

How Do You Know What You Are Doing Now?

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Abstract:

In this paper I explore Anscombe's claim that agents have non-observational, non-inferential knowledge of their own actions. I show that many of the arguments against the claim are based on a misinterpretation but agree with Anscombe's critics that her claim has certain shortcomings. The paper seeks to mitigate these by developing an alternative. I argue that agent's knowledge of own actions is based on a grasp of previously acquired practical competence and suggest a reason-based account built on the idea of teleological activity, according to which agents know non-observationally intentional actions that fall under certain types of broad descriptions. This account of knowledge of own actions is not based on observational evidence, but on empirically grounded knowledge of capabilities, skills and past successes.

Keywords: Anscombe, philosophy of action, non-observational knowledge, intentions, reasons

Introduction

Imagine that you kick a ball. How exactly do you know you are doing it? You seem to know directly, without any need to observe or infer. By contrast, if another person kicks the ball, you must observe it to know what is going on. You *can* observe the external bodily motions of your own kick, but you do not have to observe them to know about them. You seem to have some privileged epistemic relation to your own actions that you do not have to the actions of others. This led G.E.M. Anscombe (2000) to claim that some of the knowledge one has about one's own actions is non-observational. Sarah K. Paul (2009: 1) calls this "a provocative claim" because human beings are fallible creatures lacking any godlike knowledge of their own behavior.¹

Philosophers roughly split into two opposing camps regarding Anscombe's claim. On the one hand, there are such skeptics as Bratman, Davidson and Paul who find the claim obscure, unsound, and open to counterexamples. On the other hand, there are those like Gjelsvik, Setiya, and Thompson who think it fundamentally correct and who believe that rejecting it puts one in conflict with facts about action and agency. Nonetheless, even those who support Anscombe's claim struggle to justify it. The main difficulty in describing some knowledge as non-observational is explaining what such

knowledge consists of. How can agents be said to know what they are doing without observing whether their intentions have successfully been transformed into action? This has yet to be answered uncontroversially.

I wish to defend a version of Anscombe's claim, but – unlike Anscombe – I hold that non-observational knowledge is grounded in previously acquired practical competence. This competence, together with an agent's knowledge of the reasons she is, at present, acting on, provides the basis for non-observational knowledge of particular actions: precisely because the agent can offer certain broad descriptions of them. The main difference between Anscombe's account and mine is that an agent's knowledge of her own (present) actions for Anscombe is spontaneous, whereas I argue that such knowledge rather than being spontaneous is grounded in the agent's knowledge of her capabilities and past successful action. I suggest that the Anscombean spontaneity or groundlessness of agent's knowledge of own actions should be rejected in order to provide a credible epistemology. Anscombe's crucial insight, that if an agent acts intentionally, she knows without observation what she is doing under the descriptions under which the action is intentional, is preserved with the addition that this knowledge (of the agent's present act) is grounded in previously acquired capabilities.

I begin with a presentation of non-observational knowledge. Section 2 discusses Paul's inferential theory. Section 3 argues for my own, reason-based account according to which non-observational knowledge of one's own actions concerns only actions that are intended under certain broad descriptions. These actions are normal activities in everyday life. Interpreted this way, Anscombe's claim has a narrower application than it is normally assumed; much of the criticism of her account evaporates.

1. Non-observational knowledge

A theorist who wants to determine, precisely, the knowledge one has of one's own actions can choose between three options. She might take the view that such knowledge is gained by introspection: i.e., it is knowledge the agent has about her mental life, or what many would call the self. Alternately, she might conclude that such knowledge is of exactly the same kind as knowledge one has about the actions of others. Finally, she could carve out a middle course between these two extremes: this is what Anscombe tries to do. I take it to mean the following:

Anscombe's claim

If an agent acts intentionally, she knows – without observation – what she is doing, under the descriptions on which her action is intentional.

I take Anscombe's point to be that one *can* observe one's intentional actions; one *can* gain knowledge of what one is doing on the basis of observation. However, it is not necessary. So, Anscombe writes (2000: 24), "intentional actions are a sub-class of the events in a man's history which are known to him *not* just because he observes them". As Gjelsvik notes, Anscombe's strategy for capturing

intentional action differs from the standard Davidsonian alternative of interpreting actions as bodily movements, caused in the right way by the agent's (primary) reason. Anscombe "categorizes actions with other things towards which we typically have first person authority" (Gjelsvik): intentional actions belong to the sub-class of things one knows without observation.

Indeed, as Gjelsvik further notes, part of Anscombe's point is precisely that there are many things, in addition to intentional actions, that one knows without observation: e.g., believing, remembering, fearing, hoping, and regretting.

Among many others Donald Davidson relied on Anscombe's idea of actions as *intentional under a description*: one ascribes an intention to an agent through a process of rationalization; one tries to (Davidson, 2001: 3)

see something the agent saw... some feature... of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable.

