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## Anscombe and Davidson on Practical Knowledge: A Reply to Hunter

Olav Gjelsvik

David Hunter has recently argued (in this journal) that Donald Davidson and Elizabeth Anscombe were in basic agreement about practical knowledge. In this reply, it is my contention that Hunter's fascinating claim may not be satisfactorily warranted. To throw light on why, a more careful consideration of the role of the notion of practical knowledge in Anscombe's approach to intentional action is undertaken. The result indicates a possible need to distinguish between what is called 'practical knowledge' and '(non-observational) knowledge of what one is doing', and shows that Hunter's claim concerning the closeness of Anscombe to Davidson only has plausibility for knowledge of what one is doing. Contrary to an interesting suggestion by Hunter, the paper argues that it is hard to see how Davidson's position can benefit substantially from making use of the notion of knowledge of what one is doing.

# Anscombe and Davidson on Practical Knowledge: A Reply to Hunter

Olav Gjelsvik

## 1. Introduction

David Hunter has recently argued that Donald Davidson and Elizabeth Anscombe were in *basic agreement about practical knowledge*: '[A] careful study of their writings shows that in fact they held remarkably similar views on the nature and need for practical knowledge' (Hunter 2015, 3). Hunter also claims that Davidson could have made use of this notion of practical knowledge to develop his position regarding the significance of deviant causal chains.

If Hunter's claims were true, the history of analytical philosophy of action would have to be rewritten. This paper aims to show that neither claim is warranted. The main reason is that the same basic conception of 'practical knowledge' is not found in both. The further claim that Davidson could have used some notion of 'practical knowledge' to improve his position and reduce or remove the problem of deviant causal chains, is interesting, but stands in need of further argument.

There are, thus, important questions about what the notion of practical knowledge in play is and what it does. Hunter seems to assume that 'practical knowledge' in Anscombe is the same as what he calls 'agential knowledge', i.e. non-observational knowledge of what you are doing. This is not, I shall suggest, an identification we should make without careful justification. The concept of 'practical knowledge' is generally agreed by scholars to be a key concept in Anscombe's account of intentional action,

an account most interpreters see as very different from Davidson's. Whether Anscombe's concept could be given a role in the Davidsonian approach is a fascinating question.

Hunter's article is not just stimulatingly provocative in its claim about how close Anscombe and Davidson are. His paper is an interesting contribution to our understanding of Davidson's work, not least by showing that Davidson seems to acknowledge (a type of) 'agential knowledge'. Hunter's positive contribution can thus be stated as the thesis that both Anscombe and Davidson hold that some form of 'agential knowledge' is characteristic of intentional action. The question before us is what sort of difference this fact makes for their developed views on intentional action and agency.

To see the fuller picture here, we first need more details about Anscombe's views. I shall provide those in the first part, where I spell out some of the things Anscombe meant by practical knowledge, and show some of the basic functions of this concept in her approach to intentional action. In the latter part I contrast this approach to Davidson's, and go on to explain what difference it makes to the understanding of intentional action in general and in particular to Davidson's problem of wayward causal chains, before finally discussing whether Davidson can improve his position by making use of a concept of 'agential knowledge'.

## 2. Anscombe on 'Practical Knowledge'

Anscombe makes claims to the effect that this concept has been almost completely forgotten, and that this is a great loss for the philosophical task of understanding intentional action (Anscombe 1957, §32, p. 57). Recovering this concept is vital for understanding intentional action, she holds. Moreover, the clue to understanding it is practical reasoning: 'The notion of

“practical knowledge” can only be understood if we first understand “practical reasoning” (1957, §33, p. 57). She thus needs an account of practical reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

Already at this stage we should note that ‘practical knowledge’ can hardly be what Ryle discussed as ‘knowledge how to . . .’. While ‘knowledge how to . . .’ is often said to be practical knowledge, this type of knowledge was much discussed at the time. Furthermore, it seems implausible that this type of knowledge can only be understood by first understanding practical reasoning, making the connection between the two somewhat looser. I shall therefore assume that the concept ‘practical knowledge’ Anscombe wants to explore is not the Rylean notion of ‘knowledge how to . . .’.

