WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF AN INTENTION IN ACTION?

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Abstract
On the view proposed, the content of an intention in action is given by what one would say in expressing it, and the proper form for expressing such an intention is a statement about what one is doing: e.g. ‘I am doing such-and-such’. By contrast, some think that there are normative or evaluative elements to the content of an intention in action which would be left out of a form that merely stated facts. They think that the appropriate way to express such an intention is a statement about what one should be doing. Davidson, for example, thinks that the statement must essentially be a verdict: that doing such-and-such is all-out desirable. But this is to assume that practical reason is reasoning towards the truth of a proposition, the very mistake which obscures its ‘true character’, as Anscombe correctly points out. Moreover, although Davidson’s view helps him account for the possibility of weakness of will, his explanation of the phenomenon is strained and inferior by contrast with the account which the proposed view makes available. The proposed view fits into a broader picture in which intentional action is the exercise of a practical conceptual capacity.

1. Robert Brandom suggests intentions in action should be understood as volitions, in a sense Wilfrid Sellars attaches to that term.¹

Sellars explains volitions as what intentions for the future become when the time for acting comes. I think some intentions in action can be described in just those terms: they started out as intentions for the future, and they have matured into intentions in action. That is what happens with intentions for the future when their time comes, provided that the subject realizes the time for acting has arrived, and does not change her mind, and is not prevented from acting. To that extent Brandom’s proposal looks promising, though it would need to be adjusted to accommodate

doing things intentionally on the spur of the moment, where there are intentions in action that did not start out as intentions for the future.

But there is a more pressing problem for the proposal, and this will lead into an answer to my question.

Sellars frames his account of volitions in terms of a scenario in which an intention for the future, expressible by saying ‘I shall raise my hand in ten minutes’, becomes, after ten minutes, a volition, expressible by saying ‘I shall raise my hand now’. At that point Sellars’s subject, Jones, starts to raise his hand.

In this scenario ‘now’, in ‘I shall raise my hand now’, refers to the moment at which an intention for the future matures into an intention in action. We might say ‘I shall raise my hand now’ signals the onset of an intention in action. But until Jones gets to the end of saying ‘I shall raise my hand now’, the period during which the intention is going to be in action is still in the future; it starts only when he says ‘now’ and begins to raise his hand. Sellars’s policy with ‘shall’ is to detach it from its usual role as an auxiliary yielding a future tense, and appropriate it for expressing intentions in general, not necessarily for the future. But even raising one’s hand takes time, and that prevents ‘now’, in Sellars’s expression for a volition, from completely undoing the connection between ‘shall’ and futurity. The relevant hand-raising is only beginning at the moment at which Jones utters ‘now’ and starts to raise his hand. But the intention to raise his hand will be in action throughout the time it takes to raise his hand.

That suggests that the appropriate form for expressing an intention in action might be exemplified not by ‘I shall raise my hand now’, which one might say as one starts to raise one’s hand, but by ‘I am raising my hand’, which one can say at any time during the relevant hand-raising.

Of course not just any utterance of ‘I am crossing the street’ would express an intention. (I have moved to a different example, for a reason I shall give in a moment.) I might say ‘I am crossing the street’ while I am being wheeled around in a wheelchair or swept along by a flood. A street-crossing I am in the midst of need not be intentional on my part.

I have changed Sellars’s example because it is harder to imagine a case in which ‘I am raising my hand’ would not express an intention. If my hand’s going up is not intentional on my part, it is natural to say ‘My hand is rising’ rather than ‘I am raising my hand’. But that is special to actions described in terms of bodily
performances a typical agent can immediately engage in. Something similar would go for ‘I am walking across the street’. But there are verbs or verb phrases that are like ‘cross the street’ in that they can characterize intentional action but need not. And with them we need a distinction between two uses of the progressive present in the first person: one that expresses intentions and one that does not.

