions and commands can fail to be executed. There are at least two distinct ways in which an order can fail to be executed : either the person ordered to carry out the command can disobediently refuse to act on the order, or he can attempt to carry out the order but fail to execute it successfully. The latter case, Anscombe notes, is « precisely analogous » to that in which a person fails to carry out an intention he sets before himself (§32). The adoption of an intention involves accepting execution conditions just as does accepting an order – indeed, one cannot accept an order without forming an intention to bring about the end specified by that order. If one fails to carry out either an intention or an order, it is, in the words of Theophrastus, a mistake of performance, not of judgment. The rejection of an order, by contrast, involves no such failure on the part of the disobedient party : to reject an order is to refuse to form an intention in accordance with that order. In this case there can be neither success nor failure of performance, for that there is to be the relevant performance is itself rejected.

Anscombe will return to this line of thought in §45 when she gives her answer to the two-knowledges/one-object problem. She cannot give that answer yet, however, for although the parallelism between intentions and commands « is interesting and illuminates the periphery of the problem, it fails at the centre and leaves us in that darkness that we have found ourselves in » (§31). We have just noted why we remain in the darkness : « an order is not a piece of knowledge ». To get us out « of the utter darkness in which we [find] ourselves » (§32), we must first understand practical reasoning ; again, « [t]he notion of “practical knowledge” can only be understood if we first understand “practical reasoning” » (§33). The key to understanding practical

reasoning is to recognize that acts of practical reasoning do not result in beliefs about what to do but rather in intentional actions.

This is not to say, of course, that in all cases of practical reasoning what immediately follows from the act of reasoning is action in accordance with its conclusion, for often when practical reasoning concludes circumstances are not proper for acting on the conclusion. In these cases, what one forms when practical reasoning has gone well is an intention to act when circumstances are appropriate. This intention, however, cannot be understood independently of the action that would realize it. The fundamental conclusion of an act of practical reasoning is to bring about the end that the reasoning has determined is to be brought about, so the relevant intention is just the commitment to act towards the realization of that end when circumstances are appropriate. This is not all that practical reasoning brings about, however ; because it is reasoning, it also generates knowledge. The object of this knowledge is the conclusion of the act of reasoning – this is knowledge, in Anscombe's phrase, of « what happens »⁹.

3. Intentions, Commands, and Practical Knowledge

This point allows us readers to emerge in §45 from the darkness and say what practical knowledge is such that it is, to take Thompson's phrase again, « precisely self-knowledge in respect of what might in principle be observed ». Anscombe's example here is of the person who directs the construction of a building without ever seeing the building or getting reports of its progress. Although this person never observes what gets done during the construction of the building, Anscombe tells us that he knows what gets done and that « *(h)is* knowledge of what is done is practical knowledge » (§45, original emphasis). The object of this knowledge is the construction of the building, which can also be known through observation by anyone (including the builder himself) who might pass by and see the workers constructing the building. That anything gets done, however, requires that the person give orders. Once again, then, we see the nature of intention explicated by comparing it to the nature of commands.

Having presented this example, Anscombe immediately considers the obvious

⁹ The idea that in the paradigmatic case practical reasoning results in action plays an important role in R. Moran (*Authority and Estrangement*, Princeton University Press, 2001) and P. Hieronymi (« The Will as Reason », *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, 2009, p. 201-220). For a discussion of the way that practical reasoning resulting in an intention to act in the future relates to the future action, see L. Ferrero (« Decisions, Diachronic Autonomy, and the Division of Deliberative Labor », *Philosophers Imprint* 10 (2), 2010, p. 1-23).

objection to it, which can be put as follows : if the person has knowledge of the building's construction – and even this might be doubtful – it is *only if* the orders have been executed. But what if the orders are not executed, either due to incompetence or to disobedience ? Then whatever the builder seems to know is not the case. To this we might add : so all the person really knows is what orders he has given, not whether they have been or are being acted on. To this Anscombe says, « Orders. . . can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed » (§45). By issuing the commands that he does, the builder determines what is to be done. From his point of view, however, each command not only determines something to be done but also is the first step towards bringing about what is to be brought about. Because the process is initiated by the command, it is something that is happening, and because it is something that is happening, it is a proper object of knowledge, whether or not the command itself is disobeyed by the workers. What makes the builder's knowledge of what is done a bit of practical knowledge is that an execution condition concerning what is to be done has been established. Whether or not it is fulfilled is a matter of performance.

