



## Nothing Added: *Intention* §§19 and 20<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract.* Although most work in contemporary Anglophone philosophical action theory understands Elizabeth Anscombe's monograph on *Intention* as the work that inaugurates the field, action theory often operates by setting out to understand intentional action by investigating the psychological antecedents of intention action. Now, Anscombe has no quarrel with moral psychology. *Intention* is a work of moral psychology, but it is a kind of moral psychology in which we attend to the act of deliberately making something the case in order to understand having a *mind* to make something the case. The more usual approach takes things the other way around. Anscombe attempted to ward off such approaches in *Intention*. If the arguments of §19 are any good, for example, they ought to tell against the mind-first approach in contemporary Anglophone ethics and action theory. If the arguments of §20 work, then they ought to dispel any sense that Anscombe is prone to behaviorism. Together, the arguments in §§19 and 20 are meant to clear the ground necessary for work on practical knowledge. In this essay, I give a reading of these difficult, crucial sections of Anscombe's monograph in order to explore her arguments.

### I.

**I***ntroduction.* Suppose that Elizabeth Anscombe gets this much right about intentional action: An action is a means-end-structured process that is intentional under some descriptions and unintentional under

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others, and an agent's reasons for acting are keyed to those descriptions under which what's done is intentional—these pick out *which* action the agent does.

Let *A*-ing and *B*-ing be types of action that the agent means to do, and let *A*-ing be a means to *B*-ing. Anton Ford points out that there are three principal varieties of means-end relation.<sup>2</sup> *A*-ing can be part of *B*-ing as dissolving yeast is part of baking bread.<sup>3</sup> *A*-ing can be, as Anscombe put it in a slightly different context, “brute relative” to *B*-ing, as raising my hand is brute relative to bidding on a horse at auction.<sup>4</sup> Or *A*-ing can be a species of *B*-ing, as swimming is a species of taking exercise.<sup>5</sup> There may be other varieties of means-end relation, but there are at least these three: part-whole, brute-conventional, and species-genus.

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<sup>2</sup>Anton Ford, “Handout, Part II: Varieties of Means-End Relation” (lecture, Action and Practical Knowledge: Philosophy 51504, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, March 2, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Anscombe's poisoning example, on the means-end relation between “moving your arm up and down,” “pumping,” “replenishing the house water-supply,” and “poisoning the inhabitants” in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), §23.

<sup>4</sup>See G. E. M. Anscombe, “On Brute Facts,” reprinted in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Vol. III: Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 22–5. Anscombe focuses on an example in which, after I have ordered some potatoes, the grocer “brings potatoes to my house” and “leaves them there,” in such a way that these acts count as “supplying me with potatoes.” Bringing the potatoes to my house and leaving them there are brute relative to supplying me with potatoes, hence, filling my order. The whole—my order, and his filling of my order—are brute relative to my owing him money for the potatoes. In the essay, she is particularly concerned with dispelling crude variations of philosophical faith in the thought that one cannot derive an “ought” claim from a statement of fact. The general point about a variety of means-end relation is this: some act-types—e.g., bidding (while attending an auction, online, or through a real estate agent), purchasing, greeting, registering for courses, filing a complaint, making a gift, proctoring an exam, marrying or divorcing—are governed by convention. If I intend to do such a thing, then the means at my disposal are also constrained by convention. For example, if I intend to make a monthly payment on my mortgage, then I need to see to it that some of my funds are *appropriately* transferred to the bank that holds my mortgage. I can do this in any of several ways, but not just *any* way of moving money from my accounts to the mortgage-holder will do. For example, it *won't* count as making a mortgage payment if I withdraw cash in the amount of my monthly payment from my savings account, tie it up in a cloth bag with a red ribbon, and quietly leave the bag in a corner of the lobby of a local branch office of the bank that holds my mortgage. Leaving cash in the lobby is *not* a means to making a mortgage payment. Setting up a repeating payment through my checking account online *is* a means to paying my mortgage, and the various things that I must do in order to set up my payment—e.g., entering different strings of numbers in distinct fields of an online form, entering an address in other fields, checking these entries against information recorded on a billing notice, moving the cursor in order to submit the form to my bank—are means to paying my mortgage, and so they are among the things that I can do that are brute relative to mortgage payment. I am grateful to Amanda Perreau-Saussine for urging me to explain the sense in which “brute-conventional” is a variety of means-end relation.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, §22 on the relation between “lying on a bed” and “Resting” or “Doing Yoga.”

Anscombe began investigating these matters her 1957 monograph, *Intention*. Partly inspired by Donald Davidson's fondness for that slender volume, Anglophone philosophers of action came increasingly to cite *Intention* with filial piety or substantive approval and then to attribute theses to Anscombe that she *did not* propound (such as that moral goodness is the constitutive principle of willing,<sup>6</sup> or that psychological states pertinent to action can have exactly one of two directions of fit<sup>7</sup>); to find tendencies in her work that she argued *against* (such as behaviorism<sup>8</sup>); and to provide summaries of her position that are *inconsistent* with her method, arguments, and substantive conclusions (such as that she teaches us to see intention under three headings: intending to act, acting intentionally, and acting with an intention<sup>9</sup>). Decades of widespread philosophical acclaim marching arm-in-arm with equally widespread philosophical misunderstanding may help to explain why Anscombean practical philosophy is still in its infancy.