The key to the difference is that in the case in which I am being wheeled about I would need observation to be entitled to say ‘I am crossing the street’. When one knows something observationally, things are as one takes them to be independently of one’s taking them to be that way. One’s taking them to be that way is an exercise of a receptive capacity. But if I express an intention in saying ‘I am crossing the street’, and I am indeed crossing the street, my utterance is a statement of knowledge that is not derived from the fact known, and in fact knowledge that is practical, in the sense G. E. M. Anscombe borrows from Aquinas.2

Here is a suggestion, then. The content of an intention in action is given by what one would say in expressing it, or what one would say in stating the practical knowledge one has in executing it, which comes to the same thing. And the appropriate form is ‘I am doing such-and-such’.

2. I have put practical knowledge in place in terms of a quite abstract contrast with knowledge derived from the fact known. Much more would need to be said about the contrast. And I shall not do much of what is needed here. I am going to approach the topic obliquely, by considering a threat from a different direction – unlike Sellars’s play with ‘shall’ – to the idea that the proper form of expression for intentions in action is ‘I am doing such-and-such’.

A statement of that form is a statement of purported fact. That is so even if any knowledge the statement purports to state is practical knowledge. The opposing thought I want to consider is that a merely fact-stating form cannot express an intention; that would require a normative or evaluative element.

In his essay ‘Intending’,3 Donald Davidson proposes that intentions, whether in action or for the future, are appropriately

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expressed by statements to the effect that doing such-and-such is all-out desirable. I shall take Davidson’s proposal as an exemplar of the opposing thought I have just introduced.

The point of ‘all-out’ is to make a contrast with statements of prima facie desirability, statements to the effect that something is desirable *in so far as* it has such-and-such a feature. Something may be desirable in so far as it has one feature but undesirable in so far as it has another. Eating a steak may be desirable in so far as it will taste delicious, but undesirable in so far as it will promote clogging of one’s arteries. A prima facie statement of desirability gives, in its ‘*in so far as* . . .’ clause, something that can be said in favour of its topic, and is consistent with the possibility that there is also something to be said against it, and indeed that the case against it is more telling than the case for it.

What Davidson wants in an expression of intention, in contrast, is an outright *verdict* in favour of acting in a certain way.

In Davidson’s essay ‘How is weakness of the will possible?’, there is a version of this idea with an extra twist. This will help to bring out the significance of the contrast between prima facie and all-out statements. The extra twist is to accommodate the fact that it may be intentional on someone’s part that she is doing one thing *as opposed to another*. A weak-willed person does B intentionally though she thinks it would be better to do A. What she does intentionally is: B rather than A. The scope of the specification of her intention includes the phrase introduced by ‘*rather than . . .*’. And here Davidson’s doctrine takes this form: the content of an intention of this sort is expressible by an all-out comparative evaluation, an all-out statement that the action undertaken is preferable to the action not undertaken.

As before, what it is for a statement to have the all-out form is that it is not conditional on this or that consideration about its subject matter. The content is not that doing this is better than doing that in so far as . . ., but that doing this is better than doing that, period.

Davidson insists that these forms – all-out judgments of preferability and judgments of preferability in so far as . . . – are distinct even if the ‘*in so far as* . . .’ clause includes everything the subject

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4 Davidson identifies intentions with all-out judgments of desirability (p. 99). But he resists putting any weight on the term ‘judgment’ (p. 97, n. 7). His thinking seems well captured in terms of forms of words that express intentions.

5 Also in *Essays on Actions and Events*.
takes to be relevant to the question which of the two courses of action is preferable. In that case the judgment is an all things considered judgment. An all things considered judgment that one course is preferable to another is still a prima facie judgment, still a judgment of preferability in so far as . . . , even though what fills the blank includes everything the subject thinks relevant. Like any prima facie judgment, such a judgment is logically distinct from an all-out verdict. A weak-willed person judges a course of action she does not follow better all things considered than a course of action she does follow, but she intentionally does what she does rather than the alternative. In Davidson’s account that is to say she combines an all things considered judgment in favour of the course she does not take with an all-out judgment in favour of the course she does take.