Anscombe ascribes a vital role to practical reasoning in clarifying practical knowledge. Her later paper ‘Practical Inference’ (1996) takes issue with several aspects of her view on practical reasoning in *Intention*, and accepts that the inferential connection in practical reasoning is the same as in all (theoretical) reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Her positive view of practical reasoning thus evolves and

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<sup>1</sup>It is controversial whether anything like a workable account of practical reasoning is really provided by Anscombe in *Intention* or later. There are, in my view, many problems that she tries to deal with later, especially in her ‘Practical Inference’ (1996), where she abandons some earlier views and moves considerably closer to Aristotle on several points. Many issues still remain, however, and big questions as to whether her later account in this paper can be seen as coming at all close to a worked out account. Since this is so, I shall not delve into questions here, nor into the significance of claims of Anscombe’s, for instance that the practical syllogism does not describe ‘actual mental processes’ (1957, 80). Assessing that claim requires both a firm view on what a mental process is, how much of the reasoning we engage in is enthymematic, and an account of the reasoning.

<sup>2</sup>Anscombe makes this point in Anscombe (1996, 21–22), and she puts it by saying: ‘Thus, if we should want to give conditionals which are logical truths, which we might think of as giving us the logically necessary connexions which “stand behind” the inferences, *they will be exactly the same conditionals* for the practical and the corresponding “theoretical” inferences’ (her italics). The logically necessary connections she speaks of (logical truths) are what I here call inferential connections.

changes, but remains hard to pin down. It seems fair to say that she never provided a worked out account. We can, however, see interesting constraints on an adequate account of practical reasoning developing from two types of consideration. The first is this. In discussing practical reasoning and what she takes to be modern misunderstandings of Aristotle’s view, those views according to which Aristotle sees practical reasoning as reasoning towards a conclusion with a practical content. She in fact mocks (1957, 58) a view that calls a syllogism practical because it has a practical content, saying that we could just as well speak about the minced pie syllogism for syllogisms about minced pies. To introduce a kind of syllogism simply from the kind of content the syllogism has, for instance minced pies, offers no theoretically interesting way to classify syllogisms. Secondly, she makes some positive remark about the need for the premises to be on active service, so to speak (in presenting Aristotle’s view, 1957, 60). That, however, raises the issue of what the premises and the conclusions on active service are in the practical and the theoretical case, and how this relates to the previous point, that the inferential (logical) connections are the same.<sup>3</sup>

With this said about practical inference, the supposed clue to the understanding of ‘practical knowledge’, let us turn to the *knowledge of your action in acting*. Early on in *Intention* (§8) we are introduced to the use of the concept of ‘non-observational

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<sup>3</sup>I cannot here go into this, only note that the conception of premises and conclusion must be richer than in today’s standard approaches, and this added richness should exhibit the parallel ways theoretical premises relate to ‘truth’ and practical premises to the ‘good’. We should at the same time recognize that what we say about what the premises and the conclusion are must be squared with some well established points in Anscombe scholarship, namely that (1) that the ‘practical syllogism’ is supposed to display the *point* of the action; (2) that practical reasoning isn’t supposed to be something (i.e. a psychological process) that precedes an action and gives rise to it, but rather represents a rational ‘order’; and (3) that this ‘order’ is an order of means to end, i.e., the same one elicited in answers to Anscombe’s question ‘Why?’. An anonymous referee made me see the importance of adding this clarification.

knowledge of what you do'. Anscombe clearly sees our knowledge of our own mental states, for instance our beliefs, as non-observational knowledge. There are, therefore, many kinds of things we know non-observationally.<sup>4</sup> She makes use of the category of non-observational knowledge to illuminate intentional action, and maintains this: 'Now the class of things known without observation is of general interest to our enquiry because the class of intentional actions is a sub-class of it' (Anscombe 1957, §8, p. 14). Starting from the general class of things known without observation, and the general class of actions, (including both intentional and non-intentional actions), Anscombe moves towards the class of intentional actions as they are phenomena *belonging to both of these general classes*. She refines her view of intentional action by further employment of the concept of non-observational knowledge showing that we can exclude the involuntary actions known non-observationally from the more general class of actions known non-observationally by noting that the causes of involuntary actions are known observationally. That leaves us, on her view, with the class of things that we will work with when thinking about intentional action.<sup>5</sup>

Anscombe holds that intentional agents have non-observational knowledge of their own (intentional) actions. Such knowledge seems to be what Hunter calls 'agential knowledge', which in that case is non-observational knowledge of what we are doing,  $\phi$ , when doing something  $\phi$  intentionally, and thus practical in content. It is not, however, called 'practical knowledge' by Anscombe in the sections of *Intention* that discuss such non-

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<sup>4</sup>The opposition observational knowledge/non-observational knowledge is in general quite different from that of practical knowledge/non-practical knowledge.

