

## ANSCOMBE ON PRACTICAL TRUTH

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### Introduction

Since the reissue of Elizabeth Anscombe's monograph *Intention* in 2000, there has been a resurgence of scholarly discussion and debate about her philosophical writings, especially her work in the philosophy of action and ethics. Much of this renewed interest has focused on her conception of practical reasoning in *Intention*, where her position has come to be seen as one member of the broad genre of views known as « instrumentalism ». (In what follows, I will make use of this convenient label, though it is not one she herself used)<sup>1</sup>. The heart of Anscombe's instrumentalism is the idea that practical reasoning consists in calculating means to one's ends. Anscombe's version of this view is relatively expansive, insofar as she recognizes that practical reasoning need not always be a simple matter of following a well-defined « recipe » to attain one's end. It can also include « constitutive » reasoning about what attaining a given end would consist in. But she insists that practical reasoning must start from an end the agent has ; it cannot generate new ends *ex nihilo*, nor does it involve critical evaluation of one's ends, except in light of some further end of the agent's. As Anscombe puts it, the starting point in practical reasoning must be « something wanted<sup>2</sup> ». In *Intention*, Anscombe argued that all practical reasoning starts from a premise describing something the agent wants, and that the aim of practical reasoning is solely to discover means available to the agent to secure what is wanted.

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<sup>1</sup> Anscombe's most significant treatments of practical reasoning are *Intention*, Harvard University Press, 2000, « Modern Moral Philosophy », in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981, « Thought and Action in Aristotle », in *From Parmenide to Wittgenstein*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981, « Practical Inference », in M. Geach and L. Gormally, *HUMAN LIFE, ACTION AND ETHICS*, Exeter, Imprint Academics, 2005 and « Practical Truth », in *Ibid.* For the interpretation of her views as a version of instrumentalism, see A. Müller « How Theoretical is Practical Reason ? », in C. Diamond and J. Teichman (ed.), *Intention and Intentionality*, Brighton, Harvester, 1979 and « Backward-Looking Rationality and the Unity of Practical Reason », in A. Ford et al. (ed.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Harvard University Press, 2010, and C. Vogler, « Anscombe on Practical Inference », in E. Millgram (ed.), *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, MIT Press, 2001 and *Reasonably Vicious*, Harvard University Press, 2002. These authors rightly stress that the label « instrumentalism » is commonly used to refer to a variety of different commitments, and that Anscombe should not be read as holding all of them.

<sup>2</sup> E. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 64 (§35).

Anscombe's instrumentalism can naturally be interpreted as leading to a particular conclusion about the relationship between practical reason and ethics : namely, that there is no essential connection between sound practical reasoning and moral virtue<sup>3</sup>. Considerations about what would be just or courageous may move those who are (or aspire to be) virtuous and so want to act in these ways. But those who lack such ends will not be moved by these considerations, and they cannot thereby be convicted of any mistake in reasoning. Provided that vicious people reason effectively in pursuit of their ends, it seems there is nothing for an instrumentalist to say by way of criticism of their practical reasoning.

In this essay, I will defend the surprising claim that Anscombe's instrumentalism is in fact compatible with the idea that practical reasoning has an essential moral dimension. In making this argument, I will retrace and illuminate a path followed by Anscombe herself : in a series of post-*Intention* writings, she argued that the reasoning of vicious agents is essentially defective as practical reasoning<sup>4</sup>. Anscombe never explicitly addresses the question of the relation between these writings and *Intention*. But I will argue that in taking on this new commitment, Anscombe did not abandon her earlier instrumentalism, but instead built upon it in a way that radically distinguishes her position from more familiar versions of instrumentalism. For Anscombe, the key to retaining instrumentalism while also acknowledging an essential moral aspect of practical reasoning lies in her difficult conception of « practical truth ». My aim in the essay is to recover this concept from her later writings and to demonstrate how a proper appreciation of it should shape our understanding of her views about practical reason.

The essay unfolds in three main parts : first, I give an account of Anscombe's conception of practical reasoning in *Intention* and bring out how her arguments there apparently lead to the conclusion that vice does not essentially involve any error in practical reasoning. Second, I provide an interpretation of her later conception of practical truth, with a focus on showing how this conception enables forms of criticism of an agent's practical reasoning that she did not explore in *Intention*. In particular, the concept of practical truth opens up the possibility that an agent's practical reasoning might be

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<sup>3</sup> For an extended argument that Anscombe's position has this implication, see Vogle, *Reasonably Vicious*, op. cit. I discuss Vogler's interpretation in section I below.

