

# Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge'

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Among the legacies of Elizabeth Anscombe's 1957 monograph *Intention* are the introduction of the notion of 'practical knowledge' into contemporary philosophical discussion of action, and her claim, pursued throughout the book, that an agent's knowledge of what he is doing is characteristically *not* based on observation.<sup>1</sup> Each idea by itself has its own obscurities, of course, but my focus here will be on the *relation* between the two ideas, how it is that the discussion of action may lead us to speak of non-observational knowledge at all, and how this notion can be part of the understanding of a kind of ordinary knowledge that we have reason to consider practical rather than speculative. Anscombe mentions several quite different things under the heading of 'non-observational knowledge', and she first introduces the notion of the non-observational for purely dialectical purposes, associated with the task of setting out the field she wants to investigate, in a way that avoids begging the very questions she means to raise. She needs a way of distinguishing the class of movements to which a special sense of the question 'Why?' applies, but which doesn't itself employ the concepts of 'being intentional' or 'acting for a reason'. Section 8 begins: "What is required is to describe this class without using any notions like 'intended' or 'willed' or 'voluntary' and 'involuntary'. This can be done as follows: we first point out a particular class of things which are true of a man: namely the class of things which he *knows without observation*." (p. 13) She first illustrates this by the example of knowledge of the position of one's limbs, the immediate way one can normally tell, e.g., whether one's knee is bent or not. But examples of this sort are in fact ill suited to shed light on the idea of 'practical knowledge', which is the true focus of the idea of the non-observational in the study of action. When we see this we will be better able to see why Anscombe is concerned with the non-observational in the first place, and how this concern is tied to other characteristic Anscombian theses, for instance that an action will be intentional under some descriptions but not others, and that practical knowledge is distinguished from

<sup>1</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, USA, Harvard, 2000; originally published by Basil Blackwell, 1957).

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speculative knowledge in being “the cause of what it understands” (p. 87). And we will be able to understand how it is that an agent can be said to know without observation that he is doing something like painting the wall yellow, when this knowledge so patently involves claims about what is happening in the world, matters which it seems could *only* be known observationally.

What I hope to show is how the very idea of the non-observational comes to assume such an important role in Anscombe’s understanding of action, something she herself says very little about. Her account of practical knowledge is part of the more general project of reconciling what I take to be two commonplaces. On the one hand the agent’s own conception of what he is doing is not just another description, side by side with all the others, but has some claim to determine what the action itself is. There is a privileged relation, though not incorrigible, between what the agent is doing and what he takes himself to be doing. And on the other hand there is the commonplace that one can simply fail to do what one means to do, or do something quite other than what one takes oneself to be doing. I do not attempt to show that Anscombe’s notion of practical knowledge is perfectly clear, nor that her appeal to the ‘non-observational’ character of this knowledge is without problem. (Indeed, one of my purposes here is to untangle the quite distinct strands of this appeal, and to claim that they cannot all be expected to do the same kind of work in her argument.) But I do want to argue that both her appeal to a distinct kind of knowledge in action, distinct from theoretical knowledge, and her characterization of it as in some sense ‘non-observational’, have motivations that are deeper, more interesting, and more defensible than is commonly assumed.

### 1. Some varieties of the non-observational

**A**—The first and in some ways still most oft-cited example Anscombe gives of what she means by ‘non-observational knowledge’ is the awareness a person normally has of his basic bodily position:

“A man usually knows the position of his limbs without observation. It is without observation because nothing *shews* him the position of his limbs; it is not as if he were going by a tingle in his knee, which is the sign that it is bent and not straight.” (p. 13)

Certain aspects of this idea have been contested, of course, but it seems undeniable that a person does have an awareness of his

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bodily position and bodily movements which is different from the knowledge he may have of another person's position and movements by *watching* what they do. Normally one doesn't need to look down at one's leg to tell if it is bent or not, and while there may be kinesthetic sensations which accompany such awareness, it is not plausible that it is on the basis of attending to *them* that one can tell one's bodily position. For one thing, there are just too many different such positions which one *can* report on immediately and accurately, and it's hard to believe either that there *are* distinct sensations correlated with all these different positions *or* that one's ability to distinguish such sensations could possibly be what underwrites such knowledge. Agreement on this point is not crucial, however, for what is more important is the fact that the idea of the 'non-observational' in this context cannot do the sort of work the notion must carry in the rest of Anscombe's argument, with respect to extended actions, both present and future. We can see this when we compare this case to the second class of cases.

**B**—In several places, Anscombe speaks of 'practical knowledge' of what one is currently doing, where this is contrasted with, e.g., visual aids to knowledge and action. Examples include the knowledge that I am painting the wall yellow (p. 50), opening the window (p. 51), pushing the boat out (p. 54), and the knowledge of what one is writing without looking (p. 53 and p. 82). What is striking is that in these examples of ordinary actions, essential reference is made to events taking place *outside* the boundaries of the person's body, and yet Anscombe insists that *this* sort of knowledge of 'what I am doing' is *also* not based on observation.

I have argued that my knowledge of what I do is not by observation. A very clear and interesting case of this is that in which I shut my eyes and write something. I can say what I am writing. And what I say I am writing will almost always in fact appear on the paper. Now here it is clear that my capacity to say what is written is not derived from any observation. In practice of course what I write will very likely not go on being very legible if I don't use my eyes; but isn't the role of all our observation-knowledge in knowing what we are doing like the role of the eyes in producing successful writing? That is to say, once given that we have knowledge or opinion about that matter in which we perform intentional actions, our observation is merely an aid, as the eyes are an aid in writing. (p. 53)

How is it possible for the knowledge of what one is writing to be non-observational? It might be thought that non-observational

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knowledge of bodily position could still be the real basis for knowledge of extended actions, if we took a kind of two-factor approach to the knowledge of what one is doing, restricting its non-observational content to the confines of one's body and then adding to it the empirical knowledge of one's surroundings and the impact of one's body upon them. That is, it could be claimed that, to the extent that the idea of 'non-observational knowledge' is granted any plausibility at all, the *scope* of such knowledge is restricted to the boundaries of the agent's body, essentially the sort of awareness that a person has of the disposition and movements of his limbs (our category (A) here). The *appearance* of a similar awareness that extends *beyond* the body, as in the cases involving writing etc. that Anscombe is discussing above, could be explained away as the result of the agent's combining of his immediate bodily awareness with his fully empirical, observation-based knowledge of the physical *results* of the impact of his bodily movements upon the world. In this way, all that is really known without observation is contained in one's immediate proprioceptive awareness, and the action itself, as an efficacious event in the world, lies outside the scope of such awareness. If this general picture were correct, then there would be little reason left to insist on a basic difference between speculative knowledge and practical knowledge, since the idea of proprioceptive awareness, even if it is conceded to be 'non-observational', does not itself take us beyond the category of speculative knowledge. Anscombe, of course, rejects any such account, and for good reasons, as we shall see.