In action theory, the standard going alternatives to Anscombean work are indebted to Davidson. In ethics, they are of three sorts: neo-Kantian work, Humean work, and the kind of work in virtue theory that rests on the view that, as Philippa Foot puts it, "dispositions, motives, and other 'internal' elements are the primary subjects and determinants of moral goodness and badness."<sup>10</sup> What

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<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., J. David Velleman, "The Guise of the Good," *Notus* 26, no. 1 (1992): 19–20. Anscombe was quick to point out that people knowingly do disgraceful, wicked things for the sake of money, fame, ease, victory in war, and so on. The claim that human action aims at good is, for Anscombe, completely compatible with noticing that immorality is common and need not stir so much as a prick of conscience in the wrongdoer. As she put it,

It is true that it is usually for the sake of something one thinks advantageous (and so in a sense good) that one consciously misbehaves, but that does not mean that one's will is just for the good and not for the misbehaviour, recognizably such, at all.

(Anscombe, "Sin," in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally [Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008], 125.) *Bonum est multiplex*.

<sup>7</sup>See, e.g., Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 256–7. It is worth noticing, in this connection, that intention in a complex course of action, *qua* cause of what it knows and explains, both changes what is the case (mind-to-world direction of fit) and compasses such matters as taking alternate means to one's end should obstacles arise (world-to-mind direction of fit: intention in action is responsive and answerable to how things are and how they are going). Anscombe gives many examples in her monograph.

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Michael Bratman, "Davidson's Theory of Intention," in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore and Brian P. McLaughlin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 14.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., George Wilson, "Action," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2002 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/action/>.

<sup>10</sup>Philippa Foot, "Rationality and Goodness," in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2n1.

unites Davidsonian action theory with these approaches in moral philosophy is the conviction that the difference between sound intentional actions and other happenings in a human life is precisely the presence and proper operation of some internal element.

Now, Anscombe has no quarrel with moral psychology. *Intention* is a work of moral psychology. But it is a kind of moral psychology in which we attend to deliberately making something the case in order to understand having a *mind* to make something the case. The more usual approach takes things the other way around.

The mind-first approach requires locating and giving an account of the internal item or structure that makes an action intentional. When all goes well for an agent, this element will also render her action rational or otherwise good. At the very least, when all goes well, accurate accounting of the internal element will show that agents do *not* paradigmatically take themselves to have overriding reasons to *avoid* doing what they do. The mind-first strategy has been fertile. It turned out, for instance, that an account of intentional action does *not* follow straightforwardly from just any account of having a mind to make something the case. The obvious response was to generate complex proposals in philosophical practical psychology in order to repair the breach.

Anscombe attempted to ward off such approaches in *Intention*. If the arguments of §19 are any good, for example, they ought to tell against the mind-first approach in contemporary Anglophone ethics and action theory. If the arguments of §20 work, then they ought to dispel any sense that Anscombe is prone to behaviorism. Together, the arguments in §§19 and 20 are meant to clear the ground necessary for work on practical knowledge.

Both sections are meditations on what happens if we try to develop an account of intention by isolating aspects. In §19, we isolate the doer—"the man considered by himself in the moment of acting"—and in §20 we isolate his deed by asking, "is 'intentional' a characteristic of the actions that have it, which is formally independent of" expression of intention for the future and of further intention in acting?<sup>11</sup>

## II.

*Background.* Anscombe works from examples. The examples almost always involve a man doing something and an interlocutor asking questions about what he is up to as he goes along. Her arguments build, of course, and she has worked to establish a number of points in the eighteen sections preceding the

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<sup>11</sup>She has been investigating intention by considering expression of future intention, intentional action, and the further intention with which one acts. The question that orients the argument in §20 emerges from this framework.

two I will read. For my purposes, the crucial points emerging from §§1–18 concern intentional actions:

1. You will likely make true statements about what a man intends if you say what he is doing, because normally a man intends to do the kind of thing you see him doing: an intentional action [§4].
2. Intentional actions are those datable events in a man's history to which a certain sense of the question "Why are you *A*-ing?" (where *A*-ing is a kind of thing that you are doing) has application [§§5–6].
3. The relevant sense of the question can be isolated by considering responses to the question "Why are you *A*-ing?" that *refuse* its application, crucially: "I merely observed that I was *A*-ing," "*A*-ing was involuntary" (in a special sense of *involuntary*), and "I didn't know that I was *A*-ing" [§§6–17].
4. Since an action can be described in many ways—as *A*-ing, say, and also as *C*-ing—"Why are you *A*-ing?" may be given application while "Why are you *C*-ing" is not [§§4 and 6].
5. The question "Why are you *A*-ing?" is *not* refused application by the answer: "No reason" or "I don't know why I'm doing that" [§17].
6. When the question "Why are you *A*-ing?" *has* application, and the response is *not* something on the order of "no reason," the response gives a reason for *A*-ing; such responses are themselves expressions of intention [§§15–6].
7. Finally, a reason for acting, given as a response to "Why are you *A*-ing?" is the kind of statement that you can argue *against* in ways that link the reason with motives and intentions [§15].

All seven points are on the table by the time we reach §19. All are involved in her arguments in §§19 and 20.