<sup>4</sup> See Anscombe « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit., « Practical Truth », art. cit. and « Die Wahrheit "Thun" », in M. Crespo (ed.), *Menschenwurde*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag, 1998. In what follows, I aim to reconstruct a single account from these essays, and so do not highlight differences between them.

unsound even if it attains his ends in accordance with his beliefs. Finally, in the third part, I show how she used this conception in order to argue that the practical reasoning of the vicious is essentially defective, by appeal to the idea that vicious agents act under a false conception of what constitutes « doing well ».

There are several reasons why this feature of her work has not yet been generally appreciated<sup>5</sup>. *Intention* naturally tends to dominate interpretations of her views on practical reason, and some of the post-*Intention* essays in question have only recently become readily available<sup>6</sup>. But another, more significant reason is that Anscombe's approach to showing that vice involves error in practical reasoning is quite unexpected in the contemporary philosophical landscape. In contemporary work, it is generally assumed that the only way to show that vice involves error in practical reasoning is to reject instrumentalism and to argue that practical reasoning includes some form of non-instrumental reasoning about which ends one ought to adopt. But Anscombe's post-*Intention* essays undertake to do exactly what contemporary philosophy holds to be impossible: to maintain instrumentalism while also showing that vice necessarily involves error in practical reasoning. In this way, my attempt to reconstruct her work on practical truth is of value not only for understanding Anscombe's intellectual legacy, but also for opening up new possibilities for thought about practical reason and ethics more generally.

## I

Anscombe's discussion of practical reasoning in *Intention* begins from the thought that practical reasoning is a « special sort of reasoning<sup>7</sup> », set off by a « difference in form<sup>8</sup> » that distinguishes it from all theoretical reasoning. Philosophers have often held that practical reasoning is formally different from theoretical reasoning, but in Anscombe's view the grounds of this formal difference have not always been well understood. In particular, she argues that the formal difference between the two cannot come to light as long as we assume that practical reasoning is set apart from theoretical

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<sup>5</sup> One exception to this general neglect is R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 79-82.

<sup>6</sup> A further difficulty is that her writings on practical truth largely take the form of exegesis of Aristotle's treatment of the topic. I am concerned here only with how Anscombe incorporates the concept into her own philosophical project, and so do not assess the accuracy of her interpretations of Aristotle.

<sup>7</sup> E. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 58 (§33).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60 (§33).

reasoning merely in virtue of its having a distinctive subject-matter, such as « human actions » or « what one ought to do ». She famously parodies this idea by suggesting that one might on the same grounds posit a « mince pie syllogism », « the peculiarity of [which] would be that it is about mince pies<sup>9</sup> ». It would be just as absurd, Anscombe argues, to imagine that practical reasoning is marked off from theoretical reasoning by its having a distinctive subject-matter. Rather, Anscombe suggests that the way to make sense of the idea that practical reasoning has a distinctive « form » is to see that it has a distinctive aim, namely the aim of « leading to action<sup>10</sup> ».

The idea that practical reasoning has the function of bringing about action is the basis of Anscombe's instrumentalism. She insists that practical reasoning will not lead to action unless the reasoning starts from something the agent wants. As she puts it : « ...whatever is described in the proposition that is the starting point [in practical reasoning] must be wanted in order for the reasoning to lead to any action<sup>11</sup> ». The reasoning leads to action, in her view, by arriving at some means in the agent's power that will allow him to secure what he aims at.

According to Anscombe, practical reasoning particularly comes into play when there is some gap between the agent and his end, and so he needs to calculate how to get it. « The mark of practical reasoning », she writes, « is that the thing wanted is *at a distance* from the immediate action<sup>12</sup> ». Anscombe goes on to point out that the « distance » that practical reasoning seeks to bridge can be understood in a number of different ways, so that the action can be « calculated as the way of getting or doing or securing the thing wanted<sup>13</sup> ». In cases of « getting » or « securing » what is wanted, the end may be literally distant in space, as when operating a pump is a means to replenishing the water supply in a house ; or it may be distant in time, as when poisoning the house's inhabitants is a means to bringing in good government.

But in other cases, Anscombe argues, the end represents simply a « wider description<sup>14</sup> » of the immediate action, as when lying on my bed is a means of resting, or lying on the floor a means of practicing yoga. Here the end is not distant in space or time, and the action is calculated, not as a means of « getting » or « securing » something, but

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 58 (§33).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 60 (§33).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 66 (§35).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 79 (§41).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

rather as a means of « doing » the thing wanted. These cases may therefore not seem to fit our usual model of « means-end » reasoning, insofar as in them the taking of the means does not appear to be a separate event from the attaining of the end. Rather, the action that is the taking of the means simply constitutes the end.