Of course that implies a defect in rationality. If she thinks A is more strongly supported than B by the totality of the considerations she takes to be relevant to the question which is better, it is irrational for her to judge all-out that B is better than A. And this implication of irrationality is just what Davidson wants. The point of invoking the contrast between judgments all-out and judgments all things considered is not to make the weak-willed person look perfectly rational, but to enable us to avoid contradiction when we describe her. Davidson’s doctrine about intention requires us to say she judges that acting as she does is better than the alternative. Since she acts against her better judgment, we have to say also that she does not judge that acting as she does is better than the alternative. That can make it seem that we are stuck in a contradiction. But our description is free of inconsistency if we say she judges all-out in favour of acting as she does and does not judge all things considered in favour of acting as she does. It is not the same judgment that according to our description she both makes and does not make.

Nothing hangs on Davidson’s choice of ‘desirable’, or, for comparative judgments, ‘better than’ or ‘preferable to’, in these proposed forms for expressing intentions. His point turns on the distinction between all-out and prima facie judgments, rather than the specific content of the pairs of judgments that exemplify that distinction. It is not even crucial to his thinking to align intentions with judgments that are in a narrow sense evaluative. At one point in ‘Intending’ he considers a subject with an intention to improve the taste of a stew, who moves from there, by reasoning, to an intention to add sage. Davidson says the premise in this
subject’s reasoning that corresponds to the intention it starts from should be ‘evaluative in form’ (p. 86). But it becomes clear that he means ‘evaluative’ in a very general sense, not one that contrasts with, say, ‘deontic’ or ‘normative’, when he goes on to propose, as forms of words that would be suitable to capture this intention, both ‘It is desirable to improve the taste of the stew’ and ‘I ought to improve the taste of the stew’. For him nothing evidently turns on any difference between these.

3. Davidson formulates his doctrine that intentions are all-out judgments of desirability in a context in which he is endorsing the idea that an intention can be the conclusion of a bit of practical reasoning. And he thinks the doctrine is consistent with whatever is right about the Aristotelian thesis that drawing the conclusion of a bit of practical reasoning is acting, at least if the reasoning is for the here and now. The implication is that, as specifications of what one does when one draws a conclusion from a bit of practical reasoning, ‘judging that doing such-and-such is all-out desirable’ and ‘intentionally doing such-and-such’ are interchangeable.

Davidson’s writings about action are full of admiring invocations of Anscombe’s *Intention*. There is one in the very section of ‘Intending’ in which he puts forward the doctrine I am considering (p. 97, n. 6).

But at the beginning of her discussion of practical reasoning there, in a passage Davidson never mentions, Anscombe says this (pp. 57–8):

‘Practical reasoning’, or ‘practical syllogism’, which means the same thing, was one of Aristotle’s best discoveries. But its true character has been obscured. It is commonly supposed to be ordinary reasoning leading to such a conclusion as: ‘I ought to do such-and-such.’ By ‘ordinary reasoning’ I mean the only reasoning ordinarily considered in philosophy: reasoning towards the truth of a proposition, which is supposedly shewn to be true by the premises.

She goes on to consider a supposed example of practical reasoning, on this view of it, in which the showing to be true is proof and the conclusion, supposedly entailed by the premises, is ‘I ought to give this man some money’.

Now no doubt the reasoning Davidson envisages will typically not purport to *prove* its conclusion. (In some cases perhaps it may.
Suppose the only available way to improve the taste of the stew is to add sage.) But, though Anscombe spends some time objecting to the idea of practical syllogisms as, specifically, proofs of propositional conclusions, I do not believe one can accommodate her point by envisaging premises that do no more than make it rational to accept that one ought to do such-and-such – or, she might have added, that doing such-and-such is all-out desirable – without amounting to a proof of the conclusion. Anscombe says we obscure Aristotle’s discovery if we take practical reasoning to be reasoning towards the truth of a proposition. No doubt the conclusion that one ought to give the man money, or that giving him money is all-out desirable, is in some sense practical. (I shall come back to this later.) Even so, reasoning that persuades one that those things are so is reasoning towards the truth of those propositions. So by Anscombe’s lights it is not practical reasoning at all. But that is just how Davidson fits his account of intentions into what is supposed to be an account of practical reasoning.

So Davidson’s picture of intentions, which is designed to capture the thought that intentions can be conclusions of practical reasoning, flies in the face of what, according to Anscombe, is the first thing we need to register if we are to get practical reasoning – one of Aristotle’s best discoveries – into our thinking at all. And it is not that Davidson argues against this claim of Anscombe’s. It is as if he simply does not notice it.