What one does is to imagine the situation from the agent's perspective and describe the action as intentional under that description. Of course, Davidson does not claim that the agent must herself try to make her performance intentional under a description. When the action is a slip, for example, it is especially hard to imagine what the description could be. In all such cases, the agent does not want, desire, prize, etc. the slip. The difficulty for Davidson is that he both defines actions as intentional under a description and wants one to take the agent's perspective: something that does not straightforwardly work with slips.²

Anscombe has a different solution. According to her understanding of falling under a description, when someone is *Φ-ing intentionally*, a class of descriptions applies to what she is doing, with a subclass of these being descriptions she knows to be true of her action. She knows directly, without observation, that they are true. Any given action is intentional only under certain descriptions. To determine whether an action *is* intentional, it is appropriate to ask "why" questions: e.g., "why are you sawing that book?" If the agent replies, "I did not realize that I was", then her action is not intentional *under that description*. Her action might be intentional under another description: e.g., "sawing a plank"; maybe a book was underneath the plank, without her realizing it. If so she cannot be said to have sawed the book intentionally. The agent knows the description under which her action counts as intentional, and she knows it without any need to observe. Consider Anscombe's example (2000: 51):

Say I go over to the window and open it. Someone who hears me calls out: What are you doing making that noise? I reply 'Opening the window'. I have called such a statement knowledge all along; and precisely because in such a case what I say is true – I do open the window; and that means that the window is getting opened by the movements of the body out of whose mouth those words come. But I don't say the words like this: 'Let me see, what is this body bringing about? Ah yes! The opening of the window'.

The example pinpoints how – most of the time when one acts – one knows what one is up to; one seems to be armed with this knowledge without needing to infer it. Under normal circumstances, a person need not observe herself to know that the movements of her body bring about the opening of a window. She does not need to ask: “what is this body of mine bringing about?” For the observer who merely hears the sounds of the movements, on the other hand, it makes perfect sense to ask: “what are you doing making that noise?” Of course, the agent can take a look to check whether she really is bringing about the action she intends; but it is not the observation *per se* that offers her knowledge of her performance.³ In this way, human action could be seen as godlike: human beings can make changes in the world and have non-observational knowledge about these changes simply because they happen in the way the human beings intend.

It does not follow from Anscombe’s claim that one has non-observational knowledge of one’s own actions that one cannot be mistaken. Perhaps one cannot be mistaken when one says “I have a headache” or “I feel nauseous”, but one can be wrong if one says “I’ll push Button Three” but actually pushes Button Seven⁴ or if one says “I take your knight!” while removing the castle from the chess board. Indeed, slips and other mistakes in the performance of actions are common. Anscombe draws attention to this early on in *Intention* (2000: 4-5): “in some cases the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*”. When one says to oneself “now I press Button Three” pressing Button Seven, the mistake is not in what is said but in what is done (*cf.* Anscombe, 2000: 57).⁵

The subclass of non-observational knowledge that comprises intentional actions is susceptible to a special sort of “why” question whose use as a tool for enquiry dates at least to Aristotle, though Anscombe makes no reference to Aristotle when she introduces her version of it (*Intention* §8). That said, much of what she says is reminiscent of Aristotle, so a few words about his account will be illuminating. According to Aristotle, “proper” knowledge is knowledge of a cause, revealed through the answer to a “why” question; a “why” question is a request for explanation. One can be said to have knowledge of something when one has grasped its cause (Aristotle, *Physics*: 194 b 17-20).⁶ Anscombe ties the “why” question specifically to the notion of intentional action: “intentional actions are ones to which a certain sense of the question ‘why?’ has application” (Anscombe, 2000: 11). This “certain sense” is the agent’s reason for Φ -ing. The sense she has in mind does not involve the notion of a cause – including mental cause. She offers a list of what she considers proper ways to answer the “why” question: a proper answer may mention past history, interpret an action, or mention something in the future (Anscombe, 2000: 24). The latter two offer reasons for action; the first is a proper reply only if ideas of good or harm are considered.

To have non-observational knowledge is to have an answer to the “why” question, where the final answer typically just is the intention; while the set of answers to a “why” question reveals the structure of an agent’s practical reasoning. Consider a version of Anscombe’s famous example (2000: 38):

Q: "Why are you moving your arm up and down?"

A: "I'm pumping".

Q: "Why are you pumping?"

A: "I'm pumping the water supply for the house".

Q: "Why are you pumping the water?"

A: "Because it is needed at the house and to poison the people inside".

Q: "Why are you poisoning these people?"

A: "They are party members".

Q: "Why do you want to kill the party members?"

A: "If the party members die, the government can be overthrown".

The structure need not look exactly like this, nor would the agent necessarily think through the steps in exactly this manner: what this shows is one possible scenario. Through a series of repeated "why" questions and answers, which reveals the means the agent thinks she must achieve before she can reach her aim, one arrives at *the* aim, the intention: in this case, to overthrow the government.⁷ In this way, the enquirer comes to know just what the agent wants and gains knowledge about the action that the agent performs; while the agent knows her action already, as the product of her practical reasoning: she does what she meant to do. As an agent, she has practical knowledge of her actions, where "practical knowledge" is understood, in formal terms, as "the cause of what it understands"⁸; by contrast, the observer's knowledge is speculative, "derived from the objects known" (Anscombe, 2000: 87). The agent's understanding of what she is doing is not merely one more description side by side with all other possible descriptions of her action; rather, it has some claim to determine what the action is. The movements of maneuvering the pump which is leading up to the poisoning of the party members and thereby the overthrowing of the government would not count as (intentionally) overthrowing the government if the agent's practical understanding did not conceive of it in these terms.

