

Practical reasoning and free will

Abstract: *Intention* is silent about the problem of free will. But one is allowed to look for some lights on it in Anscombe's analysis of practical reasoning, since a free action, as she argues in different papers, is undetermined. The distinction between causes and reasons of an intentional action is not sufficient to defend its freedom, since it can be argued that reasons determine the action of a rational agent, or the decision, being indifferent to reasons (and causes), would be a lucky one. Anscombe's conception of the defeasibility of practical reasoning leads me to show that a free choice involves not only the choice of the means but also a ranking of the end that has no *contrastive reasons* for it, without being irrational and lucky.

By denying Christ, Peter sinned, since he did repent afterwards. So he acted *freely*. But Peter's denial was also prophesied, by Christ himself. And it has since long been recognized that foreknowledge by an infallible knower, and specially prophecy, which implies the anteriority of knowledge, constitutes a threat to freedom: the object of the prediction cannot not occur, and so is determined, at least for logical reasons. Anscombe's last page of *Intention* is an echo to the dilemma of freedom and foreknowledge. She writes : « St Peter might perhaps have calculated 'Since *he* says it, it is true' ; and yet said 'I will not do it'. The possibility in *this* case arises from the ignorance as to the way in which the prophecy would be fulfilled ; thus St Peter could do what he intended not to, without changing his mind, and yet do it intentionally ». Anscombe's point is not to show the compatibility of Christ's prophecy with Peter's *freedom*, but with the *intentionality* of his action. She had previously shown that intentional action is linked to a kind of knowledge of the future, practical knowledge, expressed by a future of intention. An agent can have the intention of doing (or not doing) a particular action, and so have (practical) knowledge that he will do it, while knowing by the way of theoretical knowledge (e.g. on the basis of a prediction made by somebody else) that the opposite will be true, but only if he does not know *how* this will be. Ignorance of the particularities of action manages a place for intentionality (where complete knowledge would be destructive). One might think that the solution to the intentionality problem could be applied to the freedom problem and conclude that Peter was still free not to deny Christ in *this* or *that* particular way, though he was not free not to deny him at all. This would be close to Aquinas saying that a sinner is free not to commit this or that sin, but not free not to sin at all. But with such a precise prophecy as Christ's one to Peter, this would be a

poor defence of Peter's free will. And it is not clear that Anscombe would have considered freedom on a par with intentionality. *Intention* is silent about the problem of free will¹.

Nonetheless, in other places, Anscombe has defended what is often called an *incompatibilist* conception of freedom. Not only is determinism incompatible with free action, but we have no reason to accept the determinist doctrine, and all our moral conceptions presuppose metaphysical freedom. Her paper "Soft-determinism" builds a complex argument against compatibilist views of freedom, based on the conditional analysis of the ability to do otherwise. "Causality and determination" argues against the assimilation of causality to necessitation, so that it would not follow from the assumption that an event is caused (or that all events are caused: universal causality) that it is necessary and inevitable, and so unfree. And in "The Causation of Action" she argues against the deterministic *itch* that leads to maintain without proof that indeterminism at the microscopic level plus probabilistic laws leads to determinism at the macroscopic level. I will not consider those very important issues for a philosophical discussion of free will, perhaps the most debated ones among contemporary philosophers². *Causal determinism* or *necessitation* is not the only threat to freedom: since necessitation is the core idea of determinism, all kinds of necessitation would have the same consequence. Aristotle's sea battle argument and the discussion of future contingents point towards a form of *logical necessitation*, that is reinforced by the idea of an infallible and omniscient knower of the future. But there is another classical discussion that bears on a possible *necessitation* of action by the *reasons* considered by the agent. A rational agent would not, could not, act against his better reasons. A purely contingent action would be such that there could be *better reasons* against it, and it so would be irrational, at least in the sense of "without reason". But this form of contingency cannot provide an interesting sense of freedom. Since Anscombe's analysis of intentional action relies on the consideration of reasons for acting, it suggests that one takes into consideration this "intellectualist" trouble.

