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An Anscombean Approach to Collective Action

§1: Introduction

Everyday speech is replete with sentences formed by combining a plural noun-phrase and a verb denoting a type of action. “We dragged him for 20 yards.” “They just kept riding up and down in the elevator.” “The Smiths throw a lovely Christmas party.” “Several of the girls are looking for eggs.” “Dr. Lau and the innkeeper inspected the scroll.” And so on. In many, but not all of these cases it is natural to say of the individuals referred to by the relevant plural noun-phrases that they *act together*. But what is it to act together and how does this differ from acting alone? And if, as is usually the case with a phrase freshly lifted from natural language, several phenomena are gathered under this locution, which, if any, are of philosophical significance?

Many contemporary philosophers addressing this question take for granted a familiar conception of solitary action, or of *acting alone*. On this conception, a solitary intentional action is a species of event that is caused in some special way by the psychological states of its agent.¹ When they turn to the topic of collective action, these philosophers typically begin by noting that there is no one mind shared by a collective agent that might serve as the subject of psychological states standing in the relevant causal relation to the relevant worldly events. They are therefore led to ask how the psychological states of individual agents must be related to the actions of a group in order for that group to be said to “act intentionally” or “share an intention.”² Their thought is that if we outfit individual agents with psychological states having an elaborate enough content and make these states jointly cause an event in the

right way, then we will have accounted for collective action. In this way, they attempt to extend the standard paradigm to the case of collective agency.

The resulting theories of collective action are predictably individualistic and psychologistic in character. For in the end they boil collective action down to the psychological states of individuals and their causal combination. Collective action brings with it no essentially new forms of explanation or agency; its account requires nothing more than a baroque redeployment of the same materials that account for solitary action. We might therefore say that these views treat acting together as though it were only a very complicated case of acting alone.³ In essence, they attempt to tame collective action by reducing it to the more familiar solitary paradigm.

Anscombe famously rejected the psychologistic account of intentional action in the case where an agent is acting alone.⁴ Instead she attempted to isolate a form of rational explanation to which intentional actions are subject. On her view, a solitary action is intentional if and only if it is subject to a certain sense of the question “Why?”, the answer to which provides an explanation for acting that is available to the agent without observation.⁵ And according to Anscombe, the same explanatory structure is also to be found in a practical syllogism. That is, the explanations that hold together the elements of an action, relating them all to an end pursued, can also be represented as rational transitions in a course of reasoning about what to do.⁶ Anscombe’s thought is that action is an exercise of the power of practical reason and is structured by the forms of explanation characteristic of such reasoning.⁷

It is time to consider an Anscombean approach to collective action. Such an approach would differ substantially from the standard approach by accounting for collective agency in terms of novel forms of collective action explanation and practical reasoning, not found in solitary action. It would thus hold out the promise of a theory of collective action

that is neither individualistic nor psychologistic. In this paper I make an initial contribution to this project. I begin in §2 by raising some initial puzzles about collective action. In §3 I consider Anscombe's account of the form of explanation that characterizes solitary intentional action, and argue that a parallel, although crucially different, form of explanation provides an account of collective action that addresses these puzzles. In §4 I raise the question of the relation of this form of explanation to practical knowledge and the practical syllogism. Finally, in §5 I briefly try to undermine the suspicion that such an account must be committed to the existence of a group mind.

§2: Some Puzzles About Collective Action

Following Searle, let us begin by considering two pairs of contrasting scenarios.⁸ In each pair, the first scenario offers us an example of collective action, whereas the second does not. We may suppose, however, that they would be indistinguishable to the eye of an innocent observer.

(1a) A and B plan to deliver a message in private to the ambassador's son. With this goal in mind they arrive at a party where he is talking to a Swedish diplomat. B distracts the Swede while A delivers the message to the ambassador's son.

(1b) A and B arrive at a party where the ambassador's son is talking to a Swedish diplomat. A intends to deliver a message in private to the ambassador's son, but B knows nothing about this intention. B happens to want to talk to the Swede, and approaching him, does so. A seizes on this opportunity to deliver his message in private to the ambassador's son.

(2a) A band of robbers plans to knock over Mellon Bank. The getaway driver sits in an alley behind the bank with the engine idling, while inside the safecracker listens to the safe with a stethoscope. While the safe is being cracked several burly men stuff money from the teller's drawer hastily into sacks. When everyone is loaded up the car speeds away.

(2b) A man happens to be parked in an alley behind Mellon Bank with his engine idling. Among the sidewalk pedestrians, several men carrying sacks and one with a stethoscope—all total strangers—happen to be passing by the bank at the time when another man opening the bank door yells “It’s a stick-up!” Pushing inside each man hopes to get some money for himself. While the man with the stethoscope listens to the safe the other men stuff money into sacks. When everyone has whatever they can carry they rush outside and each pushes into the car that happens to be sitting in the alley. The driver is told to drive away, which he does.

In both these contrasting pairs of cases the same actions (in some sense) were performed with the same outcome, but still there remains an inner difference. In the first of each of these cases we have a group of agents acting together, while in the second of each of these cases we have a mere diversity of agents acting on their own. What could account for this inner difference?

Let us begin by considering some quick and intuitive, but ultimately unilluminating, attempts to capture the difference, and so to account for the nature of collective action.

Begin by noting that in cases (1a) and (2a) there is a shared intention between the agents in question. As Anscombe pointed out, the word “intention” has several different but related uses.¹⁰ When we say that the agents in question share an intention we might mean “intention” in the sense of *the intention with which* they act: some objective they’re after in acting now. Alternately, we might mean an intention to perform an action sometime in the future, where no means to that action need now be underway. Finally, when we say that the agents in question share an intention we might mean merely that they act together intentionally.

Focusing on the first alternative, we can note that in cases (1a) and (2a) the agents all share the intention of knocking over Mellon bank or delivering the private message. Taking a clue from this feature of the cases we can say that we have a collective action whenever an action is performed with an intention that is shared by several agents.

