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## THE INTENDED AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF *INTENTION*

*Rachael Wiseman*

*Abstract.* This paper examines the context in which Anscombe wrote *Intention*—focusing on 1956-1958. At this time Anscombe was engaged in a number of battles against her university, her colleagues and, ultimately, “the spirit of the age”, including her public opposition to Oxford University’s decision to award Harry Truman an honorary degree. *Intention*, I show, must be understood as a product of the explicitly ethical and political debates in which Anscombe was involved. Understanding the intention with which she wrote *Intention* suggests that we need radically to rethink its nature and character, and that the consequences of the book—consequences Anscombe foresaw and intended—for work in ethics are yet to be understood.

### Introduction

*Intention* is a text that has frustrated the most sympathetic of commentators from the moment of its publication. Even among those who recognise Anscombe’s book as a classic, there is criticism of her style and argument, and confusion about the book’s central theme. Nevertheless, from the mid-1960s, there has been a general consensus that *Intention* contains at least three important theses. First, that *intentional action* and not *the mental state of intending to act* is the more basic notion of intention. Second, that an agent’s knowledge of the states and motions of her body is “non-observational”, in something like the way that her knowledge of the states of her mind is. Third, that actions are individuated—at least primarily—in terms of bodily action; so that if I put my

signature on a piece of paper that is an order for a bomb to be dropped and which brings about the end of the war and blunts my pen nib and gives me cramp, I still only do *one* thing.<sup>1</sup>

There has been further consensus that *Intention* does not provide adequate argument to establish these theses, nor the sort of theoretical and technical detail needed to sustain them. This verdict has acted as an invitation to others to amend, clarify, develop, and correct Anscombe's offering. The legacy of *Intention* has been a continuing debate around these theses, mostly conducted in academic journals, with friends and allies seeking to provide the technical scaffolding Anscombe omits, and foes attempting to show that the scaffolding fails.

In this paper I argue that this widespread view of *Intention* is fundamentally mistaken. Anscombe does not intend to offer a novel account of action, but something which "isn't a philosophical thesis at all".<sup>2</sup> This becomes clear once we view *Intention* as the product of the ethical debates in which Anscombe was engaged between 1956 - 1958. Through those debates Anscombe came to realise that moral philosophy had lost sight of the distinctive use of the question 'What is she doing?', the use which marks out the class of intentional actions (*Intention*, 23, 37). This question, as she saw it, was essential to identifying the nature and quality of an act, a category without which moral philosophy could not precede. Once we reframe *Intention* as a corrective to this oversight, it becomes clear that the idea that we need to complete Anscombe's account by providing technical detail or argumentative support is based on a deep misunderstanding of the sort of philosophical undertaking that *Intention* is, and of the status of the statements it contains.

## 1. The unintended consequences of *Intention*

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<sup>1</sup> Though, see Ford, Hornsby, Stoutland (eds), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011) for a number of essays which attempt to disrupt this interpretative consensus. See especially Frederick Stoutland, "Introduction: Anscombe's *Intention* in Context" and Richard Moran and Martin J. Stone, "Anscombe on Expressions of Intention: An Exegesis".

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe, "Under a Description" in her *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell) 1981, 208-211. Originally published in *Nous*, 13 (1979). This how Anscombe describes her statement, in *Intention*, that "one and the same action may have many descriptions" (210); my contention in this paper is that the same can be said of the statements in *Intention* more generally:

*Intention* was reviewed in at least seven major English-language philosophical journals: *The Journal of Philosophy*, *The Philosophical Review*, *Philosophy of Science*, *Mind*, *Philosophy*, *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, and *Philosophical Quarterly*. The Catholic British weekly, *The Tablet*, also carried a review.<sup>4</sup> Feelings were mixed. Every reader found Anscombe's monograph hard-going. P. T. Heath, the most critical reviewer, accused Anscombe of "indifference to the ordinary standards of literary exposition", and concluded that "the work seems hardly to have got beyond the stage of a first draft".<sup>5</sup> Kurt Baier, whose review is much more sympathetic and insightful than Heath's, reported nevertheless that "the book as a whole is baffling and the outline of its over-all theme not easily discerned", and admitted he would "probably not have persevered in looking for it if I had not undertaken to write this review".<sup>6</sup> A. Phillips Griffiths suggests, rather diplomatically, that "the reader's task would have been lightened if more explicit direction had been given within the text as to the turns the argument is taking".<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty of *Intention*, perhaps accounts for the fact that—at least in some circles—Anscombe's book came to be seen as something like the "first draft" that Heath suspected it of being.<sup>8</sup> From the 1960s there has been a steady stream of work which aims to move from Anscombe's "first draft" to a complete account of the nature of human action. Much of this work has been focussed around three particularly striking features of Anscombe's treatment of her topic. These features are undoubtedly present, but I will argue that they their significance has been misinterpreted.

First, Anscombe is more concerned with *intentional action* than with *the mental state of intending to act*. She denies that "if we wish to understand what intention is, we must be

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Jarvis, "Review", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Jan 1, 1959); Roderick M. Chisholm, "Review", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Jan 1959); Irving M. Copi, "Review", *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Apr. 1959); K. W. Rankin, "Review", *Mind*, Vol 68, No. 270 (Apr. 1959), 261-264; A. Phillips Griffiths, "Review", *Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 130 (Jul. 1959), 245-247; P. L. Heath, "Review", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 40 (Jul. 1960); Kurt Baier (1960) "Critical notice", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 38:1, 71-81; Iltyd Trethovvan, "The Ethics of Intention" *The Tablet*, 11th January 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Heath, *op. cit.*, 282.

<sup>6</sup> Baier, *op. cit.*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths, *op. cit.*, 247.