All the same, Anscombe's thought is that even in these cases, practical reasoning may come into play, insofar as there is still a kind of « distance » between the action and the end. For Anscombe, the distance between the action and the end in these cases comes into view when we notice that, in them, the agent's action bears the wider description in question non-trivially. She insists that if someone were to say, « I ought to do this, so I'll do it », this would not be « a piece of practical reasoning<sup>15</sup> ». In Anscombe's view, « I ought to do this, so I'll do it » is not an instance of practical reasoning because no wider description of the end is given, and so the action trivially satisfies the end : the end is simply « this », whatever action I happen to be performing. By contrast, in the case of lying on the floor as a means of practicing yoga, for example, the action is « at a distance » from the end, not in space or time, but in virtue of the fact that it is done under a description that it may or may not satisfy. In these cases, practical reasoning has the function of seeing to it that the agent succeeds, not in « getting » or « securing » something, but rather in actually « doing » the thing he aims to do.

This conception suggests a natural criterion of success for practical reasoning : practical reasoning succeeds to the extent that the « immediate action » it prescribes does in fact bring the agent closer to the end that he or she has in view. The application of this criterion is clear enough in the case where the end is distant in space or time : if I want to replenish the water supply, and pumping does not succeed in doing so (perhaps because the pump is broken), I will need to reason afresh in order to find more effective means of achieving my aim. But the same thought applies in cases where the aim is simply a wider description of the immediate action : as any insomniac will know, lying on one's bed may not be a means of resting in certain circumstances, and in that case new reasoning will be required in order to find an effective way of bringing about what one wants.

Anscombe acknowledges that there are some limitations on what sort of thing a person can take as his aim in practical reasoning. She holds that it is not possible to want just *anything*, and that our concept of « wanting » requires that « a man should see what

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

he wants under the aspect of some good<sup>16</sup> ». Thus someone who says, « I want a saucer of mud (...) is likely to be asked what for<sup>17</sup> ». If he replies by insisting that « it merely so happens that I want [it] », while refusing to give any characterization under which the thing can be seen as desirable, then, she concludes, « this is fair nonsense<sup>18</sup> ». In order for us to make sense of an agent as acting intentionally, it must be possible for him to answer a series of questions that will reveal what he is pursuing and why, ending in a final « desirability characterisation<sup>19</sup> » that brings such questions to an end. In fact, Anscombe requires not merely that the agent say or think that the object of his pursuit is good in some way ; his so saying or thinking must actually be intelligible, where this means that « the good... conceived by the agent to characterise the thing [wanted] must really be one of the many forms of good<sup>20</sup> ». In Anscombe's view, although human wants vary widely, they are not absolutely unlimited, and in order to fully make sense of an intentional action we must ultimately be able to connect it with pursuit of one of the many sorts of things that actually are good for human beings.

Anscombe emphasizes, however, that this limitation on what we can take as our starting point in practical reasoning is fairly weak. Many different sorts of responses, in her view, can function as desirability characterizations that bring a conclusion to the series of questions « What for ? » in such a way as to make sense of an action. Thus she writes that « when a man aims at health or pleasure », for example, « then the enquiry "What's the good of it ?" is not a sensible one<sup>21</sup> ». Someone who cites health or pleasure as the reason for his action has given a sufficient account of it ; ends like these are good in themselves and do not stand in need of further justification. She suggests that we can perfectly well understand even the person who says (with Milton's Satan) « evil be thou my good » by taking him to find some good in doing evil, such as « intact liberty in the unsubmitiveness of [his] will<sup>22</sup> ». In short, as Anscombe puts it, « *bonum est multiplex*<sup>23</sup> » ; although agents must pursue what they want under the aspect of some good, there are many different kinds of goods an agent might choose to pursue, such as health, pleasure, liberty, and so on, and each of them is equally valid as a starting point in

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 75 (§39).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 70 (§37).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 71 (§37).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 78 (§38).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 77 (§40).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 75 (§39).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 75 (§39).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 72 (alluding to Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia q.82 a.2).

practical reasoning.

Anscombe takes particular care to emphasize that the « good » that plays this essential role in practical reasoning should not be thought of as any special sort of « moral » good. She argues that moral approbation « is in fact irrelevant to the logical features of practical reasoning <sup>24</sup> ». In illustrating the concept of a desirability characterization she deliberately chooses examples (such as that of « what befits a Nazi ») in which the logical structure of the reasoning will not be « obscured by the fact that moral approbation on the part of the writer or reader is called into play<sup>25</sup> ». In Anscombe's view, the requirement that an agent see his aim as good does not entail that he needs to see his aim as *morally good*. Furthermore, the requirement that we as observers need to be able to make sense of the agent as pursuing something good does not entail that we need to see his aim as morally good, either. Perfectly wicked actions make perfect sense, from Anscombe's perspective, as long as they involve the pursuit of some human good or other.

