# G. E. M. Anscombe: Intention

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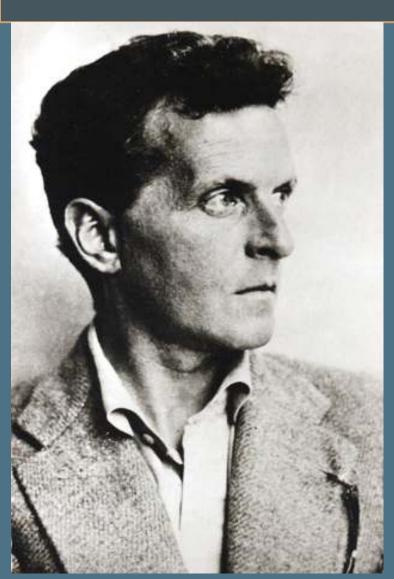
University of Idaho

## **GERTRUDE ELIZABETH MARGARET ANSCOMBE**

Born Limerick, Ireland, 18 March 1919 Entered Oxford as a student at St. Hugh's college in 1938 Began studying Catholicism immediately, converted shortly thereafter Moved to Cambridge in 1942, where she met Ludwig Wittgenstein Moved back to Oxford in 1946 Moved back to Cambridge in 1970, where she retired, holding the same Chair that Wittgenstein held

Died 5 January 2001

### LUDWIG WITTGENTSTEIN



### 26 April 1889–29 April 1951

Was in Vienna in the 1920s, where his work influenced the Vienna Circle (although he was not a part of the circle)

Moved to Cambridge in 1929 and spent most of the rest of his life there

Famous in his own day: when he arrived in Cambridge, Keynes wrote to his wife, "Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train."

### Major works

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921) Philosophical Investigations (1953)

### PHILOSOPHICAL INVESIGATIONS & "ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY"

## Ludwig Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations

TRANSLATED BY G.E.M. ANSCOMBE

### **Context: Logical Positivism**

Thought that one of philosophy's principal tasks was to explain the logical structure of modern science

Importantly and specifically, to explain the logical connections between empirical experience and the laws of scientific theory

### The primacy of (the philosophy of) language

Logic studies the relations within and between propositions (contrast, e.g., geometry and shape)

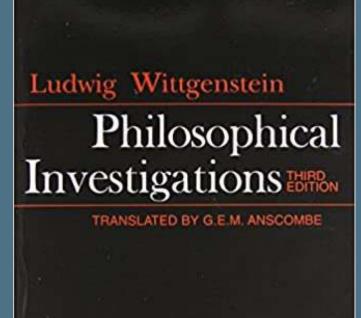
If science has a logic, then it is because of the logical relations that hold between scientific propositions

So, the study of the relation between experience and theory becomes the study between *observation sentences* and *theoretical sentences* 

#### Two important tenants

Most metaphysics is garbage Lots of ordinary language use is meaningless

### PHILOSOPHICAL INVESIGATIONS & "ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY"



Accepts the idea that when we do philosophy, we cannot get beyond language

Philosophy is about argument, asking for and giving reasons These are linguistic phenomena

So, the positivists are right about most metaphysics: it is mostly garbage

Disagrees with the artificial picture of language advanced by logical positivism

Most ordinary language use is meaningful

So, a key part of doing useful philosophy is to be asking ourselves constantly, "What do we mean when we say x?"

### **INTENTION**

"What **Anscombe** has done is to cut through a whole mess of philosophical clichés, and to give us a fresh, detailed picture of the concept of an action, and of related notions such as that of a reason for acting—and this in a way which brings out clearly the sources of a host of philosophical muddles in which one can find oneself in dealing with these concepts. To have done that is to have made a significant contribution to philosophy."—Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Journal of Philosophy* 

"Anscombe's classic work is the font from which all subsequent philosophical thought about agency flows."—Robert B. Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

"Elizabeth Anscombe's Intention is an extraordinary work: with penetrating acumen, delightfully dry wit, and not a single wasted breath, over the course of less than a hundred pages, it manages to make signal contributions to the philosophy of action, mind, and language, to moral philosophy, and to the interpretation of Aristotle and Wittgenstein."—James Conant

"Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."-Donald Davidson, University of California, Berkeley

*"Intention* opened for philosophical exploration a territory of thought, and laid out the swamps and thickets capable of trapping unwary philosophers. It is still an indispensable guide."—Cora Diamond, University of Virginia