Unfortunately, this sharing of intentions is, philosophically speaking, rather mysterious. To bring this out consider that in case (2b) each individual robber acts with the intention to steal money from Mellon Bank. So they too “share an intention”, *in a sense*: each has an individual intention with the same content as the individual intentions of the other agents acting. But we’re interested in a thicker sense of sharing an intention, a sense in which agents in (2a) share an intention while those in (2b) do not, and in virtue of which the agents of (2a) can be said to act together.

To try to distinguish the thicker sense we might say that in (2a), unlike in (2b), the agents don’t merely share intentions with the same content; rather, they have a share in one and the same intention. But it is not any easier to understand what it is for several agents to share in one and the same intention than it is to understand what it is to act together. For, the problem posed by our second pair of contrasting cases is precisely to say what the difference

is between a bunch of agents each individually performing the same action, e.g. robbing a bank, and what it is for them to have a share in a single action together.¹¹ It would seem that this approach has merely transposed the question we began with into a mental idiom, with intentions substituted for actions. But the problem remains even when the terms have been changed, for it's no easier to see how an intention can be shared (in the thick sense) than to see how an action can be performed together. Indeed it seems like practically the same question.

Nor will it help to appeal to the other use of intention, where "intention" means intention to act in such and such a way in the future. Although in (1a) and (2a) the parties involved know what they're getting into ahead of time, and have worked out a plan, it is perfectly possible to do something together in the relevant sense *on the fly*. There is no need to share an intention to do so ahead of time. For example, seeing you with your shoulder to a stalled pick-up truck I might spontaneously pitch in, and help you push it to the gas station. Here there was no plan and neither of us knew we were going to do anything together at all, until I began playing 'The Good Samaritan'.

Finally, I hope it is obvious that the third sense of intention, namely that of acting intentionally, will be of no help here. For saying that the agents in (1a) and (2a) share an intention in this sense is just to say that they act together intentionally—which is exactly what we are trying to account for.

But perhaps we can distinguish the cases in this way. In cases (1a) and (2a) we have some kind of *group* acting together. In case (2a) there is a standing body of agents—the band of robbers—that is performing the heist. And while there is no standing body to be found in case (1a), nonetheless, we do still have a group of people doing something *as a group*. In cases (1b) and (2b) there are no similar phenomena: instead of acting as a group, everyone is on

their own. Meditating on this difference we might say that cases of genuine collective action involve action by a special kind of agent: a group. We might capture what's special to this kind of agent by saying that it consists of other agents. When we have a collective action, as we do in case (2a), we have an action being performed by such an agent. When we do not, as in case (2b), there is no such special agent; the agents in question are not part of such a larger acting whole, and that's what it means to say that they are acting on their own.

Even leaving aside anxieties about the idea of a group agent (about which, more in §5), and supposing this criterion of collective agency extensionally correct, we are still left largely in the dark. Like the notion of a shared intention, this relationship of agents is something that cries out for philosophical elucidation. We can bring out this problem by noting that there are various wholes composed by the agents in (2b): the group of people in the bank, those stealing money from the bank, etc. These groups—like the band in (2a) and the pair in (1a)—can be said to *do* various things: they can serve as the grammatical subjects in sentences predicating action verbs of them. For example, one group of people in the bank in (2b) can be “standing around”, and another group “robbing the bank”. But nonetheless, in those cases everyone acts individually. As we might put it, although we have various groups of people acting, we do not have people acting *as a group*.

The sense, therefore, in which the group is acting in (1a) and (2a) is thicker than the sense in which they act in (1b) and (2b). It is acting as a group, and this corresponding thicker sense in which a group can be said to act that interest us. But isn't “acting as a group” just another way to say, “acting together”? And isn't the question of collective action with which we began the question in what sense a group can be said to act? If so then no advance in understanding has yet been made; the same problem has once again been posed in a new idiom: that of “the group”.

Having come full circle, we are left with the question: how are we to explain what it is for action to be collective?

§3: An Analogy Between Individual and Collective Agency

To make some progress and break into this circle of concepts let us employ a comparison with individual action. Since we want to know what kind of unity is found among actions performed as a group in virtue of which the members of the group can be said to be doing some one thing together, let us begin by asking what the unity is to be found among actions performed by an individual such that they can be said all to add up to his doing some one thing (alone). And since we want to know what it is to share an intention in acting, let us begin by considering what it is for an individual, doing various things, to have a single intention in so doing.

Expanding on an example from Anscombe we may consider a case where a man is making tea.¹² Let us suppose he (i) fills up the kettle, (ii) turns on the stove, (iii) puts the water on to boil, (iv) places a tea bag in each of several cups, (v) waits for the kettle to whistle, and then (vi) pours the boiling water into each cup. All along as he does first one thing and then another the man is making tea: there is some one thing he is doing throughout: when he is finished doing them all he will have made tea. So here we have several actions the performance of which adds up to the performance of a single action. And, furthermore, they all are done with the intention of making tea. So here, also, we have several actions that “share” an intention. But what is involved in this?

Let us consider it from the perspective of the explanation of action. The sort of explanation we are interested in here is the one investigated by Anscombe in which an explanation cites the agent’s reasons for acting. The question “Why?”, heard in the right way,

is a request for such an explanation. If we ask our man why he is filling the kettle he might say he is heating some water. And when we query this in turn, he might say that it's because he's making tea. Here we see a nested set of explanatory relations. For example, (i) and (ii) are explained with reference to (iii), and (iii) as well as each of the other items on the list—including (i) and (ii)—can be explained by adverting to the fact that the man is making tea: the reason the man is doing all those things is that he is making tea. The several actions thus share an explanatory unity: they are all to be explained as phases or elements of tea-making.¹³

We could gesture at the same explanatory point by saying that it is *no accident* that the man is filling the kettle—he is filling the kettle precisely because he's heating water. And it is *no accident* that he's heating water—he is doing that precisely because he is making tea. Unlike a random collocation of actions, perhaps culled haphazard from a list of actions performed by an agent on one particular day, these actions are not arbitrarily related, but rather are *fit together* in a unified explanatory series as elements of the action they serve.