The point Anscombe makes here about the builder's commands pertains generally to all intentions, whether or not commands are involved in establishing the relevant execution conditions. To intend to do something is to accept that some execution condition is to be fulfilled. When a person acts intentionally, she knows the end that she seeks to bring about, whether or not she is able to bring it about. If her end fails to be realized, then, Anscombe claims, the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment – the object of knowledge is the same whether the performance is successful or faulty. This is so even if the intention never manifests itself in bodily movement. The formation of an intention is the first step towards bringing about what is to be brought about, so the only way an intention can fail without being given up is for there to be a failure of performance. Even when an intention fails to result in anything getting done, the intender's knowledge of her intention is, in a sense, knowledge of what is done.

It is not out of line to ask here : but in *what* sense, exactly ? If the workers respond to the builder's order by immediately going on strike, in what sense is a house being built ? An if there is no sense in which it is being built, how can the builder know that it is being built ? There is a real worry here, and answering it, I think, requires not just exegesis but also some interpreting. The interpretation I shall offer proceeds in two steps. The first is to highlight a contrast between intentions and commands, a contrast that resolves an

apparent contradiction in §45. As we noted in the last section, Anscombe says in §32 that the mistake of performance through which an intention fails to realize its end is « precisely analogous » to the mistake of performance through which one tries, but fails, to execute an order. She explicitly contrasts this sort of failure with that of disobeying an order. But now, in §45, she tells us that « orders... can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed », evidently indicating a parallelism between disobedience and the mistake of performance through which intentions fail to get executed. Has she contradicted herself?

No. The difference here is that in the first example the order is considered from the point of view of the person to whom the order is given and who in turn accepts it, whereas in the latter case the order is considered from the point of view of the person who gives the order. In the first example, the failure of performance is at once a failure to satisfy an intention and to execute an order. The person in this case has accepted the order, and in accepting the order the person forms an intention to achieve the end it specifies. To fail to execute the order just is to fail to satisfy the corresponding intention. Were the person in this case to refuse the order disobediently, he would thereby refuse to form the relevant intention, and so there would be no performance at which he could fail. Things are different with the builder. He gives the order, and thereby establishes execution conditions, but his conditions can fail to be fulfilled either because they are adopted but unsuccessfully executed or, simply, because his order is disobeyed and the conditions are not adopted in an intention. From the perspective of the builder, both sorts of failure are mistakes of performance, for *his* ends are established through his commands. Whether these ends fail to be met either because they are adopted but unsuccessfully executed by others or because they are disobediently rejected, for him the failure is one of performance, not of judgment.

This point is important, for it indicates a crucial difference between intentions and commands. In the normal case, a command is successfully executed because the person who has been ordered to carry it out accepts it and forms an intention whose ends accord with that of the command. A command can fail to be executed in either of the two ways just mentioned, but in either case, the command and the ends determined by the command still stand, simply because the command has been issued. From the point of view of the person issuing the command, either sort of failure constitutes a failure of performance, but from the point of view of the person to whom the order is issued,

disobedience does not involve any failure of performance. Intentions differ because there is no point of view from which they can fail to be executed but not involve a failure of performance ; there is no analogue to disobedience in the case of intentions. For there to be an analogue, it would have to be possible at once to determine an end to be brought about, as the commander does when she issues a command, and simultaneously to reject it, as the commanded does when he disobeys that command. With intentions, if the end is determined, then the intention is formed, and if it is rejected, there is no intention – either the end is determined and is accepted, or there is no end because there is no intention.

Even though Anscombe herself does not use the comparison to make this point, this difference between intentions and commands closes the space between intending and failing to act. Maybe we should disagree with her that the builder has knowledge of what is done ; if the workers go on strike, then maybe there is no sense in which the builder knows that the house is being built, because there is no sense in which it is being built. Even if this is correct, no parallel sort of failure is possible when one forms an intention, for disobedience properly speaking is impossible. So whereas the builder might have no knowledge of what is done because the relevant intentions – viz., the workers' – are absent, in the single-person case the determination of the ends just is the formation of the intention, so a proper object of knowledge exists. Culling this claim from *Intention* is the first of the two interpretive moves I mentioned a few paragraphs back.