"Anscombe's fusion of the Aristotelian and analytical traditions is one of the highest peaks of 20th century philosophy; it has lost none of its power to destroy philosophical complacency and excite new philosophical thought."—Michael Thompson, University of Pittsburgh

"Often quoted, sometimes read, rarely understood, **Anscombe**'s *Intention* is nevertheless the defining moment in 20th-century philosophy of action."—J. David Velleman, University of Michigan

*"Intention* is a classic of modern philosophical psychology. It is unashamedly Wittgensteinian in organization and style—and Wittgensteinian too in its breaking of new ground and unerring sense of a new question, an unnoticed connection, an unexamined assumption. The freshness and intensity of the writing remain most impressive."—Crispin Wright, University of St Andrews

### g.e.m. anscombe INTENTION

"Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."

DONALD DAVIDSON

### **INTENTION §1**



"Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."

DONALD DAVIDSON

Very often, when a man says 'I am going to do such-and-such', we should say that this was an expression of intention. We also sometimes speak of an action as intentional, and we may also ask with what intention the thing was done. In each case we employ a concept of 'intention'; now if we set out to describe this concept, and took only one of these three kinds of statement as containing our whole topic, we might very likely say things about what 'intention' means which it would be false to say in one of the other cases. For example, we might say 'Intention always concerns the future'. But an action can be intentional without being concerned with the future in any way. Realising this might lead us to say that there are various senses of 'intention', and perhaps that it is thoroughly misleading that the word 'intentional' should be connected with the word 'intention', for an action can be intentional without having any intention in it. Or alternatively we may be tempted to think that only actions done with certain further intentions ought to be called intentional. And we may be inclined to say that 'intention' has a different sense when we speak of a man's intentions simpliciter-i.e. what he intends to do-and of his intention in doing or proposing something-what he aims at in it. But in fact it is implausible to say that the word is equivocal as it occurs in these different cases.

## INTENTION §1



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Where we are tempted to speak of 'different senses' of a word which is clearly not equivocal, we may infer that we are in fact pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents. There is, however, nothing wrong with taking a topic piecemeal. I shall therefore begin my enquiry by considering expressions of intention.

### THREE WAYS WE TALK ABOUT INTENTION

"Very often, when a man says 'I am going to do such-and-such', we should say that this was an expression of intention. We also sometimes speak of an action as intentional, and we may also ask with what intention the thing was done."

#### 1. Intention for the future: current mental state

Example: I intend to visit Toronto when travel becomes feasible. What could the intention here be besides some psychological state of mine?

#### 2. Intentional action: a species of event

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Contrast: I slip and accidentally knock you over vs. I intentionally push you over

#### 3. Intention with which something is done: a kind of reason

Example: Someone sees my walking to my office today and says, "Why are you going to your office? The semester is over!"

I respond, "Because I want to use the computer in my office for a talk on Anscombe I've giving this afternoon."

This is the reason, purpose, goal, telos of my action.

## HANG ON: WHY CARE ABOUT THIS?

Harry S. Truman ordered the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and in 1956, Oxford proposed to give him an honorary degree

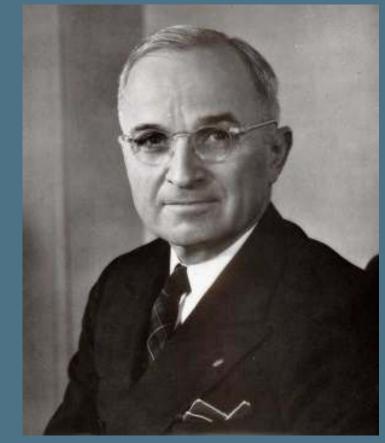
Anscombe (and some of her colleagues) were furious; as far as Anscombe was concerned, Truman was a mass murderer for dropping the bombs

Here, her Catholic background matters—her opposition to Truman is driven by her embrace of the *doctrine of double effect* 

If Truman intentionally did something morally permissible (e.g., send troops into Japan), and this predictably led to something impermissible (e.g., innocent civilians being killed), then his action *might* be permissible

But, Anscombe thought, that's not what Truman did: he *intentionally killed* tens of thousands of innocent civilians, and that's murder

But, what about the argument that Truman saved millions by killing these thousands?