Notice that the explanations of action that we are considering can also be given a purposive, or teleological formulation. We can say not only that the man is filling the kettle, or turning on the stove *because* he is making tea, but also that he is doing so *in order to* make tea, or *with a view to*, or *for the sake of*, or *with the purpose of* making tea. These possible teleological renderings mark these explanations as what Michael Thompson calls “straightforward rationalization”, and I will call “straightforward instrumental rationalization”.¹⁴ This sets them apart from other, indirect instrumental rationalizations the man might offer for what he is doing, like “because it's the maid's day off”, or “because the kettle is empty”. In explanations like these, what are on offer are facts about the agent's situation, facts which in some way bear on what the agent has to do to get what he wants, or how he has to do it. Such indirect rationalizations do not make reference, however, to what

the agent is after in acting. Since, of course, in the case we are considering the agent has the purpose of making tea, when he gives one of these indirect rationalizations for filling the kettle a straightforward one will be hovering in the background. It would move into the foreground, if we pressed for a fuller statement of the relevance of the facts cited to the performance of the action. (“Yes, fine, the kettle is empty, but why should you want to fill it up?”—“Oh, because I want to make tea.”)¹⁵

It is the fact that an explanation is a straightforward instrumental rationalization that fits it to serve as a statement of the intention with which someone is acting. For, if I do something with the intention of doing something else, then I do it in order to do that other thing, or for the purpose of doing it. So we can put the point that all the actions on our list are done with the intention of making tea in terms of the availability of a certain teleological rendering of their explanations. All of our tea-maker’s actions are done with this intention because they are all subject to straightforward instrumental rationalization in terms of tea-making.

Consider now a collective action, like that in (2a). Let us focus on the activity of the individuals pulling off the heist. A is bent over the safe with his stethoscope, listening carefully as he turns the dial. Why? Well, it’s no accident that he is listening to the safe with a stethoscope: he is, after all, cracking the safe. Here we have merely the explanation of the sort characterized in our discussion of the tea-maker, one thing A is doing being explained in terms of another. However, let us extend our familiar chain of queries one link further and ask, “Why is he cracking the safe?” *Because the band of robbers is knocking over Mellon Bank.* Here we have an explanation of the action of A with reference to an action undertaken by the band of robbers. We jump, as it were, from the individual to the group. This is something new, with no parallel to the situation of our homemaker and his rudimentary culinary activity. But

while A is cracking the safe, B is scanning the street with a pair of binoculars from an adjacent rooftop. Why is he doing that? Because he's watching for approaching police cars. And why that? *Because the band is knocking over Mellon Bank.* Once again, we have the same transition from individual to the group, from robber to robbers. The actions of A and B are not related in a haphazard or accidental fashion: they are tied together by a single explanatory nexus; they are both subject to rationalization in terms of the activity of the group. This same explanatory connection seems to hold in case (1a) as well, where the actions of A and B can each be explained by the fact that *they* are delivering a message to the ambassador's son.

What we find here could be characterized as a form of explanation of the singular by the plural. This is clear in case (1a) where the subject of the explanandum, the action of A or B, is grammatically singular and the subject of the explanans plural. But it is true in case (2a) as well, even though the fact is thinly masked by the grammatical singularity granted in American English to noun-phrases naming standing groups, e.g. "the band", which we would refer to as "it" rather than "they" were we to use a pronoun.¹⁶ The band is plural, metaphysically speaking, for the simple reason that it has more than one member. Where there is collective action, change involving a singular agent can be explained with reference to change involving a plural agent.

But this is not all. In collective action we must look not only vertically—from part to whole—but horizontally—from part to part as well. For in (1a) B is distracting the Swede because A is speaking to the ambassador's son. And in (2a) A is on the roof watching for the police because the rest of the band is doing the dirty work downstairs, some, in turn, keeping their guns trained on bank-workers and clientele because others are stuffing money into increasingly heavy burlap sacks, or cracking safes. Here we have explanation member-to-

member rather than member-to-group. In this case, although the subject of the *explanans* and the *explanandum* differ, their number need not.

And finally we find explanation of the plural by the plural. So we can imagine the manager of the bank, emerging innocently from his office during the robbery and stumbling across A with his stethoscope to the safe, asking over his shoulder: “What are you doing?” And we can imagine A answering with exasperation, “We’re cracking the safe because we’re robbing the bank; get over there with the others.” Here, as in the member-to-member case, we have action-to-action explanation with subjects of the same number, with the crucial difference that it is now the same subject in each case, and it is plural.

In collective action we find, therefore, three varieties of action explanation characterizable in terms of their numbers: (1) singular to plural, (2) singular to singular, and (3) plural to plural. In (1) and (2) we find the further peculiarity of action explanation with differing subjects of *explanans* and *explanandum*. Of course they are not *just* different subjects: in (1) the subject of the *explanandum* is included in the subject of the *explanans*, and in (2) the subjects of both the *explanans* and *explanandum* are included in an unmentioned group that might itself serve as the subject of an *explanans* as in (1).

In the individual case we saw that the unity binding many parts of an action into one underwrites a certain teleology, marked in the possibility of purposive renderings of straightforward instrumental rationalizations. These were to be contrasted with indirect instrumental rationalizations, in which the reasons for action were reasons precisely because they bore on the furthering of the agent’s purposes, without themselves being purposes. Can a similar distinction be made out in the collective case? And if so, are the forms of explanation we have been considering straightforward, or somehow indirect?