¹ . With one exception: near to the beginning of the book Anscombe quotes Wittgenstein's analogy of conscious leaves blown about by the wind, and so determined in all their movements, but thinking they are free. The example, she says, does not allow enough for intentionality, since the predictions made by the leaves are not *practical*, and the role of intention is not assigned, but she remarks that Wittgenstein's point was about free will and not about intentionality. And she adds "Now it may be that a correct description of the role of intention in our actions will not be relevant to the question of free will" (*Intention* §3)

² For an overview of the contemporary debate, see R. Kane (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Oxford, 2004

I will first try to make some conceptual and/or vocabulary distinctions, that should help for a formulation of the problem and recall some points made by Anscombe. Then I will formulate more precisely the trouble I just mentioned in order to see if her analysis of practical reasoning is of any help. This is what I will try to do in the last part.

1 Let us begin with the idea of practical deliberation. « Deliberation » is a mental (or verbal), so a conscious, activity or process, even if « deliberate » can be applied to actions that were not preceded by such a process, because they could have been, and so were potentially, objects of deliberation. What kind of activity ? I would say: *inquiry* and, mostly, *evaluation* and *comparison*. An agent has an aim; to say that he deliberates is to say that he *enquires* in order to know how to reach this aim, in order to find a means, and also that, when different means to that end are present to his mind, he *evaluates* them in order to *choose* one. I would reserve the term « choice » to cases where different means, actions, that would equally lead to the aim intended, are compared, and one is elected, preferred, chosen. When such a wealth of potential means is not present, I will call the outcome a “decision”. Every choice is a decision, but it is not clear that every decision is a choice. The conclusion of a deliberation is a decision. The latin etymology evokes a break: the break of deliberation, or the break in a certain way things were going. We can extend the word to actions that have not been preceded by a process of deliberation, in the same way as we can say of such an action that it was deliberate. The action was a decision in that it introduced a *new step* in a scenario, and this introduction was voluntary. If the break is considered as actualizing one of different possibilities the agent was confronted to, then we think of the decision as of a choice. The decision can be immediately effective, and in that case it is the action itself (including the omission, or the « let us wait until... »), or it can be the resolution to so act at some later time, it is the formation of an intention for the future.

So conceived, the decision is not considered as a special mental act, presumably an act of the will, that would be the cause of the overt action. The decision is the action itself or the formation of an intention. But that is also the beginning of an action (if I decided to fly to Singapore next month, I don't do it now, but I begin to do it, at least by doing nothing that would go contrary to that project). What is the point of using the term « decision » ? As I said, it introduces the idea of a break: not all actions or intentions make a break, a step in a scenario. And in cases where the decision is not immediately effective, it also helps to communicate to others what the agent (myself or a third person) is going to do, intentionally and after a process of deliberation, so that the future is more or less now determined (by the

decision), and the action may really be imputed to the agent. It is to say that the agent has made up his mind, and that the action is now beginning. It also implies that he could have decided otherwise, at least he could have refrained even if no other means to his end was at his disposal. So that there is still a kind of choice in every decision : between acting and not acting.

Is the decision the conclusion of the practical reasoning ? The answer should be obvious if practical reasoning meant the same as deliberation. Certainly we could consider that deliberation is a process of reasoning, and that it is practical: so it is practical reasoning. But the analysis given by Anscombe, in *Intention* and in « Practical Inference », leads to a distinction between the psychological and the logical side of the reasoning. On the logical side we consider the logical form of the reasoning process, the links between the *propositional contents* that can be attached to the end (to get B), to the beliefs concerning the means (If I do A, I will get B) and to the decision and action (let's do A). I will call this form “practical inference” or “practical syllogism”. Anscombe has shown how the practical inference relied on a logical inference, but used the propositions in another way. The logical inference, in fact a simple *modus ponens*, would go from the description of an action (I do A), and the conditional saying that the action leads to a certain result (if I do A I get B), to the conclusion that detaches the consequent of the conditional (I get B). This conclusion corresponds to the end (to get B) and so to the first premise of the practical syllogism, whereas the conclusion of the practical syllogism, which corresponds to the action (I do A), was the first premise of the logical inference. According to Anscombe : the premises are put to another service³.