C—Further differences between the cases emerge when we consider the next category of the 'non-observational', what is sometimes called 'practical foreknowledge', which is the ordinary knowledge I may have that I will do something in the future because this is one of the options that is open to me and I have made up my mind to do it. This sort of knowledge is different, and differently based, from the sort of predictive, evidence-based, knowledge that another person may have of what I am going to do. This difference is illustrated by Anscombe's famous example of the man with the shopping list, and the different relations between *this* list and the items that actually end up in the shopping cart, and another list made by a detective following him and noting the items placed in the cart. (p. 56)

Although the phrase itself does not occur in this text, this example is the *locus classicus* for the idea of a difference in 'direction of fit' between an intention and a future action, and the 'fit' between a prediction or report and some future action. When intention and

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action fail to match, it is said, the mistake is in the *action*, whereas if the prediction or report fails to match the action then it is the report which is mistaken and must be corrected (as with the detective's list). So if we are willing to speak of 'knowledge' in both these cases, we can begin to see how observation would play a very different role for the detective than it does for the person making up the shopping list. Unlike theoretical or speculative knowledge, practical knowledge will not be passive or receptive to the facts in question, but is rather a state of the person that plays a role in the constituting of such facts. This is not to say that ordinary observation has no relevance here, but rather that it plays a different role than it does in the case of knowledge which *is* passive or receptive with respect to the facts in question.

**D**—This idea of a difference in 'direction of fit' is also clearly behind Anscombe's appeal later in the book to a phrase which Aquinas uses in distinguishing the operations of the practical intellect from those of the speculative intellect. Practical knowledge is said to be non-observational in that it is "the cause of what it understands", rather than being derived from objects known. (pp. 87–8) This might seem to be simply another way of making the point above (**C**). That is, if in the right circumstances my intention to pick up some milk at the store can be the basis of my practical knowledge that I *will* pick up some milk, then we may speak of my practical knowledge here, as embodied in my intention, as being "the cause of what it understands"; the cause, that is, of my getting some milk at the store. However, as we will see, it is important to the use Anscombe makes of this idea that the interpretation of 'cause' here in terms of *efficient* causes is at best a partial and misleading understanding of the sense in which one's intention to pick up some milk can be "the cause of what it understands". The point is not that the knowledge embedded in my intention helps to *produce* the movements that lead to the picking up of some milk, but rather that those movements would not count as my picking up some milk (intentionally) unless my practical understanding conceived of them in those terms. This will be important to understanding how the practical knowledge that I am, e.g., 'opening a window' can both extend to claims about windows and other ordinary observable objects and yet not itself be based on observation.

### 2. Delimiting the scope of non-observational knowledge

I share the sense of something phenomenologically apt in all of these cases of the putatively non-observational, but such aptness

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can be misleading both in encouraging us to amalgamate the different cases, and in obscuring the actual bases of Anscombe's argument about practical knowledge. Whatever is non-observational in the awareness of one's bodily position must on Anscombe's own account have a thoroughly different basis from, for instance, the practical foreknowledge of one's immediate plans, for the basic reason that such bodily awareness, however immediate or independent of particular sensations, remains an instance of *speculative knowledge*. What is known here is still 'derived from the object known', and the 'direction of fit' is still that of fitting the judgment to the independent facts. Even if immediate, and not grounded in observational evidence, the claim that one's knee is bent is still something corrected by the fact of one's straightened leg. Hence the immediate knowledge of one's bodily position cannot be an example of what Anscombe means by "practical knowledge", despite the intimate relation of such awareness to ordinary physical action, and despite the fact that both may be said to have a basis that is in some sense 'non-observational'.<sup>2</sup>

But the most basic difficulty one is likely to have with Anscombe's central claim is just in seeing how it could possibly be *true* of an extended action such as opening a window or painting a wall yellow, that the agent knows *that* he is doing this without observation. Surely, it seems, cases such as these are paradigms of observational knowledge. Even if we accept an account along the lines I suggested of the agent's practical foreknowledge that he will perform some action he has decided upon, and even if we accept that knowledge of bodily position is not based on awareness of corresponding sensations, it seems that the *only* way one could know the truth of a statement such as "I am (now) painting the wall yellow" is by looking at the wall and seeing what's happening there. Anscombe is fully aware of the provocative nature of her claim, and her defense of it is as forthright as it is obscure.

Now, it may be, e.g., that one paints a wall yellow, meaning to do so. But is it reasonable to say that one 'knows without observation' that one is painting a wall yellow?" [...]

My reply is that the topic of an intention may be matter on which there is knowledge or opinion based on observation, inference,

<sup>2</sup> This difference is often missed, but it is clearly made out in Rosalind Hursthouse's paper 'Intention', in Roger Teichmann, ed., *Logic, Cause, and Action* (Cambridge, 2000), where she credits Keith Donnellan's 'Knowing What I Am Doing', in *The Journal of Philosophy*, v. 60, n. 14; 1963.

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hearsay, superstition or anything that knowledge or opinion ever are based on; or again matter on which an opinion is held without any foundation at all. When knowledge or opinion are present concerning what is the case, and what can happen—say, *Z*—if one does certain things, say *ABC*, then it is possible to have the intention of doing *Z* in doing *ABC*; and *if the case is one of knowledge or if the opinion is correct*, then doing or causing *Z* is an intentional action, and it is not by observation that one knows one is doing *Z*; or insofar as one is observing, inferring etc. that *Z* is actually taking place, one's knowledge is not the knowledge that a man has of his intentional actions. 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!'.  
[emphases added] (pp. 50–1)

What I gather from this is that various kinds of observation-based knowledge *are* presumed in the context of ordinary intentional action, including the knowledge of what is the case and what can happen if one does certain things. And when I am *mistaken* in such a presupposition, say the assumption that running this paint-brush along the wall will make it yellow, then I have mistaken opinion and therefore not knowledge of any sort. When I do know or believe empirically that pressing this button will produce the result of ringing this bell, then I *can have* the intention of ringing the bell by pressing the button, otherwise not. And when this empirical knowledge is in place, and can be presumed by me (when it is *true* and therefore genuinely *knowledge*), then I can have available to me the awareness that I am *doing Z*, e.g., that I am ringing the bell, when this is an intentional action of mine. And *this* awareness of what I am *doing* is not observational knowledge. It is something distinct from my observation-based knowledge that doing *ABC* can result in *Z*.