These aspects of Anscombe's instrumentalism can easily lead to the conclusion that soundness in practical reasoning is wholly independent of moral considerations. The most sophisticated version of this line of interpretation has been developed by Candace Vogler. In the course of her elucidation and defense of Anscombe's instrumentalism, Vogler argues that from an instrumentalist perspective there need not be anything essentially defective about the practical reasoning of vicious agents. She proposes that we think of the vicious person as a « worldly man » who « determines his will to the pursuit of control over worldly goods<sup>26</sup> ». As Vogler points out, we may describe such a man « in terms thick with the conviction that his life is less than a human life should be<sup>27</sup> », but it is not so clear that we can convict him of any error in practical reasoning. He may be quite clever at reasoning how to get the things he aims at. Moreover, the worldly vicious man does not violate the requirement we saw above that the good the agent pursues in his action « must really be one of the many forms of good ». As Vogler writes, « he is not *wrong* about the goodness of wealth, sensual pleasure, honor, and the like » : these are in fact genuine goods in human life. She concludes that instrumentalism entails that one can be (as the title of her book has it) « reasonably vicious », and that philosophers persuaded by Anscombe's instrumentalism had better give up the project of trying to show that vicious

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 72 (§38).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 72 (§38).

<sup>26</sup> C. Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious*, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

agents are essentially mistaken in their practical reasoning.

In *Intention*, Anscombe did consider one general strategy whereby one might attempt to convict any vicious agent of error in practical reasoning, namely by appeal to considerations about « what a *man* ought to do<sup>28</sup> ». As she discusses it, this strategy begins from the assumption that a human agent must necessarily take doing what a man ought to do as one of his ends, and indeed an overarching end in light of which one might correct or reject the pursuit of other, lower-level ends. On this basis, one might argue that since vicious actions are at odds with what a man ought to do, a rational agent should avoid vice in deference to this higher-level end. In *Intention*, her attitude toward this suggestion is complex. On the one hand, she makes one brief criticism of the idea, by pointing out that in fact a human agent need not be moved by this end on every occasion of acting : « But is it not perfectly possible to say », she writes, « At this moment, I lose all interest in what befits a man ?<sup>29</sup> ». Thus this strategy will get off to a bad start, if it assumes that *every* human action must always involve pursuing what one wants as an instance of « what a man ought to do ». It is true that one must perform one's action with a view to some form of human good. But it does not follow from this that one must perform every action under any particular description referring to human good, even a highly general one such as « what a man ought to do ». As Anscombe puts it, « the fact that *some* desirability characterisation is required » does not entail that any one characterization « is endowed with some kind of necessity in relation to wanting<sup>30</sup> ».

On the other hand, she largely set the issue aside, on the grounds that the difficult question of « what a man ought to do » « belongs to ethics<sup>31</sup> » and so cannot be properly addressed in the context of her inquiry into intention. At the same time, she acknowledged that it might be still true that « the man who says “Evil be thou my good” ... is committing errors of thought<sup>32</sup> ». I take this passage to leave open a possibility – the possibility that the vicious person is as such « committing errors of thought » – that Anscombe's post-*Intention* writings on practical truth are meant to take up. In the next section, I introduce her notion of practical truth and show how it added to, without rejecting, the instrumentalist conception of practical reasoning she defended in *Intention*. In the third

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<sup>28</sup> E. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 74 (§39).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74 n.1 (§39).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76 (§39).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76 (§39).

and final section, I show how she used this notion in order to pursue the argument – deferred in *Intention* – that a vicious agent must necessarily be committing « errors of thought ».

## II

Anscombe's aim in her discussions of practical truth is to expound a passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which she takes Aristotle to have introduced the notion :

« What affirmation and negation are in judgment, pursuit and avoidance are in desire. So, since moral virtue is a disposition of one's choice, while choice is deliberated wanting, these things show that the judgment must be true and the wanting right, if the choice is to be sound, and the one must say and the other pursue the same thing. This, then, is practical judgment and truth. In judgment that is contemplative and not practical or productive what is good and bad is the true and the false (for this is the business of any thinking). But in the case of what is practical and involves thought this is truth in agreement with right desire<sup>33</sup>. »