### III.

*Reading §19.* Begin with a modest reading of §19. The question under consideration is whether an action is made intentional "in virtue of any extra feature which exists when it is performed."<sup>12</sup> Since any such feature will enable a man to give or refuse application of our "Why?" question, and since that question is couched in terms of the kind of thing we see him doing, his positive responses pick out descriptions under which his action is intentional. The extra feature,

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<sup>12</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §19, 28.

then, will have something to do with the man, with what he has in mind in doing what he's doing, and with what kind of thing he is up to.

We suppose such a feature—"I"—and claim that a man's intentional actions are all and only those of a man's doings appropriately accompanied by *I*. We know that actions are intentional under some descriptions but not others. We want to account for intentional action. *I*, then, must be "interpreted as a description," or else "as having an internal relation to a description, of an action."<sup>13</sup>

Paradigmatically, intentional actions involve movement—our first clue about a man's intentions came from saying what he was doing—so we at least are supposing that *I* + movement = intentional action, when a man is, say, sawing a plank. We see that he's sawing a plank by watching him. That's not how *he* does it. Since "I didn't know I was doing that" refuses application of the relevant "Why?" question, he must know something of what he's doing. To distinguish what he knows from what we observe, Anscombe points out that any intentional action we watch will involve bodily events—muscle contractions, say. Focusing on *these* movements, then, will likely lead us to focus on his understanding of what he is doing as a species of self-knowledge. And that is just what we hope to do if we hope to understand intentional action by focusing on the man himself isolated at the moment of acting.

Movements like muscle contractions are not *unintentional*, since they are among the bodily aspects of what he is doing. Anscombe calls them *preintentional*. Accordingly, our hypothesis is: preintentional movement + *I* = intentional action. She writes:

If so, then the preintentional movement + *I* guarantees that *an* intentional action is performed: but which one?<sup>14</sup>

In order to pick out *an* intentional action that the man is performing, *I* must be a description under which what he does is intentional, or else must bear an internal relation to such a description.<sup>15</sup> *Ex hypothesi*, we are beginning from

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Suppose that *I* is a description. Then our situation is the practical equivalent of supposing that I am using the word *white* to name a color experience—the white-sensation. Now suppose that *I* is internally related to a description. Our situation is analogous to the one in which "The snow *appears* red" expresses the same thought as "The snow *is* white," when the snow is seen under red light. The example is Gottlob Frege's. In §24 of *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, Frege wrote, "When we see a blue surface, we have an impression of a unique sort, which corresponds to the word *blue*; this impression we recognize again, when we catch sight of another blue surface." In §26, he distinguished the "wholly subjective" sensation of, for example, white, from an objective use of the term *white*. The objective use is what is at issue when snow is viewed through a colored lens or under colored light: "When we call snow white, we mean to refer to an objective quality, which we recognize, in ordinary daylight, by a certain sensation. If the snow is seen in

un-interpreted preintentional movements. Our man is charged with assigning a description to them, a description that will place them as bodily aspects of his action. Getting the descriptions right will, in turn, allow us to open the relevant field of new inquiry about what the man is up to and why—“Why are you moving your hand?” for instance, if the muscle contractions are occurring in the course of hand movement.

Suppose that he is moving his hand. Our man could be castling in a game of chess, or displaying the habitual flex that he performs whenever he completes the hostile takeover of a rival firm, or blessing the congregation, or *anything* at all. *Ex hypothesi*, the movements are un-interpreted (hence, *preintentional*). And “nothing about the man considered by himself in the moment of contracting his muscles, and nothing in the contraction of the muscles, can possibly determine the content of the description: which therefore may be *any* one, if we are merely considering what can be determined by the man by himself in the moment.”<sup>16</sup>

This is a modest reading of §19 as an extension of the private language argument in a practical sphere. It’s not wrong. It can even accommodate a modest reading of “internally related to a description”—suppose we ask why he is making a pile of sawdust and he replies that he is sawing a plank. One makes sawdust in the course of sawing.

How will he be able to engage in even *this* simple exchange if we imagine that intentional action is a matter of assigning action-descriptions to un-interpreted, preintentional bodily events? After all, an expression of intention opens a field of inquiry into reasons for acting. Accounts of muscle contractions may invite diagnostic questions, but not questions about practical reason or practical knowledge. Such contractions could occur during fitful sleep or as one lays dying. When Anscombe charges that under the assumption that an extra *I* added to the proceedings makes them intentional action, it “is a mere happy accident that an *I* relevant to the wider context and further consequences *ever* accompanies the preintentional movements”; her use of “wider context and further consequences” is meant to remind us of this.<sup>17</sup>

The ambitious reading builds upon the modest reading by enlarging upon the candidates for the intentional-action-making feature, *I*. On the most ambitious reading of §19 that I can sustain, her target is not the view that understanding intentional action requires mapping descriptions onto movements,

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a coloured light, we take that into account in our judgment and say, for instance, ‘It *appears* red at present, but it *is* white.’” I strongly suspect that these passages from the *Grundlagen* were the source of inspiration for Ludwig Wittgenstein’s private language argument. See: *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (Breslau: Koebner, 1884); *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, 2nd ed., trans. J. L. Austin, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §19, 28–9.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, §19, 29.



mind onto world. It is the view that the addition or the proper operation of an internal element—a state, a structure, a disposition, an *I*—makes an action intentional, and so makes the difference between intentional action and things like involuntary gestures, muscle spasms, or episodes of sleepwalking. And that element could be *any one* that you like. She needs a target this wide and this varied in her sights if she is to justify her claim, “We do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional,” the very first sentence of the section. Showing that we do not get an intentional action by inwardly mapping preintentional movements onto action-descriptions is not enough. As far as I know, *none* of her contemporaries thought that an intentional action was bodily events internally mapped to descriptions.