But if this is right, then it raises questions anew about what the philosophical *importance* could be of the idea of the non-observational defined in this way, for it now looks as though it is the *observational* knowledge that is doing all the epistemic work here. We might agree, that is, that if we add to my knowledge of my immediate bodily movement the empirical "knowledge concerning what is the case and what can happen if one does certain things", then I may indeed be credited with the knowledge, for instance, that I am ringing the bell. But accepting this much may still leave one with the feeling that the non-observational component to this knowledge

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is rather thin, not something really extending beyond our category **(A)** here, and not something to make the cornerstone of one's account of human action. Further, such a reconstruction would not take us all the way to non-observational knowledge such as the knowledge that I am opening a window or painting a wall yellow, knowledge that must include what is going on with the *window*, for instance, and not just with my own limbs. And yet Anscombe clearly does want to claim that knowledge of a complete, extended action of this sort is also known by the agent non-observationally. [category **(B)** here] I'll return to this question soon.<sup>3</sup>

At this point Anscombe notes the temptation to respond to these difficulties by restricting the scope of what is known in action so that it will make sense to speak of this knowledge as non-observational. She mentions two ways in which this might be attempted. We could cut out the external world altogether and say that what is known is only the intention (or the 'willing'), or we could cut out everything beyond the surface of the person's body and say that what is known without observation is only the bodily movement itself (in effect reducing practical knowledge to the proprioceptive awareness of my category **A**.) Anscombe rejects both of these options.<sup>4</sup> But at the same time, in the long passage just quoted (p. 50), she seems to make her own restriction on the scope of what is known, so that it may count as something known without observation. That is, *if* I have empirical knowledge of what can happen if I

<sup>3</sup> Anscombe's own worry at this point in the text is something different. *Her* worry at this stage of the argument is that "if there are two *ways* of knowing here, one of which I call knowledge of one's intentional action and the other of which I call knowledge by observation of what takes place, then must there not be two *objects* of knowledge? How can one speak of two different knowledges of *exactly* the same thing?" (p. 51) For now, I simply want to mark this question and leave it aside, since it is not clear just what kind of difficulty this is. For one thing, the position and movement of one's limbs has already been mentioned as something that can be known in two very different ways, without this raising issues of two different *objects* of knowledge. (This difficulty is also noted by Hursthouse, *op. cit.* p. 97.) Later we will consider a different version of Anscombe's question: If another person can often be said simply to *see* what I am doing, how can I know the very same thing *without* observation?

<sup>4</sup> "I think that it is the difficulty of this question that has led some people to say that what one knows as intentional action is only the intention, or possibly also the bodily movement; and that the rest is known by observation to be the *result*, which was also willed in the intention. But that is a mad account; for the only sense I can give to 'willing' is that in which I might stare at something and will it to move." (51–2)



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do certain things, and if I know through observation (or otherwise) that Z can be the result of my doing ABC, *then* it is possible for me to have another sort of knowledge, the knowledge that *I am doing Z*. And *this* knowledge is not based on observation, although the intentional action that is its vehicle *does* presume the observation-based knowledge that Z can be the result of my doing ABC. Thus, the scope of what is known non-observationally includes 'what happens', but only insofar as this comes under the description of 'what I am intentionally *doing*'.

The idea of the restriction in scope here comes out one page later where she distinguishes between knowing without observation that I am writing something, and the observational role of the eyes as an *aid* in performing this action.

Someone without eyes may go on writing with a pen that has no more ink in it [...] but the essential thing he does, namely to write such and such, is done without the eyes. So without the eyes he knows what he writes; but the eyes help to assure him that what he writes actually gets legibly written. In the face of this how can I say: I *do* what *happens*? If there are two ways of knowing, there must be two different things known. (53)

Aside from whatever is thought to be problematic in the idea of "two ways of knowing", I think we might see her real problem in the following way: If what she calls "the essential thing" known by the person writing is something he knows without observation, but what is known here is consistent with there being no ink in the pen and hence no writing being formed, then the worry is that this really begins to resemble the account she rejected as a mad one just a few paragraphs back: "That what one knows as intentional is only the intention, or possibly also the bodily movement; and that the rest is known by observation to be the *result*, which was also willed in the intention." (pp. 51–2)

So the conclusion she *wants* is that I know what I am doing without observation, and that *what I do* and *what happens* are one and the same: "I *do* what *happens*. That is to say, 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." (pp. 52–3) But it keeps looking as if the conclusion she is actually steering toward is that as far as non-observational knowledge goes, this depends crucially on a *distinction* between 'what I do' and 'what happens'. That is, the *object* of my intention is a genuine resultant change in the world and not some purely interior happening. And *what* I end up doing is correctly described

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by naming some change in the world, e.g., washing the dishes. And my knowledge that I am *doing* this can be said to be non-observational only if we understand that this knowledge-of-doing depends on a background of *observation-based* knowledge of “what can happen—say, Z—f one does certain things, say ABC” (p. 50), *plus*, typically, the perceptual knowledge that serves as an *aid* in successfully carrying out this action. In this way, we could still say with Anscombe that “I *do* what *happens*,” but it won’t follow from this that my *knowledge* of what I am doing and my knowledge of what happens are the same. Hence the question I am trying to press here is not how it can *be* that “I do what happens”, but how Anscombe can claim that my *knowledge* that I am doing something can be non-observational, when *what I do* includes, for example, the window I am opening or the words I take myself to be writing.<sup>5</sup>

The problem is not that Anscombe is unaware of the possibility of error, or that the idea of the non-observational must suggest something incorrigible by the facts of what is happening or failing to happen in the world.<sup>6</sup> An agent will have such awareness of ‘opening a window’ *only when* an actual window is getting opened, and similarly for her examples of pushing a boat out or writing with a pen. Hence if the pen has run out of ink and no actual writing is

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, I think that the issues she goes on to take up at this point in the text do not directly address this question. For it is directly after the discussion of the shopping list and the difference in ‘direction of fit’ that she introduces the idea of ‘practical knowledge’ as a corrective to the modern “incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge.” (p. 57) But we should recall at this point that the shopping list and the analogy with commands seems most directly relevant to our category (C), the case of ‘Practical Foreknowledge’, and not to the case of knowledge of what I am *currently* doing, where this is said to include non-observational awareness of some happening beyond my immediate physical movements, our category (B). And yet it is these problems associated with the examples of opening the window and writing with one’s eyes closed that Anscombe takes herself to be pursuing at this point in the text.