Obviously, one must often see what one is doing in order to make sure that one is doing what one plans to do. However, the eyes are merely an aid. Knowledge of one's own action is aided by observation; it is not *based on* observation (Anscombe, 2000: 53):

So without the eyes he knows what he writes; but the eyes help to assure him that what he writes actually gets legibly written.

If one must observe or be told that one is Φ -ing then, on Anscombe's account, one is not Φ -ing intentionally; the knowledge one gains is speculative, rather than practical and non-observational. Like Gjelsvik, I see awareness as crucial for Anscombe. Gjelsvik writes: "missing awareness of what we do cancels ascriptions of intentional agency on Anscombe's view, and this point is fundamental to her thinking on intentional agency". If the agent's reply to a "why" question is that she was unaware of doing the thing she is asked about, then it does not count as something she did

intentionally. In short, “the facts about being aware of something (p) and doing something (p) intentionally are... tied into each other” (Gjelsvik).

Kieran Setiya (2007: 25) describes Anscombe’s cases of *refused application* as “the basic insight of Anscombe’s argument”. A case of apparent intentionality is refused application by the answer: “I was not aware I was doing that” (Anscombe, 2000: 11); the agent lacks knowledge of her own agency. Anscombe offers several ways this can happen. The resulting action cannot be said to accord with the agent’s intention to act; the agent is not properly aware of her action. Anscombe writes (2000: 50-51):

By the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions I mean the knowledge that one denies having if when asked e.g. ‘Why are you ringing that bell?’ one replies ‘Good heavens! I didn’t know I was ringing it!’

In cases of refused application, the agent is, in the midst of her acting, unaware – in some important way – of what she is doing. Should she be made aware she is doing something contrary to plan, she would stop what she is doing and do what she planned to do instead. She is likely to be surprised by the discovery of what she is doing: something that normally does not happen when one does what one means to do.

It is not always easy to follow Anscombe’s argument; also, her account has many details I have chosen to gloss over here. My point has only been to provide sufficient background material to discuss her account. In the next section I explore an inferential account of agent’s knowledge of actions.

2. Inferential Theory

Paul writes that “a middle course must be found between... two extremes” in the debate over non-observational knowledge: the extremes of skepticism and strong cognitivism. She ascribes the first to Davidson and the second to Velleman and Setiya. Davidson rejects Anscombe’s argument on the grounds that acting intentionally does not entail acting knowingly (2001: 92):

In writing heavily on this page I may be intending to produce ten legible carbon copies. I do not know, or believe with any confidence, that I am succeeding. But if I am producing ten legible carbon copies, I am certainly doing it intentionally.

The point appears to be that intention plus success need not amount to knowledge of success. Davidson makes no mistake in his performance, yet he must look to know whether he has succeeded. This and similar examples lead Davidson into skepticism.

Meanwhile, strong cognitivism is the view of intention as a special kind of belief; an intention to Φ is a belief that one is Φ -ing or will do so. So long as an agent successfully performs according to her intentions, her beliefs about her actions are true. She forms her intentions because of preferences to perform certain actions, not on any evidence that they will be performed. In other words, the belief that accompanies action is not grounded in observation or inference: it originates in the agent’s practical knowledge as “the cause of what she understands”; non-observational knowledge of one’s

actions is embodied in the intentions themselves. The action that the agent brings about is the representational content of the intention-belief. Setiya writes (2007: 26):

when someone is acting intentionally, there must be something he is doing intentionally, not merely trying to do, in the belief that he is doing it.

Setiya's reply to Davidson is that Davidson need not know that he is making ten simultaneous copies successfully; nevertheless, he has non-observational knowledge of what he is doing, because he knows he is pressing down hard with his pen. At the same time, it is not sufficient that he knows he intends to make ten copies; there are things that he must actually do, like pressing hard with his pen (Setiya, 2007: 25). According to the strong cognitivist, when one is successful in one's intention, one's belief about what one is doing is true. Having an intention to Φ is considered to consist in a causally *self-fulfilling belief* that one will Φ . It can be hard to grasp exactly why this should amount to knowledge. William James can be helpful. He writes (1956: 25): "faith in a fact can help create the fact". Velleman cites James before he states his own view in the following way (2007: 64):

An agent may therefore form an expectation about his forthcoming action without being prompted by evidence. Although the agent's expectation of acting is a conclusion to which he jumps before the evidence is complete, he jumps with the assurance that the conclusion will achieve verity even as he lands.

Paul sees (2009: 3, 6) a "kernel of truth" in the non-observational knowledge claim that Davidson fails to acknowledge; but she thinks that the strong cognitivists exaggerate its role. She criticizes them for the view that beliefs can be formed without sufficient prior evidence, in contradiction to common theories of rationality. She takes aim as well at Velleman's understanding of intention as "licensed wishful thinking", according to which "the agent's thoughts are licensed to be wishful because they are self-fulfilling" (Velleman, 2007: 69).

