24 Practical knowledge and the spiritual nature of man[[1]](#endnote-1)

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Abstract

In this paper, I develop and defend an interpretation of Anscombe’s philosophy of human action as a philosophy of practical knowledge. This is a philosophy which reframes questions of moral obligation as belonging to the grammar of our talk of human action. But, Anscombe’s account of the grammar of human action is not fully in view in her action-theoretic works. In the first part of the paper, I argue that to get her account of the grammar of human action fully into view we need to turn to her view of the spiritual nature of man in her religious writings. In the second part of the paper I offer an interpretation of her view of the spiritual nature of man which shows that, contrary to popular interpretations, hers is a spiritual and not an Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian philosophy of practical knowledge. I close this paper with a sketch of a spiritual philosophy of practical knowledge which moves along Anscombean lines but abandons talk of God.

1Introduction

When immersing ourselves in the literature on G. E. M. Anscombe’s great works on action, we may get the impression that it is possible to understand the full scope of her philosophy of practical knowledge without needing to move past the confines of her action-theoretic work in *Intention* and elsewhere.[[2]](#endnote-2) The thought is rarely explicitly stated in these terms, but, with very few exceptions,[[3]](#endnote-3) the omission is striking: almost none of the readings on offer look at her religious writings in developing and defending their interpretation of practical knowledge. It is the aim of this paper to show that this is indeed an omission—an omission which is justified given some of what Anscombe herself says in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ and in *Intention*, but an omission nevertheless.

It is my aim in the first part of this paper to cast doubt on the implicit assumption that we may understand Anscombe’s philosophy of practical knowledge without looking into her religious writings. Thus, in the first three sections, I look more closely at what she herself says in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ and in *Intention*. Specifically, in the second section, I suggest that her attack in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ on the concept of an overarching moral obligation should be seen as part of her attempt to recover a picture of moral philosophy as a philosophy of practical knowledge. This is a philosophy which reframes questions of moral obligation as belonging to the grammar of our talk of human action. In the third section, I turn to *Intention* and her pronouncement there that the topic of the practical syllogism is not as such an ethical one. I argue that this pronouncement is in the service of a disjunctivist, as opposed to an instrumentalist, account of practical reason. This much opens the way for taking her work on human reason in the religious writings to belong to her work on the grammar of human action. As I will suggest in the fourth section, it is the failure to recognize this that has led interpreters to assimilate her view of fully human action and reason to neo-Aristotelian or quasi-Aristotelian views.

My aim in the second part of this paper is to bring to light her distinctive—spiritual—view of human reason and show how it completes her view of the grammar of human action. Thus, in the fifth section, I show how she connects man’s distinctive truth-saying or thinking ability with man’s spiritual nature. In the sixth section, I offer an interpretation of her concept of human religiosity (i.e., the manifestation of man’s truth-saying ability in religion, morality and in some ways art) as a fact akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason (*Faktum der Vernunft*). There, I also try to show how religiosity as a fact akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason may be seen as determining the grammar of human action. In these two sections, I take myself to have shown that hers is a *spiritual* philosophy of practical knowledge. Finally, in the seventh section, I briefly sketch a spiritual philosophy of practical knowledge which moves along Anscombean lines but abandons talk of God.

2 Moral philosophy as *a* philosophy of practical knowledge

In the literature[[4]](#endnote-4) it is becoming increasingly clear that, in order to understand Anscombe’s philosophical preoccupation with action in *Intention* and elsewhere, we should situate it within the context of her moral philosophical works, beginning with the polemic she unleashes in her seminal ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. There, Anscombe’s motive for setting up the philosophical problem of action is to fight off consequentialism. Consequentialism is typically taken to be the normative ethical theory, according to which the rightness of an action is determined by its consequences, such that, in Anscombe’s words, the right action is that which produces the best possible consequences.[[5]](#endnote-5) But as a growing number of philosophers emphasize,[[6]](#endnote-6) in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ Anscombe classifies a number of views under consequentialism that one wouldn’t normally characterize as normative theories of the consequentialist variety. What these various views all share is the key that unlocks the mysteries of her essay. But the key is itself mysterious, so one had better start there.

To find this key one should look at the essay’s most polemical moments. Here is one such moment:

If someone really thinks, in advance, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration – I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The corruption Anscombe speaks of here has to do with adherence to the notion of an *overarching moral justification*,[[8]](#endnote-8) such that it encourages us to treat what we otherwise think of as morally abominable (e.g., murder, rape, torture, etc.) as something which one may be ‘morally obliged’ to do.[[9]](#endnote-9) Put in this way, it is a corruption of *mores*, of course. But Anscombe thinks that there is a philosophical reason for it—namely, that the moral fall is enabled by a corrupted philosophical mindset. In passages such as the one above, we are meant to suspect that for the uncorrupted philosophical mind, the truth that the action ought not to be done is available in knowing the action as the fully human or intentional particular action that it is under the description of ‘procuring the judicial execution of the innocent’.[[10]](#endnote-10) The thought here is that the mark by which we can distinguish this knowledge from others is that no extra thinking is needed to reach the truth that the action ought not to be done or ought not to have been done. And so, the first thing we learn about the key to the essay (what even seemingly non-consequentialist theories have in common with consequentialism) must be this: it matters little whether this extra thinking is construed by *the theory* as pertaining to the products of the action or to the state of mind that brings the action about. In both cases, *the theory* supposes that the truth that the action ought not to be done or ought not to have been done is not available in knowing the action as the fully human, fully intentional particular action that it is.

This may indeed show that there is one thing shared by all the theories that Anscombe lumps together under consequentialism, but we can’t yet see why consequentialism is what they have in common. To see this, we need to get a clearer view of the corrupt philosophical mindset that puts us in moral danger. Here is a very apt expression of this mindset:

Moral goodness or badness is not some new, higher order ingredient which gets injected into a fully human action from what is called the agent’s *Gesinnung*. If you take *that* view, you will call fully human, fully intentional particular actions not yet as such ‘morally’ good or bad. If such action is, for example, one of robbing a poor man or killing a child, you will say that the characterization so far only mentions ‘pre-moral evil’, the ‘pre-moral’ evil that the man has not the means he had of buying food, and the child loses its life. This is awful nonsense.[[11]](#endnote-11)

On this construal of the problem, *the theory* supposes that the question of the moral assessment of an action is divorceable from the question of the characterization under which it may be known as the fully human, fully intentional particular action that it is.[[12]](#endnote-12) But now we have a key to the key: *The theory* supposes this because it assumes that moral concepts are constituted independently of concepts of human action—in other words, because it assumes that moral concepts do not belong as such to concepts of action. But if moral concepts do not belong as such to concepts of action, then what else can they belong to except concepts of states of affairs? And, now, in their application to actions, moral concepts thus constituted must in one way or another contain a reference to the states of affairs that are produced by the actions at issue. And it is thus that consequentialism may corrupt even theories which on the surface may seem non-consequentialist.

But what exactly is it that this key unlocks? The corruption of consequentialism is hard to avoid and even harder to cure. The cure is not a mere matter of substituting one normative theory with another. To see that moral concepts are not constituted independently of concepts of action, one needs to be in a position to see what it is for a concept to be a concept of action—that is, one needs to have a sound grasp of the grammar of action. Then and only then can one have a reasonable view of the sense in which moral concepts belong to the genus of concepts of action. That is, then and only then can one have a reasonable view of how it is that the truth that the action is morally prohibited is available in knowing it to be the fully human or intentional particular action that it is under the description of ‘procuring the judicial execution of the innocent’. Unfortunately, according to Anscombe in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, we are not in a position to see what it is for moral concepts to be constituted as concepts of human action as we do not even see what it is for a concept to be a concept of action. As she herself proclaims in the opening section of *Intention*, we are in the dark about the *character* of the concept of the intentional.[[13]](#endnote-13) We are in this grammatical darkness about the concepts of human action (i.e., we do not know what it is for a concept of human action to *be* a concept of human action) and this explains why we cannot comprehend that moral concepts are constituted as concepts of human action.