For criticism of Anscombe on Practical Foreknowledge, see D. Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, 1989), especially pp. 18–22 and 102–5; and for a response to Velleman’s account see George Wilson, ‘Proximal Practical Foresight,’ *Philosophical Studies* 99 (2000), 3–19.

<sup>6</sup> “Say I go over to the window to open it. Someone who hears me moving 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.” (p. 51, emphasis added)

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getting done, then the agent's non-observational awareness is *mistaken*. This is all too easy to imagine. But as we've seen, Anscombe rejects the idea that in the *successful* cases, where a boat *is* getting pushed out, or writing *is* being produced, all that is really known by the agent immediately is something like the feelings of pressure in one's hands, or something else which excludes the actual boat or the window or the pen. She says two things in defense of this idea at this point (pp. 53–4). One is to point out that often the *only* way a person can describe what he is doing is by reference to objects and events beyond the confines of his body, as the person writing on the blackboard could say *what words* he is writing but could *not* describe this action in terms of any more 'immediate' motions of his hands and fingers.<sup>7</sup> In this way she seeks to undermine the idea that it is on the basis of this more immediate knowledge of the motions of one's hands that one knows what one is writing. Secondly, she appeals to the difference between knowledge of one's action being *based on* observation and being *aided by* observation. "Once given that we have knowledge or opinion about the matter in which we perform intentional actions, our observation is merely an aid, as the eyes are an aid in writing." (p. 53) Again, it is clear that whatever is known in practical knowledge will normally presume and depend on the observation-based deliverances of *speculative* knowledge. So one final way to put our question might be: if this is so, then in what way, if any, does 'what is known' in practical knowledge *go beyond* the observational knowledge that it requires? Without an answer to this question, Anscombe's appeal to the difference between knowledge *based on* observation and knowledge *aided by* observation will seem unhelpfully *ad hoc*. Anscombe needs an account of how the agent's 'practical knowledge' goes beyond his observational knowledge of what can happen and what is happening in order to avoid the charge mentioned earlier that, given the admitted dependence of successful action on empirical observations and assumptions, all the real epistemological work involved in the agent's knowing what he is doing is carried by his observational knowledge. What is still needed is a sense of practical knowledge that explains why its putatively non-observational character should matter to the account of intentional action, and which avoids the desperate measure of rescuing this character by restricting the scope of what is known to something that falls short of a genuine event in the observable world.

<sup>7</sup> "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." (p. 53)

### **3. What is done intentionally**

In describing practical knowledge as “the cause of what it understands” Anscombe says: “This means more than that practical knowledge is observed to be a necessary condition of the production of various results [...] It means that without it what happens does not come under the description—execution of intentions—whose characteristics we have been investigating.” (87–88) I take this to mean that if, for example, I do *not* have non-observational practical knowledge that I am clicking out a particular rhythm with the pump handle, then, as described this way *that* does not count as an intentional action of mine. It is something which I am indeed making *happen*, but it is not something I am *doing* in the sense of an intentional action of mine. This leads to a distinctive sense of practical knowledge as being ‘the cause of what it understands’, and it shows that the word ‘*what*’ here must get special attention. For the ‘*what*’ that is the object of one’s practical knowledge is not simply “the production of various results”, or the event of my movements themselves, but rather the *fact* that I am doing this rather than that. The ascription of practical knowledge thus creates an intensional context, and will depend on the description under which the action is picked out. Hence, if I *know* what I’m doing under the description ‘pumping water’, then *that* description can count as one of the descriptions of my *action*, as opposed to all the other things my movements may be *affecting*, or making happen. Thus the sense in which my practical knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’ is not primarily in the sense that my intention to do a particular thing is a necessary causal antecedent for my making the movements I do. That would be a fully extensional understanding of the sense of ‘cause’ here and the sense of ‘*what*’ that is understood in practical knowledge. Rather, Anscombe’s point is that practical knowledge, whose object is specified within an intensional context, determines which descriptions of ‘what happens’ may count as descriptions of what the person is intentionally *doing*. So the sense of the phrase from Aquinas is not about the efficient causal role of intention in producing movements, but rather concerns the formal or constitutive role of the description embedded in one’s practical knowledge making it the case that *this* description counts as a description of the person’s intentional action. If the agent didn’t *know* this happening under *this* description, then as so specified it *would not be* ‘what he is intentionally doing’. It is in this sense that ‘practical knowledge is the cause of that which it understands’. What practical knowledge understands is an intentional action, and

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it would not be the action it is, or perhaps any action at all, if it were not known by the agent in this way.

This interpretation may seem to run against the grain of Anscombe's earlier gloss on practical knowledge, for 'doing' and 'happening' play very different roles on the reading I am suggesting now, whereas her formulation "I *do* what *happens*" (52) insists on an identity between the two. But the clash is more apparent than real. For her claim there can be put as saying that what I *do* and what I thereby have non-observational knowledge *of* is indeed "what happens", a genuine alteration in the world and not some subjective event. The crucial point to be added is that my practical knowledge comprises factual knowledge that I am performing such-and-such an action, which indeed involves something happening, but this fact will be known by me only as described in certain ways and not in others. This is confirmed by what she says on pp. 52–3 as a gloss on the phrase 'I *do* what *happens*': "That is to say, *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." [emphasis added]

In one way it is right and in another it is not to say that in such a case "there is no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening". It is right insofar as one's doings are indeed happenings in the world, normally effectings of changes, such as 'opening the window', and the knowledge that one has in such a case is not something that stops short of the window itself. 'What I do' in such a case is not something restricted to the boundaries of my sensory body, nor is Anscombe concerned here with the claim that the agent's knowledge of his *intention* is something non-observational. Rather it is the actual accomplishment in the world that is said to be known in this way. But it is wrong or at best misleading here to say that there is "no distinction between my doing and the thing's happening" insofar as her claim that it is not by observation that I know that I am opening the window *depends* on the distinction between 'what I intentionally do' and 'what happens'. Understood, extensionally, I can know *what happens* only through observation, including the perception that serves as an aid in the execution of action such as writing on the blackboard (53), and the causal knowledge Anscombe refers to earlier as "knowledge or opinion concerning what is the case, and what can happen—say, *Z*—if one does certain things, say *ABC*" (50). With this empirical knowledge in place, I can form an intention to *do* something, such as opening a window, and then actually *do that thing*. But the event which is my action only counts as something I intentionally do only in virtue of some