<sup>8</sup> Though, no-one says this of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

investigating something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind”, and says that on the contrary the “first thing” we should consider in an enquiry into intention is “what physically takes place, i.e. what a man actually does” (§4, p. 9). This preference for considering intentional action over what goes on “in the sphere of the mind” is reflected in the structure of *Intention*: 46 out of its 52 paragraphs focus on the question, “What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not?”<sup>9</sup>

This much is beyond dispute; however, the explanation of the priority that is commonly offered is not. The explanation goes as follows: rather than holding—as is natural—that “intention” first and foremost refers to states of mind, and that bodily movements are described as “intentional” when they bear a certain relation—causal or explanatory—to such a state, Anscombe holds that “intentional” applies first and foremost to a class of bodily movements.<sup>10</sup> Donald Davidson, in his early work, attempted to develop this idea. He argued that when we give the intention with which a person acts—for example, when we say “James went to church with the intention of pleasing his mother”—we do not thereby refer to a state of mind that accompanies his action; rather the function of expressions like “the intention with which James went to church” is to “generate new descriptions of actions in terms of their reasons”.<sup>11</sup>

Davidson came to think that his attempt to dispose with the referential use of “intention”—and hence the mental state as referent—ended in failure. The difficulty Davidson found was to account for “pure intending”, which he defined as “intending that may occur without practical reasoning, action, or consequence”.<sup>12</sup> In short, it is a problem for the view that the mental state of intending can be explained away, or explained by the more basic category of *intentional action*, if the mental state can occur in perfect isolation. Davidson concluded that the

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<sup>9</sup> I count here paragraphs whose focus is *intentional action* and *intention with which* an action is done. As becomes clear, in giving the *intention with which* an action is done, one also gives a description of the *intentional action*. §1-3 and 50-52 are the excluded paragraphs.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g. Michael Bratman, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 1, 3. For discussion of this passage, see Moran and Stone, *op. cit.*, 38-9.

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Davidson, “Intending”, *op. cit.*, 83.

intelligibility of pure intending compels a theorist to admit the referential use of “intention” into her theory.<sup>13</sup> And once it has been admitted that “I intend to X” *sometimes* involves reference to the mental state of intending, “there is no reason not to allow that intention of exactly the same kind is also present when the intended action eventuates”.<sup>14</sup> The problem he located would cause problems for Anscombe too—at least on this understanding of the kind of priority she gives to intentional action..<sup>15</sup>

Second, Anscombe says that an agent knows her intentional actions “without observation”.<sup>16</sup> This statement has intrigued philosophers of mind. It seems to suggest that one might have immediate, or perhaps groundless, knowledge of the states of one’s body, in the way that epistemologists have traditionally thought is possible for states of one’s mind.<sup>17</sup> The difficulty is that *Intention* contains no adequate account of the nature of “non-observational knowledge”, nor any explanation of how it might be possible to have knowledge of one’s movements and actions which is not perceptually grounded. When Anscombe introduces the phrase she does so negatively, via a criterion for speaking of *knowing by observing*:

where we can speak of separately describable sensations, having which is in some sense our criterion for saying something, then we can speak of observing that thing; but that is not generally so when we know the position of our limbs.<sup>18</sup>

Anscombe has generally been taken to be suggesting that when we have knowledge *without* observation, it is via sensations that are *not* separately describable, but this is itself a very unclear notion, not elucidated in *Intention*. G. N. A. Vesey complained that the “attempt to understand

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<sup>13</sup> The case that Davidson describes is extremely odd, and it is not clear to me that it is coherent. Yet, as Anscombe points out, “No reason” is sometimes an intelligible answer to the question “Why?” (*Intention*, §17-18; §51). It is clear, however that Anscombe deals with such cases without taking them to show—as does Davidson—that “there is something there to be abstracted” (*ibid.*, 89).

<sup>14</sup> Davidson, *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion, see Moran and Stone, *op. cit.*.

<sup>16</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 14.

<sup>17</sup> G. N. A. Vesey, “Knowledge Without Observation”, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 72, 201. For other examples, see C. B. Martin, “Knowledge without Observation”. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Sept. 1971), 15-24; McDowell, John (2011).

<sup>18</sup> “Anscombe on Bodily Self-Knowledge”, in Ford, Hornsby, and Stoutland (eds), *op. cit.*, 128-46; Andy Hamilton, *The Self in Question*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ch. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 13.

what Miss Anscombe means by ‘knowledge without observation’ is like a treasure hunt”—the “treasure” being an understanding of “the way in which the mind is embodied”—which, unfortunately ‘*seem[s]*’ to lead, not to philosophical treasure at all, but to ... absurdity”.<sup>19</sup>

Third, Anscombe seems to suggest that actions are individuated in terms of bodily action; so that if I put my signature on a piece of paper which is an order for a bomb to be dropped and which brings about the end of the war and blunts my pen nib and gives me cramp, I still only do *one* thing.<sup>20</sup> Following Goldman’s *A Theory of Human Action*, this view became known as the “Identity thesis” or the “Davidson-Anscombe thesis”, formalised as: if a person *Fs* by *G-ing*, then her act of *F-ing*=her act of *G-ing*.<sup>21</sup> Davidson commented that this thesis “immediately raises a number of questions, the first of which is, what are the entities that are identical or different?”.<sup>22</sup> Anscombe has nothing to say on that ontological question.<sup>23</sup>

In the decade following the publication of *Intention*, over 400 articles on its topic were published in peer-reviewed philosophy journals. Reviewing Goldman’s book in 1972, Myles Brand lamented the fact that although (or perhaps, because) almost all of the “profitable discussion” had taken place in journals, the result was “piecemeal, often disunified”. It was rare, he said to see views on “act individuation, basic action, reasons as causes ... integrated into a coherent whole”.<sup>24</sup> The idea that Anscombe’s book contains these three sketched, but inadequately articulated, theses, has meant it has been rarer still to see attempts to understand *Intention* as a coherent whole.

I want to take us back to those early reviews, and focus on a puzzle that came up for two reviewers—Judith Jarvis and Iltyd Trethovvan—but which has never really been part of the

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<sup>19</sup> Vesey, *op. cit.*, 201.

<sup>20</sup> In fact, this is not Anscombe’s view, as we will see below.

<sup>21</sup> Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970). This formalisation is from George Wilson and Samuel Shpall, “Action”, in *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (2012). Anscombe responds to Goldman in “Under a Description”, *op. cit.*, 211-14.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, “Aristotle’s Action”, reprinted in his *Truth, Language and History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 284.

<sup>23</sup> Anscombe says that she has “always balked at this question (“Under a Description”, 210).