Anscombe's first move in approaching this passage is to draw attention to the final phrase « truth in agreement with right desire ». Aristotle describes this as the « business » of practical thought, and Anscombe therefore takes this to be a specification of the particular form of truth that is of concern to practical reason : it is, in other words, a formulation of what distinctively *practical* truth will consist in. Anscombe suspects that we are likely to be distracted by the appearance of the word « right » in this formulation, and so she begins by taking it out and asking us to consider what « truth in agreement with desire » would be. This, she says, is clear : « It would be : things being as a desirer wants them to be<sup>34</sup> ». This deceptively simple statement introduces the most distinctive and challenging aspect of Anscombe's treatment of practical truth. Anscombe emphatically denies that practical truth should be identified with the truth of any judgments regarding practical matters. Instead, she argues that practical truth is the truth the agent *brings about* when things are as she wants them to be, i.e., when her action actually comes to bear the descriptions under which she intends it. Thus she writes that :

« It is practical truth when the judgments involved in the formation of the "choice" leading to the action are all true ; but the practical truth is not the truth of those judgments... [It] is brought about – i.e. made true – by action (since the description of

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<sup>33</sup> VI.2 1139a21-31. The translation of the first four lines is Anscombe's (from her « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 76). She gives a slightly different translation of part of the same passage in « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 152. I have translated the remainder of the passage following her usage in these two essays.

<sup>34</sup> E. Anscombe, « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 153.

what he does is made true by his doing it), provided that a man forms and executes a good “choice”<sup>35</sup>. »

Anscombe’s point in this difficult passage is that practical truth is not truth about a particular subject matter, but rather is the truth that comes to be when the agent makes a certain description of his intended action true by executing his intention. The complications involved in the qualification that practical truth must be in agreement with « right » desire are ones we will return to below.

Anscombe does not give a direct argument for her view that practical truth should be understood in terms of this correspondence between act and intention. But we can understand it as a natural extension of the point we saw her make above about the formal difference between practical and theoretical reasoning. As we saw above, Anscombe argues that we should not think of practical reasoning as marked off by the fact that it deals with a distinctive subject matter ; rather, practical reasoning is practical in virtue of its having a distinctive aim, namely that of bringing about action. These observations about the nature of practical reasoning help us to understand what Anscombe has in mind in saying that practical truth is the truth the agent brings about by his action. Just as practical reasoning is not reasoning about action, but rather reasoning with a view to action, so also practical truth is not truth about action, but rather truth realized in action. If practical truth is the aim of practical reasoning (its « good », as the passage from Aristotle quoted above has it), then practical truth will be what is brought about when practical reasoning is successful<sup>36</sup>.

The idea of « truth » can seem to be of obscure application in this context, since we normally think of the success of practical reasoning (at least of the means-end variety) in terms of its effectiveness in finding means to what the agent wants. By contrast, we usually think of « truth » as correspondence between a mental state such as a belief and an independently existing state of affairs in the world. To say, as Anscombe urges us to, that a mental state such as a choice or intention can bring about its own truth can seem bizarre. But the role of truth here can be seen most clearly by focusing on the cases

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<sup>35</sup> E. Anscombe, « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Anscombe’s conception of practical truth may also be influenced by Aquinas’s view (*Summa Theologiae* Ia IIae q.3 a.5) that practical intellect is “causa rerum intellectarum” (cause of things understood), by contrast with speculative intellect, “cuius scientia accipitur a rebus” (whose knowledge is derived from things). According to Aquinas, practical intellect achieves its aim, not by discovering the truth about some independently existing subject matter, as speculative intellect does, but rather by bringing about the very objects of its understanding.

referred to above where I perform my action on the grounds that it constitutes the attainment of some wider aim. If my aim is resting, and I intend to rest by lying on my bed, then as I lie on my bed, I (explicitly or tacitly) call this « resting ». And if I am resting, then this description under which I act is true, and this truth is brought about by my action<sup>37</sup>.

The point of speaking of truth in such cases can be brought further into focus by noting that the description under which I act may not be made true by my action. In this case, we have practical *falsity*. Suppose that I really know nothing about yoga, but have heard that it involves lying on the floor. One day, I take it into my head to « practice yoga ». Now I lie on the floor in a rigid pose with hands and teeth clenched tight and call this « practicing yoga ». But this description is not made true by my action : I am not really practicing yoga. I am not actually engaged in any of the kinds of mental and physical exercise that yoga consists in. My practical reasoning has failed to bring me closer to my aim, but it has failed in a strange and perhaps surprising way. It is not that my aim still lies at a distance from me in space or time ; it is rather that what I am doing does not *count as* an instance of what I am aiming at, and in that sense my aim continues to elude me. My action does not in fact bear the wider description under which I intend it (« practicing yoga ») ; this falsity is the result of a lack of correspondence between what I do and the description under which I do it (though as with false belief, this falsity may be quite unknown to me).