But despite the grammatical darkness, we can get an inkling of what it means for moral concepts to belong to concepts of action if we consider, as Anscombe does in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, what was lost on us when we abandoned the divine law theory. Here is how we might understand the divine law theory under this light: It is very difficult to make sense of a commanding God without also positing the idea of distinctive cognitive labor. Let us assume that what God commands of us is x, y and z. Now, what sort of a thing does God thus command? If in commanding *x*, *y*, *z*, God commands a mere list of particulars, then God’s commands look like Socrates’ fly which intervened without *saying* but by *biting* Socrates every time he did what he wasn’t supposed to be doing. Now, this might be divine fly all right, but it would hardly count as a commanding fly. However, if in commanding *x, y, z* God commands a mere finite list of action types, then God might count as commanding states of affairs in the world (say, that there be no murder) but he could hardly be said to be commanding us to act in particular ways in particular circumstances. For, perhaps, after all, the safest way to eradicate murder from the world would be for all of us to sleep as much as possible. To avoid both of these dead ends, we must take it that in commanding us to do *x*, *y*, *z*, God is commanding the conceptual work that is involved in raising and addressing questions concerning w*hat it means to be doing x, y, z in the circumstances*. These might be questions about *what it would mean in the circumstances to be doing x, y, z* but also questions about *whether doing such and such in the circumstances would really amount to doing x, y, z or not*. As Anscombe herself says, ‘[D]oing what one is told is an interpretation and so with doing, however obedient one is one can hardly escape being one’s pilot’.[[14]](#endnote-14) So that we may say that God’s command to do *x, y, z* takes the following shape:

Be your own pilot: do the conceptual work that is involved in coming to know of an action that it is (or might be) the fully intentional particular action that it is (or might be) under the description *x, y, z*.

Or for short: ‘Know what it *means* to be doing *x, y, z* in the circumstances’.

In thus knowing an action one certainly comes to know what one ought to do. But, if what I claimed in the above paragraph is at all right, this is *not* because one knows that the action in question happens to fulfill a condition – say that it is willed by God. This can only be because one comes to know what an action *means* – which coming to know *is* what God commands. This distinction becomes sharper once we consider the situation that follows the loss of the divine law theory. Anscombe thinks that this loss might have been relatively harmless for philosophy except that even after it was discarded, philosophers kept floating around the words once tied to it, ‘moral obligation’ being one of them. This gave rise to the impression that a meaning must somehow still be attached to the phrase now standing on its own. Let us for the moment go back to Anscombe’s example above and suppose that *theory* of the sort she opposes produces the following verdict: One does have the ‘moral obligation’ to not *procure the judicial execution of the innocent*, even though we do not know this in knowing the action to be the fully intentional action that it is (i.e., *procuring of the judicial execution of the innocent*). But how do we know this now? What does the labor of such knowing now involve? It involves identifying the conditions under which the particular action thus known (i.e., as *procuring of the judicial execution of the innocent*) is injected with the added ingredient that makes it moral, whether or not this ingredient has to do with the agent’s mindset or the action’s consequences (see the second quotation above). What now gives this phrase—‘moral obligation’—meaning lies outside the scope of the human practices (the wider normative contexts)[[15]](#endnote-15) in which the action is constituted as the fully human or fully intentional action that it is under this description: *procuring of the judicial execution of the innocent*. What the labor of moral thought now comes to is the labor of exploring whether a conceptually separate element—the *added* ingredient—happens to be injected into the fully human or intentional particular action or not.

And so the labor of moral thought is now empirical: do we find that extra ingredient added onto this or that fully formed particular action or not? Nothing about what it *means* for the action to be that fully formed intentional action—i.e., nothing about what it *means* to be doing such and such in such and such circumstances—can now tell us this; only empirical research can. In the postlapsarian philosophical landscape as Anscombe describes it, there is a sharp divide in the labor of moral thought between the moral labor of the layman, which is moral but empirical, and the philosophical labor of the academic, which is conceptual but metaethical (non-moral), consisting of the exploration of such matters as whether this or that extra ingredient really is the locus of moral value, where it is to be placed on the metaphysical map of beings, and so on and so forth. On this view then, there is no deep connection between moral work and conceptual work. But this is precisely the connection that the divine law theory held on to and that was lost on us when we rejected it without abandoning the talk of ‘moral obligation’ that went with it. It was by keeping this talk that we fell into the trap of consequentialism—which, we may now say, is the trap of taking moral labor to be empirical labor. Philosophy can escape consequentialist corruption only if it can find a way to reconceive moral labor as conceptual labor. And to do this philosophy must, Anscombe thinks, find a way to reconceive moral concepts as belonging to concepts of action. For then philosophy will be in a position to reconceive moral thought as involving the conceptual work of coming to know what it *means* to be doing such and such in such and such circumstances.

However, I want to propose in this paper that this conceptual work is no more than the work of *our* coming to know an intentional action as such—no more, that is, than what the labor of practical knowledge comes to in *our* case. Put in these terms, Anscombe’s suggestion in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ is that moral philosophy can escape consequentialism only if it finds a way to re-imagine itself as a philosophy of practical knowledge.

This reading faces an immediate objection: Anscombe lays out her view of practical knowledge in *Intention* where she forcefully denies that the topic of the practical syllogism and so of practical knowledge is an ethical topic as such. The labor of moral thought must, therefore, involve something over and above the labor of mere practical knowledge. In the section that follows, I will show that this objection rests on a misunderstanding. It is this misunderstanding, I shall argue in the fourth section, that is to blame for the inability of interpreters to clearly distinguish between an Anscombean and an Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian philosophy of practical knowledge.

3 On the expulsion of the ethical in *Intention*

Very roughly speaking, in *Intention* Anscombe sets up the question of intentional action as the identification of an order that is there when an intentional action is there. When an intentional action is there, in Anscombe’s view, an etiological order of action descriptions is there (e.g., ‘I am moving my hand up and down because I am pumping water’; ‘I am pumping water because I am replenishing the water supply’; ‘I am replenishing the water supply in order to poison the inhabitants of the house,’ etc.). This order is there, Anscombe thinks, whenever a special question *Why* applies to what is there (e.g., ‘Why are you moving your hand up and down?’ ‘Because I am pumping water.’ ‘Why are you pumping water?’ ‘Because I am replenishing the water supply.’ ‘Why are you replenishing the water supply?’ ‘In order to poison the inhabitants of the house.’ etc.). According to Anscombe, to say that this special question *Why* applies is to say that what is there when an intentional action is there is not known by observation. She calls this way of knowing *practical* (glossing it over as knowledge which brings about what it understands) and she contrasts it with speculative knowledge, even though she insists that it is knowledge of what is indeed there in the world (or of *what happens*) when an intentional action is there. In this picture, when an intentional action is there, what is there has the structure of what Anscombe calls, together with Aristotle, *the practical syllogism*—the *calculation* of how to close the gap between oneself and something that one wants.

Now, Anscombe explicitly says that the topic of the practical syllogism (which is no less than the topic of practical knowledge and thus of intentional action), is not, as such, an ethical topic.[[16]](#endnote-16) In the face of this avowal, how can I go on to say that the labor of moral thought is no more than the labor of practical knowledge? In what follows I want to defend a disjunctivist reading of Anscombe’s treatment of the practical syllogism in *Intention*. This disjunctivist reading will allow me to suggest an account of morality as constituting a transformation of and not an addition to the concept of the intentional.

That the topic of the practical syllogism is not, as such, an ethical topic does not mean that the dimension in which an action is morally good or bad is conceptually external to its being a fully human or fully intentional particular action. In fact, the very opposite is the case. The danger of a misunderstanding here is such that the relevant passage from *Intention* is worth quoting in full:

It will have become clear that the practical syllogism as such is not an ethical topic. It will be of interest to an ethicist, perhaps, if he takes the rather unconvincing line that a good man is by definition just one who aims wisely at goods ends. I call this unconvincing because human goodness suggests virtues among other things, and one does not think of choosing means to ends as obviously the whole of courage, temperance, honesty and so on. So what can the practical syllogism have to do with ethics? It can only come into ethical studies if a correct philosophical psychology is requisite for a philosophical system of ethics: a view which I believe I should maintain if I thought of trying to construct such a system; but which I believe is not generally current. I am not saying that there cannot be any such thing as moral general premises, such as ‘People have a duty of paying their employees promptly’ or Huckleberry Finn’s conviction, which he failed to make his premise: ‘White boys ought to give runaway slaves up’; obviously there can, but it is clear that such general premises will only occur as premises of practical reasoning in people who want to do their duty. The point is very obvious, but has been obscured by the conception of practical syllogism as of its nature ethical, and thus as a proof about what one ought to do, which somehow naturally culminates in action.[[17]](#endnote-17)

When Anscombe so vehemently denies in the above quotation that the topic of the practical syllogism is, as such, an ethical topic, she means to block a view on which a practical syllogism may serve as a proof about what one ought to do. But this is precisely the view of the practical syllogism as external to the moral fabric of one’s being—that is, to the way one is morally inclined when one is a certain kind of person with a certain character, worldview and upbringing—and so as capable of validating the moral fabric of one’s being from the outside. Anscombe’s point in the quotation above is that the practical syllogism is not the kind of machinery that can *prove* that something ought to be done and thus *make* us want to do or do the moral thing, for it is precisely not external to the moral fabric of wanting or doing. The practical syllogism of the good person is internal to their wanting and doing, and so it cannot be used as an external tool with which to judge, validate, necessitate, etc., that wanting and doing.[[18]](#endnote-18)

But one will object again: If the practical syllogism is internal to the moral shape of wanting and doing, then why not say indeed that the practical syllogism is an ethical topic? The answer, of course, must mention that the wanting and doing of the virtuous is not all the wanting and doing that there is; there might also be the wanting and the doing of etiquette and appetite, to name but two alternatives. Each form of wanting and doing may belong to concepts of the intentional, for each may be described as *embodying* its own form of the practical syllogism—its own form of the calculation of how to close the gap between oneself and what one wants, in Anscombe’s words.