<sup>5</sup>Since Anscombe employs the notion of knowledge (i.e. non-observational knowledge) to get at this class of things we do intentionally, her view could be considered a version of a knowledge-first approach. If she also uses some concept of knowledge to give the essence (account) of the things belonging to this class, her account really is a knowledge-first account.

observational knowledge of one's actions.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the non-observational knowledge a man has of his own action is knowledge of something practical, but, by Anscombe's lights, that is not in general seen to be a good reason to think of it as a distinctive and philosophically interesting type of knowledge—not, in fact, a better ground than knowledge of minced pies would be for the same purpose.<sup>7</sup> Thus the content of knowledge, or what the knowledge is knowledge about, may not be what really matters for the categorization practical/theoretical to be obtained from practical reasoning. Note that I can equally well have knowledge about something practical when I know that Peter is walking, as I can have knowledge of something practical when I know that I am walking. These two bits of knowledge seem equally practical *in their content* but neither will necessarily introduce a theoretically or philosophically interesting kind of knowledge for that reason.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that it is the function of knowledge that matters for the distinction between practical and theoretical, and that it is this function that is to be illuminated by the account of practical reasoning.

Here is another line of reasoning to the same conclusion: We aim to understand the nature of practical knowledge. If the practicality of the practical knowledge does not reside in what is known, a natural step would be to say that it must reside *in the way this thing is known*. That leads us back to the point about function.

To explore aspects of this further, let us look at a statement made late in *Intention*, where Anscombe is summing up much of her own discussion:

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<sup>6</sup>Hunter only refers to the sections in which Anscombe introduces non-observational knowledge of one's action, which is also the only kind of 'practical knowledge' that is endorsed by Davidson; i.e., knowledge of what you are doing.

<sup>7</sup>Anscombe is in fact less than clear on how to use the term 'practical knowledge' after having introduced it.

<sup>8</sup>The last, the knowledge I have of what I do, is taken to be non-observational, but does not introduce this interesting class of knowledge.

If we put these considerations together, we can say that where (a) the description of an event is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention, (b) the event is actually the execution of an intention (by our criteria), then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds: 'Practical knowledge is the cause of what it understands', unlike 'speculative' knowledge which 'is derived from the objects known'. (Anscombe 1957, §48, p. 87)

In the Aquinas quote, 'cause' must be seen as the Aristotelian notion of 'formal cause'. A formal cause is 'the form' to be exhibited by 'the account of what-it-is-to-be' something. Practical knowledge is therefore the Aristotelian form of an intentional action, i.e., the form of something concrete, an event, a change that takes place: 'an agent doing something intentionally', a change which, in Aquinas, may also be the conclusion of practical reasoning. A special thing about something of this form is that it understands itself. This, by Anscombe, is maintained to be a kind of knowledge very different from what we these days think of as knowledge. As has been well argued by John Schwenkler, this practical knowledge is '*productive knowledge*'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I think the best account in print of 'practical knowledge' as 'productive knowledge' is given by John Schwenkler in his excellent (2015). (Note, however, that Schwenkler tends to use the term 'agential knowledge' for what I am calling 'practical knowledge'. I have not adopted his terminology for these reasons: First, I am starting out from Hunter's main terminology, and one issue between us is whether one can equate Hunter's notion of 'agential knowledge' to Anscombe's notion of 'practical knowledge'. Second, where Schwenkler speaks about 'agential knowledge', Anscombe mainly speaks about 'practical knowledge', and since the term 'agential knowledge' has a use by Hunter in the context of this paper, I stick to Anscombe's terminology.)

Let us also note in passing that there are many complex further issues here, among them, some about the phrase 'it understands' in the quote from Aquinas (in 'cause of what it understands'), about what the 'it' is, and about what it is to understand, i.e., what the 'direction of fit' is in understanding something. (Note also that understanding is factive, as knowledge also is, and that it is natural to see understanding as a form of knowledge, i.e., theoretical knowledge, as awareness also is.) I shall leave all these issues aside here.

The concept and also the term 'practical knowledge' are introduced much later in *Intention* than the concept of 'non-observational knowledge of what you are doing' (which is introduced in §8 of *Intention*).<sup>10</sup> They are never explicitly said by Anscombe to be the same thing, and it might even be that the distinction observational/non-observational has no direct application to the category of practical knowledge. 'Practical knowledge' is, as already stressed, introduced by her as something modern philosophy seems to have forgotten all about. Let us turn to one important example, and say something about its significance.