<sup>24</sup> Myles Brand, “Review”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 69, No. 9 (May 4, 1972), 249. The ‘400’ figure is Brand’s.

exegetical literature. In doing so I raise a question that is strikingly absent in work on Anscombe, especially when one considers its prominence in work on her teacher, Wittgenstein: what is the philosophical method of *Intention*?

Neither Jarvis nor Trethovvan characterise *Intention* as a sketch of a theory of action, but instead see it as a contribution toward a descriptive project, designed to clear away misunderstandings and accreted errors about the grammar of the concept of “intention”. This is the sort of project that might be associated with Wittgenstein or with the Oxford ordinary language philosophers—Anscombe’s colleagues.<sup>25</sup> Jarvis proposes that Anscombe’s major achievement is to “cut through a whole mass of philosophical clichés” and “give us a fresh, detailed picture of the concept of an action”.<sup>26</sup> Trethovvan says that *Intention* “exposes the inadequacy or the inaccuracy of a good many statements which we might ordinarily let pass on the subject of intention”.<sup>27</sup>

These reviewers read *Intention* as looking to provide an accurate description of how we apply the concept of intention, rather than a first sketch of a theory of action. If we look at *Intention*’s opening paragraph, we can bring this contrast into sharper focus.

Very often, when a man says “I am going to do such-and-such, we should say that this was an expression of intention. We also sometimes speak of an action as intentional, and we may also ask with what intention the thing was done. In each case we employ a concept of “intention”; now if we set out to describe this concept, and took only one of these three kinds of statement as containing our whole topic, we might very likely say

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The question of the relation between Wittgenstein’s grammatical method, and the methods of Oxford ordinary language philosophy—and indeed, the further question of Anscombe’s understanding of that relation—is by no means straightforward. In his review, Copi stresses the similarity, saying that “[Anscombe’s] method is the familiar one, now prevalent at Oxford, of considering what one would say, or would accept as significant to say, in this or that particular situation. That method, however, is employed more sensitively and more sensibly by Miss Anscombe than by most of its other practitioners today” (*op. cit.*, 148). However, Mary Warnock recalls that Anscombe was “absolutely furious” at her suggestion that she “thought Wittgenstein would agree with much of what had gone on in [Austin’s] things class” (Mary Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places*, 65). For helpful suggestions on the relation of Wittgenstein and ordinary language philosophy, see Andy Hamilton, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein’s On Certainty* (London: Routledge, 2014), 243-5.

<sup>26</sup> Jarvis, *op. cit.*, 41. Amazing that there are absolutely no clichés or metaphors in Anscombe’s *Intention*, nor indeed, as far as I can tell, in any of her writings.

<sup>27</sup> Trethovvan, *op. cit.*, 12.



things about what “intention” means which it would be false to say in one of the other cases.<sup>28</sup>

When Anscombe’s book is read as offering a novel theory of action, §1 is understood to make a tripartite division which introduces “philosophical perplexity” and an explanatory task for philosophy.<sup>29</sup> The task is to explain the nature of the connections between the following: the mental state of *intending to act*, *intentional action*, and *reason for acting* (intention with which).<sup>30</sup> In contrast, when read as an application of the methods of ordinary language philosophy, the section does not introduce a puzzle but, as we might put it, the range of statements that are the book’s topic. Three sorts of statement employ the concept of intention:

- When she said “I am going to fail this exam”, she was expressing her intention.
- She jumped intentionally.
- She left with the intention of fetching him.

The task is accurately to describe the conditions under which such statements are true or significant.<sup>31</sup> We can begin to see the difficulty of that task by considering the three, superficially similar, statements which do not employ the concept:

- When she said “I am going to fail this exam”, she was making a prediction.
- She jumped involuntarily.
- The thought “I must fetch him!” caused her to leave?<sup>32</sup>

In each case, as Anscombe puts it, “the distinction ... *is* intuitively clear”—in the sense that we have no problems with it in our everyday human interactions—but “if ... we ask in philosophy

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<sup>28</sup> Anscombe, *Intention*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> This is Kieran Setiya’s phrase in “Intention”, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Setiya describes this as the “principal task of the philosophy of intention”, *ibid.* Moran and Stone, in their “Anscombe on Expressions of Intention”, call this view “transformed Anscombe”, and make an excellent case against reading Anscombe as introducing and undertaking a “connective” explanatory project; for one thing, they point out, Anscombe’s first head is “expression of intention for the future” and not the mental state of intending to act (esp. 34-5).

<sup>31</sup> Anscombe, in fact, offers a diagnosis in §1 of why we feel the need to undertake the connective project: “where we are tempted to speak of “different senses” of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in fact pretty much in the dark about this character of the concept which it represents”, 1.

<sup>32</sup> As Anscombe stresses in *Intention*, (§5 and §10-15) and in “Intention” (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 57 (1956-1957), 321-332), the difference between giving the cause of her leaving and giving a reason is far from straightforward, as these cases show. Consider, ‘She suddenly thought “I must fetch him!” and was so upset by this impulsive idea she left the room in order to get some fresh air’.

what the difference is ... we are really asking what each of these is”, and that is not ‘something that is intuitively obvious’.<sup>33</sup>

At the end of this essay, I will say something about the way in which this shift in how we think about the task and method of *Intention* changes the way we understand the priority Anscombe gives to intentional action, her statement that we know our actions “without observation”, and the passages on action individuation. But first, I want to address a question that immediately arises when *Intention* is viewed as undertaking a descriptive, rather than an explanatory, project. The question is: what *Intention* is *for*? What is the point of a description of the use of these three kinds of statement? It will not give us a theory of action—at least, not in any traditional sense—and it will not move us beyond the knowledge that is already manifested in our capacity to employ the concept of “intention”. As Anscombe acknowledges, these distinctions are already intuitively obvious. Jarvis attempts to reassure those “readers who will say: now that we’ve been through all of this, what have we?”, by explaining that Anscombe has exposed “the sources of a host of philosophical muddles in which one can find oneself in dealing with these concepts”.<sup>34</sup> This is the standard defence of descriptive methods in philosophy, but it leaves many unimpressed—especially when what one has to go through is so difficult. Trethovvan articulates his worry more forthrightly:

Those who are not familiar with this kind of analysis will find it extremely heavy going. Anybody, I suppose, would find it difficult. Miss Anscombe holds that philosophy ought to be difficult, and this is obviously true if it means that philosophy ought not to be banal. The question which arises here is whether, in view of this extreme complexity, the results she has achieved ought to be called banal. This is not to suggest that the book is not worth reading. It provides a mental exercise of a kind which is most valuable in

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<sup>33</sup> *Intention*, 1-2 and 6.