This concept of practical truth opens up the possibility that practical reasoning, even on an instrumentalist conception, may be effective from the agent's point of view, but nonetheless unsound. In this way, Anscombe's later essays on practical truth deeply distinguish her position from standard forms of instrumentalism. On the most familiar version of an instrumentalist view, practical reasoning is thought of as aiming at securing the objects of the agent's desires in accordance with his beliefs. Provided that the agent makes valid inferences from his beliefs about what sorts of means will effectively bring about his ends, his reasoning cannot be faulted. The agent's beliefs may be mistaken, but this cannot be called a mistake in his practical reasoning. Rather, it is simply an error in

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<sup>37</sup> Anscombe discusses practical truth almost exclusively in connection with the very difficult description « doing well ». Her primary focus in her treatment of practical truth is to establish that vicious agents are necessarily defective in their practical reasoning because they act under a false conception of what « doing well » consists in. But for clarity of exposition I have found it easier to approach the topic by first working through simpler examples. I discuss the special problems associated with the description « doing well » below in section III. Anscombe (« Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 77) acknowledges that an agent can « make true *some* description » of his action even if his description of it as « doing well » is false (see also « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 155).

belief.

Anscombe's concern with practical truth makes her version of instrumentalism profoundly different from this more familiar variety. As an instrumentalist, Anscombe holds, as we saw above, that practical reasoning consists in finding means to something the agent wants. But for her that conception leaves open the possibility that practical reasoning can fail in two distinct ways : either it fails to get what the agent thinks he wants, or it gets what the agent thinks he wants, but what he thus gets turns out not to bear the description under which he desired it.

Acknowledging the possibility of this latter kind of failure does not depart from the core of instrumentalism, since it does not involve the idea that an agent's practical reasoning can be faulted in virtue of his lacking certain ends, or that it can furnish him with new ends *ex nihilo*. Anscombe's position, like the standard instrumentalist's, begins from the ends the agent actually aims at. She differs only in insisting that we attend scrupulously to the descriptions under which those ends are desired. In her view, our aim in practical reasoning is not to attain what we believe the thing we want consists in, but to attain what the thing we want actually consists in. Just as we don't simply want to hold beliefs, but to hold beliefs that are true, so also we don't simply want to act in accordance with our beliefs, but to act in accordance with true ones. In this respect, Anscombe suggests that we hold ourselves to a standard of truth in our actions, just as much as in our beliefs. As she puts it, when we make a choice, we not only want « the thing [we] choose », but also « what [we] choose it *for*<sup>38</sup> ». We do not simply choose a thing on the grounds that we want it ; we choose it on the grounds that it actually has the kind of goodness for the sake of which we want it. Thus what we want for the sake of some good must actually be good in that way, in order for our practical reasoning to be fully successful. In her view, truth represents a requirement on practical reasoning, and not just on belief, since practical reasoning without truth will not succeed in its characteristic aim, i.e., bringing about what the agent aims at.

### III

Practical truth as we have discussed it so far – « truth in agreement with desire » – does not imply that vice involves error in practical reasoning. But now recall Aristotle's

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<sup>38</sup> E. Anscombe, « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 154.

claim (quoted above) that practical truth must be « in agreement with right desire ». Anscombe reads this Aristotelian claim as entailing that where the agent's desire is wrong, practical truth must be lacking, i.e., that vice involves error in practical reasoning, and her goal in discussing practical truth is to make a plausible case for this thought<sup>39</sup>. In doing this, she follows a version of the path that she deferred in *Intention*, namely the path of appealing to an overarching end that even a vicious agent may be said to have. But she does so in a way that *Intention* did not anticipate, because she had not yet worked out there her conception of practical truth.

In her defense of the claim that practical truth requires « agreement with right desire », Anscombe's key move is to argue that vicious agents must necessarily act under the description « doing well ». As she puts it : « the desire or will in choice will be for this end, doing well, whether the choice is that of the good or bad man<sup>40</sup> ». I take the description « doing well » that she has in mind here to be roughly equivalent to the description « what a man ought to do », to which she alluded in *Intention*. As we saw above with her use of « good » in connection with wanting, so also in the case of « doing well », she takes special care to emphasize that « well » here should not be understood to build in a reference to any special sort of moral goodness. As an example, she represents the thought of the man who has the vice of licentiousness in the following way : « It is not that the licentious man thinks that licentiousness is moral virtue ; what he thinks is rather that this is a good way to carry on. "One should pursue the present pleasure"... doesn't mean : it's virtuous, or morally obligatory to do that – but : that's the thing to do ! »<sup>41</sup>. As in the case of « good » and wanting, acting under the description « doing well » does not require that one take one's action to be morally good ; rather, it requires taking one's action to be expressive of a conception of good human living, of the sort that even a vicious person who dismisses all talk of morality might still be said to have.