But one will object again: If the practical syllogism is internal to various shapes of wanting and doing, then this can only be because each such shape is a hybrid of two activities of practical reasoning. First, there is the activity of calculating, which is the common factor across the different shapes of wanting and doing, and which constitutes all intentional action as intentional. Second, there is *the intention with which*—in other words, that towards which one calculates and which lends a particular desirability character to the action that is calculated to close the gap between oneself and what one wants, which is different in different kinds of intentional action. In this picture, a treatise on the character of the intentional should of course mention that there can be different *intentions with which*, but its focus will be the practical syllogism as the common factor between the different kinds of intentional action.[[19]](#endnote-19)

One then imagines that there must be such a thing as a generic desirability characterization (the desirability of achieving one’s ends) which is stated in a generic major premise (the premise *This is my end* or *This is what I want*) of a practical syllogism that expresses a generic sort of practical reasoning (the reasoning that in order to achieve what I want I must take the means to it) which lies at the heart of all wanting and acting as its common factor.[[20]](#endnote-20) But Anscombe stresses time and again that what she gives is a formal account of practical reasoning and that if we are giving a formal account of practical reasoning we cannot put ‘I want’ into a premise.[[21]](#endnote-21) A *formal account of practical reasoning* is not *the account of a generic sort of reasoning* that all shapes of wanting and doing must have in common, such as the reasoning ‘I want *x*, I know that *y* is the means to *x*, therefore I must/shall do *x*’. As Anscombe elaborates the notion with the examples of the saucer of mud and the pin, [[22]](#endnote-22) it is possible to imagine cases in which the answer to the question *Why* is indeed, ‘I just want this’. But, unless we are in a certain philosophical mindset already, these cases tend to puzzle us such that we cannot quite understand what, if anything, the agent means. As she formulates the thought, ‘It is not a mere matter of what is usual in the way of wants and what is not. It is not at all clear what it meant to say: this man simply wanted a pin’.[[23]](#endnote-23) And a bit later on in the same paragraph ‘To say “I *merely* want this” without any characterization is to deprive the word of sense…’ Given this, we must conclude with Anscombe that it is ridiculous to place a notion we barely understand in particular cases at the very heart of all intentional actions as their common factor. There is no such thing as this generic wanting and this generic—instrumental—practical reasoning, supposedly common to all the different shapes of wanting and doing that we tend to call *intentional*.

A formal account of practical reasoning is not an account of a kind of reasoning, whether shared in common or aimed at by other kinds of reasoning. A kind of practical reasoning is at once a species and a genus. And a *formal* account of practical reasoning is an account of the different kinds of practical reasoning *qua* genus. There need be no common denominator between the different *kinds* of practical reasoning in virtue of which they count as different kinds of *practical reasoning*. Each kind of practical reasoning might itself be a form that the practical syllogism—the calculation about how to close the gap between oneself and what one wants—takes and so would itself be at once species and genus. Anscombe should be taken seriously when she says that *bonum est multiplex*—that is, that the good is multi*form*.[[24]](#endnote-24) The ‘intention with which’ does *not* specify the concept of a desire that is in place in the major premise of a practical syllogism otherwise untouched, as it were. In the practical syllogism proper, there is no such place in the position of the major premise. Each ‘intention with which’ ranges over the entire syllogism, changing what it means for the calculation to *be* a calculation—just as, we might say, on the transformative views of rationality the concept of a rational animal is the concept of reason as effecting a certain transformation of the concept of animality.[[25]](#endnote-25) In this picture, when Anscombe denies that the practical syllogism is such an ethical topic, she does not deny that the concept of the ethical is a certain transformation of the concept of the intentional. Far from it! What she denies is that the ethical may be forced upon us by a generic kind of reasoning of the sort described above. But the very concept of such a reasoning is mythical.

It is precisely by considering the idea that the concept of a generic kind of practical reasoning is mythical that we gain insight into the Anscombean truth that the ethical is a certain transformation of and not a mere addition to the concept of the intentional. But then the next question is precisely what sort of transformation. Interpreters have previously thought of it as being barely distinguishable from an Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian transformation. But this, as I will suggest in the following section, is a mistake owing to the assumption that Anscombe completes her account of human action in her so-called action-theoretic works. We must resist this interpretative pitfall. If the concept of the ethical is indeed a certain transformation of, and not a mere addition to, the concept of the intentional, then we must turn to Anscombe’s ethico-religious works in order to get a full picture of the grammar of human action. Staying with her action-theoretic works is staying on the formal level. But for Anscombe, the ethical does not *fully* arise as the ethical on this level; it arises as the ethical *only* as one of the many forms that the intentional may take.

4 Two philosophies of practical knowledge

The misunderstanding noted above is not unrelated to a mistaken reading of ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ and so I will return to it here briefly. Some interpreters believe that in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ Anscombe invites us to formulate a virtue ethics account of the overarching notion of morality of the sort that Hursthouse propounds.[[26]](#endnote-26) Others believe that what she proposes is closer to a radical virtue ethics view, on which the normativity of morality is internal to the logical structure of the human form of life.[[27]](#endnote-27) Yet others believe that while Anscombe herself favours a religious morality, she also thinks that an Aristotelian morality is all right.[[28]](#endnote-28) And, finally, others believe that Anscombe intends to jettison all substantial conceptions of moral obligation (both in normative ethics and in metaethics).[[29]](#endnote-29)

It is in fact true that towards the end of ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ Anscombe draws a rough sketch of what the moral landscape might look like if there was room for moral philosophy as a philosophy of practical knowledge. But in so doing, she does not even begin to give a positive answer to the question of which philosophy of practical knowledge is the true one. It is also true that in various places in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ Anscombe suggests that one need not believe in God in order to have a decent morality (i.e., one that is not consequentialist); one may instead believe in the sufficiency of the Aristotelian categoricals—very roughly speaking, truths about what human beings need in order to flourish as the kind of living beings that they are. But the language she uses in suggesting this is indicative of her wish in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ to treat all options for a philosophy of practical knowledge as no more than that. Here is, for instance, one such instance of the language she uses:

*One man—a philosopher*—may say that since justice is a virtue, and injustice a vice, and virtues and vices are built up by the performances of the action in which they are instanced, an act of injustice will tend to make a man bad; and essentially the flourishing of a man *qua* man consists in his being good (e.g. in virtues); but for any X to which such terms apply, X needs what makes it flourish, so a man needs, or ought to perform, only virtuous actions…[[30]](#endnote-30)

Later on, she says, ‘*The man who believes in divine laws* will say perhaps “It is forbidden, and however it looks, it cannot be to anyone’s profit to commit injustice.”’[[31]](#endnote-31) One man may say one thing; another man may say another.