On the psychological side, let us speak of *reasoning* activities. Theoretical reasoning, at least *demonstration* conceived of as *deduction*, might be thought of as the implementation (the plugging) of a logical inference into a mind : the propositions are thought, and the conclusion is drawn from the premises (if the propositions are not only thought but believed, so is the conclusion). But a process of deliberation is not simply the implementation of a practical inference. It is, as I said, a process of inquiry, comparison and evaluation of the means. This process is not by itself an inference. But the practical inference *shapes*, or *informs*, the inquiry and the evaluation : it is on the background of such an inference that we

³ So construed, practical syllogism is invalid as a deduction : it reverses the modus ponens, with the form : E, if A then E, so A. But a) it relies on the deductive valid form of the corresponding theoretical syllogism (modus ponens) and b) it is not a deduction of the action to be done.

inquire into the appropriate means, and that we compare them (I only look for actions that are such that they lead to the intended aim, and I compare them on the same basis). So practical reasoning is a complex process of inquiry into the means towards a certain end, that may include comparison and evaluation of competitive means, a process that is shaped by the form of practical inference, relying itself on the validity of some logical inferences⁴.

Now, it is important to underline that this process is not a *mechanical* calculus that would lead to the decision. It would be so if deliberation a) selected *only one* mean and b) were such that, once selected, it would *not be under discussion anymore*⁵. This is the model of *technical* reasoning, which is only the application of a theoretical consideration over the means, a purely instrumental use of reason. To act in such a way would be to act mechanically, as a machine or a computer: the goal is fixed, you only have to find the means and to put them at work. The surgeon reasons *technically* as long as all he does is referred to the intended objective of the operation (v.g. an amputation), and he only determines the best options towards it. But this is not what happens with real agents reasoning *practically*. Even if only one means were found or finally selected, there would remain in many cases the possibility of finding another one with some more reflection (so the possibility to go on inquiring). And even if one were ensured that the found means were the only possible one, there still would remain the possibility of renouncing to pursue the end because of some aspects of the proposed means (its consequences, the costs, let us say). The doctor might renounce to the operation, if he considered that in the end the consequences were not worthy of it (and if the surgeon is the doctor, then he would move from purely technical reasoning to practical one).

Contrary to the theoretical reasoning and to the mechanical calculus that is modelled on it, the practical reasoning is *defeasible*. Some new considerations (of other means, of the possibility of finding one, or of the consequences) taken as premises would *defeat* the conclusion. Recently the French philosopher Vincent Descombes has used as an illustration of this point made by Anscombe and Geach a famous Fable by La Fontaine: “l’Ours et l’amateur des jardins”⁶. The bear aims at protecting the sleep of his new friend amateur gardener by keeping away the flies from his face.

⁴ I developed this point in my paper “La causalité formelle du raisonnement pratique”, *Philosophie* n° 76, décembre 2002, p. 63-81

⁵ This is an important aspect of her criticism of von Wright’s « Practical Inference », in her paper now identically entitled, and recently published in M. Geach and L. Gormally (eds), *Human Life, Action and Ethics : Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, Charlottesville, VA, 2005.

⁶ See Vincent Descombes, *Le raisonnement de l’ours*, Seuil, Paris, 2007

One day, while, stretch'd upon the ground

The old man lay, in sleep profound,

A fly that buzz'd around his nose,--

And bit it sometimes, I suppose,--

Put Bruin sadly to his trumps.

At last, determined, up he jumps;

'I'll stop thy noisy buzzing now,'

Says he; 'I know precisely how.'

No sooner said than done.

He seized a paving-stone;

And by his *modus operandi*

Did both the fly and man die.

The latin rendering (“by his *modus operandi*”) masks the important wording in French where La Fontaine says: “the bear being as good an archer as it was *bad reasoner*” (“l’ours aussi bon archer que mauvais raisonneur”). The bear reasoned mechanically, he did not consider the cost of his action. His reasoning was good in that the mean he took led him to the end he aimed at, but he did not add to the set of his premises that of keeping his friend alive. Had he added that missing premise, he would have defeated his former reasoning. One source of error in practical reasoning (but not in theoretical one) is the lack of consideration for relevant other premises, and this shows the particular feature of defeasibility of practical inferences.