<sup>34</sup> Jarvis, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

virtue of its very strenuousness; it exposes the inadequacy or the inaccuracy of a good many statements which we might ordinarily let pass on the subject of intention; and it has an undercurrent, with occasional ebullitions, of quite remarkably caustic wit. But an analysis of intention which eschews all ethical questions seems doomed to reach rather unimportant conclusions.<sup>35</sup>

In the remainder of this paper I want to answer Trethovvan's question: ought *Intention* to be called banal? My suggestion is that Anscombe intended her ethics-free book to make it possible to do ethics; as such, the conclusions are far from unimportant. Though Anscombe eschews ethical questions, she intends the book to have profound consequences for ethics. The content is banal in its etymological sense—"common to all"—but certainly not in its usual English sense of "obvious" or "clichéd".

## 2. Anscombe on the public stage

*Intention* was published in 1957. Between 1956 and 1958 Anscombe was engaged in a series of public arguments with her colleagues, her university, and her compatriots. During these three years, Anscombe came to recognise that the Hebrew-Christian ethic, the moral worldview of her Catholic religion, was utterly at odds with both the "highest and best ideals of the country at large" and with the moral philosophy of her contemporaries.<sup>36</sup> She saw the rejection of the older ethic as deeply corrupting, and as responsible for creating "an actually murderous world".<sup>37</sup> Her Christian ethical outlook, she found, was "hateful to the spirit of the age",<sup>38</sup> not because of its normative content, but because it held that there are some kinds of action for which "it is correct to say "One doesn't have to consider whether to do this or not, in any circumstances; it is simply

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<sup>35</sup> Trethovvan, *op. cit.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?", *The Listener* (London, BBC), February 14, 1957, Issue 1455, 157..

<sup>37</sup> Anscombe, "The Dignity of a Human Being", in Mary Geach and Mark Gormally (eds), *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by Anscombe* (Exeter: Imprint Academia, 2005), 73.

<sup>38</sup> Anscombe, "Contraception and Chastity", in Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (eds), *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G. E. M. Anscombe* (Exeter: Imprint Academia, 2008) 191.

excluded”.<sup>39</sup> Anscombe was drawn into bitter public rows because she felt moved to defend that “hateful” truth. Her defence, however, is not of interest only to Christians. Anscombe, we will see, looks to provide a conceptual framework within which a secular, as well as theistic, ethics of prohibition could be articulated.

It is against this deeply ethical—and for Anscombe, religious—context that we must see *Intention*. In short, an ethics according to which some actions are excluded simply in virtue of their kind, requires a criterion for the *nature and quality of an act*. Anscombe, through these rows, came to recognise that such a criterion was lacking. Her intention in *Intention* is to rectify this lack.

In this section we look at that historical context, and at those public debates in which Anscombe participated between 1956 and 1958. In them we witness Anscombe’s gradually coming to the view that “it is not profitable for us to do moral philosophy until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology”.<sup>40</sup> In the next section I will return to the intended consequences of *Intention*.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1956, Oxford University’s Convocation—the University’s governing body, comprised of all its academics—considered nominations for honorary degrees, to be awarded the following month. One of the nominations was Harry S. Truman, former President of the United States, and the man who had given the order to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Anscombe, then a tutor at Somerville College, “caused a small stir” in the House by arguing that

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<sup>39</sup> Anscombe, *The Listener*, February 28, 1957, Issue 1457, 349. In this paper I want to exclude questions about content—about which kinds of acts fall within the prohibition. Here we are concerned with the work that must be done before *any* ethics of prohibition is to be possible. Anscombe coined the label “consequentialism” to describe any philosophical view which denied that it was ever correct to say “One doesn’t have to consider whether to do this or not, in any circumstances; it is simply excluded” (“Modern Moral Philosophy”, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 36. It is worth noting how far the meaning of the label has shifted since Anscombe introduced it (For a helpful discussion, see Mary Geach’s introduction to *Human Life, Action, and Ethics*, xvii-iii; and Cora Diamond, “Consequentialism in Modern Moral Philosophy and in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’”. In Oderberg, David S. and Jacqueline A. Laing, *Human lives: critical essays on consequentialist bioethics*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 1977), 13-38).

<sup>40</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”, 26.

the nomination should be rejected on the grounds that Truman was guilty of mass murder.<sup>41</sup> As such, she said, to show him honours was sycophantic and no different in principle from showing them to Nero or Genghis Khan.

Anscombe's speech did not persuade—though there is reason to suspect that this was less a matter of her argument than of the fact that members had already made up their minds and were not prepared to change them.<sup>42</sup> The House was asked to indicate its attitude toward the nomination, and showed overwhelming support.<sup>43</sup> On 20<sup>th</sup> June, Truman was awarded his honorary degree. Asked by a journalist about Anscombe's intervention, Truman stated: "I made the decision [to use the bombs] on the facts as they existed at the time, and if I had to do it again I would do it all over again".<sup>44</sup>

The fact that Truman was forced to rebut Anscombe's argument gives an indication of the very public nature of her protest. Reporters from the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times* were present at Convocation, and both papers carried pieces on her protest, including summaries of her argument. Across the Atlantic, the *New York Times* picked up the story. Anscombe herself contributed to the public dissemination of her view by publishing her speech as a pamphlet. This publication was reported in the *Manchester Guardian*, which told its readers that it "shows that she had a respectable case". Insightfully, the paper also notes that Anscombe's argument "took in far more than Mr Truman" but extended to "all the princes and potentates of the earth—among them the democratic electorates".<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Limiting War", *The Manchester Guardian*, Jun 4, 1956, 6

<sup>42</sup> Anscombe, in her pamphlet, recalls that the "dons of St John's were simply told "The women are up to something in Convocation; we have to go and vote them down" ("Mr Truman's Degree", in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, 65)

<sup>43</sup> Just who did and didn't side with Anscombe is a matter of some dispute. At the time, both *The Times* and the *Manchester Guardian* reported that "there were no calls of "*Non placet*" when the proposal was put before the House". However, R. D. M. Foot, who was also present, wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* to inform them that Anscombe's "*Non placet*" had been echoed by some in the House ("Degree for Mr Truman", *Manchester Guardian*, May 7, 1956, 6). He does not give names.