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of its descriptions and not others, and my knowledge of it can be said to be ‘non-observational’ *only* under the terms of such descriptions. That is, Anscombe needs the difference between ‘what I do’ and ‘what happens’ in order that ‘practical knowledge’, which is said to be non-observational, not devolve into a kind of speculative knowledge of events, or a “very queer and special kind of seeing eye in the middle of acting” (57).<sup>8</sup>

### 4. The extent and the restriction of practical knowledge

Along these lines I see Anscombe’s insistence on the intensional character of thought and discourse about action as doing considerably more work in her account of practical knowledge than is usually supposed. It enables her to maintain her formulation that “I do what happens”, and avoid what she earlier characterized as the “mad account”, according to which practical knowledge of what one is doing does not involve reference to actual changes in the world. But it also provides a way to say that what is claimed in practical knowledge is nonetheless something which goes beyond speculative, observational knowledge of what is the case. For the agent’s practical knowledge commits itself not only to the obtaining of certain events in the world, but to the specification of the descriptions under which what happens counts as the execution of his intention. This knowledge depends on, but does not reduce to, the speculative knowledge of what can happen and what is happening, and in this way Anscombe may evade the charge mentioned earlier that the admitted dependence of successful action on ordinary observation must mean that the agent’s knowledge of what he is doing is ultimately observational after all. And finally, it puts us in a position to say more about why the idea of the non-observational should matter in the first place to the philosophical understanding of action, for the thought is that if the agent had to *look* in order to find out what he is doing, nothing he could observe of his movements or their surroundings could itself specify the descriptions under which what is happening counts as an intentional action of his at all.

David Velleman begins his book *Practical Reflection* with consideration of cases where the person’s ordinary practical knowledge of what he is doing momentarily fails: “You are walking up Fifth Avenue. All of a sudden you realize that you don’t know what you’re

<sup>8</sup> This section in particular has benefited from some comments from Helen Steward.

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doing.”<sup>9</sup> And, as he points out, in such cases where practical knowledge fails, the normal response to realizing this is to halt the movement one is engaged in until such knowledge can be recovered, as if intentional action could not continue when the agent realizes that he is missing the ordinary knowledge of what he is doing (and indeed this dependence is precisely what Velleman’s book as a whole seeks to account for and develop further). For our purposes right now, such cases enable us to see how it can be true both that the agent will normally depend on observation of various kinds to carry through an action like walking up Fifth Avenue (Anscombe’s “observational aids”), and also that the knowledge that is temporarily lost in such cases is nonetheless not made up for by further observations alone. The person stops and *looks around*, observing his position and his environment for clues to what he might have been up to, but this by itself does not deliver to him the knowledge of what he is or was doing, for it does not provide him with the particular set of descriptions of what he sees or the movements he is making, under which what he was doing counted as an intentional action of his.

There is an ordinary sense in which he *sees* the same things as he did when he was engaged in action (e.g., walking up Fifth Avenue). But there is also a sense in which what he sees is now blank to him, because he cannot articulate his own relation to it. The objects and scenes of his environment no longer have a role assigned to them in his ongoing action (as goal, obstacle, distraction, background, etc.). He sees Fifth Avenue, and he sees it from a particular perspective which indicates what direction he was heading in, but he does not see his goal. He does not see how his surroundings orient themselves with respect to his goal. Instead, he sees *everything* around him, the traffic going by, the meaningless street-signs, the strangers’ faces, and nothing in those details enables him to discern a destination, a point to his being right here facing in this direction.

If the agent doesn’t know what he’s doing, looking around him may provide him with clues, but the knowledge he gains from looking around is not the same as the practical knowledge he has temporarily lost, and in this way we can begin to see how practical knowledge *could not* be observational, could not be perceptually derived from the world. For nothing the agent sees in the world could give him those descriptions, even though *what* is claimed in practical knowledge is a world-involving matter of fact. The person who loses his awareness of what he is doing still has a richly

<sup>9</sup> P. 15, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, 1989)

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intensionalist discourse available to him for describing his experience, for what he knows concerning Fifth Avenue, the storefronts, the people, etc. will itself be ascribable to him only under certain descriptions and not others. But he is nonetheless missing something that he had before, a kind of knowledge which involves the world around him (i.e., is not confined either to his mental interior or the surface of his body), but which further observation of the world around him does not provide him with (though such observation may prod him to *recall* what he was doing). In this way the knowledge he has temporarily lost is something that goes beyond his observational knowledge. It may depend on perception in various ways, but what he knew before he lost it was not something derived or inferred from perception.<sup>10</sup>

Anscombe's framework will thus involve an account not only of the *extent* of practical knowledge (beyond the agent's intention, beyond the agent's body), but also of the parallel *restriction* of such knowledge to the specificities of certain descriptions. The same considerations that allow her to describe what is known by the agent as genuinely world-involving will also require that what is known is restricted in ways that would not apply to the deliverances of an organ of sense. For instance, in writing the word 'cat' on the blackboard, what the agent accomplishes is as fully determinate as the event which constitutes it: he is writing at a certain speed, holding the chalk at a certain angle, in a certain particular colored chalk, in letters of a certain size. Many of these features, of course, will be ones to which the agent is indifferent, and hence do not form part of his intentional action. These descriptions and countless others are made true by the action he is performing, but the agent's practical knowledge does not extend to what happens when described in

<sup>10</sup> Early in *Intention* Anscombe briefly connects the non-observational character of practical knowledge, with the role of such knowledge in selecting from all the extensionally true descriptions of a person at a given moment: "Well, if you want to say at least some true things about a man's intentions, you will have a strong chance of success if you mention what he actually did or is doing. [...] I am referring to the sort of things you would say in a law court if you were a witness and were asked what a man was doing when you saw him. That is to say in a very large number of cases, your selection from the immense variety of true statements about him which you might make would coincide with what he could say he was doing, perhaps even without reflection, certainly without adverting to observation." (p. 8)

The person in Velleman's situation has available to him "the immense variety of true statements" about himself and his situation, but lacks what would enable him to say what he is doing.



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those terms. That is because in referring to some event as an intentional action, we are constrained to descriptions that will capture 'what happened' as something the agent had a *reason* to make happen, and this provides us with a way to circumscribe the extent and the specificity of the agent's practical knowledge. For when an action is successful, it extends as far as the descriptions under which the agent has reason for pursuing the end which his action is aimed at realizing. If the reasons for writing on the blackboard require that the writing be legible but not that the chalk be of a particular colour (though of course the chalk will necessarily *be* of some particular color, and the agent may will know which color it is), then the agent's practical knowledge includes the legibility of the writing but not the particular color of the chalk. The range of descriptions under which the agent has practical knowledge that he is doing something (in the case of successful action) will be the same as the range of descriptions under which what happens is part of his aim in acting. Hence, the agent may be said to have practical knowledge that it is the word 'cat' which is getting written, but not the exact size of the letters in the word. It is these former descriptions which determine the content of the agent's practical knowledge, because these are the descriptions that figure in the reasons supporting the intention, and they are thus among the descriptions which the agent himself would give by way of explaining *what* he did (the identity of his action) and why he did it.

