

The intended scope of Anscombe's use of Aquinas's formula about practical knowledge

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Abstract

Many interpreters take Anscombe's recitation of Aquinas's formula in §48 of *Intention* as meant to state an essence of practical knowledge. But the two conditions Anscombe states on the holding of this formula suggest qualifications, and thus that formula cannot state an essence. In this paper, I argue that the first of these conditions does not imply qualifications. Instead, I show that this qualification draws attention to a structural feature of practical knowledge and intentional action: the doer knows her doing under a particular description.

1 Aquinas's formula

In §48 of *Intention*, Anscombe writes:

... we can say that where[:]

(a) the description of an event is of a type to be formally the description
of an executed intention [and]

(b) the event is actually the execution of an intention (by our criteria)

then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds: Practical knowledge is 'the cause of what it understands,' unlike 'speculative' knowledge, which 'is derived from the objects known.'

§48, 87¹

Many interpreters have taken Anscombe's recitation of Aquinas's formula to indicate that she, like him, takes it to express the nature or essence of practical knowledge.² Certainly, Anscombe's gloss on §48 in her summarizing table of contents as giving an "elucidation of the notion of practical knowledge" corroborates this. Insofar as a statement of nature or essence designates a feature in virtue of which a thing is the kind of thing it is, this would seem to imply that the formula holds of practical knowledge *in general*: every case of practical knowledge is a case in which the knowledge is, in some sense, the cause of what it is knowledge of.

But this view faces a challenge. If the formula applies to practical knowledge in general, why does Anscombe preface it with conditions on its application? Kieran Setiya takes this line in his paper "Anscombe on Practical Knowledge." According to him, the claim Anscombe makes when she quotes Aquinas's formula is "not a

¹ I interpret Anscombe's use of "where" to suggest that (a) and (b) are *necessary* conditions. I do so because I believe Anscombe intends them to be so, and because it makes my task harder and thus my solution stronger.

² See Hursthouse (2000), 102; McDowell (2010), 417; McDowell (2011), 142.; Moran (2004), 47; Stoutland (2011), 32.

general claim about practical knowledge,” since “[w]hat she does say is carefully qualified” (Setiya 2014, 3). Setiya claims that the conditions indicate that the formula applies only to the practical knowledge that one has when the description of one’s behavior “can only be voluntary or intentional” (§47, 85; Setiya 2014, 4; Setiya 2009, 136, n.36).

Setiya’s view presents an interesting alternative interpretation, and with it a challenge for the more widespread view that the formula states a nature or applies generally. I attempt to answer this challenge in this paper. I argue that the first of Anscombe’s two conditions does not imply a qualification on the scope of Aquinas’s formula, but instead draws attention a structural features of practical knowledge.

2 Forms of description

According to Setiya, qualification (a)—that “the description of an event is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention”—sufficiently restricts the scope of Anscombe’s use of Aquinas’s formula. Setiya picks up on the word “formally” here. This word, he notes, echoes the emphasized ‘form’ in the first sentence of §47: “Thus there are many descriptions which are directly dependent on our possessing the *form* of description of intentional actions” (84).

In this section, Anscombe develops a taxonomy of descriptions of happenings. She draws up two columns of these verb-phrases, both of which are intelligible only in virtue of our “possessing” the relevant form. Here is a partial reproduction:

Intruding	Telephoning
Offending	Paying, selling, buying
Kicking	Sending for
Switching (on, off)	Marrying, contracting
⋮	⋮

In the right-hand column, Anscombe places verb-phrases that describe intentional actions whenever they are used. That these verb phrases bear the ‘form of description of intentional action,’ Anscombe says, is “evident enough” (§48, 87): Describing someone as telephoning necessarily describes her as acting intentionally, one cannot accidentally telephone. In the left-hand column, Anscombe lists verb-phrases which do not always describe intentional action. All of these can be done accidentally, *i.e.*, unintentionally. Despite their not necessarily possessing the relevant form, these are nonetheless intelligible only in terms of our grasp of the form, even when describing unintentional behavior. Both columns, finally, contrast with a third category of verb-phrases that we can understand even without our grasp of the form. These are descriptions of physical movement and processes, like ‘falling,’ ‘dissolving,’ or—Anscombe’s example—‘sliding on ice.’ Some verbs-phrases of the third class may still describe intentional actions, as in “I slid on the ice because I felt cheerful” (85).