<sup>44</sup> "Oxford Don Fights Honor for Truman", *New York Times*, Jun 19, 1956, 3.

<sup>45</sup> "Limiting War", *op. cit.*

The facts that provide the background to Anscombe's intervention are familiar. In July 1945, the Allied forces were engaged in war with Japan, and were seeking the Japanese forces' unconditional surrender. One military option for achieving this end was a land invasion, but there was good evidence that this would have catastrophic consequences. A month earlier, at the battle of Okinawa—the result of Allied forces invading the Japanese island—90,000 soldiers (U.S. and Japanese) and 150,000 civilians were killed. Mass suicides were reported among the Japanese people. On the expectation that such losses would be repeated if troops were put on the ground, Truman ruled out a land invasion to “prevent [...] an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other”.<sup>46</sup> These are among the “facts as they existed at the time”.

Alternative means of securing unconditional surrender were sought, and the decision was taken to issue an ultimatum to the Japanese government: if it did not surrender unconditionally, the country would face “prompt and utter destruction”. The Potsdam Declaration set out this ultimatum, and was signed by Truman, along with the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek, Leader of the Nationalist Government of China. The Japanese did not surrender and the threat was carried out: on 6<sup>th</sup> August Truman ordered an atomic bomb to be dropped on Nagasaki. Still no surrender came. On 9<sup>th</sup> August Truman ordered an atomic bomb to be dropped on Hiroshima. These two bombs killed between 75,000 and 125,000 people on impact, with the same number again dying before the end of the year of injuries and the effects of radiation. On 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945 the Allies' end was achieved and the Japanese government surrendered unconditionally.

Anscombe says that Truman was guilty of mass murder. She does not object to killing or to war—Anscombe is no pacifist—but to murder.<sup>47</sup> Murder, Anscombe says, is “one of the worst of human actions” and as such is subject to absolute prohibition.<sup>48</sup> It follows that the

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<sup>46</sup> David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 410.

<sup>47</sup> Anscombe calls pacifism a false and harmful doctrine (“Mr Truman's Degree”, 69). See also “War and Murder”, in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics*, 51-61; see esp., 55-7..

<sup>48</sup> “Mr Truman's Degree”, 64.

predicted or actual consequences of a murderous act are irrelevant to the question of whether or not it should be done; it should not. Thus, when Truman says that he made his decision “on the facts as they existed at the time”, he reveals himself to be denying that “it is correct to say [of dropping bombs on civilian populations] “One doesn’t have to consider whether to do this or not, in any circumstances; it is simply excluded””.

In her speech to Convocation, Anscombe sets out to show that when Truman ordered the dropping of the bombs, what he did was murder. Killing is murder if it meets two further conditions: it is intentional and the victims are innocent.<sup>49</sup> Her focus is on the second of these conditions and for this reason she devotes much of her speech to distinguishing her view from pacifist opposition to all intentional killing—which would include killing enemy combatants in war—and to considering the application of “innocent” in the context of war. However, our interest is in the first condition: that the killing be intentional. Anscombe, in 1956, supposed that it could not be seriously denied that Truman intentionally ordered the killing of the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. After all, he signed the order, and their deaths—their “prompt and utter destruction”—were the means by which Japan’s unconditional surrender was to be achieved. In her pamphlet she mentions the speech given by the censor of St. Catherine’s college, who spoke in defence of the nomination, and who seems rather inchoately to gesture toward such a denial:

Mr Truman did not make the bombs and decide to drop them without consulting anybody; no, he was only responsible for the decision. Hang it all, you can’t make a man responsible just because “his signature is at the foot of the order”.<sup>50</sup>

Anscombe simply remarks that ‘such a speech does not deserve scrutiny; after all, it was just something to say on such an occasion’.<sup>51</sup> She does not take seriously the Censor’s suggestion

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 66.

that Truman can be held responsible only for signing his name, and not for all that followed. As we will see, Anscombe soon discovered that this was a misjudgement on her part.

The following year, on February 14<sup>th</sup>, Anscombe gave a talk on BBC radio's *Third Programme*. Her topic was "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" Anscombe argued that it did not, but only because the youth were already exposed to the corrupting ideas of that philosophy in their life before university.

Anscombe's thesis is that the accusation is unfair because "Oxford moral philosophy is perfectly in tune with the highest and best ideas of the country at large".<sup>52</sup> She cites as evidence six ideas which make up the views of the country at large, and which are reflected in or supported by the moral philosophy of her colleagues.

- (1) An anti-Platonic view of justice, according to which a just society is one which is well-arranged, rather than one in which individuals act justly.
- (2) A "high" conception of responsibility for the future, limited only by our capacity to calculate the consequences of our action or inaction. So, a person is responsible for all the foreseen consequences of what she does.
- (3) A "gentle" conception of responsibility for the past, in which it is unfair to hold someone wholly responsible for what she did, given that it had all sorts of causes. So, causal factors which contributed to her doing what she did, or which were necessary to it having the results that it had, must be taken into account when assessing the extent of her responsibility.
- (4) A horror of suffering.
- (5) A flexibility about principles, which allows that one may choose the principles by which one wishes to live, and may change those principles in accord with circumstance.

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<sup>52</sup> "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?", 267.



(6) A feeling that the changing nature of the world makes it wrong to impose a rigid moral code on children, who must be allowed to develop their own principles.<sup>53</sup>

In her radio-talk, Anscombe confines herself to “demonstrat[ing her thesis] in a few instances”—that is, to giving examples which show that these ideas are common to her colleague’s moral philosophy and the country at large.<sup>54</sup> She conveys her contempt for them through a mixture of mockery and sarcasm—the tone is not so far from Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*.<sup>55</sup> For example, she notes that it follows from (1) and (2) that “the correct procedure in making moral [and legal] decisions” is to “calculate the improvement of the general state of affairs”, and also “that this is the correct procedure ... is constantly taught in the university”. She illustrates its working in the world at large with the following example:

A frequent occurrence that is much in the same spirit is the removal by authority of elderly widows from their dwelling, which anyone can see they are not keeping in accordance with the standards of hygiene which are desirable for their own and general welfare.<sup>56</sup>

Though forcibly removing widows from their homes on grounds of public hygiene is some way short of eating plump infants to alleviate the suffering of the poor, in presenting the practice Anscombe is clearly aiming for a similar effect on the reader as was Swift.