In her later essays, Anscombe insists that vicious agents act under the description « doing well », without retracting her earlier observation to the effect that it would be a

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<sup>39</sup> The reference to « desire » here must be restricted to desires flowing from a settled state of character, virtuous or vicious. I take Anscombe to make a compelling case for the idea that the characteristic actions of a habituated vicious character necessarily involve practical falsity. She wisely does not attempt to show that all bad actions are similarly defective. Indeed, she insists that agents who act badly from weakness of will, for example, cannot be criticized on the same grounds. I take this point to leave open the possibility that the practical reasoning of the weak-willed may be subject to criticism in other ways.

<sup>40</sup> E. Anscombe, « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 153. See also p.155 of the same text : « the wicked man does act in his belief that, in his very action, he *is* doing well ».

<sup>41</sup> E. Anscombe, « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 70.

mistake to assume that one cannot lose interest in such notions. In particular, she acknowledges that agents who are « ruled by passion<sup>42</sup> » or are « weak-willed<sup>43</sup> » will not act according to a conception of « doing well ». But she argues that, these special cases aside, « “doing well” is what anyone wants in some obscure and indeterminate way<sup>44</sup> ». Anscombe provides frustratingly little direct argument for the claim that all human agents act under the description « doing well ». Part of the difficulty here lies in the way she weaves her arguments in these essays together with her interpretation of Aristotle. Thus she is generally content simply to show that this description is necessarily involved in what Aristotle called « choice » (*prohairesis*). Certainly this is helpful in interpreting the passage above, where Aristotle describes practical truth as a condition on soundness in « choice ». But she moves freely between noting that this is Aristotle’s position, and putting forward the same position in her own voice, and this may give one the dismaying impression that in these essays she was content simply to take the truth of this essential piece of her argument on authority.

It is possible, as Aristotle and Anscombe seem to assume, that all human agents, except when under the special influence of passion, act under the description « doing well ». But perhaps not. Perhaps many people are just rather thoughtless and act according to what seems appropriate in the roles or situations in which they find themselves, without acting either on an overarching view of what they regard as « doing well », or being turned away from such a view by momentary passion : perhaps they simply have no such view. Fortunately, for the purpose of showing that vice necessarily involves error in practical reasoning, a weaker claim will suffice : namely that vicious people, in their characteristically vicious acts, do act according to a view of « doing well ». On a plausible view of vice, this will be part of what distinguishes a genuinely vicious person from a merely thoughtless or weak-willed one. Vice is a habituated disposition of thought as well as action and feeling, and in the process of cultivating vices a person will naturally come to develop a view of the world that fits himself and his actions<sup>45</sup>. He will adopt general principles such as « everyone is just out for themselves » or « he who dies with the most toys wins », principles that express a view of what « doing well » is in light

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>43</sup> E. Anscombe, « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> E. Anscombe, « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 76.

<sup>45</sup> On this aspect of vice, see C. Vogler, *Reasonably Vicious*, op. cit., p. 112, where she points out that vicious agents characteristically adopt « vicious patterning principles in order to be better equipped to accomplish their purposes ».

of which he makes sense of his vicious actions. Whatever may be true about most people, it is plausible to think that the genuinely licentious man, for example, adopts highly general practical principles such as « one should pursue the present pleasure », and this will be enough to see him as acting according to a view of what « doing well » consists in.

With this aspect of vice in mind, we can at last deploy the notion of practical truth to show how vice necessarily involves error in practical reasoning. To do this, we show that the vicious person cannot attain practical truth : there must be falsity in his actions. Here is how Anscombe sums up the argument :

« ...the wicked man *does* choose, and acts badly if he is effective. But does 'things being according to his choice' characterize him ? In a sense, yes, if he's clever. He robs and seduces successfully, let us say. But 'things being according to his choice' is more than that... the wicked man [acts] in the belief that, in his very action, he *is* doing well. It is at least in *this* that his thinking is false<sup>46</sup>. »

To follow Anscombe's dense paths of argument here, let's remind ourselves of the notion of practical truth as we have been discussing it so far. Practical truth we characterized above as « truth in agreement with desire », where this meant that the action the agent performs comes to actually bear the description under which he desired it (this is equivalent to what Anscombe calls, in the passage just quoted », things being according to his choice »). Thus if I lie down on the floor as a way of performing yoga, and I am performing yoga, then my action is « true » (at least to that extent). On the other hand, if I lie down on the floor as a way of performing yoga, but I know nothing about yoga and am not actually doing any of the things that yoga consists in, then my action is « false » : it does not in fact bear this description under which I am performing it.