Setiya contends that when Anscombe speaks of descriptions that are “*formally* descriptions of executed intentions” at the beginning of §48 (87), these descriptions must be verb-phrases that would fit in Anscombe’s right-hand column (Setiya 2014, 3). If that is correct, then the mention of descriptions which are “of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention” in condition (a), too, refers to right-hand column verb-phrases. This would imply that Anscombe means for Aquinas’s formula to apply only to practical knowledge which has as its object a happening expressible with a right-hand column verb-phrase. So “[f]or Anscombe,” Setiya concludes, “practical knowledge is not essentially the cause of what it understands” (Setiya 2014, 5).

This may be a natural reading of the phrase “the form of description of in-

tentional action.” But it is *not* a natural reading of Anscombe’s text as a whole. For Anscombe suggests several times that the verb-phrases not belonging in her right-hand column can bear the relevant form.

One suggestion appears at the start of §48: ‘We can now see that a great many of our descriptions of events effected by human beings are *formally* descriptions of executed intentions.’ The next sentence is telling: “That this is so for descriptions of the type in the right hand column is evident enough” (87). This sentence suggests that there are descriptions which are “*formally* descriptions of executed intentions” that do not belong on Anscombe’s right hand column, though that these descriptions are so may be less clearly “evident.”

Another suggestion appears alongside the introduction of the relevant form at the beginning of §47. Here Anscombe can be seen as claiming that all instances of left-hand column verb-phrases are intelligible in virtue of their uses which describe intentional actions. Anscombe’s example is ‘offending someone.’ She writes, “one can do this unintentionally, but there would be no such thing if it were never the description of an intentional action” (§47, 84). Anscombe seems to claim that what the description ‘offending someone’ depends on for its sense is our being able to use it to describe intentional behavior. That this ability itself requires our being able to understand and use right-hand column descriptions is a further point that she shows no sign of making. And why would Anscombe think this? One can certainly imagine a language with words like ‘kicking’ and ‘offending’ but not ‘paying’ or ‘marrying.’ This already contradicts Setiya.

But Anscombe does not stop here; she makes explicit that even verb-phrases that fall in neither column can bear the relevant form. She says, “we can speak... of the descriptions which can occur *in* this form, and note that of these some are and

some are not dependent on the existence of this form for their own sense" (§47, 85). All verb-phrases that belong to either column *by fiat* depend on the relevant form. So even Anscombe's third class "can occur *in* this form." This sentence, I think, establishes without a doubt that Anscombe means for more than Setiya's suggested class of descriptions to occur in the relevant form.

Finally, Anscombe emphasizes that it is "essential" to the relevant form that descriptions ("typically") occur in that form when they attach to the connectives like "in order to" (§47, 84–85).³ This suggests that any description of an intentional action bears the relevant form—regardless of which column, if either, the verb falls in. This is because generally descriptions of intentional actions can attach to these connectives, and therefore embody the "essential" feature connected to this form.

3 Revisionary exegesis

Of course, it can be hard to swallow the thought that a description's bearing the *form* of description of an intentional action just means that description's describing an intentional action.

This worry puts Anscombe in a hard place. What she says about "the form of description" implies that her target cannot be conceived of as a form of description at all. Interpreters, then, are forced to be revisionary to some degree. There are two options here. One can, like Setiya, take seriously the letter of the phrase "the form of description" and restrict that form to verb-phrases that describe intentional actions whenever used. This requires turning a blind eye the previously cited textual evidence suggesting otherwise. Or one can deny, on these broader textual grounds,

³ The "typically" here may be making room for the verb-phrases in statements of natural teleology to *not* bear this form.

that Anscombe is really, at bottom, getting at a form of description. Defenders of the widespread view must take the second option, since they need all descriptions of intentional action which figure in practical knowledge to bear whatever Anscombe means by “the form of description.” This is needed to secure that Aquinas’s formula applies to all cases of practical knowledge, given condition (a).

Taking this second option requires saying what Anscombe is getting at by that phrase “form of description.” I have argued that the above textual evidence suggests that Anscombe means for all descriptions of intentional actions to bear the relevant form. This gives rise to an eliminativist reading of the Anscombe’s phrase “form of description”: All Anscombe means by speaking of a description’s bearing the relevant form is that that description describes an intentional action.