The second is to render Anscombe's claim that practical knowledge is knowledge of what happens a bit more precise by saying it is, in the first place, knowledge of what is happening. This move is inspired by Thompson's work on the imperfective aspect of action-descriptions¹⁰. Indeed, it is not merely inspired by Thompson, but it is Thompson's own take on this matter. He says that « [t]he content of Anscombe's practical knowledge is progressive, imperfective, in media res. Its character as knowledge is not affected when the hydrogen bomb goes off and most of what the agent is doing never gets done¹¹ ». Imagine the pumper pumping away with the pipe intact and the water on its way to the cistern. Before the water arrives, a hydrogen bomb goes off, and all is obliterated. The house water-supply then did not get replenished, but it is nevertheless true that the pumper was replenishing the house water-supply ; he simply failed in his performance.

Haddock, also drawing on Thompson, also makes this move. He discusses

¹⁰ M. Thompson, *Life and Action*, Harvard University Press, 2008, esp. Part II)

¹¹ M. Thompson, « Anscombe's *Intention* and Practical Knowledge », art. cit., p. 209.

Anscombe's other example of a failure of performance, which is unsuccessfully writing « I am a fool » on a chalkboard without observing one's lack of success. The action fails because the chalk gives out ; one does not notice because one is blindfolded (§45 ; cf. §29). Haddock notes that if he were not blindfolded and saw that a sentence he was writing was failing to be written, he would « just pick up a new bit of chalk from the desk. [This] is a way of acknowledging the broadness of the progressive – a phenomenon to which Anscombe explicitly draws our attention – to acknowledge that I am still writing 'I am a fool' on the blackboard when I am picking up the new bit of chalk¹² ». A disruption of performance is not a failure to have been performing. A person can thus know what he is doing even if he does not do it seamlessly (Haddock's point) and even if the seamlessness prevents the action from achieving its goal (Thompson's point).

This, then, would seem to be Anscombe's ultimate answer to the two-knowledges/one-object puzzle¹³. When a person forms an intention, she knows that a set of execution conditions has been established, and she knows what these conditions are. The establishment of the conditions is the first step in the process that aims at satisfying them, so knowledge of the conditions is also knowledge that the process of satisfying them has begun. She cannot know whether the process is going *well*, however, except by observation. If, unbeknownst to her, other conditions are impeding the process, an observer may know about the impediment and thereby know that she is failing at her goal. Should he express this observation, he will say something that might sound like a contradiction of her expression of what she is intentionally doing. It is not, however, for it does not contradict what she knows, viz., the goal she is pursuing and that she is pursuing the goal. In the good case, however, the pursuit of her goal is also a possible object of an observer : he can observe, and through his observation know, the fact that she is pursuing that goal, which is the very fact she knows by pursuing her goal. Thus it is that the two distinct sorts of knowledge can have one and the same object.

4. Intentions and the Problem of « Legislating for Oneself »

In the last section, I claimed that the defense of Anscombe from charges of self-contradiction displays an important way in which intentions differ from commands. The

¹² A. Haddock, « The Knowledge that a Man Has, art. cit., p. 168. Footnotes omitted. The omitted footnotes cite Thompson (*Life and Action*, op. cit., Part II) as well as §23 of *Intention*.

¹³ Not everyone agrees : for an alternative reading of Anscombe on this point, see J. Schwenkler, « Understanding Practical Knowledge », *Philosophers' Imprint*, 15 (15), 2015, p. 20-22.

point is worth revisiting, for it can also help us make sense of Anscombe's somewhat obscure dismissal of Kant (and one might worry, Kantianism in general) in « Modern Moral Philosophy ». Here is her repudiation :

« Kant introduces the idea of “legislating for oneself”, which is as absurd as if in these days, when majority votes command great respect, one were to call each reflective decision a man made a vote resulting in a majority, which as a matter of proportion is overwhelming, for it is always 1-0. The concept of legislation requires the superior power in the legislator. His own rigoristic convictions on the subject of lying were so intense that it never occurred to him that a lie could be relevantly described as anything but just a lie (e.g. as “a lie in such-and-such circumstances”). His rule about universalizable maxims is useless without stipulations as to what shall count as a relevant description of an action with a view to constructing a maxim about it¹⁴. »