What Anscombe in fact thinks is that both an Aristotelian view and a divine law view manage to pass the threshold as moral philosophies of practical knowledge. And so both can fence off consequentialism. But this is not to say that she herself does not make a choice between the two, nor that the issue of which one we choose is a mere matter of temperament. Already in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ Anscombe points out that ‘it adds something to “unjust” to say that God prohibits it’ and this is that ‘there is an obligation not to do it’.[[32]](#endnote-32) But in her religious works, Anscombe makes it abundantly clear that she embraces the notion of a divine law-giver. And so we must infer that she also embraces the idea that there is indeed a notion of obligation that goes beyond calling an action ‘unjust’ in the way that a neo-Aristotelian would. Take, for instance, her discussion of the pronouncement that it is possible to have morality without religion in *Morality*.[[33]](#endnote-33) There, she carefully makes a distinction between two things this could mean. The first possibility, which she seems to accept, is that morality and religion are logically independent, and therefore ‘a decent person can think out a true morality if he keeps his head and is able to think clearly, without appeal to religious revelation’.[[34]](#endnote-34) But the claim she finds objectionable is that once religion fades, there is nothing substantial we lose. And to this Anscombe responds, ‘Well, of course, human beings have always had morality, but the question is *what* morality?’[[35]](#endnote-35) A different kind of morality, Anscombe goes on to suggest both in this paper and in her other religious works, and one that lacks something significant that we should be wanting to hold on to. To take another example, in her essay ‘Sin’, she discusses moral sin as either the behaviour against right reason or as the behaviour against divine law. In that essay, after she has pointed out the affinities between the two conceptions of wrong-doing she says:

‘There is one quite striking difference: if we explain “sin” in terms of a divine law, we introduce a concept of disobedience into the meaning of the word. Concepts of obedience and disobedience do not enter into the explanation “Sins are behaviors which are against reason.”’[[36]](#endnote-36)

Thus, if we take the definition of wrong-doing as acting against right reason to be one that would satisfy an Aristotelian, then we must take Anscombe to be pointing out here an important difference between the Aristotelian view of wrongdoing and her own view.

These examples are, I think, indicative of a certain failure of attention on the part of interpreters. The philosophical question here is what prevents interpreters from paying sufficient attention to the way Anscombe herself draws the line between the various Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian pictures and her own view in her religious works. My suspicion is that the culprit for this lapse in attention is the assumption that whatever the difference between the two views may be, it is a *further* difference—one that sits on top of the view of human action, which is laid out fully in her action-theoretic works. So that if we want to grasp the essence of her moral philosophy as a philosophy of practical knowledge, then all we need to look at is either what she says about the practical syllogism and inference in her *Intention* and her other action-theoretic works, or what she says about virtue in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ and her work on Aristotelian ethics.

But this interpretative assumption is, I believe, mistaken: the ethical does indeed figure in Anscombe’s action-theoretic works as a certain transformation of the intentional (see the previous section), but it is not *there* that Anscombe tells us what this transformation really comes to. True, like Aristotle, Anscombe thinks that the question of the moral goodness or badness of human action is not the question of some ‘new, higher order ingredient which gets injected into a fully human action’ from the outside of what it is for it to be a full human action.[[37]](#endnote-37) Good and bad human action is good and bad *qua* human action. And moral philosophy must be a philosophy of human action or a philosophy of practical knowledge, as I suggested in the second section. In this, Anscombe’s own view is as close to Aristotle’s as it is far from the view of modern philosophers. But her view of what in particular counts as being good *qua* human action—that is, how precisely we should conceive the transformation of the intentional that the ethical constitutes—is, in fact, not Aristotelian. Anscombe is not an ethical naturalist.[[38]](#endnote-38) Unlike Aristotle, Anscombe thinks that the description in which an action is known to be a paradigmatic human or intentional action is not the description of man’s flourishing qua *living* being (successfully moving out of a conception of himself as having this or that end) but the description of man’s progressing qua *spiritual* being (successfully moving out of a conception of himself as being a movement towards God).[[39]](#endnote-39) But to see this, one must examine her religious writings. I now, finally, turn to the task of elucidating Anscombe’s moral philosophy as a distinctive philosophy of practical knowledge.

5 Man’s truth-saying nature as man’s spiritual nature

In the previous two sections I argued that for Anscombe the ethical may be seen as a certain—and, as we shall see, dominant—transformation of—and not addition to—the intentional. In the words of the third section above, this is the thought that in beings which apprehend and can aim at moral truths, the practical syllogism (i.e., the calculation of how to close the gap between oneself and what one wants) takes a distinctive turn. But if this thought is at all right, then one does not get a full grasp of Anscombe’s view of human action and practical knowledge until one has understood the precise transformation of the intentional that Anscombe takes the ethical to be. I also suggested in the previous section that we cannot rest our case by taking Anscombe’s own view of the matter to be of a piece with the Aristotelian or with a neo-Aristotelian view. To understand her full view of the ethical turn that the practical syllogism takes in the case of human action, I suggested that we must turn to her religious writings and engage in the labor required to clarify her views there on how moral truths are grasped. It is this labor which I propose to take up in what follows.

First, let us return to Anscombe’s discussion of ‘murder’. In her *Prolegomenon to a Pursuit of the Definition of Murder*, she says:

Murder is a complex and high-level action description. A sufficient consideration of it would comprehend the ‘whole man’: the agency peculiar to man, his social being and possession of laws, his moral subjectivity and mystical value.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Here, the notion of the spiritual nature of man makes its appearance via the notion of mystical value, and this in conjunction with the notion of moral subjectivity, just as man’s possession of laws makes its appearance in conjunction with his social being. But why is it that one must consider man’s ‘moral subjectivity *and mystical value*’ (my emphasis) in order to comprehend the action description of ‘murder’?

The beginning of the answer lies in the thought that not all intentional killing truthfully admits the action description of the murder. For not all intentional killing constitutes the *injustice*, the *great wrong* of murder, the violation of *the right not to be murdered*, the manifestation of the utter *disrespect* and lack of *awe* before the human life that *murder* entails. ‘To fight a human being to the death, to try him, condemn him to death, are grave actions’, she says in another essay, but ‘they may be compatible with this awe and respect.’[[41]](#endnote-41) To understand why, Anscombe thinks, we must understand ‘the truth that man is spirit’.[[42]](#endnote-42) For if a killing is to qualify as *all of the above* it must qualify as what ‘blasphemes the spirit in man’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

One might think that the thought here is that only when we understand the truth that man is spirit do we get a glimpse of the source of the absolute prohibition on *murder*, because it is only then that we first properly know the nature that *suffers*, the nature that is *violated* or *wronged*. But this is not all. Early on in her paper on euthanasia Anscombe says that murder ‘is determined by the knowledge and will with which one acts’.[[44]](#endnote-44) And she goes on to explain that the knowledge with which one acts in *murder* is such that what one is doing is determined as *manifesting an utter lack of respect and awe before the mystery of human life*. Once we understand the truth that man is spirit, we see both that what is harmed in ‘murder’ is man’s spirit and that the *knowledge and will* with which the murderer acts is itself a corruption in man’s spirit. It is, similarly, a corruption in man’s spirit that Anscombe thinks we find in the knowledge which imbues the thinking of euthanasia’s advocates and of ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. What is thus corrupted is practical knowledge *par excellence,* what we may now call *practical wisdom*—the knowledge of *what* one is doing (or proposes to do), the achievement of which is but the understanding of the truth that man is spirit. It is in achieving this truth, moreover, that we achieve moral truth, Anscombe thinks. But what does the philosopher mean when she speaks of the truth that man is spirit? What kind of truth is this? And what does it mean to grasp it as one should? These are the questions I will be concerned with in what follows here and in the next section.

Beginning with the first question, Anscombe thinks that spirits are immaterial, and the first thing to do is understand the sense in which man’s soul—as the principle of his life—is immaterial. As she argues in ‘Analytical Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man’ (APSM), this is not the sense of an immaterial substance which is capable of its own queer, quasi-corporeal activity, which is the sense given first and foremost ‘when we remark about thinking that it is not a material activity’.[[45]](#endnote-45) Rather, it is in an account of the nature of man’s ability for thinking and in particular in an account of what it is for something to be true (which is what thought *can* and *wants to be*, as Anselm Mueller so beautifully puts it[[46]](#endnote-46)) that we find the true account of the immaterial nature of the soul. For in Anscombe’s own words, ‘The immateriality of the soul consists at bottom in the fact that you cannot specify a material character or configuration which is equivalent to truth’.[[47]](#endnote-47) This discussion is prompted by Wittgenstein’s question of how to distinguish the activity of pointing to the colour rather than the shape of a thing when one is tempted to suppose that the difference between the two physically identical acts comes down to a difference of activity of the soul or of man’s spirit as a quasi-corporeal ‘refined, ethereal medium’.[[48]](#endnote-48) *Man qua body* cannot be described as pointing to the colour rather than the shape of a thing, Anscombe says. And she continues:

This does not mean that we have to postulate a different, *another* act of pointing by a *different sort* of substance, an immaterial one—that path to the concept of spirit that Wittgenstein implicitly criticizes. *But we can say that this bodily act is an act of man qua spirit.*[[49]](#endnote-49)

The idea here is that it is man *qua* thinker, *qua* truth-sayer, that can indeed be described as pointing to the colour rather than the shape of a thing. But if no material character or configuration is equivalent to truth, then man’s being *qua* truth-sayer must itself also be irreducible to a material configuration.