Consider the relation that the actions of the robbers in our pretender case (2b) bear to one another. As far as the lone safecracker from (2b) is concerned the actions of the other agents composing the group of people who happen to be in the bank make up the circumstances of which he's taking advantage; the fact that someone is waving a gun around is an opportunity he's exploiting. These actions can only explain his action in the way in which a description of the opportunities and obstacles he finds himself confronted with sheds light on what he does. And of course, each person in the group robbing the bank is in the same position vis-à-vis the others. The activity of the others is part of the circumstance in light of which each calculates. It is clear, therefore, that the relationship of the action of each individual bank robber in (2b) both to the action of the group, and to those of his individual peers, is that of indirect rationalization. A's safecracking is explained by what the group is doing in the way that the fellow's putting on the teakettle is explained by the fact that it is his maid's day off. The different actions are not drawn together as parts of a single rational order. The unity of the explanation stems only from the fact all the agents calculate in light of the same situation; they share an indirect instrumental rationalization.

In (2a), by contrast, we have a single action, knocking over Mellon Bank, the performance of which, like that of making tea, consists in the performance of a great many actions. But in this case the actions that are sub-phases of the overarching process are split up among a diversity of agents. What provides for explanatory unity in this case is not individual calculation in light of common circumstances, but rather the unity of an action through all of its sub-phases. They are, for this reason, drawn together in a single rational order. Each can be explained with reference to the overarching process for the sake of which it is performed. In short, here we have what appears to be straightforward instrumental rationalization.

What emerges from the comparison of individual to collective action is that when a group is acting together, the actions of the individual group members can be straightforwardly instrumentally rationalized by an action being performed by the group. If this is correct then we should expect a teleological transposition of explanation by the group to be available in the first of each of our pair of cases. Consider the explanation from (1a):

B is distracting the Swede because he and A are delivering a message to the diplomat's son.

This explanation can be transposed into a purposive form, as in:

B is distracting the Swede for the sake of (with the purpose of, with a view to, etc.) delivering a message to the diplomat's son.

So also with the two explanations of action drawn from (2a):

Agent A is cracking the safe because the band of robbers is knocking over Mellon Bank.
Agent B is scanning the streets because the band of robbers is knocking over Mellon Bank.

Which can be transposed, respectively, into:

Agent A is cracking the safe for the sake of (with the purpose of, with a view to) knocking over Mellon Bank.
Agent B is scanning the streets for the sake of (with the purpose of, with a view to) knocking over Mellon Bank.

So the expectation is justified: teleological renderings for the explanations are indeed available in the collective cases. We are dealing here with straightforward instrumental rationalization.¹⁷

I am now in a position to offer a preliminary account of collective agency. People are acting together intentionally *if and only if their actions can all be straightforwardly instrumentally rationalized by the same action*.

This account distinguishes neatly between our two pairs of scenarios. For in (1a) A and B can each be said to do what they do because *they are delivering the message*. It is clear, furthermore, that this explanation is a straightforward instrumental rationalization, for A and B each act with a view to delivering the message. Contrast the situation in (1b). There, neither A nor B does anything because the pair of them is doing something. There is no explanation of action in terms of the group at all. So the account seems to distinguish the first pair of cases nicely.

What about the second pair of cases? In (2a) the actions of each robber can clearly be explained by the fact that the band is knocking over Mellon Bank. Furthermore, these explanations can clearly be provided with a purposive rendering: each robber acts for the sake of the heist. So once again we have a unitary straightforward instrumental rationalization of the actions of each robber. Now in (2b) there is a sense in which each individual's actions can be explained with reference to the actions of the group of people robbing the bank, for each exploits the same situation of group chaos as an opportunity to get some cash for himself. But this unitary explanation in (2b) is clearly not a straightforward instrumental rationalization. For, as we saw, the individuals do not act for the sake of the group's doing anything at all. So, as in the first pair of cases, the availability of a single straightforward instrumental rationalization distinguishes (2a) rather neatly from (2b).

Using this account it is also possible to account for the features of collective agency to which the failed explanations considered in §2 drew our attention. One explanation started from the fact that when people act together they act as part of a group, a group which can

itself be said to act. The problem with this was that it left unclear what it is to act as a group, and also in what more emphatic sense a group can be said to act. But now a clear account can be given of both phenomena: people act as a group when their actions are all subject to the same straightforward instrumental rationalization. And a group acts, in the richer sense, when it is the subject of actions that straightforwardly instrumentally rationalize the actions of a diversity of agents.

We are also in a position now to shed light on the idea of sharing an intention in acting. The problem here was to distinguish what it is to share a single intention in a thick sense, where this entails not merely having an intention with the same content, but having a share in one and the same intention. But now we can say simply that two agents share an intention in acting when each of their actions can be straightforwardly instrumentally rationalized by the same action. The bank robbers in (2a) share an intention in acting because all of their actions can be explained by a single further action being undertaken by the band of robbers, which explanation can be given a purposive formulation.

§4: Action Explanation and the Practical Syllogism

Thus far, the prospects for an Anscombean approach to collective action look promising. We have located a distinctive form of explanation through which it appears we can characterize collective action. But this is only half of the project. If we are to provide a truly Anscombean account, we will need to consider the connection of these novel forms of explanation to practical reasoning. To make a start on this, let us consider what Anscombe says about the connection of action explanation and the practical syllogism in the solitary case.

As Anscombe argues, for a solitary action to be intentional it must be one about which the agent has, in several respects, knowledge without observation.¹⁸ For instance, if when asked why I am standing on the hose I reply, “Oh I didn’t realize I was,” I thereby indicate that I was not doing it intentionally. In general if I don’t know at all that I am performing an action, or only know by in some way noticing, observing, inferring that I am, then that action is not intentional.¹⁹

But this is not all. Except for very special cases, it seems that if an action is an intentional one, I am also able to answer the question why I’m performing it without further ado. If in knowing what accounts for my action I am forced to speculate, or appeal to some body of esoteric knowledge, then the question is being rejected in yet another way. So, for example, although I know without observation that my body just gave an odd jerk as I dozed off, I may have no idea how this occurred, or if I do it will only be through highly rarified and esoteric neurophysiological doctrine. If my wife, believing that I’m fussing, asks me “Why are you jerking like that?” I answer a question with a different sense than the one she was asking by saying, “I’m not sure; I think it’s something about electrical discharge in the brain.” If I caught the sharp tone in her voice I might have denied her question application by saying, “I’m not doing it intentionally.”

