

Anscombe's *Intention* and Influence

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G. E. M. Anscombe:

- Read Classics at St. Hugh's, Oxford. Research student at Cambridge (1942-44). Research fellow at Somerville College, Oxford (1946-1970). Chair of Philosophy, Cambridge (1970-86).
- Author of *Intention* (1957); two other books (one co-authored with Peter Geach); her research papers collected in four volumes; translator of numerous of Wittgenstein's works.

Three Topics of *Intention*:

- (1) Expressions of intention for the future ("I'm going to walk to the store"),
- (2) Intentional action ("I am walking/I walked to the store"), and
- (3) Intention in acting ("I am walking to the store *to buy some milk*").

Expressions of intention:

- Statements about the future, but not evidence based predictions.
- Verbal expressions of intentions; not (mental/psychological) states of intending.

[...] a man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing. All this conspires to make us think that if we want to know a man's intentions it is into the contents of his mind, and only to these, that we must inquire; and hence, that if we wish to understand what intention is, we must be investigating something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind; and that although intention issues in actions, [...] still what physically takes place, i.e. what a man actually does, is the very last thing we need consider in our enquiry. Whereas I wish to say that it is the first. (*Intention*, §4, p.9)

## Compare:

And in describing intentional actions as such, it will be a mistake to look for *the* fundamental description of what occurs – such as the movements of muscles or molecules – and then think of intention as something, perhaps very complicated, which qualifies this. The only events to consider are intentional actions themselves, and to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description we give (or could give) of it. (§19, p.29)

Intentional Action:

What distinguishes actions which are intentional from those which are not? The answer I shall suggest is that they are the actions to which a special sense of the question "Why?" has application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting (§5, p.9)

Questions:

- What is the special sense of “why?” here?
- When does it have application, and when not?

The question has application when we give a positive or negative answer to it. Refusing application is not the same as negatively answering a question.

Granting application positively:

- When expressing one’s intention:  
Q: “Why are you crossing the street?”  
A: “To look at that shop window.”
- When giving one’s motives (love, despair, vanity).

Common ground: both are things the agent finds attractive in some way, and both explain the aim or “point” of the action.

Granting application negatively:

- “For no particular reason.”
- “I just wanted to, that’s all.”

To answer in this way is to deny that there is any further reason for doing the thing in question.

Refusing application of the question:

- One way of refusing application to the question is to deny the description of the thing done:  
Q: “Why are you X:ing?”  
A: “I’m not X:ing, I am Y:ing!”, or “I wasn’t doing, *that*, I was ...”

Actions and their descriptions:

- An action can be intentional under one (or some) description of it, but unintentional under others.

Our enquiries into the question ‘Why?’ enable us to narrow down our consideration of descriptions of what he is doing to a range covering all and only his intentional actions. ‘He is X-ing’ is a description of an intentional action if (a) it is true and (b) there is such a thing as an answer in the range I have defined to the question ‘Why are you X-ing?’ [...] there are a large number of X’s, in the imagined case, for which which we can readily suppose that the answer to the question ‘Why are you X-ing?’ falls within the range. E.g. ‘Why are you moving your arm up and down?’ – ‘I am pumping’. ‘Why are you pumping?’ – ‘I’m pumping the water supply to the house’ [...] (§23, p. 38)

Question: How many actions are being performed here? One, or many, given the different intentions with which the person is engaged in?

Anscombe’s answer:

- One action, but with multiple intentional descriptions of it; see §26 of *Intention*.

Anscombe's influence:

- The idea that one action can have many descriptions came to be called the "Anscombe-Davidson thesis", but what that thesis amounts to in Anscombe and Davidson, is a different question.
  - o For a discussion, see e.g., Jennifer Hornsby, "Actions in their circumstances" in *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*.
- The "Logical Connection Argument", according to which desires and reasons are conceptually connected to actions. Hence they are not logically independent of the actions, and cannot be their causes. Formulated by e.g. A. Melden (in his *Free Action*) and von Wright (in *Explanation and Understanding*).
  - o For a brief overview on the logical connection argument cf. the discussion in Rowland Stout's *Action* (p.77-81),
  - o For a more in-depth treatment of the problem, see Frederick Stoutland, "The Logical Connection Argument" in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7, monograph Series no. 4 (1970).
  - o For a reply to the argument, see Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes" (1963).

Recent literature on Anscombe & Intention:

- Roger Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (OUP, 2008).
  - o An overview of Anscombe's philosophy.
- Ford, Hornsby & Stoutland (eds.), *Essays on Anscombe's Intention* (HUP, 2011).
  - o The essays by Stoutland are good introductory reading.
  - o Essays by Moran & Stone, Ford, & Hornsby contrast different aspect of Anscombe's philosophy of action to causal accounts.
- Rachel Wiseman, *Guidebook to Anscombe's Intention* (Routledge, 2016).
  - o A comprehensive commentary on *Intention*.
- Douglas Lavin, "On the Problem of Action"
  - o Distinguishes Anscombian approaches to action explanation from standard, Davidsonian, approaches.
  - o Accessible online (in English):  
<https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/9887629>
  - o Published (in German) as "Über das Problem des Handelns" in *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 61, 2013.
- Lucy Campbell, "Two Notions of Intentional Action? Solving a puzzle in Anscombe's Intention"
  - o Connects Anscombe's discussions on the "Why-Question Characterisation" of intentional action with the claim that intentional action is a sub-class of things the agent knows without observation.
  - o Forthcoming in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.