But we cannot leave matters there. The reason why brings me to the second question above, concerning the character of the truth that man is spirit. Anscombe herself in other writings points out that the connection between man’s thinking or truth-saying ability and man’s spirituality is not a logical one:

‘I have said that spirituality does not seem to me to be demonstrated by the capacity to think, reason and understand as such. A corollary to this would be that it does not seem impossible for there to be rational—i.e., language using— beings, who were not spiritual.’[[50]](#endnote-50)

It is true that *we can say that this bodily act is an act of man qua spirit* and mean by this man’s thinking, truth-saying being, but because the connection between spirituality and the ability to speak the truth is not a logical connection, we are *not* supposed to get insight into the nature of spirituality as such by getting insight into the nature of truth and truth-saying as such, and *vice versa*. But even though it is possible that there are truth-saying beings who are not spiritual, yet, the truth-saying that human beings are *in fact* capable of, is one they are capable of *qua* spiritual beings. Without some such thought in sight, it is very difficult to understand why Anscombe says of the bodily act of pointing to the colour of a thing as opposed to its shape that it is ‘an act of man qua spirit’.[[51]](#endnote-51)

To get insight into the peculiar truth-saying that human beings are capable of, we must think of man’s truth-saying being in terms of the *fact* of *religiosity* broadly understood—that is, the fact of a certain way of aiming at the true, which may be discerned in the all-too-human practices of religion, morality and in some way art. Here are Anscombe’s own words:

I do not say “God” because the thing is clear independently of people’s believing in God; it is clear for example in the existence of such an idea as nirvana. What shows this capacity is the religion, and ethics…, and in some way art.[[52]](#endnote-52)

It is conceivable, Anscombe thinks, that there are beings whose truth-saying ability has nothing to do with that aiming at the true that is manifested in the practices of religiosity (e.g., religion, morality and in some way art). Moreover, one could argue that her action-theoretic work in *Intention* could in principle apply to both such beings and beings such as ourselves. However, when we conceive beings for whom religiosity is not the dominant fact, we imagine beings other than ourselves. The aiming at the true which is manifested in the practices of religiosity involves consciousness of the truth that man is spirit. And this consciousness, we may now say, is for Anscombe akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason. Part of what this means is that it is impossible to comprehend the turn that the intentional takes in *our* case, without comprehending this consciousness and how it is of itself practical.

The first thing we learn about this consciousness in Anscombe’s religious writings is that it is a relation to the eternal as a conception and as an end. Here is how she glosses this consciousness in ‘The Immortality of the Soul’:

I put it forward that the spirituality of the human soul is *its capacity to get a conception of the eternal*, and to be concerned with *the eternal as an objective*, and perhaps also *as something that can be leant on and feared*.[[53]](#endnote-53)

The consciousness of the truth that man is spirit is thus the consciousness of oneself and the other as capable of a certain knowledge and action. This consciousness, Anscombe thinks, is there in an incipient form in anyone who feels ‘a certain fear before the idea of ever destroying a human life’.[[54]](#endnote-54) And in its more developed form, it is to be found in the consciousness that ‘men are made by God in God’s likeness, to know and love God’.[[55]](#endnote-55) But how should we make sense of this consciousness and in what sense may it constitute a fact akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason? These will be my questions in the following section.

6 Spirit as the fact of reason

In its more developed form, consciousness of the truth that man is spirit is consciousness of ourselves in relation to God. But this, Anscombe explains, is not a *cogitatio* that exists in our minds in the way that a mental image or an impression is supposed to exist in a Cartesian mind. This consciousness is what she refers to in her essay ‘Sin’ by the mysterious phrase the practice of the presence of God.’ Indeed, she explains that the practice of the presence of God is a matter of the ‘ultimate reasons we could give, speaking truly, for *what* we are at any time doing.’[[56]](#endnote-56) But what does this mean? One place to look for help here is Anscombe’s work on practical truth. In ‘Practical Truth’, Anscombe discusses the difference between a case in which ‘if a branch falls and breaks a tea-pot, the falling branch has made it true that the tea-pot is broken’[[57]](#endnote-57) and the kind of making true of which *we* are capable. The truth-making *we* are capable of, which we could call *praxistic*, is, Anscombe says,

‘truth brought about by a praxis resulting from deliberation—i.e., by an action (in fulfillment of a choice) which satisfies the description ‘doing well’. That is a final description of what every praxis—every ‘action’ in this limited sense—aims at being.’[[58]](#endnote-58)

As we briefly saw in the third section above, in *Intention* Anscombe explains that every intentional action must be understood as aiming at being a true description all the way up to a desirability characterization which itself stands in need of no further explanation (e.g., we all understand the desirability of health when one is exercising in order to keep healthy, or of fun when one is dancing for fun, and so on and so forth)—what Anscombe calls for short *the intention with which*. However, depending on the circumstances, any one such—i.e., intentional—action may be *chosen*—that is, calculated as a way of closing the gap between oneself and doing or living well. In choice, the concept of one’s life, as such, is operative, for the description one aspires to make true in acting in fulfillment of choice is the description of one’s living, as such, as good. To think otherwise is to risk either of two unacceptable thoughts: A) The supposition that our time general concepts are general as aggregates are general. This would lead to such nonsense as saying that eating and drinking excessively is right here right now what it is to live well for a 20-year-old woman and what it is to live badly for a 40-year-old woman. B) The view of the action is seen as the mere satisfaction of appetite. In this case, it would make sense to think of some of the concepts operative in our practical reasoning as time-specific. As, when for instance, we say that eating three slices of cake appears good now that the craving is here. But it would not make sense to think of all of what we do in terms of such concepts. For, to keep with the example, if all acting were appetitive, we would be able to retain the concept of bulimic and anorectic eating, but not the concept of being on a diet. For what is distinctive of being on a diet (in contrast to being bulimic or anorectic), is precisely this: that one acts through the concept of one’s life as a whole and not through one’s time-specific concepts.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Now when Anscombe speaks of *the practice of the presence of God* what she means is that when one’s intentional action is chosen, its description as doing or living well involves the presence of God as seeing and hearing and commanding what we are doing in thus acting[[60]](#endnote-60) (Sin, 148). But what could this mean?

In ‘The Immortality of the Soul’, Anscombe says,

‘I suggest that the reason for speaking of the spirituality of the soul—that is, for using the adjective of ‘spirit’—is not a quasi-physical common property, but that *human beings are in for a final orientation towards or away from the good*.’[[61]](#endnote-61)

And in a wonderful passage in ‘Contraception and Chastity’, she says:

What people are for is, we believe, like guided missiles, to home in on God, God who is the one truth it is infinitely worth knowing, the possession of which you could never get tired of, like the water slaked for ever and always. It’s this potentiality, this incredible possibility, of the knowledge of God of such a kind as even to be sharing in his nature, which Christianity holds out to people; and because of this potentiality every life, right up to the last, must be treated as precious. Its potentialities in all things the world cares about may be slight: but there is always the possibility of what it’s for; we can’t ever know that the time of possibility of gaining eternal life is over, however old, wretched, ‘useless’ someone has become.[[62]](#endnote-62)

In these two passages, Anscombe is thinking that there is a stake for us over and above what is at stake in laying claims of truth about the whole of life in the knowledge of what we are doing in the circumstances. In man’s potential for choice—that is, in man’s potential to realize *through the whole of his life* an aspect of the good human life—man himself is revealed as potentiality and as a movement. I said above, that in ‘Practical Truth’ Anscombe explains man’s ability for the intentional action that constitutes one’s choice as man’s ability to realize the truth (of an aspect) of the good human life. But the means man takes to achieve this is none other than his own life. It is with his own life as a whole that man attempts in his actions to realize (an aspect of) the good human life. But now, the distinctive Anscombean thought in the passages above is this: In realizing more and more fully his potential to aim at the good human life with his own life, man realizes more and more his own self as a movement towards, or in the Anscombe’s words a ‘guided missile’, towards God.