Despite the textual support, there are several issues with this eliminativist reading. The first has to do with its eliminativist character. Saying that all Anscombe means by a description’s bearing the relevant form is that the description describes an intentional action ignores Anscombe’s use of the word “form.”

A second, related worry about the eliminativist reading is that it threatens to make condition (a) redundant. Since condition (b) already specifies that the happening which the description describes is an executed intention, (a) seems to add nothing beyond what (b) puts in place.⁴ It would be surprising if Anscombe just overlooked this redundancy. So one can be led out of charity of interpretation to agree with Setiya that Anscombe means for less than all descriptions of executed intentions to bear the relevant form.

These worries suggest that an eliminativist reading will not do. The defender of the widespread view must therefore find something else which Anscombe could

⁴ See Setiya (2014), 4.

mean by a description's bearing the relevant form than its merely describing an intentional action. This is a difficult task. For this something must (1) show some sensitivity to the letter of the phrase "form of description," (2) avoid implying that condition (a) is redundant, and yet (3) not restrict the application of Aquinas's formula to only some cases of practical knowledge.

4 Acting under a description

My suggestion is that Anscombe combines two thoughts in talking of a form of description. The first is that practical knowledge is the form of intentional action. The second is that the description which figures in a case of practical knowledge is the description under which the doer knows what happens as his intentional doing. The two thoughts can be summed up by saying that the form of an intentional action—practical knowledge—represents its object through a sense attaching to a particular description. So a description's bearing what Anscombe calls "the form of description of intentional action" *is* its figuring in a case of practical knowledge.

My first thought—that practical knowledge is the form of an intentional action—is natural once we note that Anscombe is fairly loose about distinguishing descriptions from what they describe. Anscombe's remarks on 'offending someone' make this clear: "one can do this unintentionally, but there would be no such thing if it were never the description of an intentional action" (§47, 84). Note that Anscombe's use of anaphora in this quotation slides between referring to a description and to what it describes: "it" refers to a description of an intentional action, while "this" refers to an intentional action. This looseness makes it plausible to think that Anscombe's talk of a form of description is, at bottom, best conceived of as concerning the form of what gets described in the relevant descriptions—in this case,

intentional action.

That Anscombe is interested in the form of an intentional action, rather than of a description, can be revealed by focusing on why Anscombe introduces the notion of a form of description of intentional action in the first place. The form of description is introduced as an element of an alternative to a tempting picture of intentional action that Anscombe rejects. This tempting picture is made attractive by naïve reflection on the left-hand column verb-phrases, which sometimes describe intentional actions and other times unintentional ones. Since these verb-phrases describe both types, “it can be quite natural,” Anscombe notes, “to think that events which are characterisable as intentional or unintentional are a certain natural class, ‘intentional’ being an extra property which a philosopher must try to describe” (§47, 84). The thought here is that all that separates, for example, intentional offendings or kickings from unintentional offendings or kickings is merely the presence of an “extra” property, for example, having been caused by certain mental states.

Let us consider the alternative. If being intentional is not an “extra” property of the set of happenings that are intentional actions, it must instead be intrinsic to those happenings that they are intentional. The notion of “form” seems apt for expressing this relationship between a happening of this sort and its being intentional. What makes an intentional action intentional is the *form* or constitution of the happening itself, as opposed to something outside it, such as mental causal antecedents.

What could be the “form” of an intentional action? §48 seems to give an answer: If we interpret ‘cause’ in Aquinas’s formula as *formal* cause, as indeed many have,⁵

⁵ See Hursthouse (2000), 103; Moran (2004), 47, 54; Rödl (2011), 222–224; Setiya (2014), 4; Setiya (2009), 136, n. 36; Stoutland (2011), 18.

then we can say that the practical knowledge is the *form* of the intentional action that is known in it. Without this knowledge, there is no such happening, regardless of whether the happening in question is a marrying or an intentionally offending. This seems to me a better interpretation of ‘cause’ in Aquinas’s formula than the ‘cause’ of efficient causation, given Anscombe’s rejection of the view that what makes a happening intentional is an “extra” feature. “Extra” features would presumably include causal antecedents, even necessary ones. This seems to be Anscombe’s point when she says that “intentional actions are not marked off just by being subject to mental causality” (§16, 24).⁶

Of course, taking practical knowledge to be the form of intentional action already conflicts with Setiya’s view about the intended scope of Anscombe’s use of Aquinas’s formula. It implies that all intentional actions, not just ones describable using right-hand column verbs, are formally caused by practical knowledge. To not beg the question against Setiya, one needs to show how this view avoids his worry about condition (a)’s becoming redundant.