Among the actions that (1)-(6) make permissible, is murder; that is, those ideas have nothing in them which would allow us to say, “One doesn’t have to consider whether to commit murder, in any circumstances; it is simply excluded”. We can see this if we consider once again the case of Truman. Truman does not act justly, in the Platonic sense, when he orders the killing

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<sup>53</sup> These can be located in her talk. Anscombe also lists them, in this way, in “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, April 04, 1957, 537.

<sup>54</sup> “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?”, 267. See also her letter to *The Listener* on 4<sup>th</sup> April, in which she cites further evidence.

<sup>55</sup> Reflecting on her paper “War and Murder”, published in 1961, Anscombe expresses regret that it was “written in a tone of righteous fury”—Jenny Teichman describes Anscombe’s tone in that paper as “like the Prophet Jeremiah’s” (J. Teichman, “Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe: 1919-2001”, *Biographical memoirs of fellows*, Vol. 115, Oxford University Press, 2002), 49. Anscombe laments that “if I was torn by a *saeva indignatio*, I wish I had the talent of Swift in expressing it” (Introduction to *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, p. vii. (The latin phrase is from Swift’s self-penned epitaph)).

<sup>56</sup> “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?”, 267.

of Japanese civilians; however, if justice is a matter of the arrangement of society, we may think that insofar as the unconditional surrender that Truman's act brings about is one which is better arranged—peaceful and democratic, for example—we may evaluate his action as promoting justice [1]. It might be said that Truman would have been neglecting his responsibilities if he had refrained from murdering Japanese civilians, given that he was able to predict the relative consequences of dropping the bomb and not dropping it, and to calculate that the former state of affairs was better [2].<sup>57</sup> However, as the Censor indicated, we cannot hold him wholly responsible for those murders, given that his order was just one of the many causal antecedents; his order *alone* did not bring about those deaths—he was just one tiny cog in a complex causal machine [3].<sup>58</sup> One of the reasons why we may think of his action as necessary—though obviously regrettable—is that he prevented even worse suffering than the suffering he caused; anything which decreases suffering is to be admired [4]. Thus, though it is clearly a good rule of thumb that murder is morally wrong, given certain circumstances, other principles, like the principle that one has a moral duty to do what is best for one's country, may replace them [5]. Finally, given that young people are growing into an increasingly complex world, in which the consequences of actions are ever more wide-reaching and interconnected, children should be taught to be flexible in their moral outlook, and to recognise that moral laws are like the Queensbury rules [6].

Anscombe makes absolutely no attempt to disguise her disgust at the ethical outlook embodied in (1)-(6), nor her contempt toward those who propagate it. Her talk outraged her colleagues and peers. Over the seven weeks following her broadcast, the BBC's *The Listener* magazine published fifteen letters to the editor, before announcing the correspondence closed. Four were from

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<sup>57</sup> In fact, Anscombe quite fiercely denies the claim that Truman saved lives with his act. See fn. 73.

<sup>58</sup> Compare the Censor's defence, and the argument made in defence of Mr Truman by the dons in "Worcester, in All Souls, in New College": "*It would be wrong to try to PUNISH Mr Truman*" ("Mr Truman's Degree", 65).

Anscombe, defending her thesis and her reputation; the rest were from her Oxford colleagues and other philosophers.

R. M. Hare, one of the Oxford moral philosophers whom Anscombe is attacking, took particular exception. This is no surprise as he is explicitly identified in Anscombe's talk. She begins by referring to a review in *Mind* which reported that "there are people who think that moral philosophy in one of its current fashions "corrupts the youth"".<sup>59</sup> She refers here to R. B. Braithwaite's review of Hare's *The Language of Morals*. In that review, Braithwaite says that the charge of corruption would be "utterly fantastic in the case of Mr. Hare" due to his "high moral earnestness".<sup>60</sup> Anscombe remarks that earnestness is "not good evidence" for the claim someone is not a corrupter; on the contrary, she says, "if you really wanted to corrupt people ... moral earnestness would, in fact, be an important item of equipment".<sup>61</sup>

Hare took Anscombe's opening remarks to imply—which of course they don't—that "if someone seems to be earnest about a moral question, the obvious explanation is that this is 'an important piece of equipment' for corrupting people".<sup>62</sup> Her point is negative: moral earnestness is not evidence that someone is not corrupt.<sup>63</sup> He also represents her as disapproving of "the desire to prevent suffering, especially that of children". What Anscombe says is that what it means to take "preventive measures" in relation to children's welfare (in order to prevent suffering [4]) is to determine to "go into people's homes to push them around, not because they have done anything, but just in case they do"; her point is that suffering ought not to be prevented by unjust action, not that the desire to prevent children from suffering is invalid.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?", 266

<sup>60</sup> R. B. Braithwaite, "Review", *Mind*, Vol. 63, No. 250 (Apr., 1954), 249.

<sup>61</sup> Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?", 266-7.

<sup>62</sup> R. M. Hare, "Oxford Moral Philosophy", *The Listener*, February 21, 1957, 311.

<sup>63</sup> That said, she is certainly suspicious of those who appear morally earnest. Compare her discussion of the false view of Christianity: "turning counsels into precepts results in high-sounding principles" ("War and Murder", 56). Compare also her third thesis in "Modern Moral Philosophy": "that the concepts ... *moral* obligation and *moral* duty ... ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible". I take it that one of Anscombe's points here is that these words are used to articulate "high sounding precepts" which amount to nothing more than empty expressions of earnestness (26).

<sup>64</sup> Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?", 267.

Anscombe dismisses his accusations as “simple expressions of rage”.<sup>65</sup> He attributes to her the view—which he finds incredible—that it is “wrong to judge acts by the foreseen consequences of committing them”.<sup>66</sup> But, Anscombe thinks only that it is wrong to think that every kind of act is such that it may be rendered permissible by its consequences.