But if man himself is potentiality and movement, then as long as he remains in being, his being as potentiality and movement also remains. It does not matter that this or that potentiality of his may be slight. It does not matter how old or wretched or ‘useless’ man is. As long as man remains, the orientation towards or away from God remains. In the language of ‘Practical Truth’, we might say that the distinctive truth-saying of which *we* are capable *qua* spiritual beings is the truth-saying of our acting which aims at making itself true all the way up to the specification of one’s whole life, not as a successful (or ‘flourishing’) way of living, as an Aristotelian might have it, but as a successful movement towards God. This, I can finally say, is what Anscombe calls *practising the presence of God* and *knowing God.* This knowing is not knowledge of an *indifferent truth* but is knowledge that she characterizes in her ‘Knowledge and the Reverence for Human Life’ as *connatural*. Following Aquinas, Anscombe takes this to be knowledge which is possible in virtue of a certain natural affinity between the knower and its object. We are practicing the presence of God in the most developed form when in acting out of choice (in acting through the whole of our lives) we self-consciously aspire to bring God into our lives by aspiring to thus (i.e., connaturally) know God. But to the extent that we are successful in thus bringing God into our lives, we are transcending our lives and sharing in the being of God.

Now, it is this consciousness of man as being a movement towards God that is there in an incipient form, Anscombe thinks, in anyone who merely feels ‘a certain fear before the idea of ever destroying a human life’.[[63]](#endnote-63) For it is only the one who conceives of man accordingly who can grasp the truth of the dignity of human nature and thus manifest the most important kind of connatural knowledge.[[64]](#endnote-64) For only that man can truly grasp the fact that even if one is ‘useless’ and all of one’s potentialities for this or that worldly aim have been destroyed, there persists a radical potentiality, which is none other than man himself in his being a movement towards God. Only that man understands clearly and without sentimentalism that human life is sacred and has a value that is absolute. And only that man can feel the whole weight of injustice; for only that man is then conscious of the terrible affliction of man’s spirit that injustice may constitute. But to know of an action that it is an affliction on the life of the spirit, one’s own spirit must *not* be corrupt; one’s own life of practicing the presence of the eternal must be quick. It is the deadening of the life of the spirit in oneself –either in what Anscombe takes as the propaganda in favor of death or in Modern Moral Philosophy – that does not let one see that the fate of man qua absolute potentiality cannot be put on the scales with any state of affairs.

But one might object: all this may be true and fine of some people, but there is no reason to assume that this should have anything to do with human nature. There are, after all, people who neither believe in man as being a ‘guided missile’ towards God nor feel a certain fear before the very idea of destroying a human life. Here it should be noted that Anscombe’s claim about the consciousness of the truth that man is spirit in the above sense is a grammatical claim. It is part of the way the moral concepts structure our lives with each other that we take questions such as the following to apply to our actions:

Is this what you take man (yourself and the other) to be for?

The thinking and knowing that is involved in raising and understanding questions such as the one above is the thinking and knowing we are capable of precisely because we can conceive of human beings as themselves ‘being for’ something, even when one may be useless for all the things man may ‘be after’ in life. To say, in the grammatical sense, that human action bears the mark of the spiritual in an incipient form in every person is to say that questions, such as the above, are in place about it. Of course, the answer to a question such as the above may be negative but the question still applies. It wouldn’t apply only if the one whom we addressed it to was puzzled, unable to understand what the question meant. But in this case, we would have reason to suppose that the addressee did not have adequate mastery of the concepts of *human* action. That questions such as the above are in place shows that in our reasoning about human action we do operate with a concept of goodness which stretches beyond the mere concept of living well, even though it is in living well that it is brought into presence through practice. And this concept, as Ancombe takes it, is none other than the concept of God.

We can now conclude that the fact that these questions apply in this sense is no accident but a fact which plays a dominant role in the *grammar* of human action. The consciousness of the truth of oneself and the other as spirit is no more than the form that the practical knowledge of *Intention* (i.e., knowledge of what one is doing which brings about what it understands) takes in the case of the paradigmatic human action—that is, choice. The question of what one ought to do involves, in Anscombe’s view, the conceptual labor of raising and addressing the question of what it *means* to be doing *x*, *y* and *z* intentionally in the circumstances, in this very distinctive sense: Does doing *x*, *y* and *z* intentionally in the circumstances *mean* that one takes man to ‘be for’ something rather than nothing? And this, Anscombe thinks, is an undeveloped form of asking the question: Does doing *x*, *y* and *z* intentionally in the circumstances *mean* that one takes man to ‘be for God’ rather than for nothing? Or, would doing such and such in the circumstances amount to taking man to ‘be for’ God rather than for nothing? To deliver on the promise I made in the second section of this paper, it is in this distinctive, Deistic spiritual, sense that Anscombe’s view of moral philosophy is a philosophy of practical knowledge. It is not one thing to know what one is doing when one is acting intentionally in the case of human action and another to know whether what one is thus doing is morally good or bad. It turns out that moral concepts are indeed no more than concepts of human action. But, if what I have argued so far is at all right, Anscombe’s conception of human action is not fully understood unless: (1) Concepts of action are understood for what they are—that is, as purely formal concepts in the sense outlined in Section 3 above; and (2) Practical truth and choice (acting through the whole of life) are understood in terms of a fact akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason—the consciousness of the truth that man is spirit, as it was outlined in this and the previous section.

7 Towards a spiritual philosophy of practical knowledge without god

Let us close this paper with a few misgivings about what I take to be Anscombe’s way of falsifying her own insight into the spiritual, alongside a few remarks regarding the possibility of a spiritual view of practical knowledge without God.

One has not understood Anscombe’s account of the spiritual nature of man until one has understood that Anscombe takes talk of the spiritual nature of man to be a domain of practical truth. The ‘pagan’ who sees that there is a certain depth in the heart of the religious man but leaves it at that is one who does not appreciate this. The ‘pagan’ who treats religiosity with an admiration of the poetic or aesthetic form is one who does not appreciate this either.[[65]](#endnote-65) If the spiritual nature of man is what is (connaturally) known when one knows the absolute prohibition on action descriptions such as ‘murder’, then we cannot tolerate the falsification of the spiritual nature of man when it is poeticized or left in obscurity. I believe that Anscombe is right to wage war against these sentimental attitudes towards the spiritual. The surest mark of a true account of spirituality is that it claims to be just that: a true account. Thus, in the spirit of paying tribute to Anscombe’s conception of the spiritual as the domain of practical truth, I want to close now with a few critical remarks on some of the ways Anscombe speaks about the topics of wrongdoing she is most concerned with.

I believe that we find signs of Anscombe falsifying her own insight into the spiritual in the callous way with which she referred to animals, women, trans and queer people in her various discussions of cases of sin. Most of this callousness was manifested in her failing to consider whom she took to be sinners in the spirit of the spiritual-practical knowledge she herself advocated. Thus, for instance, in ‘The Dignity of the Human Being’ she spoke of ‘in vitro fertilization’, ‘abortion’ and ‘gender operations’, all of which she described as ‘assaults on the value and dignity of human nature in man’s bodily life’.[[66]](#endnote-66) In ‘Contraception and Chastity’, we find her speaking of ‘sodomy’ and ‘homosexual intercourse.’[[67]](#endnote-67) We find similar talk in her infamous example of ‘the many sparrows’ whose killing she took without argument to be ‘less grave’ than the killing of a human being.[[68]](#endnote-68) There is something important that the Anscombean account of spirituality commits us to and this is the thought that there is a way of speaking that trivializes and belittles the spiritual nature in oneself and in the other—the other who is always, however wretched their life seems to be, a being worthy of our awe and respect. Now the point I want to make here moves well beyond the question of whether Anscombe was right or wrong about whether the human embryo is a small human being in the same way that a horse’s embryo is a small horse, and past the question about whether sexual intercourse is not to be had in the way one picks up a mushroom on the side of the street and eats it.[[69]](#endnote-69) For the sake of argument let us momentarily suppose that all those that Anscombe took to be sinners in the cases discussed in this paragraph are indeed sinners as Anscombe supposed. The point I want to make here is that in speaking of those she took to be sinners in the above way, she was looking at them from the perspective of knowledge of indifferent truth.[[70]](#endnote-70) And in doing this, she was falsifying her own view of the spiritual, for the perspective of knowledge of indifferent truth does not let individuals arise (even in the reflection of their (supposed) wrong-doing) as themselves spiritual beings, as well they should. Anscombe speaks of ‘in vitro fertilization’, ‘abortion’, ‘gender operations’, ‘sodomy and ‘homosexual intercourse’, and in doing so she fails to consider the pregnant woman as ‘she is walking into the abortion clinic’, the teenager who ‘is walking to school every day under the ridiculing eye of their peers’, the gay lovers who ‘are sneaking into hotel rooms’, and so on and so forth. To see what I mean, take the strangest of her examples: the example of ‘the killing’ of many sparrows vs. ‘the killing’ of one human being. Here, too Anscombe failed to ask questions such as the following: What were the many sparrows doing when the man grabbed them with his bare hands? Were they trying to feed their small ones or simply get home? Did the man who grabbed them with his bare hands go on to strangle them one by one or did he tie them up and drown them all together? Was the man unable to eat or sleep afterwards? The thought here is *not* that in all the cases above Anscombe did not consider arguments on the ‘other’ side. *Nor* is it that she did not have room for personal kindness for these people in her own life.[[71]](#endnote-71) The thought here is that in the above discussions Anscombe missed the spiritual particulars of the cases because she considered action types (‘murder’, ‘abortion’, ‘sodomy’ and so forth) and not actions in their doing (‘I am walking into the abortion clinic’, ‘I am walking to school every day under the ridiculing eye of my peers’, ‘We are sneaking into hotel rooms’).[[72]](#endnote-72) Anscombe was in fact not careful enough to make the distinction between action types and the particular doing of them. As a result of this rare failure of percipience, she did not consider the full reality of intentional action, which, as she herself had shown in *Intention*, is the living (ongoing, endless) reality of individuals that are doing one thing in doing another. Had she been careful enough to make the distinction between action types and actions in their doing and had she considered the latter instead of the former, she might have been able to make room in her discussions for the living reality of the individuals she considered and critiqued.[[73]](#endnote-73) If she had thus made room, she might have been able to hear the voice of those who were, from her own perspective, sinners. And, had she done so, she might have wondered: Who are they? What cross do they have to bear? What is it that they know as they bear this cross? And might this knowledge be such as to be met with grace halfway through? Might I even be wrong about them?[[74]](#endnote-74) So that at the very least, she might have been more lenient towards them, and at the most, she might have even changed her mind about them.