### THIS TAKES US TO ANSCOMBE'S 2<sup>ND</sup>–MOST FAMOUS WORK...

## "MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY"

# PHILOSOPHY

#### THE JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY

VOL. XXXIII, No. 124

JANUARY 1958

#### MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY'

#### G. E. M. ANSCOMBE

I WILL begin by stating three theses which I present in this paper. The first is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My third thesis is that the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

### The three theses, in reverse:

1. Most English-language moral philosophy since the 1870s is basically the same

Anscombe coined a term for what unites them: *consequentialism* 

These views don't have the resources to express the doctrine of double effect and so can't express why it was wrong for Truman to order the bombings

(Aside: she invents the term 'consequentialism' here and announces the project of virtue ethics...and as for deontology...)

2. Moral philosophers ought to stop talking about "the moral sense of 'ought"

3. In fact, moral philosophy should is basically pointless until we have an adequate "philosophy of psychology"

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## *INTENTION:* A PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY

Reviewing the project—analyze the three ways 'intention' and its cognates are used

- 1. Intention for the future: current mental state
- 2. Intentional action: a species of event
- 3. Intention with which something is done: a kind of reason

Strategy: see if one of these three uses is *prior* to the rest, *explains* the rest of the uses

#### Anscombe thinks most of her contemporaries will start with (1):

"...a man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing.... [T]his conspires to make us think that if we want to know a man's intentions it is into the contents of his mind, and only into these, that we must enquire; and hence, that if we wish to understand what intention is, we must be investigating something whose existence is purely in the sphere of the mind; and that although intention issues in actions, and the way this happens also presents interesting questions, still what physically takes place, i.e. what a man actually does, is the very last thing we need consider in our enquiry.

Whereas I wish to say that it is the first."

G.E.M. ANSCOMBE

INTENTION

"Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment

of action since Aristotle."

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## ANSCOMBE'S TARGET: PSYCHOLOGISM

This pumper—call him pumper A—is (1) moving his arms up and down...

...and thereby (2) operates the pump...
...and thereby (3) replenishes the house water supply...
...and thereby (4) deliberately poisons the inhabitants.

Contrast this with the case where (1)-(3) hold but (4) does not. In this case, the pumper—call him pumper B—poisons the inhabitants accidentally.

Do pumper A and pumper B do the same thing? Legally? Almost certainly not. Morally? Almost certainly not. Metaphysically? Not clear...so let's do some philosophy!



## ANSCOMBE'S TARGET: PSYCHOLOGISM

Psychological/epistemic differences between the two pumpers:

Pumper A wants to poison the inhabitants and knows he is doing so

Pumper B does not want to poison the inhabitants and does not know he is doing so

Psychologistic hypothesis: this is a difference in intention between the two, and it is primarily a *causal* difference

Maybe this means the actions are different, or maybe not What is different, and what matters for the legal/moral difference, is the cause of the action

On this view, intentions are psychological springs that set action in motion



### CHALLENGING PSYCHOLOGISM

### First step: The how-many-intentions argument

Anscombe asks: how many actions does pumper A perform?

1? 4? An infinite number? A very large number?

Her answer: all action is action under a description

You don't individuate and count actions the way you do cheetahs and chairs

# We can ask the parallel question: how many intentions does he have?

- 1? 4? An infinite number? A very large number?
- Can't be infinite: brains/minds are finite
- So, there must be (at least in principle) some way to count the number of intentions the pumper has, both in the example and in general
- But, what are the individuation conditions?
- Skeptical gambit: Any answer to this question will be arbitrary, questionbegging, or otherwise problematic



### CHALLENGING PSYCHOLOGISM

### Second step: Consider the alternatives

### Eliminativism (e.g., behaviorism)

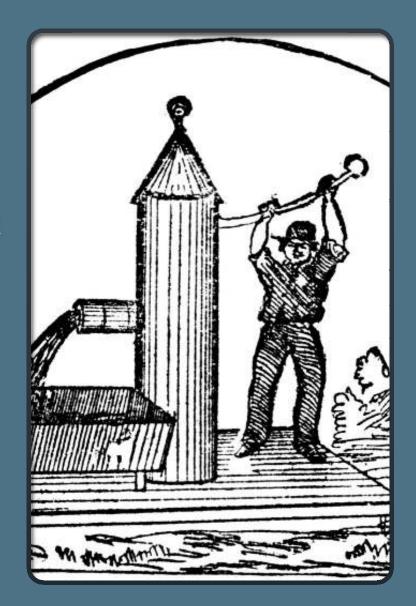
Similar response to Hume re: causation: good luck with that As we'll see, would require broad skepticism about practical reasoning, and good luck with that