We might put the point generally by saying that intentional action is a manifestation of self-consciousness. When I act intentionally, special cases aside, I know what it is I’m doing and why I’m doing it. For this reason when one person attributes an intentional action to another person, he presupposes that the very thing he puts forward in his attribution is grasped by the agent acting; his third person attribution presupposes the possibility of a corresponding first person self-attribution.²⁰ So too with any explanation of action that

means to capture the reasons for which the agent acts. Such an explanation must be available to the agent acting as well if the action is intentional and the explanation is correct.

A way to see the importance of this point is to consider the connection Anscombe finds in an individual's action between the rational order present in intentional action and the practical syllogism. For, she claims that what emerges in her account as a series of answers to the question "Why?" asked with its special sense could also be laid out as a practical syllogism where "the premises shew what good, what use, the action is," thereby displaying the rational order in action as the product of the practical reason of the agent so acting.²¹ This is the heart of her account.

Suppose I want to show what the point is of turning on the stove. I can display its point by showing how the considerations I am acting on recommend the action I am undertaking. This can be represented as a kind of argument. Starting from a final objective, by means of some factual premises, an action is justified.²² Consider the following bit of practical reasoning.

Objective: I want to make tea.

Pouring boiling water into this cup with a teabag will make tea.

Turning on the fire under this kettle will boil water.

So: I'm turning on the fire.

It is plain that the structure displayed here is the same as that given in the series of explanations given above. Just read the chain of propositions downwards and you have a syllogism, starting from the objective of making tea, and moving by way of successive answers to the question "How?", first to pouring boiling water into a cup, then down to the action of turning on the fire under the kettle. Read the chain the other way, starting from the

concluding action of turning on the fire, up through the premises to the objective of making tea, and you have the series of answers to the question “Why?” posed of the actions specified at each step. If the explanations given above for this man’s intentionally turning on the fire hold, then his action can also be justified with this argument.

This recasting of our explanation as an argument will only be possible if the explanation that we consider possesses the feature that fits it to serve as an answer to the special sense of the question “Why?”: it must be known without observation by the agent so acting. If the order registered in our explanations were opaque to the agent in the way that would require speculation or observation on his part to uncover it, then this identity with the practical syllogism could not hold. For what would the point be of representing the order present in action as recommended by reasoning if it were reasoning that did not represent the considerations on which the agent was in fact acting? In that case the argument might show why the agent *ought* to perform the action, or why it *would have been a good thing* if he had performed it, but it is difficult to see how it could explain the actual performance of the action, given that the agent acting does not appreciate the force of these considerations. Such an argument might display some reasons for performing this action, but they would not be *his* reasons, the reasons why *he* undertook this action. In light of this fact it seems that if the explanations in question are not knowable without observation then the link with reasons for action, and so too with practical reason, is lost.

With these remarks about solitary action in mind, let us return to the collective case. Let us explore for a moment the difference between the solitary and collective forms of explanation by starting—as Anscombe does—with the question “Why?”. For, the forms of explanation we have been discussing may be used to define a sense of the question “Why?” different from the sense discussed by Anscombe.

To see how this is so consider the following case. Suppose I come upon several men pushing a car: first up a hill and then left down the next street towards the gas station. If I ask one of them, “Why are you pushing the car up the hill?” I might get different sorts of answers depending on in what sense he takes the question. Perhaps he will say “To get it to the gas station.” But perhaps he will say, “To get some exercise, that’s why I’m helping out at any rate.”

Suppose he takes the second line. Then it is quite possible that I will correct him: “No, but why are you all pushing the car?” Or again, “No, but why did you turn the car left at this particular street?” Perhaps he’ll say “It’s just how we get exercise” and that will be one kind of case. But he might say “Oh, well, we’re pushing it to the gas station; it’s out of gas. That’s why we turned left here.” If this is how he answers, then it shows that he originally misunderstood my question: what I was after was not information about how his action relates to what it is that he in particular wants, or is up to, but rather, information about how his action fits into what the group is up to. What I was interested in was not the agent’s personal motivation for participating in the actions of the group, but rather the significance of his action in relation to the actions of his peers. In short, he mistook my question for one with Anscombe’s sense.²³

Now consider under what conditions the question “Why?”—understood in the special collective action sense—is refused application. It is definitely refused application if the agent queried is unaware that he is performing the action in question. In that case the action is straightforwardly unintentional; it would also be refused application if taken in Anscombe’s sense. But even if the agent is performing an intentional action the question will be refused application if he does not know that he is acting as part of a group. For example,

if he says, “My God! Are there other people pushing this car too?”, then the question will have been refused application in this sense.

Interestingly, the question is *not* necessarily refused application when an individual agent does not know without observation the explanation of his action. For, in cases of collective action, we sometimes find a sort of epistemic deferment, especially when either authority relations or relations of trust are involved. For example, those at the bottom end of authority relations are not necessarily privy to the reasoning engaged in by their superiors, and so may not know exactly what collective purposes their actions serve, even as they act together with others to achieve a goal. But note that even in cases like this, *some* suitably placed person(s) must know without observation what purposes the group is pursuing. A group cannot be said to ϕ intentionally, if none of its members knows that it is ϕ 'ing, or even if some do but only through observation.