The point at the end that all action is action under a description will be familiar to any Anscombe reader ; I will set aside whether it tells against Kant's discussion of lying¹⁵. What interests me is her apparent dismissal of the idea of self-legislation. The idea that reason can, and indeed should, legislate what a person does would seem to be as old as Western Philosophy itself – Plato seems to say as much when he asserts that the just person's actions are controlled by the rational part of her soul¹⁶. It is striking, then, that Anscombe calls the idea « absurd » and discards it after only two sentences of discussion. To be sure, she devotes more time than this over the course of the essay arguing against a legislative conception of ethics, but we hear no more about the absurdity of self-legislation.

If we bring the discussion of this essay to bear on Anscombe's dismissal, however, we can construct a rationale for her remarks¹⁷. Recall the first of the two interpretive moves from the last section, which argued that intentions can only fail due to a failure of performance. Commands differ, for they can fail to be executed due to disobedience.

¹⁴ G. E. M. Anscombe, « Modern Moral Philosophy », *Philosophy* 33, 1958, p. 2.

¹⁵ I doubt that it does. For a recent discussion of Kant's remarks on lying that, I think, shows how Kant can be saved from Anscombe's complaint, see H. Varden (« Kant and Lying to the Murderer at the Door . . . One More Time : Kant's Legal Philosophy and Lies to Murderers and Nazis », *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41, 2010, p. 403-421). For Anscombe's remarks on actions always being actions under a description, see, *inter alia*, §§6, 23, 26, 35, and 38.

¹⁶ I hedge this claim with « seems », for one might object that self-control is an executive matter, which differs from self-legislation. Even if there is a meaningful distinction here, it is still a bit boggling how blithely Anscombe dismisses the self-legislation view.

¹⁷ Other, compatible rationales may also be constructed. For example, the problem with self-legislation might be that it requires a person to give herself a rule in a way that any good Wittgensteinian will deny is possible. See McDowell (*Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge (US), Harvard University Press, 1998, Part III) for what a good Wittgensteinian thinks and says on these matters. I will not elaborate on this possibility here, except to say that it does not seem to be a competitor to the one I am offering.

Disobedience is possible with commands because commanding involves a pair of agents, each with his own power vis-à-vis the command: the commander exercises the (presumably) legitimate power of setting an end for the commanded, and the commanded exercises the (presumably) illegitimate power of rejecting the end. For self-legislation to be possible, a person would have to be capable of standing to herself both as a superior power, which enacts the legislation, and an inferior power, which can obey or disobey the legislation. But this, as we saw earlier, is absurd. When a person sets or restricts her own ends, she does so by forming intentions. There is no possible gap between the setting or restricting of the end and the formation of the intention – to put this in a slogan, to set is to form. This is not true of legislation. To enact legislation is either to set an end or to establish restrictions on what ends may be set. The enactment of the legislation does not thereby form all of the intentions necessary for carrying the legislation out, however, for disobedient refusal is always a possibility. Reflective decision-making, then, is not a sort of self-legislation, for the former leaves no room for the possibility of disobedience that is always present with the latter.

Once we see this, we can also see why Anscombe thinks that treating all reflective decision-making as a 1-0 vote is absurd. In a normal case of voting, a voter who is in the midst of casting his vote cannot be certain that the side for which he is voting will win the day. We can articulate this commonplace by saying that there is a gap between what this voter decides and what ends up being decided as a result of the vote. This is the same gap that exists between commander and commanded. The voter voting is like the commander commanding: we can think of the voter's vote as commanding that his side win the day. But just as the commander's command can be denied by a separate power, the voter's vote can be denied by a separate power, viz., the votes of those who oppose his side. No such gap exists in reflective decision-making. When a person makes a decision, she does not have to wait – literally, metaphorically, or in any other way – to see if her decision will win the day, for there is no gap between making the decision and the result of doing so. Again, with decision-making, to set is to form. When we consider the dynamics of both making and enforcing the law in the context of Anscombe's discussion of intentions and commands, then, we have a rationale through which we can understand her dismissive remarks about self-legislation.