Suppose an account of what a person has in mind when setting out to do something. It doesn't matter what sort of an account you choose. The person has a fully formed, holistic, Davidsonian mind and has made all-things-considered judgments about what she should do as a result of sustained and reflective practical reasoning. Or, the person has an excellent character—he is non-accidentally sensitive to what ought to be done in any circumstances, and disposed to do a good action in the appropriate manner with respect to the appropriate other people under the appropriate circumstances. Or the person has some of the contemporary hallmarks of appropriate self-governance and prudence—he commits himself, takes stands, holds himself accountable. Or the person expects that he will *B* and has a standing interest in saying that he means to *B* on the basis of intimate experience with his own practical tendencies.<sup>18</sup> Or the person has a still more complicated inner stance that registers that he will *B*, approves *B*-ing, and directs him to get busy all at once.<sup>19</sup> It does not matter which sort of account you favor concerning what it is that makes it the case that someone is in good shape volitionally and psychologically as an agent. Call the features stressed in your favorite account “*I*.”

Anscombe's question becomes: Can any such account show what has to be added to or to accompany an action in order to make the action intentional? Can any such account provide the basis for *distinguishing between* actions and mere behavior? Can the operation of any such internal element make movement into an intentional action? And her answer is no.

What we now have in place is a much richer picture of the man in motion. Does building up his psychology do the trick? Well, it depends upon what you take to be the status of the new and improved moral psychology. Many

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<sup>18</sup>David Velleman offers such an account in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup>If I understand him, Keiran Setiya offers such an account in *Reasons without Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).



contemporary philosophers of action working on and from moral psychology clearly understand the internal circumstances that they describe as picking out key features of having a mind to make something the case quite apart from what comes of it. For these philosophers, the moral psychology can be folded into an account of “what can be determined about the man by himself in the moment of acting.”<sup>20</sup> That puts them in range.<sup>21</sup>

While they do not discuss preintentional movements, each of them is very worried about how to get the reason that is in the man to infuse the action, rendering the action rational, virtuous, prudent, reasonable, or in some other way good.

On the one side there is the mind. On the other side there is the action. We want to know what the one has to do with the other—how the mind informs the action. In order to inform the action, the mind has to select those descriptions under which the action will be intentional. How might it do this? Well, the agent can guess. That can’t be right, since having a mind to make something the case is supposed to account for changing what is the case. Suppose, then, that the outward act builds upon an inward act. Anscombe makes short shrift of this: it “turns the summoning up of *I* into an intentional action itself, for which we shall have to look for a second *I*.”<sup>22</sup> Commenting on Anscombe’s view, Peter Geach is a bit more helpful:

A far more influential view [than the view about needing to describe muscle twitches in order to map mind onto action] has been the view that intentions are occurrent acts of the mind. There are immediate grounds for suspicion. It seems absurd that an intention should steal upon one unawares, like a fit of anger or fear. On the other hand, how can there be voluntary acts of intending? . . .

People have sometimes identified as acts of intention what are perfectly genuine acts of mind, namely acts of ‘saying in one’s heart’ something like ‘What I am about (to do) is so-and-so.’ But such performances cannot

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<sup>20</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §19, 29 (echoing 28).

<sup>21</sup>The other possible route to go here is a route that Anscombe names “logicism”: the theorist adopts the view that the mind to make something the case controls the relevant descriptions of what comes of it through inferential relations obtaining between true descriptions of what is done and the contents of thought and volition. Anscombe’s argument against this attempt is to be found in her essay on Von Wright on practical inference. See G. E. M. Anscombe, “Von Wright on Practical Inference,” in *The Philosophy of Georg Henrik Von Wright*, ed. P. A. Schlipp and L. E. Hahn (La Salle: Open Court, 1989), 377–404. The essay was reprinted in *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1–34. I give a reading of her argument in “Anscombe on Practical Inference,” in *Varieties of Practical Reasoning*, ed. Elijah Millgram (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2001).

<sup>22</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §19.

fulfill the role of intentions. For one thing, in ever so many cases of intentional action, nothing like this is ‘said in the heart’ at the time. Theories of acts of intention cover up such awkward cases by such phrases as ‘virtual intention’ or ‘habitual intention.’ . . .

Again, as regards what I say in my heart, just as much as what I say aloud, the question may arise whether I really mean it. . . . But something as to which we can ask again what was meant and how it was meant cannot fulfill the role of determining the way an outward action is meant.<sup>23</sup>

But surely we are no longer this crude about moral psychology! Surely, at this point, we are more inclined to work on *structural* aspects of having a mind to make such-and-such the case! Geach raises the possibility of asking whether I was sincere and what I meant in saying something in my heart. That is the sort of difficulty that opens onto whole ranges of issues about what psychoanalysts might classify as unconscious motivation, reminding us that there is no end to the interpretive questions we might ask about the significance of what I tell myself about what I’m doing. But there is a more general problem looming.