So, although it is more complicated than in the case of solitary action, it is clear from the conditions under which the collective action question is refused application, that the answers to this question are also manifestations of self-consciousness. For if an agent does not know without observation that he is performing the action in question, or does not know that he is performing it for the sake of some action being undertaken by the group, then the question is refused application. And even where an agent does not know exactly why he is performing a certain action, the epistemic buck will have to be passed to some other suitably placed member of the group who does.

For this reason, the first person pronoun plays an important role in the collective forms of explanation of action as well. Thus far, the forms of explanation and attributions of action we have been discussing have been cast in the third person. The subjects of our sentences have either been dummy names (“A” and “B”) or expressions impersonally

referring to some group (“the band” or “the pair”). I have spoken of cases where the explanation of an individual’s action is given through a reference to the action of a group, but by sticking to the third person I have obscured a connection between the subjects of each of these actions. If I am acting together with others, then the group the action of which provides a unitary explanation of what we are doing must be a group to which we belong. In collective action the subjects (group and individual) of the judgments we are considering cannot be unrelated: the one must include the other; and the agents in question must be aware of this connection.

This fact can be brought out if we switch gears by moving from the third person into the first. Instead of considering explanations proffered by some disinterested third party, we must imagine the question “Why?” put to the agents in question, and an answer given in their own voice. “Why are you cracking the safe?”—“Because we’re knocking over Mellon Bank.” “Why are you scanning the streets?”—“Because we’re knocking over Mellon Bank.” That is, each of the judgments from (2a), with a shift into the first person, can be given in the following way.

I’m cracking the safe because **we’re** knocking over Mellon Bank.
I’m scanning the rooftops because **we’re** knocking over Mellon Bank.

Here we have the action of the agent named by the first person singular being explained by the action of the agent named by the first person plural. The fact that each is in the first person makes clear that the two subjects are related, and also that the individual agent acting is cognizant of the explanation for his action.²⁴ The number of the pronouns, on the other hand, makes clear that we have a case of collective action, the hallmark of which, I have been arguing, is the explanation of the singular by the plural.

With all of this in place, the definition of collective action I provided in §3 can be recast—in high Anscombean fashion—as a definition in terms of a special sense of the question “Why?” different from the sense that defines solitary action. An individual is acting as part of some group if and only if his action is subject to the special collective action sense of the question “Why?”. A group of people are acting together if and only if (1) their individual, first person singular, actions are all subject to the special collective action sense of the question “Why?” and (2) the same answer holds in each case, consisting of an appeal to an action with a first person plural subject.

But what about the connection to the practical syllogism that is so central to Anscombe’s account in the solitary case? We have already noted that individual agents may not be aware of the rationalizations for their actions in cases when authority relations or relations of trust are involved. We can add further that when a group is acting, the members of the group usually, each focused on his own actions, will have no very clear idea how his compatriots are prosecuting their various tasks. Given this epistemic compartmentalization, can we find, between the actions of diverse individual agents, the same kind of rational connections that are exhibited in a practical syllogism? Don’t we rather have bits and pieces of practical knowledge spread all over the place, without necessarily being combined in any conclusive way that could be represented by a practical syllogism? In that case, although we have gone a long way towards an Anscombean account, one crucial element would seem impossible to produce in the collective case. The idea that we can shed light on collective action by considering a form of explanation that can be expressed with a practical syllogism will then be lost.

In reply, I would like to say that although there may be no one person who has the whole picture in view all at once, when we have a group performing an intentional action, it is

possible to piece together what the different agents know. Once we have assembled the pieces, I think that something on the order of a practical syllogism can be seen as displaying the same rational connections that link the actions of the members to one another.

For instance when a certain action is being taken by a ship during a storm, we may imagine that an order is relayed by the captain to the first mate, and several orders (of which the captain is unaware) in the service of that order to individual crew members, who do things of which the first mate is unaware. There will, throughout, be knowledge without observation of what the group is doing. The captain will have knowledge of what the ship is doing through the order he has given, and the first mate through his several orders, and the individual crew members through their individual intentional actions. Sometimes the people performing a particular action may not know why they're performing it, and sometimes the people who know the end that ultimately explains what everyone is doing may not know what particular actions are serving that end. But everyone will know something and this will be enough to satisfy the analogue of Anscombe's claims about non-observational knowledge that holds in the case of collective action.

We could for instance race around the deck of the ship asking the question why and noting down our results: first of the captain, "Why are you giving this order?" Then, leaving the captain behind, we could follow the first mate, posing this same question as he gives his various orders. Then, racing from crew member to crew member we could ask, leaning over their shoulders, "What are you doing?" and "Why are you doing it?" Afterwards, if we were not swept overboard, or made to walk the plank, we could review our notes over a hot cup of tea. Reading backwards from the bottom of a page to the top we would have a chain of questions and answers no different in form from (although very much more complicated than) Anscombe's case of the tea-maker. Here the explanatory connections between actions

would be clearly displayed, and we could read each step as an answer to the question “Why?” posed of its predecessor.

Reading these notes down instead of up we would be able to see how certain considerations recommended various actions in the light of the objectives of the ship. From the captain’s intention in issuing his order, through the orders given by the first mate, and down to the actions and decisions of the crew members, we could set out the notes in the form of a bit of reasoning, recommending the particular actions undertaken by the crew members. In this case we would view each step as an answer to the question “How?” posed of its predecessor. (Our chain of premises here would follow the chain of command.) So the order revealed by the “Why?” questions asked on the deck of the ship could also be displayed as a practical syllogism answering a corresponding set of “How?” questions.

The unity of action represented in the form of explanation considered in §3 is, seen from another angle, the unity of knowledge represented in the practical syllogism. The same rational transitions that serve to link the elements of the action together into a single explanatory order at the same time serve to justify the action.