The shopping cart example involves a shopping list and two ways of relating to that list. When things go as they should, the shopper fills the cart with all the items on the list. The onlooker takes down a list of his own of what goes into the cart. When things go as they should, the two lists match.

The actual list is naturally seen as a concrete representation of what we more generally may want to think of as the abstract notion of propositional content. The shopper is making the world be in a certain specific way (making it as it should be according to the list); the onlooker is registering how the world is (what goes into the cart). When both things go as they should, the onlooker knows what is in the cart, and the shopper succeeds in getting hold of all of the listed items, and no others, and putting them into the cart. Still, the list has one clear function: it informs the shopper fully of what she should make be in her action. (Recall that we are in fact aiming to describe the function of practical knowledge, i.e., the notion Anscombe is pushing for understanding intentional action and which philosophy has forgotten all about.)

The onlooker's knowledge has a different function; it is speculative or theoretical insofar as she is trying to take the world in

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<sup>10</sup>The term 'practical knowledge' is in fact introduced at the end of the discussion of the famous shopping cart example in the book (Anscombe 1957, §32, pp. 56–57).



regarding an issue, and, insofar as she succeeds, there is knowledge: knowledge that  $p$  (the list). There is a mistake when  $p$  is incorrect, when some item is on the onlooker's list, but not in the cart, and vice versa.

Here is a further point about the fact that what is taken to be practical knowledge might fail to be such knowledge: the mistake might be in the performance. An agent seems to be subject to a *type of possible mistake* we do not see in the theoretical case. This is the case where the list is the correct one, there is no relevant theoretical error on the part of the agent, and the agent trying to put the items on the list into her cart (to 'make the list true of the world'), but still fails.<sup>11</sup> Of course, one typical case of failure in action is that the agent has some false belief, but the mistake being in the performance seems to stipulate a case where this is not so. The mistake in that case is a purely practical mistake, a mistake in the execution of the action, for instance when one (absentmindedly?) simply picks the wrong item from the shelf, or an item fails to get into the cart (falls out on the far side, something one might not even notice). Mistakes in the performance are additional to and different from failures in what you believe. They are, I suggest, pure failures in practical knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

At this juncture, the point is not whether Anscombe is right in recognizing these mistakes in performance. The point is in-

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<sup>11</sup>As one reviewer points out, it is natural to think there must be some false belief at play when one makes a mistake in performance. Typically there is. The point here is that one can also make an executive mistake without any relevant false belief. One may push the wrong button in the lift, realizing immediately after having done so that it is the wrong one. One may be clumsy without having false beliefs.

<sup>12</sup>Thus the production fails practically, while no theoretical failure can take the blame. Note, again, Anscombe's words where she hints at what she meant by practical knowledge: '(b) the event is actually the execution of an intention (by our criteria), then the account given by Aquinas of the nature of practical knowledge holds' (1957, 87). It naturally follows that if the event (yes, Anscombe speaks of 'event!'), fails to be an 'actual execution of an intention' due to some purely executive mistake, then this is not practical knowledge.

stead what would follow from taking her view. It would mean that there is a type of mistake unique to practical knowledge. If we were to use the terminology of direction of fit, we can say that practical knowledge has the opposite direction of fit from theoretical knowledge; practical knowledge is making the world fit our representation. Correctness criteria for practical knowledge therefore hook up with success criteria in what you are intentionally engaged in doing; for this reason it is indeed natural to think of practical knowledge as productive knowledge that produces its object and must do so to count as (practical) knowledge.

### Summing up Anscombe

In the picture I have presented of Anscombe I actually make use of distinctions she herself did not always draw properly. This was done to ensure a cleaner picture, and clearer picture, of practical knowledge. The most important part of this is that what seems, also sometimes by her, to be called practical knowledge, is actually at least three different things. It is

- (a) Knowledge how to do  $\phi$ .
- (b) The practical-productive knowledge relation you have to what you actually do ( $\phi$ ) when you do  $\phi$  on an occasion. (Aristotelian formal cause of intentional action.)
- (c) The non-observational knowledge you have of your own action in doing something intentionally.<sup>13</sup>

It is (b) that captures the phrase 'the cause of what it understands'; (c) is the non-observational knowledge that you are  $\phi$ -ing when you are  $\phi$ -ing; while (a) is the knowledge how to  $\phi$  (by many also called 'practical knowledge') that gets applied on this occasion of agency. Note that the knowledge in (a) can be

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<sup>13</sup>So I am open for the thought that this is the type of knowledge that is called 'agential awareness' in the large recent self-knowledge literature. This knowledge is not productive in its function. See for instance Peacocke (2014).