2 Defeasibility introduces an *indetermination* in practical reasoning between the premises and the conclusion that is an action. And it might seem to be a good place to look at, if one is inquiring into the very nature of freedom. But it should be noted that the possibility of defeating a practical reasoning, and its underlying practical inference, by adding a new premise, and then going to a new conclusion, following a new inferential form, *this* is the job of deliberation. Deliberation not only includes comparisons of *alternative means* as leading to the end, but also *evaluation of their consequences*. A means that would lead to an undesired consequence would be abandoned in favour of a less expedient one without bad consequences. It could also be abandoned as well as the pursuit of the end if it were not attainable without such bad consequences. So this is not a different form of evaluation and defeasibility than the one we just considered with reference to the consequences of the end. To say of two actions A and B, that are means to an end E, that A is better than B because it is

cheaper, faster or easier, is to say that it satisfies an end E' that B does not satisfy: to reach E by the cheapest, fastest or easiest way (among those available). Instead of A and B, the choice is then one between E and E', between the two ends. But deliberation goes on if E and E' can be considered themselves as means towards a higher end F, and if a new comparison (between E and E') can be made according to the structure of practical inference. Once again, the output of deliberation is *mechanical*. One can say that such a deliberation delivers the *contrastive reasons* that make an option A preferable to an option B, in the pursuit of a certain end. We said that practical reasoning is defeasible because deliberation can be *enlarged* with new considerations. But for a good reasoner who considers all the costs (available to him before deciding) it seems that deliberation leads him *mechanically* to decision and action. Practical deliberation would be of the same kind as technical deliberation, and indetermination would vanish: contrastive reasons would determinate the decision (not in a causal sense, but they would make the decision unavoidable for a rational agent)

Real cases of indetermination would occur if the means were of absolutely *equal interest*, but in those cases deliberation would have no point. Indetermination would also occur if the two concurrent options were *incommensurable*. On one side it would be a good thing to visit my grand mother, and so leave my house and family for the all weekend. On the other side, I consider that it would not be good for them, and my staying at home would be better. In my deliberation, I will compare the pros and cons on each side, but this can be done only if I consider a third further end F. It might be another end I happen to have, such that only one option would satisfy it (not to spend too much money at the end of the month, so that staying is clearly the winner over leaving). Or it might be an end such that the two ends E and E' in competition are both means to it, perhaps something like the kind of man I want to be, the kind of live I want to leave. But one sees that such an overarching end, if there is some, is not of the same kind as lower ones. There is a *break*, as Anscombe says in a famous passage of *Intention* (§23). The chosen action would not by itself lead to such an end. And it might very well be the case that both kinds of action would equally and incommensurably be part of this end. It might also be that I have opposite, contradictory and incompatible views about the kind of man I want to be. And finally, it might be that I simply have no further end above E and E', so that they cannot be ranked by reference to such an end, that would give a contrastive reason in favour of one.

Faced with such an alternative, I may have *reasons for acting*, and so for deciding, rather than not (so contrastive reasons for acting/deciding), without *contrastive reasons* for deciding on one side (in favour of one rather than the other). The choice will then seem irrational.

There is no more point in deliberating than there is about equal means to the same end. One is then inclined to think that deliberation is only instrumental calculus and reason is a “slave of passions”, that fix the end. This would be said by those who think that we have no power over the ends we happen to have; they only depend on our passions, which depend on our nature, our education and influences, and so our actions are unfree but determined. On the other side, if one maintains that the choice is causally undetermined, it is now absolutely contingent, having no more reasons than causes to determine it. Decision would then be arbitrary. Some defend the view that *this* is the power of free will: to decide without causes nor reasons. Others object that decision would then be *a mere matter of chance*. This is a favorite argument on the side of so-called compatibilists, as well as on the side of rationalists: the argument from *luck*⁷. If an action or a choice were in the end due to luck, it would not be really the agent’s action, it would not be really imputable to him. Decisionists and voluntarists would retort that arbitrary, irrational, uncaused decision is what makes me the real and free agent of my action.

