

Human action

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Bio

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to grasp the very object of so-called philosophy of action, namely human action. It purports to explore what it is that philosophers of action are interested in when they talk about 'action' in a restricted sense. To do so I rely on Elizabeth Anscombe's way of addressing the issue. Drawing from her monography on intention and from various later writings, I reject the possibility of conceiving of human action as some kind of sub-class of events and thus the possibility of providing an extensional account of 'human action'. Rather, I explore its relation to the voluntary and the intentional, to the kind of agent performing such actions and to morality.

[S]uch a description as 'paying his gas bill', when all he is doing is handling two bits of paper to a girl, might make an enquirer say: 'Description of a human action is something enormously complicated, if one were to say what is really involved in it – and yet a child can give such a report!'¹

We do such things as paying our gas bills all the time; we recognize what we and others do (e.g. as belonging to all sorts of practices); most of the time we know perfectly well how to describe what people do, did, intend to do. In other words, as language users, we know how and when to use the concept² of 'action'. Of course, a child does³! Any language user knows, in this respect, what actions 'are'.

¹ Anscombe G.E.M., (1957) *Intention* (2nd edition), Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, §43.

² In what follows, I use the word 'concept' as distinct from 'word'. The use of a concept does not reduce to the occurrence of the word we use to designate the concept, but it relates to the various 'language games' (see Wittgenstein L. (2009) *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth PI), Oxford: Blackwell, §23) in which the concept is involved. Hence, for instance, the concept of 'action' – and as we shall see of 'human action' – is involved in the description 'Paying his gas bill'.

³ That is, in her example, a child already acquainted with the practice of being indebted and paying bills. But, more generally, a child gets to learn how to talk about what we do as she gets acquainted with and to participate in all sorts of things we do: naming, eating, walking, dancing, singing, etc.

Nevertheless, philosophers' work starts when it comes to describing the "enormously complicated tacit conventions" that accompany our understanding of ordinary language⁴ (*Intention* §43). Such a description amounts to bringing out what makes some descriptions of what happens relevant and others irrelevant to the concept of (human) action.

Given a certain situation, there are in fact indefinitely many descriptions we can provide of what happens⁵, but only a part of them will be relevant to what interests us, namely *human action*. Anscombe's enquiry in *Intention* helps us 'reveal the order that there is in this chaos' (*ibid.*), by exploring the sense of the question 'why?' which is relevant to the concept of 'action' (and more specifically of 'intentional action').

In her enquiry on 'intention', Anscombe is aiming at a clarification of what she calls 'human action'⁶, a concept which, being its subject matter, is essential to *ethics*. Her strategy in the book is to start with a broad collection of descriptions of what happens in a given situation and to provide some philosophical (or rather 'grammatical' in Wittgenstein's sense) tools to, first, sort out these descriptions in relation to what interests us – namely (human) action (as distinct from, for instance, mere physiological or physical events) –, and also to sort out, amongst various possible descriptions of what we *do*, those that are intentional (as distinct from merely voluntary, or even accidental, involuntary, etc.). The examples she focuses on mostly involve human agents, but also, on occasions, animals (cats, dogs, birds) and even supernatural agents⁷.

This fact, that she is interested in specifically *human action*, might either go unnoticed or appear as a trivial obviousness, not necessitating the reader's attention. It is indeed often taken for granted that philosophy of action primarily deals with *human action* and only secondarily, by contrast with, or even sometimes at the exclusion of, other types of action (e.g. that of aspirin or of climate change). One could have argued that this focus on *human action* (testified by the very apparition of the phrase in *Intention*) – and not action *tout court* – does not in fact deserve any exaggerated attention as it is simply meant to zoom in on some aspect of action. But that would be without considering, not only the discussions of the extent to which action descriptions apply to human agents and to animal agents (see e.g. *Intention* §47; UD), but more importantly a number of papers where Anscombe explicitly purports to clarifying what she means by 'human action'. This is the case of the two papers with which the following

⁴ Anscombe is quoting Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein L. (1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (henceforth TLP), London, Routledge & Keagan Paul, 4.002)

⁵ See e.g. Anscombe's famous pumping man example *Intention* §23, p. 37: 'The man's arm is going up and down, up and down. Certain muscles, with Latin names which doctors know, are contracting and relaxing. Certain substances are getting generated in some nerve fibres – substances whose generation in the course of voluntary movement interests physiologists. The moving arm is casting a shadow on a rockery where at one place and from one position it produces a curious effect as if a face were looking out of the rockery. Further, the pump makes a series of clicking noises, which are in fact beating out a noticeable rhythm.'

⁶ It could seem obvious that, being interested in 'intention', Anscombe is indeed interested in *human action*, as distinct from action in general. But the philosophical question is: why is it obvious that the concept of intention centrally concerns *human action*? This is a real philosophical question, even more so as the concept of intention applies to all sorts of non-human agents. Cf. *Intention*, §47.