§5: *A Reason to be Skeptical?*

Notice that I have made the case that a collective agent is a subject of a practical syllogism without so much as mentioning the collective agent’s mind. Scenting a weakness here, proponents of the standard approach are likely to rush in, insisting that far from avoiding pernicious circularity, I have precisely smuggled in what needs to be explained. For surely, whatever we may believe ourselves to have cobbled together, it cannot be a real practical syllogism unless it has a unitary subject who possesses the relevant practical knowledge of the connections represented. But in the collective case, this requirement cannot be met,

precisely because there is no single group mind to be the subject of the knowledge represented in the different premises. Therefore, either the account is an elaborate distraction, leaving mysterious what it is to share an intention, or—even worse!—it is committed to the existence of a mythological group mentality: the dreaded hive mind, rightly dismissed at the outset by proponents of the standard view as superstitious claptrap.

With the materials of our investigation ready to hand, I will attempt to defuse this worry with the help of an analogy. A campus, I suppose, is a geographical-institutional unity of buildings.²⁵ The buildings that compose a campus are clearly physical things, possessing walls, doors, windows, and roofs, and are the subjects of various physical predicates, e.g. size, shape and location. The campus, by contrast, does not (or need not) have its own separate roof, doors and windows. Nonetheless it is still the subject of various physical predicates, having e.g. a determinate location on a map and definite aesthetic properties. It does this not by being a giant building to which physical predicates apply, but rather by being a geographical-institutional unity of such buildings. There is obviously nothing superstitious or arcane in this.

Keeping the campus in mind let us turn to collective agents. A collective agent is a unity of individual agents. Individual agents are embodied, occupying a definite space and possessing limbs, a head, a torso, and so on. They are the unproblematic subject of physical predicates, and interact with the physical world in straightforward ways, by moving about and changing things. A collective agent need not, however, have yet another body in addition to this in order to be a perfectly respectable subject of physical predicates, and bring about changes in the world.²⁶ For example, if I ask where the band of robbers is someone might tell me “In Moon Township,” or give a more complex answer like, “A, B and C are in Moon Township, but D and E are still at the hideout.” But the question is not refused application,

and this shows that collective agents are, for example, spatio-temporally located. Similarly, the band can act so as to change the world, e.g. painting the word “action” on a hillside, not by moving a giant set of arms, but rather through the movements made by its members. This claim is no more mysterious than the analogous claim about campuses.

Of course the objection we are considering is concerned with the mental aspect of collective agents, not the physical. But, although the issue is more difficult here, I believe that we might plausibly treat the mental case as parallel to the physical case, at least up to a point. Individual embodied agents are the straightforward subjects of mental predicates, thinking, feeling and knowing various things—most importantly for our argument, what they are doing and why. So if a collective agent is a unity of individual agents, then it is a unity of knowing subjects. In that case, it need not itself have yet another mind—much less a brain!—in order to be the subject of mind-involving predicates, knowing and being aware of various things. It can do this by being a unity of agents who know and are aware, just as it can be a subject of physical predicates, although not having a body, by being a unity of embodied agents.

In light of this why not say that a collective agent knows what it is doing, and why, without observation? After all, while it sounds very strange to say that the band of robbers has a group mind, it doesn’t sound especially strange to say that the band knows, or is aware, or cognizant, of this or that fact. On the surface of it there is no mystery about the attribution of such mental predicates to a group.²⁷ Given this fact, consider further that “knowledge without observation” is a philosopher’s phrase, being a term that Anscombe coined in the course of her philosophical investigation of intention. If it seems to have a point in this context, why withhold it? So perhaps we can unproblematically speak of groups knowing without observation what they are doing. In this way we would straightforwardly have a unitary knowing subject of the practical syllogism in the collective case.

But even if it is laying it on a bit thick to speak in this way, it doesn't really matter. It is enough that the same order displayed in collective action explanation can also be represented as a set of rational transitions justifying the actions undertaken by members of a group in light of a shared objective. In this way, whether or not there is strictly speaking a unitary knowing subject of the whole action, we can still see the actions in question as recommended by reasoning. This reasoning will not, of course, occur through the exercise of a separate practical reason possessed by the group, but rather through the reasoning of the individual members as they execute their shared objective. We might sum up this point by saying that just as a collective agent can only act through the actions of its individual members, it can only know through their knowing, and reason through their reasoning. In this way, even without a mind of its own, it can be the subject of a practical syllogism.

It seems then that an Anscombean approach to collective action cannot be dismissed out of hand. In that case, it surely deserves our serious consideration.

¹ The “standard story,” as it is often called, is associated with Donald Davidson, “Actions, Reasons and Causes” in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (OUP: 1980), 3-23.

² See John Searle, "Collective Intentions and Actions", in P. Cohen, J. Morgan, and M. Pollack, (eds.): *Intentions in Communication*. (MIT Press: 1990), 401-415 at 404; and Michael Bratman, "Shared Intention", *Ethics* 104, 97-113 at 99. For a variant see J. David Velleman, "How to Share an Intention?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXII, 29-50. Velleman argues that shared public representations—like speech acts, or written documents—can play the relevant causal role.

³ This can be said even of a view like Searle’s, which is self-consciously anti-reductive in that the content of the psychological states it posits as causally operating in collective action includes an element (the first person plural pronoun) that is not to be found in the individual case. Nonetheless, the form of explanation Searle posits in the collective case is the same as that found in solitary action, differing only in the details of its content.

⁴ See G.E.M. Anscombe, “Practical Inference” in G. Lawrence, R. Hursthouse and W. Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons: Essays in Honor of Philippa Foot* (OUP: 1998), 1-34 at 2-3.

⁵ §§5-17 of *Intention* are devoted to isolating the relevant sense of the question why.

⁶ See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (HUP:2000), §§32-44.

⁷ Such an account of solitary action, in contrast to the standard view, is anti-psychologistic, because it finds the same structure of rational connections in worldly events as in the minds of the agents bringing those events about. The psychological and the worldly items are therefore to be comprehended as two sides of the same rational coin. For an Anscombean account of solitary action that highlights this anti-psychologistic feature, see Part Two of Michael Thompson’s *Life and Action* (HUP: 2008), 85-148.