According to Paul's middle path, intentions are not beliefs. She claims there are many counterexamples: e.g., one can seriously intend to get a Ph.D. without fully believing one will get it. After all, many obstacles stand in the way of long-term plans, and intentions can fail. One assumes that the doctoral student will do all she needs to toward her intended goal without needing further to assume the belief that she will (necessarily) arrive there; nonetheless, it is reasonable to say that she intends to do so (Paul, 2009: 7).⁹

There are other cases of intended actions that need not involve a belief that one will do as one intends. Consider the agent who intends to stop and get gas on the way home from work but counts on the possibility she will forget her plan and drive straight home instead (Paul, 2009: 7; see also Bratman, 1987). Paul allows that one could argue against her examples and claim that the person who doubts her success does not really intend to succeed, only to try; but this idea – that the only thing one knows non-observationally is one's intention to try – she sees as problematic for Anscombe, given her view that what one knows is that which actually happens.

Anscombe's thoughts on agents' non-observational knowledge of what happens is a real worry for Paul, because "intending and doing are not the same thing" (Paul, 2009: 2). As Paul's examples show, merely having an intention is often insufficient to pull off a plan. All manner of things might hinder one from doing what one intends: weakness of will, procrastination, self-deception, change of mind, and so on (Paul, 2009: 12):

We routinely misidentify the motives behind our decisions, agonize over trying to figure out what it is we want, spend years not knowing that we are really in love, and so on. Why should we expect our knowledge of our intentions to be dependable and accurate enough to serve as the basis of non-observational knowledge of action?

The worry is understandable and one that most people can likely relate to, simply by recalling times when plans went wrong: the diet that ended up in weight gain, the intention to visit the gym regularly whose only sign is an expensive membership.

Though Paul does not accept Anscombe's argument as it is, she sees some sense to the notion of non-observational knowledge of what one is doing. Paul sees her approach as neo-Gricean, sharing with Grice the view that agents achieve knowledge of their agency (Paul, 2009: 12) "by tending to believe, in the absence to the contrary, that we are doing what we intend to be doing". Grice famously held that an agent intends to Φ just in case she wills to Φ and believes that she will Φ simply because of her willing to do so, based on her knowledge of her own will. Anscombe considered theories like Grice's to be "mad" precisely because of the role they give to the will (2000: 52): "the only sense I can give to 'willing' is that in which I might stare at something and will it to move". What one knows when one knows one's intentional actions should not be separated into non-observational knowledge of one's intentions and observational knowledge of one's performance. For Anscombe, such a view attributes an absurd role to the will. One does not stare at a matchbox and will it to move; one does not treat one's arm like a magician's wand and give it orders like "arm, wave!" or "arm, pick up that pencil!" A willing in and of itself cannot make something happen; and intention, for Anscombe, must relate to *something that happens*. However, Paul departs from Grice on this point. Instead of giving the role to willing something that he wishes to, she offers the following alternative (2009: 11):

If we think of intentions as distinctively practical, conative commitments that do not constitutively involve the belief that one will do what one intends, then we can replace the role of willing in the Gricean structure with intending.

Of her Inferential Theory, Paul writes (2009: 9):

The central idea behind the Inferential Theory is that our beliefs about our intentional actions are not spontaneous, but evidence-based – based largely, I will argue, on our knowledge of what we *intend* to be doing, where intentions are not themselves beliefs.

Highly relevant for Paul is an agent's background of belief in her ability to perform the actions she intends. *Contra* Velleman, she holds that it is unlicensed for an agent to believe she is doing something just because she intends it. The agent must have good reasons, derived from previous experience, to back this up. That means that the agent must have knowledge of her own history to know about her actions. Knowledge of one's history can reveal how likely it is that one will end up doing what one intends: e.g., a researcher might be reliable when it comes to paper deadlines but unreliable in other settings (Paul, 2009: 15). Knowledge for Paul is given through experience; but she does not want to claim that all that one knows without observation is what one intends to do. What exactly does that leave for non-observational knowledge of one's own agency?

For Paul, it is crucial that the knowledge an agent has of her actions does not come about "just like that": at some point in her history, she acquired it; but the observational/experiential basis of that knowledge need not apply to every performance of it.

Paul's inferential theory lays out the conditions under which agents need not depend on observation of action in particular performances. (1) The agent must be confident that she has the abilities she needs to fulfill her intention. (2) The agent must have a proper grasp of the conventions that apply to the situation she is in, and she must understand the cause/effect structure on which her intention relies. (3) The agent must know how likely she is, given her previous history, to carry through with her plan. Echoing what Anscombe might say, Paul also mentions a fourth condition on the agent (2009: 18):

His understanding of the way some action descriptions apply partly in virtue of his intention in acting. The last consideration in particular makes it possible for him to know what is actually happening, under a certain description, in knowing what he intends to be doing.

Paul emphasizes throughout that the agent's beliefs *per se* do not cause the actions she performs (2009: 18):

According to the Inferential Theory, the agent's non-observational belief about what he is doing is based on the cause of its truth, but is not itself the efficient cause.

Paul sees this point as driving a wedge between her position and that of strong cognitivism. Agential knowledge is evidentially based on intention in two senses. First, it is because of the intention that the agent initiates and successfully completes the action. Second, the intention determines whether the agent's action falls under the intended description. What the agent arrives at is not mere speculation but counts as non-observational knowledge. It forms not simply a response to antecedent evidence about the external world; "the truth of the belief depends on the agent's choice to *make* it true, by carrying out the intention on which the belief is based, and not on its being an accurate reflection of the way things already stand" (Paul, 2009: 18-19).