This does not mean that we must picture the agent as entertaining a whole range of intensionally-specified thoughts each time he acts in pursuit of some goal. If for no other reason, that would be a conclusion to avoid in light of the utter pervasiveness of intentional action, large and small, in our daily lives. During our waking moments, but not restricted to our reflective ones, we are more or less *always* engaged in intentional activity of one sort or another, both small and large, immediate and long-range. Some of these actions that are the result of explicit choosing and weighing between different options, but much of what we intentionally do involves no such prior planning or reflecting on reasons, but is more like something we find ourselves doing in the course of the stream of other activities. And yet, even for the less reflective and more spontaneous of our actions, the norm is for the person to know what he is doing, and to know this in knowing his reasons, and hence to know his action under some descriptions and not others. But the assumption that the person knows what he is doing at a given moment does not require anything like explicit consciousness of his reasons. We can see this by consideration of what happens to the

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person in Velleman's example when he temporarily loses his practical knowledge of what he is doing in walking up Fifth Avenue. In describing the change that leads him to stop in his tracks, it is not as if we are imagining that prior to this moment he must have any particular thoughts or descriptions in mind as he walked along. Instead he just 'knows what he is doing' in the ordinary, non-articulated sense. He knows his reasons for what he is doing, but not because he is thinking about them, or is describing his own behavior in some terms but not others. What changes is not that he goes from explicit awareness of his reasons to unawareness of them, but rather that before this he *could* become consciously aware of them by reflecting on what he is doing, and now when he reflects he finds that he cannot become so aware. The *recovery* of this knowledge will likely involve explicit reflection on his reasons, as well as the observation of his surroundings, but that doesn't mean that what he has temporarily lost is something either observational or explicit. Hence Anscombe's 'practical knowledge' does not involve some phenomenological vehicle, something containing a certain description, a "seeing eye in the middle of acting" (Anscombe, p. 57) which filters what it sees through the veil of some description. The knowledge thus attributed is non-observational, not because the agent is thought to have some non-observational awareness of these descriptions, but because these descriptions pick out an *aim* of his, and it is not by observation that one knows one's aims or knows what will count as the realization of one's aims.

### 5. Practical, speculative, and their possibilities of failure

The agent can, of course, be flatly wrong about what he takes himself to be doing, for instance when the wall is not getting painted yellow (p. 50), or when the pen runs out of ink without his noticing (p. 53), or more generally when the empirical conditions enabling a particular action fail to obtain. If he is wrong in assuming that writing is getting produced, then he cannot have practical knowledge that he is writing. In considering this sort of case, Anscombe herself seems to confuse the requirement of truth for knowledge, which applies to any knowledge, practical or speculative, with the question of whether it is the action or the (putative) knowledge that is to be corrected in the case of disparity:

"That intention, for example, would not have been executed if something had gone wrong with the chalk or the surface, so that the words did not appear. And my knowledge would have been

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the same even if this had happened. If then my knowledge is independent of what actually happens, how can it be knowledge of what does happen? Someone might say that it was a funny sort of knowledge that was still knowledge even though what it was knowledge of was not the case! On the other hand, Theophrastus' remark holds good: 'the mistake is in the performance, not in the judgement'." (p. 82)

But it is *not* a good answer to this problem of error and knowledge to advert to Theophrastus and the thought that the mistake here lies in the *performance* and not in what is *said*. To disqualify as knowledge, it doesn't matter where the error comes from so long as there is error; 'direction of fit' considerations are not to the point here. The distinction between practical and speculative knowledge does not concern the requirement of truth, but the question of what is to be corrected in cases of failure of fit.<sup>11</sup> But as with knowledge generally, while practical knowledge requires truth, it does not require being beyond risk of error. Observational aids and the general cooperation of the world will be necessary for the agent to be in a position to have practical knowledge of what he is doing, and when these fail then the claim to knowledge must fail as well. But this dependence does not by itself mean that the knowledge in question must really be observational after all, any more than the dependence of one's mathematical knowledge on the good working order of a calculator or a teacher or one's own brain means that such knowledge is really empirical and not *a priori*.<sup>12</sup>

However, I think that understanding Anscombe's emphasis on the intensional character of attributions of intentional action as well as attributions of practical knowledge enables us to see how the possibilities and consequences of error are importantly different for speculative and practical knowledge. Toward the end of *Intention* Anscombe says "It is necessarily the rare exception for a man's performance in its more immediate descriptions not be what he supposes" (p. 87), and this claim is followed immediately by the sentence, "Furthermore, 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." "It is necessarily the rare exception", I take it, because when the agent's practical knowledge *does* fail in this way, we may find ourselves unable to say what intentional action he

<sup>11</sup> I have been helped here by some remarks of David Velleman, although my way of putting this point may not be in line with his.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Burge, Tyler, 'Content Preservation', *Philosophical Review* 102, No. 4 (October 1993).

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is performing at all, even though the general form of action-description still seems to apply. For imagine one of Anscombe's cases where our agent is failing at making true one of these "more immediate descriptions" of what he is doing. Something has gone wrong with the chalk and no writing is appearing, or something has gone wrong with the paint brush and the wall is not getting painted yellow. (p. 53, p. 82) In such a case if we ask 'what is he doing?', an answer such as 'painting the wall yellow' is unavailable to us for the simple reason that it is not true. And, not being true, it is not something of which we, as observers, could suppose the agent to have practical knowledge. But in such a case it is not clear that there is any *better* answer that could be given to the question what intentional action he is then performing.