⁷ See e.g. *Intention*, §46: 'if writing appeared on a wall as at Belshazzar's feast, or a house rose up not made by men'; §36 and the discussion of 'The dog wants a bone' and 'The cat is waiting for a mouse at a mousehole'; §47 on the 'stalking cat' (about the later see Moran and Stone (2009) 'Anscombe on Expression of Intention' in C.S. Sandis, *New Essays on the Explanation of Action*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 132-68 and V. Aucouturier 'Emotions, Intentions and their Expressions' – forthcoming in *Enrahonar. An International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason*).

considerations are mainly concerned, namely ‘Action, Intention and Double-Effect’⁸ (henceforth AIDE) and ‘Good and Bad Human Action’⁹ (henceforth GBHA).

Therefore, the following discussion is an attempt to understand how the adjective ‘human’ is used in the phrase ‘human action’ and its philosophical importance for the philosophy of action and ethics in general.

In the first section, I focus on Anscombe’s logical circumscription of the category of human action by means of the question ‘Why?’. The question ‘Why?’ being insufficient to specify what interests us (human action as distinct from the mere act of a human being), this first step opens the way to the three following sections. The next two sections focus on characteristic aspects of human action. The first (section 2), is concerned with the particular meaning of the voluntary that applies to human action and the relationship between human action and the agent who performs it (‘under the command of reason’). The third and last section (section 3) deals with the necessarily ‘moral’ dimension of human action.

1. What we are interested in

Luckily enough (since she rarely does so), Anscombe introduces a sort of definition of ‘human action’ in ‘Action, Intention and Double-Effect’ (1982) pertaining to the very object of philosophy of action¹⁰:

There is a goal in view when people want to introduce a restricted sense of ‘action’, but I don’t think it can be attained by trying to find a characterisation of a sub-class of event. (...) What is being aimed at, I think, is the category called ‘human action’ by some scholastics: they made a distinction between ‘human action’ – *actus humanus* – and ‘act of a human being’ – *actus hominis*. (...) Idly stroking one’s beard, or idly scratching one’s head, may be an ‘act of a human being’ without being a ‘human act’. (...) Also (...) ‘act of a human being’ is a wider notion, which includes ‘human action’.

The contrast is that human actions are *under the command of reason*: this does not mean just that reason can intervene to forbid – for that holds of idle actions too.¹¹

Note that Anscombe refuses, as she did in *Intention* (§46), the philosophical strategy which would consist in picking out, from a very general ontological category of ‘events’, some subclass called ‘actions’¹². This extensional circumscription of the object of the philosophy of action was and is still very common. However, ‘action’, as it figures in the phrase ‘philosophy of action’ is rather concerned with a *form of description* of what happens, which, indeed, usually involves human agents. In other words, our enquiry is not concerned with the extension of the concept of ‘human action’ but rather with the ‘logical circumscription’ of human action and of

⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Action, Intention and Double-Effect’ (AIDE) in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 207-226.

⁹ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Good and Bad Human Action’ (GBHA), in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 195-206.

¹⁰ This takes place within a discussion of Donald Davidson’s criteria for circumscribing the domain of ‘action’ (as a sub-class of ‘events’ in general) and ‘agency’. See Davidson (2001) *Essays on Action and Event*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 45-47.

¹¹ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Action, Intention and Double-Effect’ (henceforth AIDE) in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 208.

¹² ‘We are not, like Davidson, attempting a classification which will divide all events into members and non-members of a class.’ (Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209)

related concepts (such as intentional, voluntary, good and bad, etc.). More needs to be said about this point. But, for now, let us remember the following passage of *Intention*:

Of course we have a special interest in human actions: but what is it that we have a special interest in here? It is not that we have a special interest in the movement of these molecules – namely, the ones in a human being; or even in the movements of certain bodies – namely human ones. The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question ‘Why?’ did not. It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question ‘Why?’ So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on blackboard are subject to the question ‘What does it say?’ It is of a word or sentence that we ask ‘What does it say?’; and the description of something as a word or a sentence could not occur prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning. So the description of something as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question ‘Why?’, simply as a kind of utterance by which we were then obscurely prompted to address the question.¹³

This calls for a few remarks. First, that there is no ready-to-be-labelled phenomena in the world called ‘human action’. Rather the description of something as ‘human action’ is logically dependent on a certain language game – which has been described in the book through the special (reason-asking) sense of the question ‘Why?’¹⁴.

In fact, as the distinction between *actus humanus* and *actus hominis* implies, not everything a human agent does deserves to be called ‘human action’. We already know from *Intention* (§23) that to the question ‘What is this man doing?’, ‘any description of what is going on, with him as subject, which is in fact true’ can be an answer. Such descriptions may be as various as follows: ‘he is earning wages, he is supporting a family, he is wearing away his shoe-soles, he is making a disturbance of the air. He is sweating, he is generating those substances in his nerve fibres.’ And so on. Nonetheless, amongst the indefinitely many various descriptions of what someone is doing, the concept of ‘human action’ (and the question ‘Why?’, which is meant to circumscribe the logical domain of intentional action) picks out the ones that are relevant to our ‘special interest’.