As long as complex accounts of the structure and inner workings of having-a-mind-to-*A*-as-a-means-to-*B*-ing maintain that we lose Anscombe’s concept of intentional action if her question “Why are you *A*-ing?” is refused application, such views must hold that I am onto what I mean to do. They must also hold that what happens is non-accidentally linked to what I have in mind. But at *any* stage of the proceedings, I can be interrupted.

There are indefinitely many ways that an interruption can disrupt the hinge between what I mean to do and what happens. As Foot might put it, philosophers can arrange it so that the interruption *accidentally produces* an event that seems identical to the act that I mean to do. In stepping off the curb, I take it that I am crossing the street. Suppose that, as I raise my foot, I have a seizure. I stumble into the street, lurch forward, and wind up half-falling onto the sidewalk at the far side of the very road I meant to cross when I raised my foot. All of my reasons for crossing the street are, of course, undisturbed by the seizure, even though what happens next probably involves seeking medical assistance (a thing I never would have dreamed I ought to do immediately upon making it to the other side). And, of course, when I took it I was starting to cross the street I was, as it turned out, starting to cross the street. Nevertheless, it “is a mere happy accident that an *I* relevant to the wider context and further consequences” accompanied “the preintentional movements” involved in stepping off the curb, as Anscombe warned.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>P. T. Geach, “Intention, Freedom, and Predictability,” in *Logic, Cause, and Action*, ed. Roger Teichmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73–4.

<sup>24</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §19, 29.

The unhappy pedestrian example involves what Davidsonians will treat as “deviant” causal chains. Rather than treat such cases as cases in which *an action* is produced in some unexpected way (calling for a special explanation), Anscombe will treat such cases as cases in which *no action occurs*. It’s not that an action has a surprising source. It’s rather that there *is no action at all* in such cases. The whole tendency to worry about wayward or deviant causation of actions presupposes that a single sort of event—for example, an action (e.g., crossing the street) comes about in an unusual way (e.g., as a result of a seizure). For Anscombe, there is no such thing as an action, *A-ing* (e.g., crossing the street), that could happen in any number of ways—through intention, during a seizure episode, as a result of a mighty wind, through elaborate electrical means involving manipulation of the pedestrian’s muscles having paralyzed him with a poison dart gun just as he began to cross the street, etc.—such that we might need to explain away many street-crossings as actions that were not properly intentional. The job *isn’t* to find the special ingredient that makes some actions intentional. Diagnosing the reasons-for-acting-seeking question “Why?” is supposed to illuminate action, intention, and reasons for acting all at once. If “Why are you *A-ing*?” is refused application, then, *prima facie*, *A-ing* is not among those datable events in an agent’s history that count as the agent’s actions. If an agent’s *A-ing* is interrupted, then there is, *prima facie*, no reason to suppose that “Why are you *A-ing*?” will continue to have application even if it looks like it might.

The persistent possibility of *accidentally* being caught up in events that bear superficial resemblance to what I meant to do, Anscombe warns, will haunt mind-first accounts of what has to be added to an action to make it intentional. While the letter of the passage supports the modest reading more directly than it does the ambitious reading, I take it that the spirit of the complaint has wider application.

The general problem with the suggestion that *I* + action = intentional action is that it fails to take into account the order of descriptions under which an action is intentional. Normally, *I A* in order to *B*, *B* in order to *C*, *C* in order to *D*. I move my arm while holding the saw and steadying the plank with my other hand in order to saw the plank; I saw the plank in order to obtain two shorter lengths of wood; I produce two shorter lengths of wood in order to take the next step in my bookshelf-building project, which I do in order to complete the bookshelf. The whole process has an internal order. That order is in what I do as I go along. Checks on an expression of intention—the sort of thing that we *don’t* have in the case of the “saying-in-one’s-heart” account of intention—come in the first instance from the end-governed order of events paradigmatic of intentional action, which likewise supports taking alternate means when the initial means fail.

## IV.

*Turning to §20.* The move in §19 turned on lopping off such aspects of the future as unfolded intentionally in the immediate proceedings—that is, in the intentional action. The move in §20 will turn on lopping off such aspects of the future as will go beyond the immediate proceedings—again, the intentional action. This is the force of her opening question in §20: “Would intentional actions still have the characteristic ‘intentional,’ if there were no such thing as expression of intention for the future, or further intention in acting?”<sup>25</sup>

She clarifies the question by asking, “Is ‘intentional’ a characteristic of the actions that have it, which is formally independent of those other occurrences of the concept of intention?”<sup>26</sup> She means: Can we get an account of intention strictly in terms of an analysis of intentional actions?

You might think that we could if you were struck by the fact that an expression of intention is, itself, an intentional action, or by the fact that a further intention in acting is having a mind to do more. You might, that is, have a “one thing after another and then another” account of a life, all made up of one-off intentional actions strung like beads on a wire. If that is a good account of a human life, then it ought to be possible to understand intention by focusing on one-off intentional actions.