This argument might work against strong cognitivism, but it is not an argument against

Anscombe.¹⁰ At the time that Anscombe's agent performs her action, she knows what she does, because she causes what happens. This, however, is to talk about causation formally. In the case of intentional action, any speculation about Aristotelian *efficient* cause is ruled out, and the answer to the relevant "why" question is not of the kind that can be provided by a neurophysiologist: a point on which Anscombe is quite explicit.

Aristotle's *formal cause* concerns the "form": e.g., the shape of a statue; while efficient cause is the primary source of change and what directly produces someone's bodily movements. As Moran (2004: 67) writes "speculative knowledge is not the cause, either formally or materially, of what it understands". Anscombe points out that, when dealing with human behavior, what one wants to know are not the efficient causes behind the human machinery; rather, one wants information to make actions intelligible and meaningful. Knowing that someone's C-neurons fired says nothing about the norms that govern the situation nor the agent's grasp of it. Efficient causal factors are always to be found, but Paul and Anscombe are not looking for them.

Paul's account is less distinct from Anscombe's than first blush might suggest. Indeed, I think Anscombe would agree to many of Paul's points. With Paul's unconfident Ph.D. student in mind, consider Anscombe's view (2000: 87) that "the failure to achieve what one would finally like to achieve is common". Anscombe discusses other cases where the agent intends something without believing that her intention will amount to action, even as "one can be as certain as possible that one will do something, and yet intend not to do it" (Anscombe, 2000: 94): e.g., a person can intend not to break down under torture and yet thoroughly expect to do so. However, such cases are rare. More typically, the agent says "I am going to do such and such" and does what she says.

Anscombe in no way suggests that an agent cannot be wrong or uncertain whether she will do what she intends. The agent could change her mind or be prevented from acting. An issue I find highly relevant for Anscombe is almost always overlooked: namely her focus on "the small activities of everyday life" (Anscombe, 2000: 92). When it comes to these matters, one does – most of the time – what one intends to do. Of course, one can also talk of knowledge of long-term plans, but there so much more can go wrong.¹¹ In these cases, I would suppose Anscombe to say that the agent who fulfills her long-term plan knows, without observation, at the precise moment when she finally e.g. signs her marriage contract. One cannot know what one is doing unless one is doing it, and the things one intends must actually happen before one can be said to have knowledge about them.

Nevertheless, Anscombe's critics put forth examples such as the following, focusing not on typical, everyday actions, but on sophisticated skills (Velleman, 2007: 202):

Anscombe believes that if one is trying to shoot a bull's eye, intends to shoot one, and will consequently end up having shot one intentionally, then one already knows without observation that one is shooting a bull's eye, not just that one is intending or trying to do so, or moving one's limb with that aim.

How can the content of one's intention to hit the bull's eye constitute knowledge of doing so? Such examples make Anscombe's position seem unreasonable. Not even the most professional dart player

can know beforehand that she will hit the bull's eye, though she intends to do so.¹² Again, however, Anscombe's focus is not on the extraordinary but the ordinary: the "small activities of everyday life", the totally standard things one plans to do on a daily basis. "I intend to paint the wall". "I intend to go to the cinema". "I intend to open the window". There is a difference between intending to hit a bull's eye and intending to go to the cinema. The first is a complex feat of eye to hand coordination, the other places next to no performative demands on the agent.¹³ How often does one set out for the cinema with the ticket in one's pocket, filled with excitement wondering, "will I really manage to see a movie?" Of course, such obstacles as weakness of will and self-deception can intervene; but as Anscombe (2001: 87) writes:

What is necessarily the rare exception is for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not to be what he supposes. Further, it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention.

Seen this way, Anscombe's position seems far less improbable than it is often read.

Contra the strong cognitivists, Anscombe does not take intention as a form of belief. If an agent fails to act as she intends and the mistake is not due to a false belief about the means or possibilities for action, then "the mistake is not one of judgment but of performance" (Anscombe, 2000: 57). The intention sets the standard for success. If a claim to non-observational knowledge turns out to be wrong, it is because of a mistake in the performance: the agent fails to perform in accordance with her knowledge (judgment). If the agent makes a mistake in performance, she lacks (non-observational) knowledge of her action.

I think a typical misreading of Anscombe takes her claim to concern knowledge of one's self. True, knowledge is, for Anscombe, related to intentions. However, the intended relation is not such that one has transparent knowledge of the kind of person one is. Rather, the descriptions under which an agent would appropriately say that her action counts as intentional are such that she knows them without having to observe them. One might spend one's whole life contemplating such questions as "who am I?" But if one needs to speculate about what one is doing, it will not count as knowledge for Anscombe. One might find oneself in situations where one starts asking oneself, "what am I doing?" If one needs to know what one is doing and this, in and of itself, is insufficient to provide the answer, one cannot be said to have non-observational knowledge of what one is doing. One has entered the domain of speculation. For the agent with non-observational knowledge, the wanting to know is sufficient to provide the information: one knows directly.