I want to finish this paper with a few words about this voice; the voice of those for whom the final orientation towards or away from the good remains open as long as they themselves remain. When Simone Weil, another renowned Christian thinker, attempts to explain the wrongdoing of injustice, she points to a voice which can be heard in the words or even the silences of the human being who is being wronged: ‘Why am I being hurt?’[[75]](#endnote-75) Weil’s account is rich an interesting in its own right, but here I want to draw attention to one particular insight. She tells us that, even in the face of the greatest adversity and harm, there is the expectation that good will be done to us. Here is how she herself puts it:

At the bottom of every heart of every human being, from earliest infancy until the tomb, there is something that goes on indomitably expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him. It is this above all that is sacred in every human being.[[76]](#endnote-76)

This ‘profound and childlike and unchanging expectation’ is according to Weil what is thwarted or afflicted when one is being wronged.[[77]](#endnote-77) The voice that asks, ‘Why am I being hurt?’ expresses the expectation of good in the face of the evil being done. I wish to suggest that this expectation of good is an expression of the knowledge of good as practical knowledge, in Anscombe’s rich spiritual sense of the term. And that the one whose spirit has not be corrupted is the one who can hear this expectation in the circumstances in which it arises.

It is in experiencing evil that the expectation of good rises in one’s breast. ‘But isn’t this idiotic?’, one will ask. ‘Hadn’t one rather be realistic and accept the evil that is being done?’ ‘This is, after all, one’s reality now, is it not?’ It is precisely such questioning, however, that misses the spiritual nature of man and therefore the truth of injustice, for it misses the fact that it is in experiencing this cry rise in one, in still expecting the good, that man sees the reality of his affliction for what it is. It is impossible to even say ‘I am being hurt’ without employing notions of goodness and justice—even if ones that are violated. Even the realism of the cynic rests on conceptions of goodness and justice. But the cry Weil speaks of employs the concept of goodness and justice in a very distinctive way. The cry that is the expectation and knowledge of good is a question that is addressed to someone, and therefore involves a second person relation, a ‘You’ in relation to an ‘I’.[[78]](#endnote-78) Anscombe takes this ‘You’ to be the God we ‘are for’ just as Weil takes it to be Christ. But such a theistic account is not the only way of fathoming this second-person relation. In crying out Weil’s question, the ‘I’ addresses the ‘You’ committing the injustice and the wrongdoing. But this is not the ‘You’ as the perpetrator with regard to ‘Me’, the ‘You’ the victimizer with regard to ‘Me’, the ‘You’ the wrongdoer with regard to ‘Me’. This is not the broken ‘You-to-I’. This is the ‘You-to-I’ which lies beyond any limitation, beyond any violation, wrongdoing and injustice. This is the ‘You to I’ which restores both ‘I’ and ‘You’ as the fully spiritual beings that we are. Our ability to speak the truth of affliction, wrongdoing, injustice is our ability to relate to the other in a way which aspires to make itself true all the way to the description of an ‘I to You’ *which lies beyond any limitation and suffering and affliction—and in the sense the eternal*—in the very moment man bears witness to its violation.

It is consciousness of this ‘I to You’ that is expressed in the recognition of injustice that the cry of injustice expresses (‘Why are you doing this to me?’). And it is the fact of this consciousness if any, that is akin to Kant’s Fact of Reason. That is, we human beings are capable of such consciousness *qua* the distinctive truth-sayers that we are. To be realistic—where that means being conscious of the grammatical reality of our lives and not merely being cynical about meaning—we must say that in grasping the truth of injustice man is grasping himself as a spiritual being. To think otherwise is to think the unacceptable consequentialist thought, which Anscombe urges us to fight against, that injustice and wrong may on occasion be acceptable, such as to not warrant *Me* to protest against *You* in raising the question: ‘Why are you hurting me?’, thereby re-establishing the absolute nature of our positioning towards each other, not as an A towards a B, but as an I towards a You—that is, as a consciousness which at once takes the place of both positions (both that of I and that of You). The brokenness that injustice constitutes is one in which an I aspires to be ‘an A to a B’ (say a rich man to a poor man), as opposed to an ‘I to You’. In the latter case, but not the former, the reflexive reciprocity remains intact and one is at once in both positions (that of the addressee and the addresser, as it were). It is this reciprocity that the cry of injustice—‘Why are you hurting me?’—is at once an expression of the violation of and an expression of. For in letting out this cry of injustice, the I reinstates itself as an ‘I to You’, thus beginning to break the injustice.

The point here is not one of *mere* conceptual dependence for it is not a point of *mere* conception. The point is closer to the spirit in which Anscombe speaks of the practice of the *presence* of God, whose success is God’s *being there* as a knowable. In the account I am sketching here, what is at stake is not the ability to merely *conceive* of a relation to the other which is *this* or *that* (depending on our favoured political theory, let’s say), but the ability to *practice the presence of the inalienable ‘I to You*’ in letting out the cry of injustice. But now one will ask: Who can take the place of this ‘I to You’? Anyone who can let out this cry is the answer.

This, moreover, is a grammatical point. Beings such as ourselves are capable of speaking the truth of injustice. Despite the many philosophical corruptions we are subject to, we take the following question to be applicable to actions that are intelligible as being intentional:

Why are you doing this to me?

This question, we might say, is in place about human actions, and it is a question that can be heard as being posed by a sparrow struggling for his life in man’s strangling hands as much as by a pregnant woman entering the abortion clinic with the whole weight of Anscombe’s scholarly condemnation of her on her shoulders.[[79]](#endnote-79) We can imagine the man hearing one of the many sparrows cry out to him ‘Why are you doing this to me?’ as he lays awake night after night, haunted by his deed. We can imagine Anscombe hearing the woman cry out ‘Why are you doing this to me?’ as the visions of the woman’s bowed head come back to haunt her at her desk. Of course, one could say that both the man and Anscombe would be wrong in thus understanding the haunting visions. But my point here is grammatical: even in this case, the question still applies. It wouldn’t apply only if one were to say one did not know what we meant by thus envisioning the man and Anscombe. If one were unable to understand, for instance, why the man could lie sleepless night after night haunted by the spasm of the whole being of the sparrow in the tightening grip of his hands. And if one were utterly puzzled by the Catholic philosopher who sat at her desk haunted by the woman entering the abortion clinic. But in both cases, I think, we would have reason to suppose that in showing a total lack of comprehension of what we meant, our interlocutor would be showing a lack of adequate mastery of the concepts of human action. With this I want to insist that the fact that these re-envisionings of the cases make sense both in the case of human and non-human individuals is part of the *grammar* of human action.