4. Anscombe does not directly connect her contrasting account of practical reasoning with the question I am organizing things around, the question how intentions in action might be expressed.

She constructs a counterpart to the dietary practical syllogisms that figure in Aristotle, with the following premises (p. 60):

Vitamin X is good for all men over 60.
Pig’s tripes are full of vitamin X.
I’m a man over 60.
Here’s some pig’s tripes.

And she goes on (pp. 60–1):

Aristotle seldom states the conclusion of a practical syllogism, and sometimes speaks of it as an action; so we may suppose the
man who has been thinking on these lines to take some of the dish that he sees. But there is of course no objection to inventing a form of words by which he *accompanies* this action, which we may call the conclusion in a verbalised form. We may render it as:

(a) So I’ll have some
or (b) So I’d better have some
or (c) So it’d be a good thing for me to have some.

One might be tempted to find an opening for Davidson in the second and third of these. But we should begin with the first.

‘So I’ll do such-and-such’ is a natural form for expressing practical assent – saying ‘Yes’ to an action – as one embarks on the action. Anscombe might have spoken of a form of words by which the agent accompanies *beginning* to act. The point here is of a piece with my claim that Sellars’s form for expressions of volition is apt for signalling the onset of an intention in action, but not for expressing intentions in action in general. Drawing the conclusion of a bit of practical reasoning is something one does at a determinate moment. If the reasoning is for the here and now, drawing the conclusion is embarking on an action; that is the Aristotelian doctrine. To bring the action to completion, one needs to sustain the intention that begins to be in action at that time, over a period during which, if it was as a result of reasoning that one started to act, the reasoning, including whatever move is appropriately conceived as drawing a conclusion from it, is receding into the past. *Going on* intentionally doing something cannot be equated with drawing a conclusion from some practical reasoning, any more than going on believing something can be equated with drawing a conclusion from some theoretical reasoning, even if the way one came to believe it was by considering the premises of the reasoning and drawing the conclusion. So it is right that a form of words that is a verbal expression of drawing the conclusion should be suitable for expressing the onset of an intention in action rather than its continuation. And Anscombe’s choice of words here – ‘So I’ll have some’ – does not speak to the question what might be an appropriate expression for an intention in action while it is in action. The intention that is in action in one’s having (eating) some pig’s tripes – something that takes time – could hardly be expressed by saying ‘I’ll have some’ as one is chewing one’s third or fourth mouthful, and Anscombe cannot mean to suggest anything to the contrary.
This carries over to the second and third of her forms, the ones that superficially suggest a match with Davidson. ‘So I’d better have some’ and ‘So it’d be a good thing for me to have some’ are natural expressions for the same thing that is naturally expressed by ‘So I’ll have some’: the initial undertaking of practical assent to having some pig’s tripes, with the evaluative elements – ‘I’d better’, ‘a good thing’ – emphasizing that the assent is made in rational response to the reasoning. The syllogism supplies a reason for having some pig’s tripes, and it is just another way of saying that to say that it reveals a respect in which having some pig’s tripes is good by the agent’s lights. But the conclusion of the reasoning is having some pig’s tripes, not judging that it would be good to have some pig’s tripes. There is no support here for Davidson’s idea that the relevant intention in action, which would have to be a continuing assent to the action in which it is, is well expressed by a statement that taking some pig’s tripes is all-out desirable, or all-out preferable to any alternative, with Anscombe’s premises supposedly making it rational to hold that that is how things are.

Those remarks of Anscombe’s are not the place to look for clues to an Anscombean view about how intentions in action, as opposed to onsets of intentions in action, might be expressed.

For that we should look earlier in Intention, where she considers a line of thought she says she was formerly tempted to encapsulate in the slogan ‘I do what happens’ (p. 52). By the time of writing Intention, she is resisting the temptation, but not abandoning the line of thought that the slogan was designed to capture.

