

# Practical Knowledge: Generalizability Over Simplicity

Ege Ersü

This paper will be an investigation of the extent of an agent's knowledge of his own actions. I will first introduce Anscombe's case that the agent's knowledge extends all the way out to what happens and 'what an agent does' can't be separated from 'what happens'. I will then introduce Velleman's framework and how it weakens our understanding of agency as opposed to Anscombe's. Finally, I will give Moran's argument against Anscombe's definition of practical knowledge and explain how it sometimes fails to capture what is actually going on with the agent, as well as the world.

Anscombe defines practical knowledge through a thought experiment. She asks us to imagine a builder who is directing a project to erect a building. He does not see what happens and receives no report of what is happening at the building site. He is allowed to have super-human imagination where he represents whatever he needs to represent, such as the position of certain materials or very complex properties of the building site, many which only a builder would know. He also has a group of workers who are ready to do whatever the builder orders them to do. We also assume that whenever a worker receives an order from the builder, he will faultlessly execute that order. Anscombe reminds us that the builder is not speculatively considering how a thing might be done given certain states of the construction site. The builder is instead giving us a dynamic sequence of orders, where each order specified in a very precise manner. What I mean by dynamic is that the sequence does not have to be determined before the construction begins, but at each step the builder must be ready to give the next order in order to proceed, constructing the sequence, as well as the building, as he goes. This

can only be achieved if at each time-step, the builder knows the current state of the building, which is somehow represented by his imagination, so that he can make use of that representation, since there is no perceptual input, to determine what the next order ought to be. At this point we will make two definitions. The one who gave an in-order-to structure to the activity of construction, by generating a dynamic sequence of orders, is the agent, which in this case happens to be the builder. And that agent's knowledge of what is *done*, is his practical knowledge.

Let us further discover additional properties of this type of knowledge, following Anscombe. Practical knowledge is not a product of observation, such as the agent watching the event of construction from a distance. It is also not known by accepting the testimony of others who have seen the event unfold. The builder's knowledge does not come from any type of observation, but instead resembles a detailed simulation constructed by the builder's imagination. But Anscombe would not fully agree with my last statement, since her practical knowledges are by no means confined within the minds of their owners.

When asked what this knowledge is in terms of its content, Anscombe states: "First and foremost, he can say what the house is like" (82). Our everyday intuition, which I think we ought to trust to solve this problem, pushes us to interpret the sentence in the following manner: the agent in his mind has an accurate description of what the house is like. But that is not what Anscombe is going for, since she claims what the builder knows is the actual building itself, located in the physical world. Therefore, the builder's knowledge is not just the sum of his orders, or a building he imagined within his mind or any other mental object he somehow infers. If the object of his knowledge is what takes

place: an object in our physical world, then any observer (including himself) could know about the very same object by simply observing the physical world. This means that the agent is capable of knowing the same thing by either acting intentionally, or by simply going to the construction site and looking at the building. If we go with this view, the knowledge of what is done turns out to have the very same object as the knowledge of what happens, leading us to the conclusion of “I do what happens”.

Let us now introduce a case which would put Anscombe’s framework to test. The painter’s eyes are shut, and he means to paint the wall yellow. For some reason the paint does not work, and the wall does not turn yellow. With Anscombe, theoretical knowledge achieves the truth by describing it, and practical knowledge achieves the truth by producing it. No sane person would argue against the theoretical knowledge of the wall not being yellow, but what can we say about the practical knowledge of the painter? Accepting the claim that “an agent does what happens”, the wall’s color not turning to yellow indicates that the painter did not paint the wall yellow. In other words, the object of the painter’s practical knowledge has to be the painter’s knowledge of what is done. Just like the builder knowing what the house is like, in the end the painter has to know what the wall is like if he is to have practical knowledge. When intentions fail to get executed, such as the painter’s case, we can no longer say “painting the wall yellow” was an intentional action of the painter, since there is no such thing that is happening (the wall’s color turning yellow), which can be an object of the painter’s practical knowledge. If we are to fully accept Anscombe’s practical knowledge, then there is no difference between our unlucky painter and a random person simply standing before the wall. But are they really equally distant from the truth?

In order to further better express the issue, let us introduce two terms Velleman uses throughout his work. You almost always believe a prima facie description of what you are doing, such as “painting the wall” in the painter’s case. But what we are really interested in is the interpretive description of what you are doing, a description known by the agent that reveals his motives and explains why he is painting the wall. Maybe the painter’s brother just had a daughter, and he is painting the walls of their nursery as a favor. He might also believe that yellow is the perfect gender-neutral color, since he takes himself to be a true liberal. Velleman wants us to imagine a case where the agent no longer knows an interpretive description of his conduct. The painter knows that he is moving his hand up and down with a brush in his hand, and that he is painting the wall. But he has no idea *why* he is painting that wall or why he is using yellow paint.

Velleman would say he is suffering from a failure of self-knowledge. He further claims that this rarely happens, and most of the time we have both descriptions available: we know what we are doing and why we are doing it. Velleman argues that this is the results of a very simple rule concerning human action: you don’t undertake an action unless you know that much about it.