Antony Flew describes her broadcast as full of “bitter sneers” and “an affront to professional standards and to the decencies of controversy”. He accuses her of “characteristically” relying on “the fact that few of her readers will ... check any assertion she may find it convenient to make”.<sup>67</sup> Nowell-Smith says she uses “sarcasm, innuendo, and travesty” to spread “misrepresentation about colleagues”.<sup>68</sup> Anscombe replies that her colleagues “aren’t angry at me because I misrepresented them, but because I represented them truthfully. Really, their only objection should be that I laughed at them”.<sup>69</sup>

The letters display a startling misapprehension of Anscombe’s talk. Her style is difficult, it is true, but the lack of understanding looks at times wilful. Her claim is that there is a worldview—prevalent in society and reflected in the work of her colleagues—according to which justice is a matter of how things are arranged, and actions are evaluated by their foreseen consequences. That worldview, she says, may make permissible or preferable courses of action—for example, certain procedures for looking after widows—which are unjust, in the Platonic sense.

Anscombe’s strategy of holding up for derision the implications of (1)-(6) was not particularly successful, and not just because it elicited rage rather than critical engagement. She perhaps underestimated the extent to which the actions that she saw as shocking—authorities intervening to prevent cruelty to children by “go[ing] into people’s homes to push them around”; bombing

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<sup>65</sup> Anscombe, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, February 28, 1957, 349.

<sup>66</sup> R. M. Hare, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, February 21, 1957, 311.

<sup>67</sup> Anthony Flew, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, February 28, 1957, 349; and March 21, 457.

<sup>68</sup> Nowell-Smith, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, March 14, 1957, 405.

<sup>69</sup> Anscombe, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, April 04, 1957, 564.

civilian populations; removing widows from their homes—would strike her peers as quite sensible policies. A lot of what Anscombe finds shocking fails to shock. What helps to bring out the radical character of (1)-(6)—the familiarity of which can make them seem benign—is to contrast with their negations. This will give us the framework for the ethic Anscombe seeks to recover.

- (1') A Platonic view of justice, according to which a just society is one in which individuals act justly, rather than one which is well-arranged.
- (2') A “practicable” conception of responsibility for the future, limited to what we intend or voluntarily bring about.
- (3') A ‘severe’ conception of responsibility for the past, in which a person is wholly responsible for what he does, intentionally or voluntarily.<sup>70</sup>
- (4') An acceptance of suffering.
- (5') An inflexibility about principles, in which principles remain fixed however the circumstances may change.
- (6') A recognition of parental authority, and parental duty to teach a moral code to children.

Anscombe argues for each of (1')-(6') elsewhere.<sup>71</sup>

Among the letters of protest and outrage, is one by Nowell-Smith which identifies the task that needs undertaking if an ethical code based on (1')-(6') is to be possible; he intends this as a rebuke, but Anscombe instead sees it as an invitation:

The general burden of her criticism of the morality of the country at large is that people tend to judge all acts by their consequences rather than by their “nature and quality” and she implies that Oxford philosophers share this attitude ... Miss Anscombe seems to be (though I can scarcely believe that she is) ignorant of the difficulties involved in drawing

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<sup>70</sup> I take the labels “practicable” and ‘severe’ from Anscombe’s description of Christianity in “War and Murder”. She says: “The truth about Christianity is that it is a severe and practicable religion, not a beautifully ideal but impracticable one”, 56.

<sup>71</sup> See, e.g. “War and Murder”; “Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*; “The Moral Environment of the Child” in *Faith in Hard Ground*; “Authority in Morals” in *Faith in Hard Ground*; ‘sins of Omission?: The Non-Treatment of Controls in Criminal Trials’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*.

a distinction between an act and its consequences. For example, was Mr. Truman's "act" the signing of an order, the killing of a number of Japanese, or the saving of a number of Japanese and other lives? If it was the first only, Miss Anscombe has, on her own principles, as little right to condemn it as Mr. Truman's supporters have to defend it, since both judgments turn on its consequences. But if the killing is to be included in the nature and quality of Mr. Truman's act, why not the saving of lives?<sup>72</sup>

Nowell-Smith's point is worth pause. Anscombe's claim is that when Truman gave the order for the bombs to be dropped, what he did was commit mass murder, and that as such it was an act the nature and quality of which render it prohibited. But Nowell-Smith proposes that Anscombe faces a dilemma. If the "nature and quality of an act" is determined by what is done in the moment, then Truman's act is morally neutral (all he did was put "his signature is at the foot of the order"); if it is determined by its foreseen consequences, Anscombe should include as part of the "nature and quality of the act" the lives that Truman predicted his act would save (by its preventing an "Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other"). In which case, what right has she to condemn Truman for murder rather than to praise him for life-saving?

In her letter of response, Anscombe simply acknowledges "the colossal difficulty of making out the character of an act" given that an act may be described in virtue of its foreseen consequences.<sup>73</sup> She goes on:

The suggestion that one cannot treat "Do not murder" as an intelligible commandment in a broadcast without a preliminary *exposé* of the philosophical problems of defining an

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<sup>72</sup> Nowell-Smith, "Oxford Moral Philosophy", *The Listener*, February 21, 1957, 311.

<sup>73</sup> She changes the example because, she says, "a factual example ought to be according to fact", and that Truman's act 'saved lives is merely one of the known lies it is permissible to tell'; Truman's act may have spared more lives than would a land invasion, but given that "it is well known ... that Truman knew the Japanese were urgently seeking to surrender on terms". Instead, she gives a fictional case, in which the job is to make out the nature and quality of "an act which is at once (a) sending chocolates through the post, (b) poisoning your aunt, (c) securing a legacy". Nowell-Smith takes this to be an act of subversion on her part; he writes to the *Listener* again, complaining that her remark is 'sarcastic in that she affects to believe that I would find a "colossal difficulty" in a case in which there is clearly no difficulty at all'. But in this he is quite wrong. There is precisely the same difficulty about Anscombe's fictional case as about Truman's. Are we to condemn the person at the post-box on the grounds that she is murdering her aunt, or commend her for sending chocolates, or think her practical for securing a legacy? That Nowell-Smith fails to see the cases as parallel must reveal a failure on his part to appreciate the nature of the difficulty he himself raises.

action seems to me in a high degree comic. I lecture on such problems in Oxford, in the philosophy of psychology.<sup>74</sup>

During Hilary term (January-March) 1957—the term in which she gave her radio talk, and wrote that letter—Anscombe was delivering the series of lectures that became the *Intention*.