The point of the slogan was that the knowledge of an action one has as its agent is knowledge of something that is happening, which is (in general) a kind of thing that can be known observationally. Anscombe brings practical knowledge into the picture to avert a mystery she says there would otherwise be about how there can be ‘two knowledges – one by observation, the other in intention –’ (p. 57) of the very same thing. If we do not recognize that knowledge in intention is not contemplative, we shall be induced to look for ‘the different mode of contemplative knowledge in acting, as if there were a very queer and special sort of seeing eye in the middle of the acting’ (ibid.). This is the point at which she turns to her discussion of practical reasoning, which starts with the remark about how Aristotle’s discovery is obscured by a common prejudice about reasoning. We need to understand practical reasoning, she says, in order to understand practical knowledge. And
she returns to practical knowledge at the end of her treatment of practical reasoning.

I think Anscombe’s worry about the two knowledges concerns the relation between practical knowledge of an action and observational knowledge on the agent’s part of the happening that the action is. But the happening is an element in the public world. It is observationally knowable by others too, if they have a suitable point of vantage on it.

If the content of an intention in action would be the content of a bit of practical knowledge, conceived in accordance with the thought encapsulated in the slogan ‘I do what happens’, then the content of my intention in, say, crossing the street would be expressed by a first-person counterpart of a statement that could be knowledgeably made – of course not in the first person – by someone else on the basis of observing the happening that is my doing what I am doing. An observer would say ‘He is crossing the street’. So if my expression of intention expresses practical knowledge of that happening, the appropriate form is, just as I have been urging, ‘I am crossing the street’.

5. So far all I have presented is a clash of authorities. Is there anything better than an argument from authority against Davidson’s view?

As I said, Davidson seems not to notice the passage in Anscombe that threatens his thinking, let alone argue against it. The case he mounts for his account of intentions presupposes, already contrary to what I have found in Anscombe, that the content of the conclusion of a bit of practical reasoning is captured by a judgment of desirability. What he takes himself to need to argue is just that the judgment must be all-out rather than prima facie. But something he says in arguing for that may be helpful in adjudicating the implicit dispute between him and Anscombe.

Davidson writes (‘Intending’, pp. 98–9):

Prima facie judgements cannot be directly associated with actions, for it is not reasonable to perform an action merely because it has a desirable characteristic. It is a reason for acting that the action is believed to have a desirable characteristic, but the fact that the action is performed represents a further judgement that the desirable characteristic was enough to act on – that other considerations did not outweigh it. . . . The reasons
that determine the description under which an action is intended do not allow us to deduce that the action is simply worth performing; all we can deduce is that the action has a feature that argues in its favour. This is enough, however, to allow us to give the intention with which the action was performed. What is misleading is that the reasons that enter this account do not generally constitute all the reasons the agent considered in acting, and so knowing the intention with which someone acted does not allow us to reconstruct his actual reasoning. For we may not know how the agent got from his desires and other attitudes – his prima facie reasons – to the conclusion that a certain action was desirable.

Consider Anscombe’s practical syllogism that issues in a man’s taking some pig’s tripes. The premises display a feature that argues in favour of his doing that. If we know that the syllogism answers the question why he is doing that, we are thereby enabled to give the intention with which he is acting, in the way Davidson here envisages: his intention is to ingest some vitamin X by eating some pig’s tripes.

Someone who takes some pig’s tripes to get some vitamin X into him may or may not have considered other things that bear on the question whether to do that, perhaps that the pig’s tripes will probably taste disgusting. Surely silence about this does not make Anscombe’s syllogism somehow incomplete, as Davidson implies. Suppose we ask the man why he took the pig’s tripes, and he gives us the premises of Anscombe’s syllogism in response. Would we object that the explanation is incomplete until we know whether he considered the prospect of a disgusting taste and decided not to let it deter him? Anscombe’s syllogism provides a reason-revealing explanation of his action, even if we think it was stupid of him not to be deterred by the prospect of a disgusting taste. Contrary to what Davidson says, it can be reasonable to perform an action merely because it has a desirable characteristic.

Suppose we know someone has taken some pig’s tripes for the reason given by Anscombe’s syllogism. In that case we know he judged the desirable characteristic spelled out in the syllogism’s premises to be enough to act on. We know, for instance, that if he did consider the prospect of a disgusting taste, it did not deflect him from taking the pig’s tripes. But saying he judged the desirable characteristic to be enough to act on is just another way of
saying he made it his reason for acting – he took the pig’s tripes for that reason.