From the point of view of this sort of truth, how do things stand with the vicious agent ? Suppose that, as in Anscombe's example above, the vicious man robs and seduces. These will be things he does intentionally. And he may make true some of the corresponding descriptions of his actions, i.e., descriptions such as « seducing my neighbor's wife ». In this sense, things will be according to his choice : he chooses to seduce, and in fact he seduces. But now consider the further description « doing well », under which we have said that the vicious agent acts. This description is *not* true of his vicious actions. Of course the vicious man believes that what he does is doing well, and so he believes that things are according to his choice. But in this belief he is mistaken, for

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<sup>46</sup> E. Anscombe, « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 155.

living viciously is not actually doing well. This latter claim is obviously disputable. Anscombe makes no attempt to defend it in these essays, and I will not undertake to do so here. But assuming that living viciously is not doing well, we can say that even in the case of the effective vicious agent, things are not « according to his choice ». In Anscombe's view, practical truth is only attained when the agent makes true all of the descriptions under which he acts, and this includes « the truth of the description "doing well" <sup>47</sup> ». Insofar as no vicious agent can make this description of his action true, no vicious agent can attain practical truth. Since the vicious man's practical reasoning thus does not attain practical truth, we can conclude that vice necessarily involves error in practical reasoning<sup>48</sup>.

Note that this argument need not be seen as a retraction of her claim in *Intention* that moral approbation is « irrelevant to the logical features of practical reasoning ». She is consistent in holding that the actions of vicious agents make logical sense. In developing the notion of practical truth, she simply insists that logical features do not represent the only grounds on which reasoning can be criticized. After all, the logical features of true and false beliefs are also the same. False beliefs make sense as beliefs, but nonetheless fall short of the characteristic aim of belief, which is to represent the world as it really is. In the same way, Anscombe suggests, vicious practical reasoning can make sense as reasoning, but nonetheless fall short of the characteristic aim of practical reasoning, insofar as it cannot make true all of the descriptions under which the agent acts.

Anscombe's later work on practical truth thus shows us how to maintain two apparently incompatible positions : 1) instrumentalism about practical reasoning ; and 2) the idea that the reasoning of vicious agents is as such defective. Anscombe's position counts as a form of instrumentalism insofar as she holds that practical reasoning consists in finding means in the agent's power to bring about something he wants. Her position departs from more familiar versions of instrumentalism only by insisting that practical reasoning does not bring about what the agent wants simply by attaining the objects of his desires in accordance with his beliefs. Anscombe points out that an agent's beliefs

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>48</sup> Anscombe also undertakes to argue for an even tighter connection between right desire and practical truth, according to which an agent cannot fail to attain practical truth (at least as regards « doing well ») involuntarily, and therefore error in this area necessarily implies badness in desire : see Anscombe « Thought and Action in Aristotle », art. cit. p. 76-7 and « Practical Truth », art. cit., p. 157-8. Since this argument raises many difficulties and is not directly relevant to my main concerns in this paper, I don't discuss it here.

about what certain of his ends consist in may be false, and argues that in this case, even if he reasons in accordance with his beliefs, he still cannot be said to get what he wants, since his action does not actually have the kind of goodness for the sake of which he wanted it. In particular, vicious agents who act under a false conception of doing well do not really get what they want, even if they act effectively according to that conception. They want to perform their vicious actions on the grounds that they constitute doing well, but those actions are not what doing well really consists in. Since the practical reasoning of the vicious in this way necessarily fails to bring about what the agent wants, we can say that it is faulty as practical reasoning.

### **Conclusion**

My primary aim in this essay has been to reconstruct Anscombe's conception of practical truth and to show how a proper appreciation of that concept can deepen our understanding of her intellectual legacy. In particular, I have argued that engagement with her writings on practical truth reveals an important but widely neglected aspect of her philosophical project. In her post-*Intention* essays, Anscombe maintained her instrumentalism, while enriching her account of practical reasoning by adding to it the idea that practical reasoning should be seen as beholden to a standard of truth. This new idea in turn enabled her to argue that the reasoning of vicious agents is necessarily faulty, even if effective by their own lights, since it involves a false conception of what « doing well » for a human being consists in.

In a broader sense, this argument helps us not only to better understand Anscombe's own work, but also to better appreciate its enduring relevance for contemporary philosophy. In current work in ethics, it is widely assumed that instrumentalism about practical reasoning rules out the view that vice as such involves error. If my interpretation of Anscombe is correct, then her later work shows that this assumption is erroneous. In that way, I aim not only to deepen our appreciation for the full scope of Anscombe's achievement, but also to highlight one way in which her work continues to challenge current thinking and to open up unrecognized possibilities for future thought.

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