applied ever so many times, and that an executive failure on a single occasion does not as such invalidate the ascription of this knowledge. On the other hand, knowledge of the sort one finds in (a) is necessary for the type of knowledge one finds in (b) and it is natural to think that it grounds it. Knowledge of type (b) lies at the heart of the current matter: it is Anscombe's notion of practical knowledge, and it is different in function from all speculative knowledge and also the knowledge in (a). What it does instead is rather to apply the knowledge in (a) productively on an occasion, by making the world be so and so. It is different from all speculative knowledge in its success conditions and functional characteristics, as there are failures specific to this kind of thing: the mistakes in performance, the executive failures, require thus no mistake on the theoretical side.

The knowledge at issue in (c) is, or at least seems to be, a type of awareness, awareness of what you are doing, often called 'agential awareness'. Since the correctness criterion for this type of knowledge seems to be the same as those of 'speculative' knowledge, by Anscombe's own standards (assuming that all awareness is a type of speculative knowledge, and that speculative knowledge must fit the world), it is knowledge quite like the knowledge you have when you are aware that 'Peter is  $\phi$ -ing'. It is knowledge about your own action, and it is non-observational (as opposed to knowledge about Peter).<sup>14</sup>

Anscombe does not distinguish (a), (b), and (c) very carefully—even after having introduced (b). To my mind, it is very important to do so to appreciate her position in relation to Davidson's. That there is a distinction between (a) and (b), is not at all controversial among Anscombe interpreters, nor generally. The relation between (b) and (c) is, possibly, contested in Anscombe scholarship. Good interpreters do not make the distinction,

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<sup>14</sup>'Practical' can thus both characterize the content of the knowledge, as it does in (c), and the way it is held, which is the salient feature in (b), where 'practical' characterizes a mode of knowing.

and we might thus think of it as an open question whether the distinction is found in Anscombe. John Schwenkler, in his thorough discussion of Anscombe's concept of practical knowledge as productive knowledge, does not ascribe the distinction to her. But he also questions the very need for the non-observational knowledge of one's action that Anscombe endorses for intentional action. I will only note two things: 1) Anscombe clearly uses non-observational knowledge of what you are doing to determine which of your actions are such that you do them intentionally (1957, §8); 2) her later, big step, is the introduction of the concept of practical knowledge, which again seems to have a crucial role in the metaphysical account given that it is or provides the formal cause, the account of what it is to do something intentionally. Since there is no sign of rejecting the earlier part, one way of understanding her is to say that practical knowledge (with its special direction of fit) must come with non-observational knowledge of what one is doing (which in its turn can be seen as the understanding what you are doing, which has the opposite direction of fit from practical knowledge).

If what matters for practical knowledge is not that what is known is something practical, but the way this content is known, the (productive) function of this way of knowing, then the distinction between (b) and (c) is useful for our purposes and in our context. It is useful since what we can ascribe to Davidson is knowledge of what we are doing, i.e., knowledge of type (c), even if there is not, in his work, any trace of the practical or productive type of knowledge (type (b)) that Anscombe wants to reintroduce into philosophy in order to account for intentional agency.

### 3. Davidson and 'Agential Knowledge'

Davidson took a lot of inspiration from Anscombe, and clearly admired her work. But he also provided a fresh and clearly

very different view on how to think of action and causation. Davidson argued, controversially, that much of the resistance to thinking of intentional action as caused by beliefs and desires of the agent was misplaced. This resistance typically started from an opposition between logical relations and causal relations, and arguments to the effect that things that were logically related could not be causally related. Davidson held that logical relations hold between, as he would put it, descriptions of actions and events, while causal relations hold between actions and events in the world. It followed from this recognition that many arguments given against seeing actions as *causes* failed.

After his ground-clearing work on this point about the causes of action and the different relations between descriptions of things and the things described, Davidson went on to look for an account of intentional action. He saw an intentional action as caused by its primary reason (a belief-desire combination that rationalizes the action), but did not take for granted that one from this could provide anything like an account or definition of intentional action.<sup>15</sup>

The important question raised by David Hunter is whether it is right to attribute to Davidson the view that it is the causal origin of the action, standardly the primary reason (a belief-desire combination), later in Davidson's work the intention, that *makes an action into an intentional action*. This is a version of the approach of what is often called the standard view in the philosophy of action, the causal theory of action. Did Davidson really embrace such a causal theory of action? This is the generally accepted way of understanding Davidson, not least his famous 1963 paper, and seems to be corroborated by several factors. First by Davidson's general view that actions like all events are