That is, let's suppose that in the event of success in action, one true description of what he is up to is 'painting the wall yellow'. Such a description counts as a true answer to the question not only by fitting the facts about what is happening there on the wall, but also only insofar as this description of what is happening there on the wall fits a certain structure. For, as we've seen, there are many other true descriptions of what is happening as a result of these movements that would *not* be truthful answers to the question 'What are you (intentionally) doing there?'. He may be dripping paint on the floor, or covering up an unseen inscription on the wall, aggravating the bursitis in his elbow, etc. If he is failing at painting the wall yellow, neither of us can simply retreat to one of these extensionally true descriptions of what is happening as an answer to the question 'What is he doing?'. To give one of *them* as a revised answer to the question would be as false as it would be now to say that he is painting the wall yellow.<sup>13</sup> An answer that gives the content of the agent's *practical knowledge* must conform to the structure under which what is happening is described as an *intentional action*, and this imposes requirements on the possible content of practical knowledge that do not constrain claims to speculative knowledge. Practical knowledge applies to only one domain: the agent's own intentional actions; whereas the possible objects of speculative knowledge are as unlimited as the range of knowable truths. Given this restriction of the domain of practical knowledge, it follows that what is thereby known must be something "to which a certain sense of the question 'Why?' is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting." (p.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that nothing a person *does* can fall outside of what he *intended*, that accidents are not possible, or that we don't sometimes respond to accidents by saying "Look what you've *done!*"

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9). This question asks for some *point* to what the person is doing, even if that point is nothing involving some *further* end, but simply that of doing it for its own sake. And even here there will be such a point to what the person is doing only when that happening is described in certain terms and not in others. As described differently but no less truly, what the person has caused to happen may be something he has no reason to pursue, may be something from which he recoils in horror or embarrassment, and thus under such a description Anscombe's question 'Why?' is refused application. If there is nothing the person is making happen which can be described in terms of some aim of his, then nothing happening can be an object of his practical knowledge. What this means is that the range of descriptions under which what is happening is a possible object of practical knowledge may be quite narrow, certainly more narrow than the range of descriptions under which one might qualify a claim to speculative knowledge of something, and when some preferred description of the action (e.g., 'painting the wall yellow') is shown to fail, there may be no other true description of what is happening that would fall within the range of things being done of which the agent has practical knowledge.

If we are watching someone with a paint brush, the point of asking the question 'What is he doing?' depends on the assumption that the agent does know what he is doing. And it assumes as well that his epistemic position with respect to this question is different from ours or that of some other observer, for the observer, after all, can see as well as he can what is *happening* or not happening here. His question is asking for something which goes beyond this. And then we can express the problem this way. The agent is plainly doing something; it is not the case that these movements lie outside of action description altogether, if that means that either the agent or the observer confronts them as some kind of reflex. And yet he is also plainly not doing what he takes himself to be doing "in its more immediate description". So the observer knows that this person cannot be said to have practical knowledge of what he is then doing. And yet, in Anscombe's words, "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" (p. 87). Here the observer can see that there is no description of what is happening that would count either as contributing to an aim the agent has, or as something he is pursuing for its own sake. There seems to be no weaker action description to fall back on, which would be a true answer to the question "What is he doing?" where the doing is meant to refer to an intentional action.

What I mean by a weaker description is a statement of what he is

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doing, where this statement is an expression of his practical knowledge; that is, we seem to lack a place for a claim of the *same form* as the claim that has just come to grief, but now a more circumscribed claim that will still count an expression of his practical knowledge of what he is doing. Such possibilities of qualification and retreat are part of the very texture of claims to *speculative* knowledge of one sort or another. I claim that there is a goldfinch at the bottom of the garden, but my companion corrects me. I then may say, "Well, it's either a goldfinch or a goldcrest", and then perhaps I have to retreat from this too, and so on. There is still quite some distance I may have to go before I'm willing to entertain the thought that I know *nothing* here (Well there's a bird there anyway", "I'm telling you I saw *something*"). In familiar ways, this process of retreat and recovery can become merely tedious, or it can be part of the ordinary process of actually getting more precise. The important point for now is that at each stage of revision, the person here is still entitled to make a claim of the same sort, a claim to speculative knowledge. But the situation of the person with the paint brush or the chalk seems different. In the event of failure of this kind (i.e., in the action's "more immediate" descriptions), although there are certainly things he can *say* about what is happening, we may arrive more quickly at the point where there is no weaker claim to practical knowledge of what he is doing to which he can retreat, a claim of the same form as the one he has been forced to withdraw.

If the wall is not getting painted yellow, it will not answer our question to say, for instance, "He is dripping paint on the floor", or "He is aggravating his bursitis." These would not answer our question, even assuming their truth and even assuming he was then and there aware of this truth. The reason for this is not only that we may assume that 'aggravating his bursitis' is not the description of an intentional movement of his. (It may be the *result* of an intentional movement of his, but so is digestion the result of the intentional movements connected with eating. But digestion is not an action.) For it would also not be an answer to our question for him to say: "I am moving my arm back and forth across this wall, can't you see?"—even though, unlike the other two examples, *this* might be thought to be one of the descriptions under which his movements count still as willed or voluntary (p. 89). For *this* to count as an answer to the question "What are you doing?", he would need to have practical knowledge either of some aim he has in moving his arm back and forth as such, or the fact that he is doing this simply for its own sake, which is also possible. This latter type of practical knowledge is *not* the same as having *no* answer to the question of

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why one is making some movement. It is not what is "left over" after any and all practical purposes have been ruled out. Rather, making this movement "for its own sake" would be specifically a positive answer to the question of what one is doing *in* making this movement, and as such is an expression of the agent's practical knowledge. But often neither of these types of answer will be available in the case of this sort of failure.

At this point it may be insisted that the person is at least *trying* to paint the wall yellow, and that this is a good answer to Anscombe's question 'What is he doing?' Sometimes, of course, that will certainly be the response, but it will not always serve as an answer to *this* question. If 'trying' is meant to refer to some more purely internal occurrence, then saying this may well be a way of making the person's movements intelligible to us, but it will not be a description of what the person is *doing* in the sense to which Anscombe means her claim to apply. It's important to recall that for her the expression of practical knowledge is a claim about what is *getting done*, a world-involving intensional description, and not a claim about one's intentions or tryings, when these are meant to be understood in a way that is independent of what happens. It is clear that, on her understanding of the terms, the claim to practical knowledge *fails* in the cases we are discussing, as it would *not* fail if it involved a claim only of what one is trying to do, in this purely internal sense. Practical knowledge is defined by her as knowledge of what one is *doing*, and "I do what happens" (p. 52). On the other hand, 'trying' need not be understood this way, of course, and commonly refers to the means employed to achieve some end. In the case of a more extended action-description, such as 'fixing a leak', the trying in question will itself consist in other describable actions, and the more immediate ones of these will be those to which Anscombe means her claim to apply (e.g., "I tried tightening it, and I tried taping it." See Anscombe's claim from p. 87). Here the person's trying to fix the leak consists in other describable actions, actions which can succeed or fail. If the leak is not in fact getting fixed, it will indeed still be true that the person is *trying* to fix it, and if so then he will have practical knowledge that he is, e.g., taping the pipe, or twisting the bolt. And if the action which constitutes this trying also fails, so that no tightening of the bolt is in fact taking place, he may still retreat to the claim that he is *trying* to tighten it (e.g., by holding the wrench this way and that, turning it, etc.). But this can be an answer to the original question 'What are you doing?', one that is on the same level as the claim that failed ('tightening the bolt') only because there is a straightforward way in which the