She investigates her questions by isolating the immediate proceedings (in roughly the way that she set out to cope with the questions in §19 by isolating the man by himself in the moment of acting). I think that it’s much easier to make sense of her “curious suppositions” if we remind ourselves what we will have if we succeed in isolating the immediate proceedings. Consider Smith’s sawing his oak plank in two, thereby making a big pile of sawdust, a lot of noise, and two shorter lengths of wood. Call this event “X-ing.” We could make no headway with determining the order in the descriptions under which X-ing was intentional by attending to what could be said only about the carpenter considered by himself in the moment of sawing. If we allow ourselves to include what can be said about the sawing, but disallow any account of what he means to do with the wood when he’s done (either what he has in mind or how he might explain it), can we understand intentionally sawing a plank in two? Her answer will be no.

We have our intentional action. How do we lop off an account of what is supposed to happen next in order to see whether the action all on its own can give us everything we need to understand intention?

Well, firstly we decide not to make *reference* to the future in *our* account. We do this through supposition (*a*): “Suppose that ‘intention’ only occurred as

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., §20, 30.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

it occurs in ‘intentional action.’”<sup>27</sup> That is, don’t worry about anything a man might say about what comes next in his project, and don’t worry about what *will* happen next, no matter what he says. Secondly, we dramatically limit the kinds of answers that *he* can give to our “Why?” question (*b*): “Suppose that the only answer to the question ‘Why are you X-ing?’ granted that the question is not refused application, were ‘I just am, that’s all.’”<sup>28</sup>

The extreme restriction on answers to the “Why?” question at the start appears to lop off not only the future but also the past. It becomes clear that the agent will be allowed to make reference to the past (he can tell us something that happened before he started sawing—the point is that his understanding of the past is entirely confined to what he has to say at present about what he is here and now doing). What happens?

## V.

*The First Interpretation of Supposition (a)*. Under the first interpretation of (*a*), where we do not advert to anything but the immediate proceedings, “intentional” in “intentional action” becomes an adjective picking out how things seem to be going. Our man is over there. He’s sawing. It looks deliberate—it doesn’t look like somnambulant busyness, for example; and it certainly doesn’t look like he’s on the verge of fainting again and again, and that the near swoon keeps pushing that saw he’s holding forward as he is about to collapse. What sense can we give to “deliberate” under this interpretation of our supposition (*a*)—where the supposition means, basically, it looks like he’s doing it on purpose?

The one thing we know is that “deliberately” *cannot* have the sense “to some further end.” That is the thing that we have left out of account by hypothesis in our decision to isolate the immediate proceedings. So what sense can it have?

Anscombe says that “intentional action” comes to have the sense “intentional action” under this interpretation of our supposition. She summarizes our situation this way:

Intention, on this interpretation of our supposition (*a*), has become a style-characteristic of observable human proceedings, with which is associated the question “Why?”<sup>29</sup>

Exactly the same proceedings are being discussed when we discuss any aspect of Jones’s sawing of Smith’s oak plank:

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

- Why are you sweating?
- Why are you raising a blister on your hand?
- Why are you making that racket?
- Why are you making a pile of sawdust on the woodshop floor?
- Why are you sawing?
- Why are you sawing a plank?
- Why are you sawing an oak plank?
- Why are you sawing Smith's plank?
- Etc.

That is, provided that all of these are true descriptions of what is taking place, and we can tell as much, any of these questions might arise. *Ex hypothesi*, Jones is doing all of these things at once, and, by the look of things, he means it. But our questions are doing no more than latching onto any of the indefinitely many true things that might be said about what he's doing. The activity looks deliberate in the way that a facial expression looks sad. And, because the *observers* (rather than the carpenter) are in the position of privilege, this removes the possibility of refusing application of our "Why are you *X*-ing" question. Here's how.

On this first interpretation of supposition (*a*), there are two options for the sense of our "Why?" question, neither of which preserves what we have learned about intention.

#### Option One:

Any true description of the proceedings can become the legitimate subject of the "Why are you *X*-ing?" question. Here, it does not matter whether the proceedings are intentional qua *A*-ing and unintentional qua *B*-ing, *C*-ing or *D*-ing, since all of them are true of exactly the same happenings in the woodshop. This in turn suggests that there is no such thing as refusing application of the question. Since the way that we isolated the sense of our question was precisely by considering the responses that refused it application, we no longer have our sense of the question "Why?" and, hence, no longer have a grip on intention.

#### Option Two:

In order to get around this result, we could try suggesting that Jones's sawing is intentional under the description "sawing a plank in two." If we ask Jones why he's sawing *Smith's* plank, Jones can say, "Am I? Golly . . ." Since the *observers* are in the position of privilege here, once the question is posed—"Why are you sawing Smith's plank?"—Jones is now apprised of

the fact that the plank belongs to Smith. This, alone, is enough to *extend* the range of descriptions that Jones knows to be true of the sawing. He knew that he was sawing. He now also knows that he was sawing Smith's plank. That is why Anscombe writes, "If we try to make it retain this characteristic by suggesting that proceedings-in-a-given-description are what bears the stamp of intention, we shall have to suppose that a man who, having been seen clearly, is asked 'Why are you X-ing?' can never profess unawareness that he was X-ing except on pain of being a liar if in fact he was X-ing."<sup>30</sup>

We have *given* Jones a *new description* of what he is doing.