Davidson says this judgment, that the desirable characteristic is enough to act on, is a further judgment represented by the fact that the action is performed. That wording – ‘represented by the fact that the action is performed’ – might fit what I have just said, but Davidson’s picture seems to be different. His picture seems to be, not that attributing the further judgment is just another way of saying the person draws the conclusion, but that the further judgment is needed for the transition from the premises to the conclusion to be rational. Without this further judgment the premises yield only that there is something to be said for acting in the way in question, not an outright verdict in favour of acting in that way. Davidson would have to acknowledge that to know the man judged the desirable characteristic to be enough to act on is not yet to know what, if any, other things he took into account and judged to be outweighed by it; it is not yet to be in a position to reconstruct his actual reasoning, as Davidson conceives that. But as Davidson sees things, it is to know this: if the man did consider any considerations that pointed in other directions, he judged the desirable characteristic to outweigh them. Hence it is to know at least schematically how he got from his prima facie reasons to his conclusion, in a bit of practical reasoning as Davidson conceives that.

But here Davidson’s idea that the conclusion must be an outright verdict in favour of doing such-and-such seems to be distorting the point of saying the agent judges the desirable characteristic to be enough to act on. As I said, the point is just to register that the agent draws the conclusion. What that means is not that he moves from a prima facie reason for acting as he does to an outright judgment in favour of doing that, but just that he acts as he does for the reason constituted by the desirable characteristic.

I can bring out the significance of the divergence I am urging by noting that it makes room for a picture of weak-willed action that differs from Davidson’s, and seems superior to it. A weak-willed person acts for a reason that she takes to tell less compellingly in favour of doing what she does than she takes some other reason to tell in favour of doing something else. By acting for that reason, she reveals that she takes it to be enough to act on. As before, saying this is just registering that she acts for that reason. She is irrational in that she acts for a reason that, by her
own lights, is not as good a reason for doing what she does as another reason she has is for doing something else.

In the passage I have quoted, Davidson identifies judging that a certain desirable characteristic is enough to act on with judging that other considerations do not outweigh it. This belongs with his view that a weak-willed person judges acting as she does all-out preferable to an alternative that she judges preferable all things considered. But in the sense in which it is correct to say that a weak-willed person, like anyone who acts for a reason, judges the reason for which she acts to be enough to act on, that judgment is not to be equated with judging that the reason for which she acts is not outweighed by other considerations. The irrationality of the weak-willed person lies precisely in the fact that she judges that the reason for which she acts is outweighed by other considerations, even while, in acting as she does, she treats it as enough to act on. There is no need to strain, as Davidson does, to find a sense in which she judges her weak-willed action preferable to the course, better supported by reasons in her own view, that she does not take.

6. As I acknowledged, judgments of the sort that figure as conclusions in the kind of reasoning Anscombe says modern philosophers misidentify as practical reasoning are in some sense practical. That is true about the judgment ‘I ought to give this man money’ in the case she considers. And it is true about Davidson’s candidate, the all-out judgment that giving the man money would be desirable.

Anscombe’s view implies that practicality in the conclusion, in whatever sense it is in which these judgments are practical, makes no difference to the fact that reasoning that issues in these judgments is not practical reasoning, because it is reasoning towards the truth of the propositions that constitute the content of these judgments. Davidson’s conception of intentions is designed to capture the idea that intentions can be conclusions of practical reasoning. So, as I have been urging, his conception of intentions reflects the blind spot for what practical reasoning really is that Anscombe finds in modern philosophy.

But if the judgments Davidson equates with intentions are practical in some sense, one might wonder whether it really is a blind spot. How could reasoning that issues in judgments that are practical not be practical reasoning?