### 3. The intended consequences of *Intention*

*Intention* is an answer to the question “how do we tell the character of an act?” This is not a metaphysical question, but a conceptual one. What distinction are we making when we evoke these intuitively clear contrasts: “That was an expression of intention, not a prediction”; “that was involuntary not intentional”; “that was the cause, not the reason”? The central case

Anscombe uses to illuminate this question is one of *war* and *murder*:

A man is pumping water into the cistern which supplies the drinking water of a house. Someone has found a way of systematically contaminating the source with a deadly cumulative poison whose effects are unnoticeable until they can be cured. The house is regularly inhabited by a small group of party chiefs, with their immediate families, who are in control of a great state; they are engaged in exterminating the Jews and perhaps plan a world war.—The man who contaminated the source calculated that all if these people are destroyed some good men will get into power who will govern well ...; and he has revealed the calculation, together with the fact about the poison, to the man who is pumping. The death of the inhabitants of the house will, of course, have all sorts of other effects [...]

This man’s arm is going up and down, up and down. [...] Now we may ask: What is this man doing? What is *the* description of his action?<sup>75</sup>

Here is not the place to repeat Anscombe’s detailed answer, and there is certainly no space to work through the implications of this shift in our thinking about *Intention*’s task. However, a very

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<sup>74</sup> Anscombe, “Oxford Moral Philosophy”, *The Listener*, March 21, 1957, 457.

<sup>75</sup> *Intention*, 37.

quick sketch of Anscombe's answer to the question she poses in §38, will be enough to cast doubt on the idea that her book contains the three theses about action, three theses which need technical and argumentative scaffolding.

Anscombe begins by pointing out that “of course, *any* description of what is going on, with him as the subject, which is in fact true” is a description of what he is doing.<sup>76</sup> When we say what a man is “doing” in this wide sense, we are indifferent to the distinctions that are Anscombe's topic. This list will include descriptions which he *intends* (“operating the pump”), *knows* (“clicking out a rhythm”), and *does not know* (“generating certain substances in some nerve fibres”); and descriptions in terms of consequences which are *intended* (“poisoning the inhabitants”), *foreseen* (“earning some money”), and *unforeseen* (“causing NN to come into some money through a legacy”). She then notes that her “enquiries into the question “Why?” enables us to narrow down our considerations of descriptions of what he is doing to a range covering all and only his intentional actions”.<sup>77</sup> This range is delimited by the application of the question “Why?”, the criteria for which are summarised in §16.<sup>78</sup> Any description that falls within that range will give the “character of [his] act”. Next, Anscombe sets out how the descriptions within this range can be arranged into chains of descriptions, and it is this ordering principle that introduces the possibility of asking *how many* things that this man is doing, in that he is moving his arm up and down.<sup>79</sup>

In this context, Anscombe's focus on intentional action—on “what a man actually does”—is explained by the fact that it is there that the criteria for the application of the question “Why?”, and the formal order that the question reveals, are most easily brought into view. The priority is a matter of method and not metaphysics. The statement that a man knows what he is doing without observation is not an epistemological thesis. Rather, it is criterion for the

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 24-5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 45.



application of the question “Why?” The difficult work—work that will take us beyond conceptual analysis and into the human sciences—will of course be to describe the underlying capacity, or capacities, which enable us to give some descriptions which are true of use ‘straight off’.<sup>80</sup> Finally, the “identity thesis”, so called, is no part of Anscombe’s view. That thesis has ontological commitments, it asserts an identity relation between entities: if a person *Fs by Ging*, then her act of *Fing*=her act of *Ging*. Anscombe’s, on the other hand, describes an “order that is there whenever actions are done with intentions”, an order which shows why a single action may be described in many ways.<sup>81</sup>

The context I have described allows us to reconstruct the intended consequences of *Intention*—consequences which have not come to pass. Had those first reviewers made the connection between Anscombe’s “righteous fury” and her philosophy of action, things might have turned out very differently.<sup>82</sup>

The most significant omission from the legacy of *Intention* is an attempt to undertake, using the account of action provided in *Intention*, the ethical task that Anscombe describes in “Modern Moral Philosophy”. That paper was published in January 1958, just a few months after *Intention*. In it Anscombe famously defends three theses, the first of which is that “moral philosophy ... should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of

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<sup>80</sup> Anscombe suggests that the capacity to say straight off how one’s limbs are arranged, and the capacity to say straight off what one is (intentionally) doing are in fact distinct (*ibid*, 50).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>82</sup> It is rather surprising that they didn’t. Perhaps Alan R. White’s rather astounding verdict on the third volume of *The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*—the volume on *Ethics, Religion and Politics*—is revealing of a more general prejudice among philosophers:

The group of articles in the third volume, which I have called personal expressions of opinion, includes such themes as war and murder, the morality of dropping the atom bomb on Hiroshima, the justice of the 1939-45 war... Since I don’t believe that the opinions of a philosopher, however intelligent, are of any more—or any less—value on such themes than those of an equally intelligent non-philosopher, I think they are misclassified under the title *Collected Philosophical Papers*. I shall say nothing about them. (“Review”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 131 (Apr. 1983), 192)

Or perhaps the exclusion of overtly ethical questions in *Intention* was enough to push Anscombe’s recent forays into questions of ethics to one side. Had *Intention* been published *after* “Modern Moral Philosophy”, perhaps the connections would have been more salient.

psychology”.<sup>83</sup> What is needed, Anscombe says, before ethics can begin, is “an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as ‘doing such-and-such’ is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is needed”.<sup>84</sup> *Intention* provides that piece of “conceptual analysis”. Anscombe’s intention in doing that work was to provide ethics with a starting point from which it could give an explanation of “how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one”, not a starting point from which philosophers of mind and action could fill out technical details in a metaphysics of action.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> “Modern Moral Philosophy”, 26.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 29.