What has become of the "Why are you X-ing?" question? Well, now *every* time it is asked of some aspect of the proceedings, the very *asking of the question* introduces the embedded description as a description under which sawing is occurring. Anscombe concludes: "And this supposition would involve such radical changes that it becomes impossible to say whether we could still see a place for the concept of intention at all, or diagnose the question 'Why?'"<sup>31</sup>

Recall that such headway as we've made with intention we made by "diagnosing" the question "Why?" Recall that our diagnosis turned on finding the limits of the field of new inquiry it opened by looking at the points where it was refused application. On this interpretation of supposition (*a*), we no longer have a situation in which the question can be *refused* application. So we'll need a new interpretation of supposition (*a*).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid, §20, 31. (As Will Small once put it in conversation on this interpretation, having a mind to make something the case involves states that are "intensional-with-an-'s' but not yet intentional-with-a-'t'.")

<sup>32</sup>In conversation, John McDowell urged a different reading of: "If we try to make it retain this characteristic by suggesting that proceedings-in-a-given-description are what bears the stamp of intention, we shall have to suppose that a man who, having been seen clearly, is asked 'Why are you X-ing?' can never profess unawareness that he was X-ing except on pain of being a liar if in fact he was X-ing" (*Intention*, §20, 30).

If I understand him, McDowell takes it that the restriction to "proceedings-in-a-given-description" is, in effect, a restriction to undeniable descriptions, descriptions such that, provided that our man has his wits about him and came to reason in the same world as we, the observers, did, he *must* accept as descriptions of what he is doing. I think that there are problems with McDowell's reading. In the first place, Anscombe will reject this interpretation of Supposition (*a*) because it "would involve such radical changes that it becomes impossible to say whether we could still see a place for the concept of intention at all, or diagnose the question 'Why?'" (*Intention*, §20, 31). It is hard to see why placing limits on "Why?" questions will make it impossible to "diagnose the question 'Why?'" The diagnosis is carried out in terms of how *the agent* responds to the question, not to which sort of questions *an observer* might ask about what the agent is doing. Observers can ask whatever they like. Only some of their questions will be given application. Her point is that putting *observers* in the position of privilege does violence to the account of intention that has been emerging through her diagnosis of the question "Why?" A reading that requires *agents*



## VI.

*The Second Interpretation of Supposition (a).* We try a different tack. On the new interpretation of supposition (*a*), intention in intentional action “is not a style that marks an action, or an action-in-a-description; for it is possible for a man to think he is doing one thing when he is not doing that thing but another,”<sup>33</sup> as when Jones doesn’t know that he’s sawing Smith’s plank. Moreover, we allow that our man can know that he is *X*-ing *and* that he is *Y*-ing, as long as he is *Y*-ing in *X*-ing, and this allows for the kind of further intention with which he can act without exceeding the boundaries of the immediate proceedings. So, Jones is sawing, and he is dividing the plank into two shorter lengths. In sawing, he is dividing. In this case, he will reach the end of the sawing portion of his time in the woodshop at the same time as he finishes dividing the plank. We could even allow for him to make repeated strokes of the saw, and let him intend sawing in drawing the blade back and pushing it forward. As long as *X*-ing (drawing the blade back and then pushing it forward) coincides with *Y*-ing (sawing), we will have stayed within the limits of the immediate proceedings. What does this give us? She writes:

In this case intentional actions will be marked out as those of which a man has non-observational knowledge, and for which there is a question [“Why did you *X*?”] whose answers fall in the range (*a*) “I just did,” (*b*) backward-looking motive, and (*c*) sentimental characterization.<sup>34</sup>

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to take on board any true descriptions of what they are doing that are embedded in the observers’ questions captures this aspect of the difficulty more clearly, as near as I can tell. In the second place, I think that her phrase—“on pain of being a liar”—is supposed to surprise her reader. The tone of the passage seems to me to be one in which it might not have occurred to the reader that the first interpretation of Supposition (*a*) could result in putting agents in this position. If the first interpretation (modified in the suggested way) makes it the case that the question “Why are you *A*-ing?” cannot be refused application because no one could deny that he was *A*-ing at the moment the question was posed, then he just is a liar if he refuses to give the question application.

I am crossing the street. You ask, “Why are you crossing the street?” Say that I profess ignorance that I was crossing the street when you called out your question. I am either in deep trouble cognitively or psychologically, or else I am telling a lie *so* transparent that it scarcely counts as a lie. Whereas I might profess sincere ignorance if you call out, “Why are you crossing Honorary Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe Boulevard?” I know that I am crossing the street. I might even know that I am crossing Stony Island Avenue. I may not know that the Chicago City Council had decided to give Stony Island an honorary name to celebrate the achievements of the person thereby honored. Restricting observers to asking only undeniable questions does no radical violence to the account of intention Anscombe has been working to develop. Allowing *any* true description of what I am doing to *become* undeniable once the question is posed does radical violence to the account.

<sup>33</sup>Anscombe, *Intention*, §20, 31.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

Our next task has to be to investigate whether this question—the “Why?” question whose answers fall within that range—is the “Why?” question that we have been studying. Is this a *reasons-for-acting-seeking* question “Why?”