I think the sense in which those judgments are practical is this: a judgment that giving this man money would be desirable, or, in
the formulation Anscombe considers, that one ought to give this man money, stands to one’s giving him money in a relation analogous to that in which an order stands to someone’s obeying it. If an order is not independently objectionable, perhaps as lacking authority or impossible to obey, and is not obeyed, the defect is not in the order but in the disobedient conduct, whereas if things are not as one says they are in a purportedly factual statement, the defect is in the saying rather than in how things are. Similarly, if one does not act as one thinks one ought to act, the defect revealed by the mismatch is in the acting, not the judgment. The judgment may be defective, but it is not shown to be defective by the mismatch with what one does.

This contrast, which later philosophers have described in terms of opposed directions of fit, is drawn in the famous shopping-list passage in *Intention* (p. 56). Anscombe distinguishes the relations in which what a man buys stands to a list given him by his wife, which is a sort of order, and to a list made by a detective following him, which is a record of what he buys. Abstracting from the possibility that the order may be independently open to criticism – for instance, if one puts ‘tackle for catching sharks’ on a list of things to buy in Oxford – we can say that if the list and what the man buys do not match, then in the case of the order the defect is in what he does, and in the case of the record the defect is in the list.

When Anscombe draws this contrast, she is working up to her separation of practical knowledge from contemplative knowledge. And the distinction of locations for the defect in cases of mismatch is helpful in guiding us in that direction. An analogy between intentions and orders prepares us for appreciating how practical knowledge, knowledge in intention, differs from contemplative knowledge in that, so far from being derived from what is known, it is, in the phrase Anscombe takes from Aquinas, ‘the cause of what it understands’ (*Intention*, p. 87).

And I have acknowledged that there is an analogy between orders and statements of desirability. So is there reason here to agree with Davidson, after all, that a form of words suitable to capture the content of an intention should have the sort of practicality exemplified by statements of desirability? If we said ‘Yes’, we would be taking it that Anscombe is wrong about the blind spot. And we would have to give up the idea that the content of an intention just is the content of one’s knowledge of what one is doing when one is executing it.
But the argument limps, and this last implication of it brings out how. It is precisely that knowledge that Anscombe says is not derived from what is known. If one is not doing what one says one is doing when one gives expression to a putative bit of practical knowledge, the primary defect is in what one is doing, not in what one says. But what one knows when one has a bit of practical knowledge is simply that one is doing such-and-such. There is no normative or evaluative element in the content of the knowledge, even though this knowledge is ‘the cause of what it understands’.

What goes missing in the defence of Davidson that I am considering is this: the practicality of practical knowledge is compatible with, and indeed requires, the possibility of a derivative defect not in what one is doing but in what one says, if one expresses what purports to be a bit of practical knowledge when one is not doing the thing in question, or if one expresses the corresponding intention. (We can still say those come to the same thing.) If I express an intention in action by saying ‘I am crossing the street’, it is not by virtue of something that is so anyway, independently of the intention I express, that I am stating a bit of knowledge, if I am. If it were not for the intention, there would not be the relevant fact. But even so, if I am not crossing the street what I say is false in the ordinary way; things are not as I say they are.

At one point in *Intention* Anscombe comes close, at least, to obscuring this. She considers a case in which she is writing ‘I am a fool’ on a blackboard with her eyes shut, knowing in intention that she is doing that. And she says (p. 82):

Orders, however, can be disobeyed, and intentions fail to get executed. 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 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 judgment’.

Citing the remark attributed to Theophrastus is insisting on the point I made by saying that the primary defect is in what she does rather than in what she says. By citing the remark in this context,
Anscombe can seem to imply that the other location for a defect, the one characteristic of statements, is irrelevant to this kind of knowledge – as if practical knowledge is indeed a funny sort of knowledge, still knowledge even if what it is knowledge of is not the case.

But it is surely wrong to suppose Anscombe’s claim to be writing ‘I am a fool’ on the blackboard can express knowledge if those words are not getting written on the blackboard.6 Whatever Anscombe’s point is in this passage, she cannot mean to be suggesting, in her own voice, that practical knowledge is indifferent to whether one is actually doing what one takes oneself to be doing. She came up with the slogan ‘I do what happens’, which paves the way for her introduction of practical knowledge, precisely in opposition to the temptation to interiorize what is known in intention so that it does not include what is actually happening, except perhaps for bodily movements (pp. 51–3). She cannot herself be falling into a version of that temptation here.