We are now in a muddle. It has opposed medieval theologians as well as modern political thinkers, and still arises nowadays among philosophers who discuss over the problem of free will. The controversy seems to be built upon the model of a division of labour between the agent and the expert. One way to conceive their work is to subordinate the agent to the expert. The conclusion of the expert, the *output of expertise*, would be the *input of action*, which follows. Another way is to subordinate the expert to the agent, who delegates the calculus of the means, but fixes the end, and then follows the expert’s conclusion. A third way is to give a second chance to the agent, after the expert’s work: he still can suspend the decision, ask for another expertise and so on. The first model is a purely *rationalist* one. The third one is purely *voluntarist* and *decisionist*. The second one is the *humean* and perhaps more common view, and it shares the difficulties on both sides. One seems to be attracted on the rationalist side when one considers the *rationality* of a decision: it is a third person point of view, the agent decides according to what seems to be the best thing to do. One is attracted on the voluntarist side when one considers the *owner* of action: for an action to be properly mine, I must be the

⁷ Peter van Inwagen (*An Essay on Free Will*, Oxford, 1983) called it the *Mind* argument, because of the many versions of it that appeared in the journal *Mind*. It has been revived by many others since then, and is considered as a major threat by many libertarians such as Robert Kane (*The Significance of Free Will*, Oxford, 1996) or Peter van Inwagen himself (« Free Will remains a Mystery » reprinted in Kane, ed. 2004)

one who decides. This is a first person point of view. But it now has to face the *luck argument*.

3. Anscombe's analysis of intentional action and practical reasoning should guard us against such a model. The agent is *both* an expert and a decision maker. The two tasks cannot be separated. Or they can be when expertise is *externalized*, but this does not mean that the agent will not deliberate anymore. He will then consider the results of the expertise, the costs and consequences, and will make up his mind. External expertise is only a help, a counsel, it does not rob all of the intellectual job of deliberation. This shows also the limits of any theory of the mind faculties if one wants to separate the task of the intellect and that of the will, and to say that, *first*, the intellect deliberates and, *then*, the will decides. *Actiones sunt suppositorum*: it is the *agent* that deliberates and decides (homunculus fallacy). Practical reasoning leads to decision and action, because it is the reasoning of an agent who has ends and reflects upon them (or is able to do so). One cannot separate the volitional and decisional task, from the calculating one. Practical reasoning is first person reasoning, because the end is not something one *considers* as a premise, but something one *has*, from which he reasons, by the way of informations concerning possible means towards it, to the action.

Now, this answer avoids a crude and absurd conception of deliberation and decision, but it does not solve the problem of indifference. What about cases where there are no contrastive reasons between two incompatible options A and B?

Should one conclude that the chosen option, in absence of contrastive reasons, is due to contrastive *causes*, that explain my doing A rather than B? This reference to causes would explain, in many cases, why I do this particular action rather than other possible ones that would lead to the same result. Anscombe's discussion about mental causes in *Intention* (§§10-11), can be referred to. The reason why I jump in the train at that very moment, and not one minute sooner or later (alternative actions that would come to the same for my intended aim), is my hearing of a bell, a mental *cause* that *makes me jump*. But such a mental cause only explains why *this* particular action (token) is done, not why *such* an action (type) is: only my *reasons* for doing so would give such an explanation. Equally, if I am doing pottery and two heaps of (identical) clay are available to me, the reason why I take a bit of one is probably of a causal nature: it is the closest to me, it is on my right side and I use my right hand, it is the one I am seeing now. I have no contrastive reason for choosing it, and there is no point in deliberating. Once again, the given explanation only concerns the *particularity* of my action, not the *kind* of action. The reason why I used some clay was my doing pottery. This was the

end of my action, but it was equally a reason for using the other heap of clay. So only causal considerations explain my “choice”. But, of course, the problem of indifference concerns *kinds* or *types* of actions, choices between kinds of actions (to do *a* A rather than *a* B), and causal considerations do not explain them.

The problem of indifference is at its climax when two actions are available for two incompatible ends. I cannot have my cake and eat it, though each action is available to me and I have good reasons for *having* it (and eat it later, or give it to someone else) and also good reasons for *eating* it (because I am hungry, or I like it so much and do not want to wait). And so it seems that it is not any lack of reasons that leaves me in a state of indifference, but a superabundance of reasons. Whatever I do, I will have good reasons for doing it. That is: in each case, I have an end towards which my action is a means. But, we have said that the choice would then be a choice between the two ends. And that there is no further end that would be a good reason for choosing one rather than the other. Regress must stop somewhere. The chain of reasons is finite. And so it seems that for each chain of reasons, the ultimate end and reason has no reason for it. One may say that they are ends *in* or *by themselves*. But then, ultimate ends have no *contrastive* reasons, reasons why they have to be preferred to others, or ranked at a certain level. If we nonetheless do have a hierarchy of ends, consider some higher and some lower (I’d rather give my cake to my child, and so have it, rather than satisfy my desire and eat it myself), this is because of the kind of person we are (or have come to be: habits, virtues and vices), because of our *character*. But is our character something we have power upon? If the answer is *no*, then it seems that our decisions depend on something that is not *up to us*, and so are no more really up to us in the end of the day. If the answer is *yes*, then we face a new regress. In order not to come back to the first answer (*no*), one has to admit that some of our choices, at least, do not depend (only) on our character. They would be the real, true, ultimate free choices. But wouldn’t they be also arbitrary, irrational, and finally lucky ones?