Because (a) “I just did” is equivalent to “No reason,” answers of that sort are not helpful to us. We won’t be able to tell, from such answers, whether or not our “Why?” question is in play, since our question sometimes gets such answers too. We don’t have forward-looking motive, since we have lopped off thought about the future. We are left with backward-looking motive and a fairly impoverished version of interpretive motive that she calls “sentimental characterization.” There’s the spirit in which the thing is done, and there’s past good or bad. These can belong to the immediate proceedings no matter what happens next. So our question becomes whether backward-looking motive and this kind of interpretive motive are enough to bring reasons for acting into view, and the answer is, again, no.

It looks as though we might be able to make some headway with this new interpretation of supposition (a) because, just as the field of new inquiry opened for us by the reasons-for-acting-seeking question “Why?” is a field in which we criticize a man’s reasons, we can criticize *motives*. When Anscombe read a message intended for someone else, thought, “That unspeakable man!” with feelings of hatred, tore the message up, and laughed,<sup>35</sup> she acted in anger. We criticize people for episodes of pettiness, petulance, and spite. Perhaps she ought not to have torn the message up.

What is the point of criticizing her under these assumptions?

The answer *can’t* be “in order to convince her to develop better self-control in the future,” or “in order to convince her to seek out the man, apologize, and tell him what his message said” (partly with the thought that it is unpleasant to do such things, and this may help her change her ways). Just as she can’t have a further, future intention in acting under our suppositions, we, her critics, can’t criticize in order to change things in the future. And so, Anscombe writes, “One can argue against motives—i.e., criticize a man for having acted on such a motive—but a great deal of the point of doing so will be gone if we imagine the expression of intention for the future to be absent, as it is in our hypothesis.”<sup>36</sup> Basically, our criticism has something of the status of her inward cry, “That unspeakable man!” Her complaint extends to any criticism we might make of backward-looking motive as well.

In short, this “Why?” question is not a reasons-for-acting-seeking “Why?” question. And, since the reasons-for-acting-seeking question is our device for eliciting intention, we can conclude that we have lost track of intention by

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, §11, 17.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, §20, 31–2.

confining our attention to the immediate proceedings in the ways we were directed to do by Supposition (a).

## VII.

*Moving On to Supposition (b).* Supposition (b) does away with responses to our “Why?” question that mention backward-looking motive or that give the spirit in which the thing is or was done. We have won the right to do so through the work on Supposition (a).

We left the answer, “I just *am*” to one side in considering the second interpretation of Supposition (a). *That* answer is equivalent to, “No reason.” We were trying to discover whether the other answers that were left to us might give reasons for *X*-ing. There were two of these: backward-looking motive and sentimental interpretive motive. You could tell that neither of them gave a reason for acting because, once we have ruled out talk about the future, we have gotten rid of the point of criticizing motives. Getting rid of the point of criticism shows us that we are *not* in the field of further inquiry that is supposed to be opened by an expression of intention. We have left only one kind of answer that might be an answer to a reasons-for-acting-seeking question. Could this be the *only* answer to our “Why?”

She points out that the response fails to distinguish between members of the class of acts known without observation. In order to make headway with her argument for this point, it’s important to recognize that we are in a world where there is no answer to the question, “What for?” The reason that I can’t confidently distinguish the inward experience of meaning to make something the case from the inward experience of an involuntary gesture is that the former *is* the experience of future-directedness. If we bracket *that*, since we are bracketing everything *but* the current proceedings (mental, behavioral, what have you), we are left without a principled basis for the distinction. That is her point.

So she tries yet another tack—voluntary acts can be commanded. And here, the problem will be isomorphic with the problem that we encountered in trying to understand pointless criticism of the spirit in which something is done, or an action undertaken in response to some past good turn or injury. Yes—there is a distinction between what can and what cannot be commanded. Sometimes we do things in obedience to some authority. Sometimes we do things commanded by some authority, but not in obedience. But notice that it is not as though we could ask whether an authority ought to be obeyed. You can’t use criticism as a technique for changing things, any more than I can use criticism as a spur to self-improvement. Basically, the distinction between what can and what cannot be commanded is useless.

## VIII.

*A Concluding Remark.* I have worked to begin giving readings of §§19 and 20 of *Intention*. Anscombe works to ward off what I called “mind-first” accounts of intentional action in §19. The arguments of §20 ought, I think, to be enough to dispel any concerns that her interest in intentional action marks her as a behaviorist.

The deep concern of both passages is to lay the groundwork for her discussion of what she names the *A–D* order—the means-end structure that informs intention, intentional action, and practical reason alike. She takes it that we will fail to understand intention, action, practical reason, or practical knowledge if we fail to attend to the nature of intentional action as an unfolding series of doings linked together by and ordered to the end of a larger project or action—that order informs both a mind to do such-and-such and the doing of such-and-such. It’s not that we have the class of actions and, among these, a special sub-class of properly intentional actions, and that action theory is the effort to find the characteristic marks of the privileged sub-class of special, somehow higher, finer, more authentic, or otherwise *better* actions. Her hope is to argue that we cannot even get *action* into view without working out the way that *A*-ing is ordered to the end of *B*-ing, *B*-ing to *C*-ing, *C*-ing to *D*-ing, and so on, such that all of these form a unified object of inquiry. Accordingly, “we do not add anything attaching to the action at the time it is done by describing it as intentional,” in the sense pointing to the proper operation of some internal element that renders an action intentional, and we do not add anything to an action by marking it as a stage leading to a further, future action. These are already there in understanding an event as an action.

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