But even if I’m right about all this, Anscombe may still think that with God out of the picture, my philosophy of practical knowledge is missing something essential. Now, I am not sure that I can see what is missing, as I do not believe in God myself, but what I tried to show above is that it cannot be missing anything important as far as the experience of bearing witness to the spiritual character of human action is concerned. In fact, one may think that Anscombe’s Christian God is what is responsible for her inability to clearly distinguish between action types and the individuals doing them in her description of what she takes to be the sins of abortion, sodomy, and so on; and hence for her failure to be properly sensitive to the spiritual particulars in what she takes to be cases of sin. But I do not think that this explanation has any philosophical merit. I think that the answer with a true philosophical point is this: Anscombe’s failure to hear the voice of *the wretched* (in the *de dicto* sense) is part of a vulnerability we all share. It is part of Anscombe’s genius to have shown us that failing to hear the voice of the afflicted is a sin, but it is equally part of her genius to have shown us that this sin is one we are vulnerable to *qua* human agents. This is the genius, who could in her better moments hear the voice of the wronged, whether this was the ‘wives often struggling to bring up young children or abandoned to loneliness in middle age’ or the youth with the ‘miseries and hang-ups’ that the loss of innocence is associated with,[[80]](#endnote-80) or even the other animals:

“You don’t call it an evil for a stone to fall to the ground and lack the capacity to flat in the air.” Well, that is correct enough; we call newborn kittens blind only because they are *im*perfect cats. Cats see: the lack of sight is a stage of development and so only narrowly an evil for kittens. But when an animal goes blind, that is an unhappy evil for it and might be part of a process of total decay. However, so long as it exists, it has the good of existence; and what totally destroys it, however much in the course of nature that is, takes away all its good. So that alone of all the natural developments is a deprivation of all there is to the creature that suffers it.[[81]](#endnote-81)

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2. Most of the discussions of her theory of practical knowledge in the literature focus almost entirely on *Intention*. Thus, we have accounts of Anscombean practical knowledge that highlight the connection between non-observational knowledge and knowledge of what one is doing when one is acting intentionally. See, for instance, Falvey (2000), Pickard (2004) and Paul (2009). Other interpretations focus their attention exclusively on the special (formal) causality that practical knowledge constitutes when things go well or on the extent to which practical knowledge is knowledge-how. See, for instance, Schwenkler (2015), Moran (2004), Rödl (2007, 2011), Ford (2011), Marcus (2012), Lavin (2013), Setiya (2008). For a very helpful survey of the landscape of interpretations of this sort, see Schwenkler (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for instance, Frey (2019a). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Wiseman (2016), Frey (2019a), and Schwenkler (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Diamond (1997), Teichmann (2008), and Wiseman (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I owe this felicitous expression to Jim Conant in Conant (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This would be a notion of moral obligation, which renders the very idea of *absolute prohibition* senseless. For an elaboration of this point see Frey (2019b). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Of course, it is possible to ‘know’ what one is doing as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent without knowing that it ought not to be done, as when one may intentionally procure the judicial execution of the innocent in order to frighten members of a certain community. Or one may ‘know’ what one is doing under that description and think that this may be morally required of him on the basis of a consideration of the consequences. And it is even possible to perform the action precisely because one ‘knows’ it ought not to be done—say because in a Nietzschean fashion he thinks of morality as a slavish frame of mind to be superseded, or because like the eponymous character of Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Jack* (2020) who is tempted to break whatever seems fragile. But this is precisely Anscombe’s point here: in all these cases we should be speaking of moral corruption, and in all these cases the corruption could be seen to go hand in hand with a corruption *of* a certain knowing, such that its being the knowing of a particular action as fully human is its being the knowing of that action as what ought to or ought not to be done. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘The Controversy Over a New Morality’, in *Human Life, Action, and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), p. 235. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For instance, when talking about borderline cases, she says:

Now if you are either an Aristotelian, or a believer in divine law, you will deal with a borderline case by considering whether doing such-and-such in such-and-such circumstances is, say, murder, or is an act of injustice; and according as you decide it is or it isn’t, you judge it to be a thing to do or not.

(‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p. 10) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*,2nd ed.(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000)*.* For a brilliant clarification of Anscombe’s opening thought in *Intention* about being in the dark about the character of the concept of the intentional, see Wiseman (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Authority in Morals’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For the interpretation of human practices as the wider normative contexts in which actions are constituted as the fully human or intentional actions that they are, see Thompson 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Anscombe, *Intention*, par. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Anscombe, par. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. This is what we should take Anscombe to mean when she says earlier in *Intention* that ‘the fact that some desirability characterization is required does not have the least tendency to show that *any* is endowed with some kind of necessity in relation to wanting’ (p. 39). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. One of these two mistakes must be the mistake of those interpretations of Anscombe’s text which take her to be propounding an instrumental theory of reason and rationality. See, for instance, Lawrence (2004) and Vogler (2009). But in fact, Anscombe commits herself to no such normative theory in *Intention*. The most she commits herself to is the claim that the *bonum*, the good, and with it practical reason, is multiform. But this, as I shall show in what follows, need not mean that she takes her theory of the practical syllogism to be a theory of the common factor between the different forms of practical reason. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Vogler’s and Lawrence’s readings both share this premise, I think. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. See *Intention*, par. 31–36. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Anscombe, *Intention*, par. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Anscombe, par. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 75, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Boyle (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See, for instance, Solomon, 2008. For what I take to be a conclusive criticism of such interpretations, see Hacker-Wright (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. To some extent, Frey 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Sandis (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Doyle (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, p. 193, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Anscombe, pp. 193–194, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Anscombe, p. 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Anscombe, ‘Morality’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Anscombe, p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Anscombe, p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Anscombe, ‘Sin’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Anscombe, ‘Controversy’, p. 235. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For one particular difficulty in giving such a reading of Anscombe, see Vogler (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. As she says in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, speaking of the sense in which injustice might be related to well-being, if one is a Jew or Christian (as she herself was), then ‘the way it will profit him to abstain from injustice is something that he leaves to God to determine, himself only saying, ‘It can’t do me any good to go against his law’’ (Anscombe, p. 19). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Anscombe, ‘Prolegomenon to a Pursuit of the Definition of Murder’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Anscombe, ‘Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Anscombe, p. 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Anscombe, p. 269. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Anscombe, p. 262. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Anscombe, ‘Analytical Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. For a fascinating interpretation of Anscombe’s view of the spiritual nature of the soul as logically connected with the ability of truth-seeking, see Muller, 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Anscombe, p. 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Anscombe, p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Anscombe, p. 16, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Anscombe, ‘The Immortality of the Soul’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Of course, one could suppose here that Anscombe changed her mind between the two works, or, as Anselm Mueller suggested to me in private conversation, that Anscombe moved from a wider to a narrower notion of the spiritual. But Anscombe is so adamant about the importance of spirit in the narrow sense for human life that I doubt that she would have pardoned any lighter or wider use of that notion to cover the nature of beings who could only speak the truth of appetitive or instrumental reasoning. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Anscombe, p. 74. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Anscombe, p. 74, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Anscombe, ‘Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia’, p. 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Anscombe, p. 270, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Anscombe, ‘Sin’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground,* p. 148, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Anscombe, ‘Practical Truth’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Anscombe, p. 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. I owe this felicitous way of putting the idea to Irad Kimhi. As John Schwenkler pointed out to me in correspondence, this notion of the final end of an action captured by the concept of ‘choice’ stands in stark contrast with the consequentialist concept of ‘doing what is best’, which is a description that may hold of an isolated action, whatever the rest of one’s life looks like. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Anscombe, ‘Sin’, p. 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Anscombe, ‘The Immortality of the Soul’, p. 83, my emphasis. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Anscombe, ‘Contraception and Chastity’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Anscombe, ‘Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Anscombe, ‘Knowledge and the Reverence for Human Life’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. For a seething critique of these attitudes on the religious, see Anscombe’s ‘Paganism, Superstition and Philosophy’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 49-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Anscombe, ‘The Dignity of the Human Being’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Anscombe, ‘Contraception and Chastity’, in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, p. 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Anscombe, ‘Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, p. 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Anscombe, ‘Contraception and Chastity’, p. 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. This is the knowledge Anscombe contrasts with connatural knowledge in Anscombe, ‘Knowledge and the Reverence for Human Life’, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. I thank Rachael Wiseman for pushing me on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. I am grateful to Constantine Sandis for bringing this point home to me. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. We may thus now say that Anscombe’s account of action in *Intention* is necessary for a spiritual account of practical knowledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. I have in mind here Marilynne Robinson’s closing lines in *Jack*. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Simone Weil, ‘Human Personality’, in *An Anthology*, ed. Sian Miles (New York: Penguin, 2005), p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Weil, p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Weil, p. 51. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Many thanks to John Schwenkler for pointing this out to me in an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. For a brilliant and moving explication of this thought, see Coetzee, 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Anscombe, ‘Contraception and Chastity’, p. 187–8. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Anscombe, ‘Sin’, p. 141. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)