I am not sure what to make of this passage in Anscombe. Perhaps the problematic remarks are meant to be heard as spoken by an interlocutor, rather than by Anscombe herself.7 And there may be other options for interpreting the passage. I am not going to offer a reading of it here. All I want to say about it is that we should not allow it to contradict the opposition to interiorizing what is known in intention that drives Anscombe’s discussion of practical knowledge. We should insist that there is knowledge in intention only if what is happening is what one says is happening when one says what one is doing. If it is to express practical knowledge, the saying needs to be true in the ordinary way.

This undercuts the motivation I have been considering for the idea that an expression of intention in action should be something other than a statement of what one is doing, as in the Davidsonian view I have been resisting.8

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6 It is not to the point to say that writing those words on the blackboard might be something one is doing even if one’s current efforts at getting them written are not succeeding; when one realizes that the words are not appearing on the blackboard, one will try again. That is true, but what Anscombe claims to be doing is writing those words with her eyes shut. If, when she looks, the words turn out not to have appeared on the blackboard, she will not have been doing what she said she was doing.

7 Eylem Özaltun has a detailed reading on these lines.

8 ‘But an intention is a commitment, so surely it needs to be expressed in deontic or normative terms.’ – A claim is a commitment, but claims need to be expressed in deontic terms only if they are claims about deontic or normative matters.
7. What Anscombe, or her interlocutor voice, seems to say, in that problematic passage, is that her practical knowledge, her knowledge in intention, would have been the same even if she had not been doing what she took herself to be doing. That looks like a *highest common factor* conception of knowledge in intention, according to which her knowledge in intention in the case she considers cannot extend further into objective reality, so to speak, than something that would not be falsified if, say, the chalk were not working. One might make this concrete by saying that her knowledge in intention extends only as far as the fact that she is *trying* to write those words on the blackboard. I urged that such a picture conflicts with a central thought in Anscombe’s treatment of practical knowledge.

The most obvious alternative is a *disjunctive* conception. To have practical knowledge of a happening that is one’s doing something intentionally is to know that happening ‘from inside’, as its agent. One’s knowledge in intention embraces the features of what is happening in objective reality that figure in one’s intention, even though – this is the other disjunct – one can be wrong in taking oneself to be doing such-and-such because of malfunctioning chalk and the like.

Much work, which I am obviously not going to do now, would be needed for a proper elaboration of this. I shall end by proposing this way of framing the thought: our intentional interventions in the world are themselves cases of our conceptual capacities in operation. Conceptual capacities, in the relevant sense, are capacities that belong to reason, and they include capacities not only for discursive thought but also for acting. An exercise of a practical conceptual capacity is, to put things as I did earlier, a practical assent to acting in a certain way. If the fallibility that belongs to any such capacity does not kick in, assenting to acting in a certain way can itself be intentionally acting in that way, realizing the concept of acting in that way; that is what practical assent is, absent such factors as malfunctioning chalk, if the occasion of the assent is the occasion for the acting assented to. And intentional interventions in the world, like any actualizations of capacities that belong to reason, are as such self-conscious, and hence within the purview of a capacity, fallible because of things.

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9 The proviso is to leave room for practical reasoning that addresses the question what to do on some future occasion. This should not dislodge the idea that when the question addressed by practical reasoning is what to do now, drawing the conclusion is acting.
like the risk of malfunctioning chalk, for knowledge that is not a reality distinct from what is known, as observational knowledge is.

Anscombe’s conception of practical knowledge can be framed in those terms. And one thing that is grand about the conception is its radical departure from the philosophical prejudices that underlie familiar sorts of shrinkage in the scope we attribute to immediate self-knowledge. This brings out a resonance for the thesis I have been urging in this paper: that the proper form of expression for an intention in action is not a statement of what one should be doing but a statement of what one is doing.\(^\text{10}\)

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\(^{10}\) I mean these closing remarks to echo some of the wording in Sebastian Rödl’s wonderful book *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); though I think his treatment of practical self-consciousness in ch. 2 is insufficiently responsive to Anscombe’s point that reasoning towards the truth of a proposition is not practical reasoning.