Paul is certainly correct to question Anscombe's claim: it is hard to pin down. Though numerous philosophers have written on the topic recently, it remains one of considerable debate. I think Paul makes points that should be taken seriously, particularly regarding previous experience as an important source for knowledge of agency: the agent must, at some point in her history, have acquired the skills on which she bases her intentional performances. Such grounding must exist, even though the agent need not speculate about it every time she applies it. One must learn what one is

capable of doing intentionally before it makes sense to speak of non-observational knowledge. Agential experience seems to be missing from Anscombe's account. Experience belongs to the epistemological and phenomenological issues on which she is silent. Paul covers some of them.

It is important to grasp what exactly one is meant to have non-observational knowledge about. I have tried to show that, on Anscombe's account, such knowledge is supposed to be – not about one's self and personality – but rather about one's actions. I am convinced that many seeming counterarguments to Anscombe evaporate if one makes this distinction properly. I hope to have said enough on this admittedly complex topic to move on. I turn now to an argument against non-observational knowledge that centers around the act rather than the self.

3. A reason-based account

I see two main keys to a proper understanding of non-observational knowledge of one's own actions. The first is Anscombe's notion of mistake in performance, the second her notion of practical reasoning. In addition to the Paul's work, I wish also to draw on the work of Betty Powell (1967) and Anne Newstead (2009). Powell suggests that the question "how did you find out?" is generally inapplicable as a request for an agent's knowledge of what she is doing. This is a good point, but Powell says too little about why this is so. Drawing on Newstead's account I suggest that the question is inapplicable because the agent knows her reasons for doing what she is intentionally doing, under broad descriptions: that is, in a teleological sense; she seems not to be aware of the narrowest descriptions that apply to what she does: the smallest bodily movements, etc. I agree with Newstead's claim that the agent has knowledge of her present intentions by knowing her reasons for action; but I also part from her in several important respects. For example, I accept Paul's claim that the agent – at some point in her history – must have gained the knowledge she has of her practical capacity to perform intentionally, knowledge from which she can now benefit non-observationally; and whereas Newstead (2009) does not focus on the "why" question, it plays an important role in my account.¹⁴

Let me begin with Powell's suggestion that the question "how do you know what you are doing (now)?" is inappropriate, if what one really is asking is: "how did you find out?" An agent need not wonder who is performing Φ when *she* is the one doing so. Consider the difference between the questions "how do you know that S did Φ " and "how do you know that you are Φ -ing (now)?" In comparing the possible answers to these two questions, the inappropriateness of the latter comes to light.

Consider the first question. Imagine asking some person – say, Sarah – "how do you know that Serena Williams won the tennis match?" If Sarah watched the match on television, she might answer: "I saw it on TV". Given an everyday setting, this seems an acceptable answer, even though it is not the only way to answer the question. Maybe Sarah did not watch the match herself; she could have read about it and so reply: "I read about it in the newspaper". Maybe she got the news from a person she trusts; if so, she might say, "I know because Linda told me so". Maybe she was in the

audience when the match was played; if so, she could offer a reply people often find trustworthy: “I was there when it happened”. All are potentially proper ways to satisfy the enquiry, even though some might invite further probing: “are you sure *that* is what you read in the newspaper?” In short, everyday justifications for knowledge about the actions of others include “I saw it”, “I was told”, “I was present when it happened”, etc.

Now consider the second question. Imagine asking Michael: “how do you know what you are doing just now?” A natural reaction from him would be to remark that the question seems odd. Suppose that, for the sake of argument, one really asks that question. What exactly is one asking? In what enlightening way can Michael respond? Suppose he is baking bread. To make a proper analogy with Sarah’s case, imagine asking him: “how did you find out that you are baking bread just now?” It is not very helpful if Michael responds that the reason he knows he is baking bread is that he is present for the occasion. A person cannot completely fail to be present, when performing some action. Admittedly, one sometimes says things like “I am not myself today” or “sorry, my thoughts are elsewhere”: there is a sense in which one can fail to be fully mentally present when going about one’s business. Nevertheless, one cannot be wholly absent from one’s own action. It also sounds absurd if Michael says, “well, I observe myself doing so”. This is where Anscombe’s idea of mistake in performance comes in. Think of this mistake as a slip. It seems natural to suppose that a person normally has direct knowledge of what she does; it is only when something goes wrong that one questions her knowledge: the agent’s claim to non-observational knowledge breaks down when she makes a slip. Slips do not occur because the agent lacks the appropriate practical competence; nor, for Anscombe, do they occur because of a false belief, but rather because they fail to accord with the agent’s knowledge. She writes (2000: 57):

Can it be that there is something that modern philosophy has blankly misunderstood: namely what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*? Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts. The facts, reality, are prior, and dictate what is to be said, if it is knowledge.

With few exceptions (e.g., Gjelsvik; Moran, 2004; Newstead, 2009; Vogler, 2001), researchers who discuss Anscombe ignore the direct move she takes from practical knowledge and mistake in performance to practical reasoning. In the paragraph after her treatment of mistake in performance and introduction of practical knowledge, Anscombe writes: “the notion of ‘practical knowledge’ can only be understood if we first understand ‘practical reasoning’” (Anscombe, 2000: 57). For Anscombe, a claim to practical knowledge is based, not on observation or inference, but rather on actions that manifest the conclusion of a process of practical reasoning.