I respond that condition (a) *does* rule out some descriptions, though not in the way Setiya thinks it does. The descriptions ruled out are those that are *not* the descriptions of what someone is doing “*under which* he knows it” (§6, 12; *cf.* §48,

⁶ To deny that ‘cause’ in Aquinas’s formula is efficient cause is not to deny that practical knowledge brings about its object by setting it in motion, even necessarily. I do not know if Anscombe would deny this, though her skepticism of our ability to introspect the mental item which caused our intentional action suggests she may (Anscombe 1983, 179–180). So does Anscombe’s connection to a Wittgensteinian tradition that denied that mental states which are conceptually connected to their object could cause their objects (see Hursthouse 2000, 85–86; Stoutland 2011, 6, 11). But what can certainly be attributed to Anscombe is the point that what it is for some happening to be someone’s intentional action is for that happening to be known in a special way by that someone, not for it to be set into motion by that knowledge (even if it is). Anscombe initially indicates this ‘special way’ by saying that the knowledge is “without observation” (§8, 13). But I would like to suggest that this indication is preliminary and that the specialness is better expressed by the knowledge’s being the form of intentional action.

87). This leads us to what I indicated above as the second thought implicit in Anscombe's talk of a "form of description." To illustrate, imagine you are sawing a plank. Anscombe notes that what you are up to can be described in various ways, "e.g., 'sawing a plank', 'sawing oak', 'sawing one of Smith's planks', 'making a squeaky noise with the saw', 'making a great deal of sawdust' and so on and so on" (§6, 11). You may know what you are doing under one but not others of these descriptions, for example, if you do not know that you have taken one of Smith's planks. This is a result of the referentially opaque context of the content of knowledge in general. I may know things about Hesperus without knowing that what I know about Hesperus applies also to Phosphorus if I do not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus. Similarly, you may know that you are sawing the plank without knowing you are sawing Smith's plank if you do not know that the plank is Smith's plank. In the case where you do not know that the plank you are sawing is Smith's, we do not say that you are intentionally sawing Smith's plank, despite the fact that you are intentionally sawing the plank and your sawing the plank *is* sawing Smith's plank. Indeed, if you were asked why you are sawing Smith's plank, you would deny knowledge of this. So one and the same happening is intentional under some descriptions and not others. Only the descriptions under which I know the happening bear what Anscombe calls "the form of description of intentional action."

This reading of what Anscombe means by "the form of description" meets our three numbered criteria from above. It meets criterion (1), since it interprets "the form of description" in terms of a description of an action's figuring in the form of that action. It meets criterion (2), since it implies that the mention of "form" in condition (a) removes descriptions of happenings under which the happening is not

intentional from the content of the practical knowledge in question. And yet it meets criterion (3), since this does not imply a restriction on the scope of application of Aquinas's formula. It does not because it is impossible to have practical knowledge of a happening which has as its content a description under which you do not know that happening as your doing. For happenings known in practical knowledge are necessarily known under the description one knows them under.

That condition (a) does not rule out any cases of practical knowledge does not imply that it is redundant. For it does rule out some descriptions of even executed intentions—namely, the ones that do not figure in practical knowledge, because they are not the descriptions under which the doer knows what she does. The condition then functions to bring light to this structural characteristic of practical knowledge. One can see it, for example, as a warning against a misleading way of speaking which does not pay proper attention to the referentially opaque context of knowledge attributions. For when you have practical knowledge of sawing the plank without knowing it is Smith's plank, it does make sense to say you have knowledge of a happening that happens to be the sawing of Smith's plank. But it would be incorrect to attribute to you knowledge of sawing Smith's plank without making the *de re* character of the attribution explicit.

5 Conclusion

I think an argument with a similar form can be given about Anscombe's second condition. For lack of space, I have focused on the first. I did this to show how Anscombe's conditions can be read as highlighting structural features of practical knowledge and not as "careful qualifications."

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