Another intuitive claim of Velleman is that if your self-knowledge fails, and you longer have an interpretive description of why you are painting the wall, you will stop painting the wall. The realization that you no longer have a *why* to your action, usually comes after you ask yourself “What am I doing?”. He claims that the motive for asking that and the motive for stopping is the very same desire to know what you’re doing. In this framework, to intend an action is simply to believe that one will perform it, where that belief is the result of reflective reasoning. At any given moment the agent can expect to

perform a variety of actions, limited by his motives, and when he expects an action to be his next one, he expects that it will come about partially because of his expectation of it. Reflecting reasoning terminates in a conclusion, the intention, which the agent sees as optional for him since there were many other conclusions he could have jumped to. He simply picked an action because he was able to name and explain it beforehand. That's why Velleman thinks we rarely find ourselves without an interpretive description of what we are doing or find ourselves trying to understand the motives for our actions by examining them. We already know enough about our intentional actions *before* we take them, and there is no such thing being spontaneously known by simply taking the action. If we are to move on with this framework, we must abandon Anscombe's practical knowledge and that what I do is what happens. The builder's practical knowledge will no longer have a physical building as its object.

I would argue that Anscombe and Velleman are on the complete opposite sides of the spectrum when it comes to giving an account of agency, and how the agent's knowledge of his own actions is related to the objective reality we refer to when we talk about what is true of the world. It is obvious that Anscombe's agent is a lot stronger than of Velleman's when it comes to his relation what happens in the world. He practically reasons, and as a result, produces a change in the world, which is now the truth: what is true of that world. Velleman's agent expects an action and then there is a middleman, some mysterious force that is not *the* agent, between him and the world. It is possibly a network of motives, including the motive of self-understanding, each fighting the others to produce a change in the world. Surely the agent has a strong influence on this middleman, since Velleman accepts that the agent is partly responsible for the very

action he predicts, but in the end, it is the middleman who has the final say in what is *now* true of the world. So, if we take what the builder knows once all of his orders are executed, and we take the knowledge of what happened in the world, if they turn out to be the very same thing, we should be thanking the middleman and not the agent (maybe a brief handshake out of courtesy). Anscombe would say that Velleman's agent knows the outcome of his intentional doings only by observation and that he is no different than a sightseer watching the workers erect the building, which I think would be a harsher criticism than necessary, since it is the agent who has the inclination to do things he knows and understands.

Now I will introduce Moran, who I believe exposes a huge problem of Anscombe's practical reason. In order to motivate his view, let us go back to the painter and remember how the failure case made us consider if the knowledge of what is done and the knowledge of what happens in the world have the same object or not. Moran's main issue is that if the color of the wall did not change to yellow due to certain empirical conditions, his particular action failed to obtain. If he is wrong in assuming that the wall is turning yellow, Anscombe would say that he cannot have practical knowledge that he is painting the wall yellow. This forces us to ask two questions: if he is not painting the wall yellow, what intentional action is he performing? And, if he does not have practical knowledge that he is painting the wall yellow, does he have practical knowledge of anything else? We know that these two questions are very closely related given Anscombe's claim: "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". But now that "painting the wall yellow" is not a description that is true of the world, Anscombe advises

through a second observation she makes: “It is necessarily the rare exception for a man’s performance in its more immediate descriptions not be what he supposes”.

These immediate descriptions are Velleman’s prima facie descriptions such as “painting the wall”, “moving my hand up and down” or “moving the brush up and down”. Even if the color of the wall remains unchanged, we know that these prima facie descriptions are true of the world given the painter’s movements. But are we really aloud to use them as descriptions under which the agent is performing an intentional action?

Moran reminds us that a description counts as a true answer to the question “What is he doing?” not only by it being a true description of the world, but if it is also a description that fits into a structure under which what is happening is described as an intentional action. This takes us back to the first half of Anscombe’s Intention, where what is known must be something that can serve as an answer to the question “Why?” in its relevant sense, which is a reason for acting. So if there is no happening in the world that is done by the agent which can also be described as an aim of the agent, then there is no possible happening which could qualify to be an object of the agent’s practical knowledge. This is consistent with the observation that the set of possible objects for speculative knowledge is always smaller than the set of possible objects for practical knowledge. The agent may be dripping paint on the floor, and by hearing the drops he might also be aware that it is true of the world, making it an object of his theoretical knowledge. But for it to be a description we can retreat to in the failure case, it must be an answer to “Why?”, which it is not. The painter is not dripping paint on the floor in order to achieve an end and it is not a description of an intentional movement of his. After investigating the case for a time, one could realize that there are no weaker claims

we can retreat to, making it impossible to pick out an intentional action of our unlucky painter. The world surely changed by the dripping of the paint on the floor, but if we are to move on with Anscombe's framework, it was not an intentional action of the painter.

Velleman's agent has various problems, and the most crucial one is the agent's relation to reality being moderated by a middleman. All he can do is expect and the rest is handled by an alien force, which gives him only some partial credit in producing what is true of the world. My first-person experience is consistent with this framework, but it is obvious that most people would disagree. That is where Anscombe's framework shines with its simpler model, by only having the agent and an external reality. The object of the knowledge of one's intentional action is out in this external reality, and it can also be known by observation, making it the case that I do what happens. Although it is a simpler model and gives the agent more power as most people take that to be the case with life, it lacks the generalizability of Velleman's framework. As discussed via Moran's argument, in cases of intention's failure, Anscombe's agent ends up not having any happening that could be an object of his practical knowledge. This means that there is no difference of practical knowledge between our unlucky painter, and another person who happens to be standing before the wall, not doing anything towards the end of making the color of the wall turn yellow.



# References

Anscombe G. E. M., *Intention*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1963

Moran R., « Anscombe on “Practical Knowledge” », in *Agency and Action* (Royal Institute of Philosophy, suppl. 55), J. Hyman and H. Steward, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 43-68.

Velleman J. D., *Practical Reflection*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989.