Anscombe’s “why” question is meant to be posed to the agent performing the action, not to an observer. The resulting series of questions and answers reveal the structure of the reasoning leading to the agent’s intention. The final answer to the final “why” question typically is the intention. It can be

and often is a broader description than the observer can derive from watching the action.¹⁵ This is the sense of broad description I am after: not a description of basic bodily movements like “I’m contracting my muscles in such and such a way”, but a description under which the action counts as intentional for the agent, revealing the action’s purpose or *telos* like “I’m pumping water with the aim of overthrowing the government”. The agent may well not know the narrowest descriptions that apply. Broad descriptions are not, however, to my mind, sufficient to count as non-observational knowledge.

Anne Newstead writes (2009: 166): “practical knowledge is simply *knowledge of reasons for acting*”. I see this as a step in the right direction, but matters are not quite so simple. As Paul has pointed out, the agent must – at some point – have gained the skill in which her non-observational knowledge is grounded. With this confirmed, one does not only know these broad descriptions Newstead refers to; one can also actively intend and perform them, precisely because of practical competence one has previously acquired. Such practical competence grounds the agent’s action repertoire and provides the basic explanation for why something like the claim from Anscombe (2000: 87) that “it is the agents’ knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention”. Of course, it is important to remember that “an intended effect just occasionally comes about by accident” (Anscombe, 2000: 39).

Anscombe does not discuss the distinction between expert and novice. I think it important: most of the time, someone expert in a skill will accomplish what she intends; the novice, who has not yet acquired the grounding for the appropriate non-observational knowledge, will experience more setbacks. That knowledge should qualify as non-observational in this way distinguishes my position from that of Newstead or Anscombe. Along with Paul, I cannot see how non-observational knowledge can arise completely without such grounding. The skill, ability, competence, know how, reliability – whatever one chooses to call it – that the agent needs to perform the actions she intends must have been acquired at some point. That achievement in hand, she needs not intend her use of the skill on every occasion for which it is necessary to the performance of an action. As Stanley (2010) argues, the agent must somehow have grasped that she has the competence and can apply it to perform what she intends. I see some problems in Stanley’s approach, but on this point he must be basically right – even though I am not sure what exactly the *something* is that the agent has grasped (Stanley calls it a truth). I might be inclined to say, as Lucy O’Brien does (2007: 165), that “one [is] acting against a grasp of possible things one could have done as basic actions”, even though she does not pinpoint just what the agent has grasped, either: only that one is aware of one’s options. Still, this may be all I need, and I can say that what the agent has grasped are simply the available ways to realize her intention practically. This practical knowledge is constitutive of what she is doing whenever her actions are intentionally performed, for reasons that fall under certain broad descriptions. Again, the narrow descriptions are often unknown to the agent, as Anscombe emphasizes (2000: 53):

The only description that I clearly know of what I am doing may be of something that is at a distance from me. It is not the case that I clearly know the movements I make, and the intention is just a result which I calculate and hope will follow on these movements.

Put differently, things that are teleologically basic are such that the agent need not intend them to perform them successfully. The agent is so skilled at performing them that she can do them even while making a slip – in which case, she lacks non-observational knowledge of what she is doing, precisely because she acts contrary to her intention. Some hold that this still counts as intentional behavior; but, clearly, in some sense it is not. The agent performs goal-directed movements, but the “why” question does not apply, and what the agent does is not the product of her practical reasoning. I believe people perform fewer intentional actions than is often assumed. Much of what one does is done automatically, with little or no reflection. One need not confer with one’s reasons; one simply falls into familiar routes and routines. I think this is how days go by for most of us.

Conclusion

Anscombe’s view that agents have non-observational, unmediated, or groundless knowledge of their own actions – a creator’s knowledge of what she herself creates – has been regarded by many as being highly problematic. For good reasons, I believe. It is not epistemologically satisfying. Knowledge does not appear out of thin air – not even for the agent who creates her own intentional act. Actually, Anscombe attests to the fact in her own theory through the concept of “mistake in performance”. The agent who makes such a mistake lacks, as Gjelsvik remarks, awareness of her act i.e. she does not know what she does then and there. She thinks that she does, but she is wrong. But if she is wrong, then the belief is based on *something false*¹⁶. In other words, it is based on something. It is not unmediated nor groundless. Anscombe should have offered further explanation here.

My suggestion is that though the agent does not have unmediated or groundless awareness of her own action, she does have non-observational knowledge, knowledge based on prior observations of her own behavior and agentive capabilities. Think about a novice learning to dance versus an accomplished master. The novice has to rely on observations of her own body in order to copy and reproduce the correct steps and movements. The novice dancer typically keeps looking at her feet. The master, on the other hand, knows what she does without looking.