<sup>15</sup>Note however the substantial move taken by Davidson here in seeing psychological states as reasons; today many of us hold that reason is a normative category, and that Davidson is guilty of a problematic psychologism about reasons. That does not make his causal thesis (about the causal roles of psychological states) untrue.

to be individuated by their causes and effects. Also by certain things Davidson says in his later paper 'Freedom to Act' where he speaks of the causal theory of action and seems to think of himself as developing it. There is, however, a real question about whether it is further corroborated after Davidson's attention to cases of wayward causal chains, where the primary reason, or an intention, causes an action, but in a wrong way, and the action is not intentional. Davidson did see this as a very substantial problem for a causal account of intentional action. Here is what he says:

If the agent does *x* intentionally, then his doing *x* is caused by the attitudes which rationalize *x*. But since there may be wayward causal chains, we cannot say that if attitudes that would rationalize *x* cause an agent to do *x*, then he does *x* intentionally. (Davidson 1980, 79)

This suggests that while Davidson took the claims about the possible causal roles of primary reasons to be established, he did *not*, in this paper, claim to have established a causal *account* of what intentional action is. What he says is precisely that the action might be caused by the primary reason and yet not be an intentional action.

Hunter seems to think that Davidson at this point could have exploited the further view he seems to accept, that in the case of intentional action an agent knows the action under some description. Hunter calls this 'agential knowledge', and let us use the term in this way, giving ourselves leeway for ascribing this knowledge to Davidson.

Hunter is right, given this way of using the term, that Davidson does seem to accept some version of the view that agents possess agential knowledge when they act intentionally (although Davidson does so without taking a stand on the possible non-observational character of this knowledge). Davidson states:

Action does require that what the agent does is intentional under some description, and this in turn requires, I think, that what the



agent does is known to him under some description. (Davidson 1980, 50)

Davidson did try to analyse action in terms of causality (also in the essay 'Agency', 1980, 52–55), and at the end of that discussion he sums it up negatively, saying that he, for the rest of the paper, 'abandons the search for an analysis of the concept of agency that does not appeal to intention' (55). What he means by the 'appeal to intention' is an appeal to doing things intentionally or doing things with an intention.<sup>16</sup> He clearly did think that if what an agent does is intentional under some description, it must be known to the agent (under that description or possibly under some other description). We might even say that it is precisely because Davidson accepts that agents acting intentionally have agential knowledge of some sort that he realizes that he has not delivered a causal account of intentional action.

It should be clear from what has been said so far that Davidson separates the two issues of whether the primary reason for an action is its cause, and whether he has available a satisfactory causal account of intentional action. The first is a claim about explanation, the second a claim in metaphysics. Davidson seems to think he succeeds in establishing the first but not in the second claim. He seems also to doubt whether he can get much further than he does on the second question, and that we in a certain sense will have to take the notion of intentional action as primitive, metaphysically speaking.

Hunter usefully draws our attention to Davidson's struggles in accounting for what the primary reason (causing an action) is.

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<sup>16</sup>There are in fact very delicate issues about the relations being between *doing  $\phi$  intentionally* and *doing  $\phi$  in an intentional act with the aim of doing  $\phi$* . These do not necessarily have the same truth-conditions. One might do  $\phi$  intentionally without having an aim to do  $\phi$ , as when  $\phi$  is an unfortunate side effect. And one might do  $\phi$  in an intentional act aiming for  $\phi$ , even if one does not do  $\phi$  intentionally, for instance when one is just trying and failing, trying to find a way to do  $\phi$  (which one really wants and aims for). Thanks to a reviewer for raising these issues.

Davidson aimed to describe it as something that rationalizes the action but is logically independent of it. He had problems, and it took him a long time to sort them out to his own satisfaction. The difficulty centred on identifying a belief about the action, namely a belief that it belonged to a certain kind, but which did not refer directly to the token action being performed. If it had done, the required logical independence would be lost. Hunter does a very good job at resolving this difficulty for Davidson, showing that the resources for this were available by the time the paper 'Intending' was published. There were indeed two beliefs involved in acting intentionally, a general belief and also a particular belief. The latter Hunter plausibly interprets as agential awareness.