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person can see what he *is* doing (holding the wrench in place, pulling on it) as potentially contributing to the realization of the aim in question. This follows from the teleological structure of action. It is because the person can see what he is doing as contributing to an aim of his that it can be part of an intentional action of his and hence a possible object of his practical knowledge. And it is for this reason that an answer of this form ('trying to tighten the bolt') can be an answer to the question of what he is doing, an answer that is weaker than, but on the same level as, the original claim that failed. When we turn back to Anscombe's original cases of failure, however, it is much less clear that these conditions will always be fulfilled. If someone takes himself to be painting the wall yellow (p. 50), and discovers that either there is no paint on the brush or that it is red paint, he will not continue as before while retreating to claim "Well, I'm *trying* to paint the wall yellow, anyway", for that could only be an answer if he thought that moving the brush either with no paint or red paint on it could be a possible *way* of painting the wall yellow. Someone can be said to be *trying* to do X only if he can see what he is doing as potentially contributing to the achievement of X, and the cases Anscombe is concerned with fail in this regard. This kind of failure of knowledge of the action "in its more immediate description" may thus provide no weaker, substitute claim that is both a true description of what is happening and something which, as so described, the agent understands himself to have a reason to pursue. Without that there is nowhere to enter a claim to practical knowledge, and the agent's realization of this brings action to a halt.

By contrast, claims to speculative knowledge have greater resources for retreat and recovery when one's original claim has to be withdrawn, while maintaining the general claim to be in some relation of knowing to the way the world is. When my claim "There's a goldfinch in the bottom of the garden" fails, there are various weaker claims I can still insist on as expressing something that I *know*, and thus I can still maintain a claim of the same kind as the one that had to be withdrawn. For instance, there will normally be various more *general* descriptions of what I saw to which I can retreat and recover my claim to know something, whereas it will only be in special circumstances that a more general description of what I am doing will also satisfy the requirements of an object of practical knowledge (e.g., "All right, I may not be writing my name on the board, but I'm certainly making some marks."). If no writing is being formed by my movements, there may well be no other description of my movements that I could give, certainly no purely physical description, and not one that I could deliver without observation of



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myself and my surroundings. I knew my movements and could describe them only insofar as they contributed to my aim of writing on the blackboard. If they now do *not* contribute to any aim of mine that I recognize, they are not a possible object of my practical knowledge. And lacking an alternative description of those movements, according to which they would count as contributing to the realization of some aim, there will not be another weaker claim of the same sort (that is, a claim to practical knowledge) to which I might retreat and qualify my claim to know what I'm doing.

Speculative knowledge is not the cause, either formally or materially, of what it understands; and it follows from this that the failure of a speculative knowledge claim does not have the same consequences as a failure of practical knowledge. If a particular practical knowledge claim fails, then it is no longer the case that, within the specific terms of that knowledge, the event in question counts as an intentional action. Because of the relation of formal causality, a failure of practical knowledge means that the event in question no longer counts as a thing of a certain kind (an intentional action, as described in those terms). ("Without it, what happens does not come under the description—execution of intentions—whose characteristics we have been investigating." (p. 88)) An object of speculative knowledge, on the other hand, is independent, both formally and materially, of being known. No particular person stands in a relation to these facts such that they would not *be* the facts they are if they were not known by that person in a particular way. Because of this, a failure of some claim to speculative knowledge does not make any difference to the character of the object of that failed claim. Its being known in certain terms was not part of its character as a possible object of speculative knowledge, and hence when such a claim fails, the object in question remains intact, as it were, with all its properties, and stands ready to receive another more guarded attempt at a successful claim to knowledge.

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This paper began by exploring the thought that there is some privileged relation (though not one of incorrigibility), within intentional action, between what an agent is doing and what he takes himself to be doing. A better way to put this now would be to say that Anscombe's conception of practical knowledge points to the place where *one* person's conception of the action does not bear only an epistemic relation to the action (that is, a theoretical or a descriptive relation), but rather also plays a role in constituting it *as* the action it is. For *practical* knowledge, on her account, is a necessary condi-

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tion for the thing known to be the sort of thing it is, vis. the agent's intentional action. *This* sort of awareness of what I am doing is not just a kind of access to it which I have and which other people do not have, as in the case of awareness of the position of one's limbs.<sup>14</sup> The fact of my leg's being bent or straight is not dependent on, or in any way constituted by, my being aware of it as such. The person's non-observational awareness of this position is not "the cause of what it understands" either in the sense of an efficient cause or a formal cause.

The situation is different with respect to knowledge of what one is doing. An observer can be said to *see* straight off what someone is doing only if he is entitled to assume that the agent himself knows what he is doing *without* looking. The agent himself cannot know what he is doing intentionally by looking, if that means *only* by looking. For if he can't know this non-observationally, in the manner of practical knowledge, then there is nothing of the right kind for another person to *see* him doing. What the notion of 'privilege' comes to here is that if the agent doesn't know what he is doing, then no one else *can* know. This does not mean that the agent is always *right* about what he is doing, but that any observer's knowledge of what he is doing is dependent on the assumption that the agent himself does know, for "it is the agent's knowledge of what he is doing that gives the description under which what is going on is the execution of an intention." (p. 87) And moreover, what the observer can know is dependent on the assumption that the agent knows what he is doing *without* observation. When such practical knowledge is known to fail, then those descriptions are unavailable to both agent and observer, and yet falling back on one of the many extensionally true descriptions of what is happening will not tell either of them what intentional action, if any, he is performing.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For all I've said here, it may be that such non-observational awareness of the position of one's limbs is a necessary condition for ordinary agency. What I'm concerned to argue here is that such awareness does not play any constituting role for one's limbs being in a certain position.

<sup>15</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were delivered at the University of Edinburgh at the conference on 'The Will in Moral Psychology' in July 2002, and at the Royal Institute of Philosophy conference on 'Agency and Action' held at Oxford University in September 2002, and I'm grateful to the audiences on both those occasions. In the early stages of writing I had especially encouraging conversations with Martin Stone and Ed Minar. I also benefitted from the comments of Luca Ferrero, Richard Holton, Jennifer Hornsby, Adam Leite, Lucy O'Brien, Michael Smith, David Velleman, Bernard Williams, and George Wilson. Special thanks to the editors of this volume for comments at the final stages.