⁸See “Collective Actions and Intentions”, 401-403.

⁹ Anscombe, *Intention*, §1.

¹⁰ It will not help here to bring in what linguists call distributivity. If five boys laugh then each of the five laughs. In this case to say that the group is doing X is to say that each of the group’s members is doing X; the predicate “is Xing” distributes to each of them. By contrast, if a crowd is pouring into a room each member is not pouring into a room. Perhaps we can distinguish cases (2a) and (2b) by saying that in (2b) robbing the bank is to be understood distributively, whereas in (2a) it is not? This will not work. First of all, I think we *can* say in (2a) that each member of the band is robbing the bank, and so this does not distinguish it from (2b). (What is A, in particular, doing right now? He is, precisely, robbing the bank.) To the extent that we refuse to say this about (2a), I believe that it is because we are using the locution to mean that each member of the band is robbing the *bank all by himself*. Here we merely import the idea that we are struggling to elucidate. If “each” just means “individually” then to point out that in (2b) “each” robs the bank, whereas in (2a) “each” does not, is to make no advance in understanding.

¹¹ See Anscombe, *Intention*, 22-23. The reason that I am not focusing on the case she gives most attention to—that of the pumper—is that it is an example not of many actions all done with the same further intention, or all adding up to a single action, but, rather, of one action that has many *descriptions*. It is, therefore, not apt to shed light on the case of acting together, where we consider several agents acting, and so, a fortiori, several different actions too.

¹² This follows closely what Anscombe says about the A-D order in §23 of *Intention*.

¹³ See Michael Thompson, *Life and Action*, 89.

¹⁴I am not claiming that a straightforward rationalization is available for every action. Clearly the chain must come to an end somewhere with a non-instrumental reason. All I am claiming is that when someone acts with a further purpose in view then a straightforward instrumental rationalization will be available.

¹⁵Note that speakers of British English tend to treat noun-phrases like “the band” as plural, and so would count as unproblematic the sentence “The band are robbing Mellon Bank”.

¹⁶ Let me address the sense someone might have that these transpositions are fishy. The reason for this sense, I believe is this: although in some conversational contexts they are natural, in others they are misleading. When the group is salient they will do just fine. But when the conversational context is such that it is not clear whether the agent in question is acting alone or with others, it is true that the purposive sentences may seem to imply that the whole purpose mentioned is being attributed to the lone agent that is their subject. We will tend to correct this impression either by inserting some qualifying phrase, e.g. “for the sake of helping to...”, or by clarifying at greater length with an explicit reference to the group, e.g. “He’s doing it with a view to knocking over Mellon Bank. His band is robbing the bank right now.” Does the occasional need for this clarification or qualification somehow show that these sentences are not genuinely purposive? On the contrary, the qualifying phrase seems an utterly superficial amendment not touching on the purposive form, and the clarification is nothing but an explicit transposition of the purposive judgment into its non-purposive cousin. Once we have in this way cancelled awkward conversational implicatures, the purposive credentials of these explanations are perfectly legitimate.

¹⁷ Most philosophers of action have followed her in this, accepting her claim or a suitably qualified version of it. The examples that follow are all drawn from Anscombe, *Intention*, §§6-17.

¹⁸ There are complications here involving a counterexample offered by Davidson that involve an agent attempting an action under conditions that are uncertain, where she must check to see whether or not she is actually accomplishing what she is setting out to do. For some thoughts about how someone sympathetic to Anscombe's approach might treat this purported counterexample, see the papers by Kieran Setiya and Michael Thompson in this collection.

¹⁹ Here I pass over the difficult question of Freudian style explanations of actions. They seem to me to present a special and rather complicated case, requiring a different sort of treatment.

²⁰ Anscombe, "Practical Inference", 5.

²¹ Admittedly, the idea of a practical form of reasoning is a very difficult one and I do not here attempt to provide anything remotely like a theory of practical reasoning. But hopefully my modest remarks will be enough to make plausible the connection Anscombe finds between the practical knowledge involved in explanations of action and the structure of practical reasoning. For her most developed remarks on the form of such reasoning, see her paper, "Practical Inference".

²² Notice that both sorts of explanation can be true of one and the same action; the legitimacy of the one does not impugn the legitimacy of the other. Indeed, in the case above it would be possible for my original question to have been intended the other way. If he answered "To get it to the gas station," I might have corrected him, "No, but why did *you* do

it? What were *you* after?” These are two different sorts of interest that we can take in the contributions of an agent to a collective action. We can treat such an action as that of an individual *as an individual*, or of an individual *as a member of the group*.

²³ The role of the first person plural in collective action is the centerpiece of Margaret Gilbert’s account of collective agency. She argues that there is a special sense of “we” that underwrites the possibility of plural subjects. But she defends this claim by considering social situations where using the first person plural would be presumptuous or rude (see especially her example involving the inappropriate dinner party guest). I agree with her conclusion, but would argue for it on different grounds. As I see it, this special sense of “we” has nothing to do with norms of etiquette or with conversational implicature about how I am intimately connected with other people, but rather with its aptness to serve in answer to the special sense of the question “Why?” that goes with collective action. See Margaret Gilbert, *On Social Facts* (PUP:1989), 167-203.

²⁴ I take the example from Gilbert Ryle who uses it to explain what it is to make a category mistake. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (University of Chicago Press: 1949), 16.

²⁵ Although it might. When I was a child I used to watch a Japanese cartoon named “Voltron” in which Voltron, a giant robot, was formed, in times of crisis, out of five smaller robots. As they were forming Voltron each smaller robot would declare its role in the whole, ending with the declaration of the last robot: “And I’ll be the head!” This case is, needless to say, rather outré.

²⁶ No doubt many questions arise about when and in what way we can attribute mental predicates to a group on the basis of the holding of mental predicates of its members. All my

argument here requires is that in the relevant cases of collective we can unproblematically make this transition.