The general and particular beliefs are identified here:

If someone performs an action of type *A* with the intention of performing an action of type *B*, then he must have a pro attitude towards actions of type *B* (which may be expressed in the form: an action of type *B* is good (or has some other positive attribute)) and a belief that in performing an action of type *A* he will be (or probably will be) performing an action of type *B* (the belief may be expressed in the obvious way). (Davidson 1980, 87)

This exhibits the necessary logical independence: The general belief is that an action of type *A* is of type *B*, the particular belief is that this action is of type *A*.

The agential awareness claim is most clearly made by Davidson in 'Agency' (51; also quoted above):

For an agent always knows how he moves his body when, in acting intentionally, he moves his body, in the sense that there is *some* description of the movement under which he knows that he makes it. Such descriptions are, to be sure, apt to be trivial and unrevealing; this is what ensures their existence. So, if I tie my shoelaces, there is a description of my movements: I move my body in just the way required to tie the shoelaces. (Davidson 1980, 51; italics in original)

There is, as earlier stated, no direct evidence that Davidson thought of the latter knowledge as non-observational, but no

direct evidence against it either. The description under which the agent has agential knowledge must be linked to the general belief in the good of the action.

I shall assume for the nonce that Hunter is right and that there is something we may call 'agential knowledge'—also in Davidson's case. Davidson is more interesting and subtle than some writers have taken him to be, and Hunter has done us a good service in making this clear. But the question is how this fits into Davidson's general approach, and whether it can be put to use to change the pessimistic mood that pervades the summing up Davidson provides (see above). Let us therefore turn to the question of whether Davidson can make use of the notion of 'agential knowledge' within his more general account of intentional action, and by doing so mitigate the problems introduced by the case of deviant causal chains and thus rescue or improve his causal theory of action. Davidson clearly did not appeal to the employment of agential knowledge when discussing the case of the climber. If that would have helped his account, why did he not do so? Let us turn to this case.

### **Application: The Climber**

The climber is a person doing mountain climbing with some others, all attached to each other by safety rope. He realizes that an accident is coming, and the only way to save his own life is to release the rope. He thus has a primary reason (and maybe an intention) for letting the rope attached to his colleagues go, and this unnerves him so that he lets the rope go. Both Davidson and Anscombe think that the latter 'doing' is not an intentional action, and we can, I think, agree that there is no non-observational knowledge of it when it happens.

Anscombe seems to have an explanation of sorts as to why there is no 'agential awareness'. It is because there is no practical knowledge in this case (according to the account of practical knowledge, the formal cause), and thus no intentional action to

be known. (Or if practical and agential knowledge are the same, simply no agential knowledge.)

Davidson can also describe the climber case as one in which 'agential knowledge' is (or could be) missing. The absence of agential awareness could in that case be seen as disqualifying it as an intentional action. Davidson would then in fact be adding agential knowledge as a further necessary condition of intentional action, in order to render his account somewhat immune to the problem of deviant causal chains. This is what Hunter suggests on Davidson's behalf. The resulting view would be that something is an action when it is caused by the primary reason and it also exhibits agential knowledge.

This is an interesting idea. I shall maintain, though, that Hunter needs to do more than he has done so far to warrant its promise. Here is why.

Let us first assume that the agential knowledge is standard observational knowledge, necessary for intentional action. When you tie your shoelaces intentionally, you either have to see your hand move, or, for instance, have proprioceptive experience of doing it. In the climber's case you may see your grip loosening. If the 'agential knowledge' is observational knowledge, however, the observed loosening of your grip and letting go of the rope may still not be an intentional action. Even if it is caused by your belief and desire, and you have observational knowledge of what your hand is doing, the wayward causality may still be in place. It is not entirely implausible that Davidson himself thought of 'agential knowledge' as observational knowledge, and that this is why he did not see any point in making further use of such 'agential knowledge' when accounting for intentional action.

Now, take the case where 'agential knowledge' is non-observational knowledge of your action. Here, you know non-observationally that you are letting the rope go, you are aware that you are doing this. When this knowledge is non-observational, it is the sort of knowledge Anscombe employed to get the extension right for the class of intentional actions,

and there may be agreement between Davidson and Anscombe about what 'agential knowledge' is: it is (c) above.

The problem I then seem to spot in Hunter's amended version of Davidson is this. The agential (non-observational) knowledge seems not only to be necessary for intentional action, it might be sufficient as well. If agential knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for intentional action, then the *causal history of the event would not play any role in determining whether we are facing an action or not*. Agential knowledge would do all the work on this score.

Since a causal connection to reasons or intentions is not sufficient for intentional action, we may surely ask whether it is at all necessary. Are there cases of agential knowledge without such causation by primary reason or intention?