This is a way of formulating the problem of free will, focusing on the alternative between indifference to reasons and determination by reasons. I do not know of any answer to it by E. Anscombe. But neither do I know of any similar question asked by her. Since it is very improbable that she never thought about it, I think her silence might be explained because it all seemed evident, or because it all seemed mysterious, or because the question was an ill-framed one. I am inclined to favour the last option. But *what* is going wrong with this question? There are two presuppositions: one is that in order to be rational, a choice has to be made according to *contrastive reasons* (reasons that make the option seem better to the agent

than any alternative one he considers). The other is that such contrastive reasons *determine* (necessitate) the decision. Both presuppositions can be, and have been, disputed. One can contend that reasons *influence* without *necessitating* the decision. But if one admits that the having of contrastive reasons may leave room for contingency, what is at stake is that a decision going contrary to those reasons would be *irrational*. Freedom would then be only the possibility (active power) of being irrational. But one can also contend that a choice can be rational even when made without contrastive reasons. Some philosophers argue that such is the case of choices that are fundamental options in life. It might be that the choice between one or the other heap of clay is irrational (and only causally determined), or that the choice between vanilla and strawberry in the ice cream shop is a pure mental flipping of a coin, if I like both. But in more important cases, moral dilemmas, conflicts between duty and passion, answer to any kind of demanding vocation, then the choice is not arbitrary even when it has no contrastive reasons. And it usually has none: I very often can consider the other alternative as having good reasons for it. The *weighing* of reasons can be neutral. And the ultimate *weighting* is determined with my decision (not determining it)⁸. I just decide the end I favour most with my decision to do this.

I guess this would be more akin to Anscombe's views. But she most certainly would not have considered those ultimate choices as some instantaneous decisions which make me take one path at a crossroad in my life. This one is a view defended by many libertarians today (Kane, van Inwagen). They consider that most of our putative free actions and decisions are not such that it was up to us to do them or not some time before, but those actions and decisions can still be considered as free, or at least as imputable to us, because they are the inheritors of really free ultimate choices made earlier in one's life. I suggest the idea of a "fundamental option" (understood as option one takes without contrastive reasons) as *involved in* our many concrete choices and decisions rather than *preceding* them. I do not choose (for contrastive reasons and so unfreely) to go and visit my grand mother because I firstly decided that my duties as a grandson were above my duties as a father. But in making this choice, I decide, *in that situation*, that it be so. It is not irrational one might argue, to so decide without contrastive reasons. What is irrational is to look for contrastive reasons all the way: one has to stop somewhere. It is irrational to look for contrastive reasons in the heap of clay case: because this kind of choice has not to be of a rational kind (we can leave it to

⁸ Using R. Nozick's famous distinction, in *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 1981)

nature, causes, chance). It is also irrational to look for contrastive reasons in the ranking of the ends. The choices that involve them can be split into a) the concrete choice (of that action), that is ultimately motivated by the end, and b) the *ranking of the end* which has no contrastive reasons.

I would then make a distinction in the defeasible character of practical reasoning. One comes from the circumstances, maybe from luck. Had I made this consideration, I would have chosen otherwise. But it did not occur to me, and this occurring of a consideration is not something I have power upon, at least not just now. The other kind of defeasibility is dependent upon me: I could have ranked my ends otherwise, and so would have chosen and acted otherwise. And so it appears that, while practical reasoning leads to the choice of the means, from the consideration of the end(s), free will is concerned ultimately with the ends only, and so free decision is not the output of a practical reasoning, though it is involved in it.

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