### Post-/Neo-Cartesian dualism

Psychologism is itself a descendent of Cartesianism Even if the metaphysics is monist physicalism, the dualistic structure is preserved in the mechanistic way action is explained

### Review again the explanatory order for 'intention'

- 1. Intention for the future: current mental state
- 2. Intentional action: a species of event
- 3. Intention with which something is done: a kind of reason
- What if we start with 3 instead of 1?



## THE ARISTOTELIAN ALTERNATIVE TO PSYCHOLOGISM

Start with practical reasoning. What is its goal?

Getting or doing or bringing about what we think is good.

### How does such reasoning go?

Dry food suits any human Such-and-such food is dry I am human This is a bit of such-and-such food : This food suits me : (Reach out for the food)



N.B.: The conclusion of this reasoning is action itself

The point of the reasoning is to figure out what to get or to do something *in the world* 

The reasoning is incomplete if it terminates with a mental state

This is its key difference with "scientific" or "theoretical" reasoning": the latter aims at truth and terminates in belief, whereas the former aims at "the good" and terminates in action

A practical reason, then, is a step in the chain of reasoning that leads to action

## THE ARISTOTELIAN ALTERNATIVE TO PSYCHOLOGISM

Anscombe: Aristotle's notion of practical reasoning "reveals the order" that there is in the "chaos" of human action

The order in question is teleological

This does not mean that all action is preceded with explicit acts of reasoning

What it means is, in the normal run of things, a person can say why they are doing what they are doing

(Aside: this claim is compatible with the possibility of us acting on motives of which we are not aware)



To understand what an intention is, then, we don't start with psychology but rather with logic

Specifically, we start with practical logic, the order in which action proceeds

And action proceeds teleologically, a series of means towards an ends

So, when we call an action "intentional," we are saying that that action belongs to this structure, a means to an end

So, to understand what an intention is, we must first understand what intentional action is—this is the proper order of explanation

## BACK TO TRUMAN AND THE DOCTRINE OF DOUBLE EFFECT

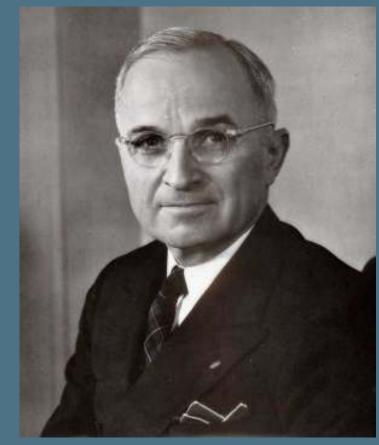
**Doctrine of Double Effect:** If Truman intentionally did something morally permissible (e.g., send troops into Japan), and this predictably led to something impermissible (e.g., innocent civilians being killed), then his action *might* be permissible

**Intentional action:** human activity that has the teleological order of practical reasoning

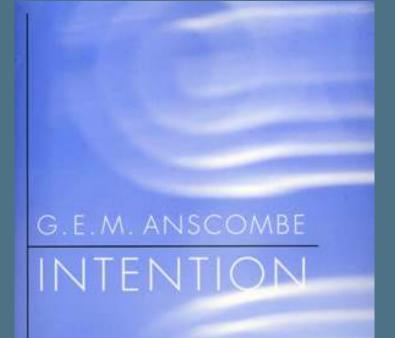
So, when Truman dropped the bombs, was the killing of innocent civilians a predictable side-effect or was it the means toward the desired end (i.e., making the Japanese surrender)?

Anscombe: it was the means to the end

So, it was intentional, because it belonged to the overarching logic of the action So (by definition), it was murder



### (SOME OF) THE LEGACY OF INTENTION



"Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."

DONALD DAVIDSON

Revealed how deeply Cartesianism runs in contemporary philosophy even after substance dualism is rejected

Provided a genuine alternative to the Cartesian picture of the mind by revitalizing Aristotelian notions of reason and action the mind's workings cannot be understood in separation from our bodily lives

Provided an alternative to Cartesian epistemology by explicating the notion of *non-observational knowledge*