Anscombe maintains that there are. There are intentional actions done for no reason, and not done from any prior intention. This has been pushed further with force by, for instance, R. Hursthouse.<sup>17</sup> If Anscombe and Hursthouse are right in this, then making the assumption that the causal story of Davidson's is necessary seems to wrongly exclude cases of intentional action. This issue needs careful scrutiny by Hunter's amended Davidsonian view.

Let us then turn to the metaphysical issues.<sup>18</sup> The real difference at this point between Davidson and Anscombe resides precisely in the fact that Anscombe's productive notion of practical knowledge ((b) above) is meant to contribute to a metaphysical account of intentional action. If it is successful in doing this, by employing the 'lost' but now recovered conception of pro-

ductive knowledge, it can, in a certain sense, explain the lack of agential knowledge (non-observational knowledge of what you do, or (c)) from the lack of practical knowledge, i.e., lack of the Aristotelian form of intentional action. (The explanation would assume that the presence of the Aristotelian form in (b) carries with it agential knowledge—non-observational knowledge—of type (c), 'cause of what it understands'). When we see more clearly what job the notion of practical (and productive) knowledge is supposed to do, we see that the difference between our two thinkers is that Anscombe has a notion of practical knowledge which may be equipped to do some metaphysical work. Whether it delivers is here taken to be an open question.<sup>19</sup> Davidson's approach to intentional action is, on the other side, marked by his general approach to the metaphysics of events, individuation of events by actual causes and effects. It has problems: It individuates events by all the other events there are, and does not answer any question as to the nature of events besides being the relata of the causal relation. Anscombe provides an account of a type of event by characteristics unique to that type of event, and not by the relations to other events of that type. Davidson's own attempt at a causal account of intentional action ends in some sort of pessimism or despair about providing an account in his paper 'Agency'. Hunter still needs to say more about how his suggested approach can move a Davidsonian position beyond this pessimism, or whether one should rather aim at throwing light on the causal element in production (in practical-productive knowledge).

<sup>17</sup>This seems to have been Anscombe's view, to be further developed by Rosalind Hursthouse in a famous paper (Hursthouse 1991). There is a lot to say about these cases, and strategies are available from the Davidsonian point of view. I am just pointing towards these issues.

<sup>18</sup>Take a case like Quine's case of a creature with a heart, and a creature with kidneys, and assume they are co-extensional. We still need to say a lot more to give an account what it is to be a creature with a heart or a creature with kidneys.

<sup>19</sup>And it is also an open question whether it can deliver without bringing in causal notions in order to say something more about the production part of the notion of 'productive knowledge'. In my view, Hunter would do well to focus on this point; there might indeed be a need to bring in causal material to make clearer what productive knowledge is. This approach need not, however, assign the relevant causal power to 'agential knowledge', seen as non-observational knowledge of what one is doing. This would be a way of using elements from Davidson to improve Anscombe, rather than *vice versa*.

## 4. Conclusion

Let me again repeat what Hunter writes: ‘a careful study of their writings shows that in fact they held remarkably similar views on the nature and need for practical knowledge’ (2015, 3). We now see that this is not warranted. We have, however, reached some agreement with Hunter to the effect that Anscombe and Davidson might have held somewhat similar views about the role of ‘agential knowledge’ in determining the extension of the class of intentional actions. But we have also concluded that the point where they really differ is on the nature and need for *practical productive knowledge*, and, more generally, on what a metaphysical account of intentional action should be.

Davidson does not in his writings attempt to make use of a notion of productive knowledge, nor is there any direct comment upon Anscombe’s notion of ‘practical knowledge’. We could see the divide between the two as part of the big divide in philosophy between those who try and make do with causal notions in accounting for something that other philosophers account for by some concept of knowledge. (Of course, the causal approach can extend to knowledge itself.<sup>20</sup>)

Simply put: Davidson tries to do without a notion of productive practical knowledge, or a notion doing some equivalent metaphysical job, although he also acknowledges that his attempt to account for intentional action in terms of its cause had not ultimately succeeded. Agential knowledge in the form he accepts cannot, it seems, easily be brought in to complete his own type of account; at the very least quite a lot more needs to be said to make that plausible. I thus throw the ball back into Hunter’s court, and encourage him to try and do more to achieve this.

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<sup>20</sup>Note that by saying that something is accounted for by some notion of knowledge, and not from for instance causal notions, does not stand in the way of seeing what is thus accounted for as having causes and effects. In this sense ‘practical knowledge’ is a ‘causal concept’; namely a concept of something with causal properties.

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