To understand these remarks, however, is not to endorse them, at least not fully. We might agree with her that the idea of individual self-legislation, taken literally, is absurd,

without going on to say that modeling ethics as a sort of self-legislation is in turn absurd. We can find room for a non-absurd model of self-legislation if the self in question is not individual, always winning its vote 1-0, but plural, a collective to which the individual belongs but with which she can also find herself at odds. Conceived of from this person's point of view, ethics is a matter of what *we* decide and thereby legislate, but the fact that we make a given decision does not guarantee that I will form all of the needed intentions to carry it out. There is a gap between decision and intention – here, to set is not to form. Seen this way, Anscombe's dismissal of self-legislation should be taken as showing the absurdity of individual self-legislation, which then poses the philosophical tasks of clarifying collective selfhood, collective decision-making, and collective intentionality.¹⁸ If the basic tack of this essay has been correct, the proper execution of these tasks will keep careful track of the differences between intentions and commands.¹⁹

Bibliography

- Anscombe G. E. M., *Intention*, 2nd ed., Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963.
- Anscombe G. E. M., « Modern Moral Philosophy », *Philosophy* 33, 1958, p. 1-19.
- Castañeda H.-N., *Thinking and Doing*, Dordrecht Reidel Publishing Company, 1975.
- Chrisman M. & Hubbs G., « The Practitional Approach to Imperatives », unpublished.
- Cohen J., *Rousseau : A Free Community of Equals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Ferrero L., « Decisions, Diachronic Autonomy, & the Division of Deliberative Labor », *Philosophers Imprint* 10 (2), 2010, p. 1-23.
- Haddock A., « The Knowledge that a Man Has », in A. Ford, J. Hornsby and F.

¹⁸ B. Laurence (« An Anscombian Approach to Collective Action », in A. Ford et al. Ed., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, op. cit., 2011, p. 270-294) explores an Anscombean account of collective intentionality. For a response to Anscombe along these lines offered as a defense of constructivism, see R. Stern (« Constructivism and the Argument from Autonomy », in J. Lenman and Y. Shemmer, ed., *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 119-137). I think the way to carry out the philosophical task just mentioned is to analyze carefully Rousseau's notion of the General Will along the lines of J. Cohen (*Rousseau : A Free Community of Equals*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010) : for a discussion of this, see G. Hubbs (« Transparency, Corruption, and Democratic Institutions », *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum* 9(1), 2014, p. 67-71).

¹⁹ For their advice on an ancestor of this essay, I thank John McDowell, Sebastian Rödl, and Kieran Setiya. For their help bringing the present draft to light, I thank Valérie Aucouturier, Matthew Chrisman, and John Schwenkler.

Stoutland (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 147-69.

- Hieronymi P., « The Will as Reason », *Philosophical Perspectives* 23, 2009, p. 201-220.
- Hubbs G., « Transparency, Corruption, and Democratic Institutions », *Les ateliers de l'éthique / The Ethics Forum* 9 (1), 2014, p. 65-83.
- Kaufmann M., *Interpreting Imperatives*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2012.
- Laurence B., « An Anscombian Approach to Collective Action », in A. Ford, J. Hornsby and F. Stoutland (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 270-94.
- Lewis D., « General semantics », *Synthese* 22, 1970, p. 18-67.
- McDowell J., *Mind, Value, and Reality*, Cambridge (US), Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Moran R., « Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge' », in J. Hyman and H. Steward (eds.), *Agency and Action*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 43-68.
- Moran R., *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-knowledge*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Schwenkler J., « Understanding « Practical Knowledge » », *Philosophers' Imprint*, 15(15), 2015, p. 1-32.
- Setiya K., « Practical Knowledge », *Ethics* 118, 2008, p. 388-409.
- Stern R., « Constructivism and the Argument from Autonomy », in J. Lenman and Y. Shemmer (eds.), *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, 119-37.
- Stoutland F., « Summary of Anscombe's *Intention* », in A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 23-32.
- Thompson M., « Anscombe's Intention and Practical Knowledge », in A. Ford, J. Hornsby, and F. Stoutland (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2011, p. 198-210.

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

- Thompson M., *Life and Action: Elementary Structures in Practical Thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008.
- Varden H., « Kant and Lying to the Murderer at the Door... One More Time : Kant's Legal Philosophy and Lies to Murderers and Nazis », *Journal of Social Philosophy* 41, 2010, p. 403–421.
- Vogler C., *Reasonably Vicious*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003.