It is often overlooked in the literature that Anscombe in her philosophy of action foremostly wrote about actions of the everyday kind, and not goals for the distant future. She focused on the elementary acts people perform in an everyday life, like reading books, getting cups of coffee, and opening windows. So, when Anscombe speaks about non-observational knowledge, these are the things she speaks about. Not getting Ph.Ds, getting married, or shooting bull’s eyes at target ranges. Importantly, non-observational knowledge does not constitute a psychological profile of oneself as an agent. It is the knowledge that one has about what one does as one is doing it. When opening a window I do not have to empirically verify that I am opening a window in order to know that I am opening a window. I do the motions, and I know that I do it because I know my capacity for executing my own intentions. Sometimes, though, I go through the motions and end up doing something else than what I intended, like getting up to fetch coffee and ending up in the bathroom wondering: what am I doing here? These are instances where non-observational knowledge is

lacking. Hence, they are good examples of just what Anscombe's means by non-observational knowledge. Namely, direct awareness of myself as an agent.

Having stated this, I agree with Anscombe's critics that she does not provide an adequate explanation as to how an agent comes by this knowledge. It is here I believe I can contribute by pointing out that non-observational knowledge is grounded in an agent's repertoire of basic actions, that our non-observational knowledge about what we do comes from an understanding of ourselves as doers and the knowledge how that we possess.

Anscombe holds that an agent's knowledge of her actions must involve more than mere knowledge of internal goings on: intentions, desires, etc. This "something more" is what happens in the world when one acts, as Anscombe emphasizes through her formula "I do what happens" (2000: §29): "...when the description of what happens is the very thing which I should say I was doing, then there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening".

The view that what one knows non-observationally when one acts is only the intention – the internal trying, willing, etc. – is nothing more for Anscombe than a "mad account" (2000: 52). I think she is right. That said, I argue with Paul for a more restrictive view, according to which the agent must have acquired her knowledge at some point previously. *Contra* Anscombe, it cannot be that knowledge comes – ever – completely without grounding. For any of an agent's actions, previously acquired knowledge lurks in the background. The agent can be made to reveal her reasons in response to a series of "why" questions about her action, in which case she will describe what she is doing under broader descriptions than the observer would otherwise have access to. This knowledge is unique to the agent. It allows her to say that what she is doing is overthrowing the government, when all that the observer can see is that she is pumping water.

Endnotes:

1. Paul writes: "In spite of our patent lack of omnipotence, it has been thought by some that through our intentional actions, we human agents can also have a special kind of knowledge of the world." (2009: 1) And: "our knowledge of our own minds is notoriously fallible and prone to error" (2009: 12).
2. In order to defend Davidson's theory, it could be objected that his theory is supposed to explain actions, but slips are not actions. This, however, is problematic seeing as slips are thoroughly intertwined with intentional action. Slips are clearly not intended *per se*, yet they always occur within a sequence of behavior that is. Moreover, slips are something that agents identify as their own doing. For example, pressing the wrong elevator button. Of course, the Davidsonian could object that the act is intentional under the description "the agent pushes a button", but allowing actions to be counted as intentional under a more generalized description is not a good move, for the agent did not simply intend to push whatever button – she intended a specific button, and she ended up doing something else. I will not dwell further into the topic, nothing substantial hinges on it.
3. Moran's (2004) article on the topic is illuminating; see in particular pp. 57-58.
4. My variation on Anscombe's example (2000: 57).
5. See Moran and Stone (2008) for a detailed discussion of Anscombe's view on expression of intention.
6. See also Falcon's SEP article on Aristotle and causality.

7. The agent can, of course, have further reasons beyond the reasons she has for the exact action that she is at present performing. In this case, for example, unless she is being irrational, she has reasons for wanting to overthrow the government. One such reason could be that the party members are corrupt (see Anscombe, 2000 p. 40: "...there is probably a further answer, other than 'just for fun'...").
8. Anscombe took inspiration from Aquinas. For him it described God's knowledge of His creation. God knows what the world is like, not because he finds out what it is like, but because it is just like he meant it to be. He knows what the world is like simply by meaning it to be that way. Anscombe's idea is that agents create their intentional actions in a similar sense.
9. Note that Paul is not explicitly attempting to interpret Anscombe in her paper. What she does is rather to make sense of Anscombe's claim about agency and non-observational knowledge in light of the discussions that Anscombe's claim spawned. However, in doing this, she does paint a picture of what is contained in Anscombe's claim, and it is this picture that I discuss. In general, I argue against the way Anscombe has often been received in the philosophical debate regarding agency and non-observational knowledge and offer a different take on the issue.
10. For the record, Paul acknowledges that Anscombe did not hold the view that practical knowledge is the efficient cause of the action it represents (Paul, 2009: 2).
11. Anscombe said very little about long-term plans. See Bratman's work for a thorough treatment of plans in all its facets.
12. Of course, the skilled dart player understands how good her throw is before the dart actually hits. She knows from experience what a good throw feels like, she can measure the wind etc., however Anscombe's focus was standard everyday actions and not endeavours that demand expertise.
13. That is, no performative demands that are not readily met by any normally functioning individual.
14. For the record: Newstead mentions the "why" question elsewhere, for example in her "Knowledge by Intention? On the Possibility of Agent's Knowledge" (2006).
15. Anscombe also thinks that an observer can often say straight off what a person she observes intends simply by reporting what this person is doing (2000: §4).
16. It is important to notice that what is false here, is not a false belief about how to perform the action in question, for example, the agent has no false belief about how to push the right button, she has a *true* belief about how to push the button she intends to push and she has the necessary skill, it is just that then and there her intention slips on the world, so to say, and she pushes the wrong button.

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