Now some pending question remains that I shall consider in what follows. In *Intention*, the enquiry into the question ‘Why?’ is used as a device to circumscribe the concepts of *intention* and *intentional* action. However, in ‘Action, Intention and Double-Effect’ and in ‘Good and Bad Human Action’, Anscombe equates the concept of human action to a special sense of ‘voluntary action’, while maintaining a distinction between ‘voluntary action’ and ‘intentional action’. How can these two claims remain compatible? How can it be that ‘the extension of ‘human action’ is wider than that of ‘intentional human action’ (AIDE 213) if ‘human action’ is, so to speak, logically circumscribed by the question ‘Why?’?

Of course, we are not speaking of an extensional coincidence (or rather non-coincidence) between ‘human action’ and ‘intentional action’, but of the logical domain of application of these concepts. This puzzle will be solved (section 3), but so that the suspense is not unbearable, let us consider a hint in the above §46 quote.

Indeed Anscombe says: ‘The description of what we are interested in is a type of description that would not exist if our question “Why?” did not’ and she concludes ‘So the description of something as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question “Why?”’. She is indeed pointing to the fact that there is a logical *dependence* between the

¹³ Anscombe, G.E.M., *Intention* §46.

¹⁴ The exposition of what this description entails would be too long in the context of the present discussion. from now on, when I speak of the question ‘Why?’, I intend ‘the question “Why?” in the special sense that interests Anscombe in *Intention*’.

concept of ‘human action’ and the question ‘Why?’: something we would describe as human action is something to which the question ‘Why?’ would, *de jure* if not *de facto*, apply¹⁵. She is *not* claiming that any description to which the question ‘Why?’ would apply (any ‘human action’) would be a description under which the considered (human) action is intentional. So, she is not saying that ‘human action’ is ‘intentional action’. Nor is she saying (like e.g. Davidson 2001) that anything deserving to be called (human) action must be intentional under at least one description.

All she is claiming is that we need the existence of the question ‘Why?’ in order to have the concept of human action (and vice versa), which means we need the existence of cases where the answer to the question confirms that the description under which the action considered is intentional, i.e. ‘answers that give reasons for acting’ (*Intention* §21). Remember the conclusion of *Intention* §20: ‘The occurrence of other answers to the question ‘Why?’ besides ones like ‘I just did’, is essential to the existence of the concept of an intention or voluntary action¹⁶.’ It is important here that Anscombe mentions both concepts ‘of an intention’ and of ‘voluntary action’, for although the range of application of the question ‘why?’ does not exactly match that of voluntary and/or human action¹⁷, the existence of the question ‘why?’ is a logical condition of the existence of the concept of human action.

[T]his does not mean that an action cannot be called voluntary or intentional unless the agent has an end in view; it means that the concept of voluntary or intentional action would not exist, if the question ‘Why?’, with answers that give reasons for acting, did not. Given that it does exist, the cases where the answer is ‘For no particular reason’, etc. can occur (...).¹⁸

The point here is that the fact that the question ‘Why?’ can legitimately (and sensibly) be raised even in cases where it does not have an answer (or rather where the answer is that there is no answer) depends on the fact that there are cases in which it does have an answer. Now, the concept of ‘human action’ philosophers are aiming at depends on the existence of the question ‘Why?’ with its full scope of applications, although the scope of application of ‘human action’ does not coincide with that of the question ‘Why?’.

For now, let us simply acknowledge that ‘movements of humans’ are not always human actions (they may be simple ‘acts of a human being’), that is, it is not always relevant to ask about what someone does or did why she did it.

However, to complicate the matter a bit, let us recall that the question ‘Why?’ also applies to non-human agents (e.g. animals). From which we may already conclude that, as a device to circumscribe ‘human action’, the enquiry into the question ‘Why?’ is insufficient. It either takes on too many or too few cases. On the one hand, it takes on too many cases, because it does not only include non-human agents but also (as we will see) a *mere* physiological sense of ‘voluntary’ (see section 2). On the other hand, it takes on too few cases, for, while including the things I may be doing for no particular reason or the things I feel compelled to do, it excludes

¹⁵ As we shall see, what Anscombe elsewhere calls a ‘callability to account’ (Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia’ (henceforth MME), in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 262) has to do with the applicability of the ‘Why?’ question, although the two concepts do not match perfectly for the ‘callability to account’ appeals to the concepts of good and bad (and potential guilt), whereas the ‘Why?’ question does not necessarily do so.

¹⁶ And its summary (*Intention*: v): ‘There would be no such thing as our question ‘Why?’ or intentional action if the only answer were: “For no particular reason”.’

¹⁷ More needs to be said about the way the concept of ‘voluntary action’ relates to the concept of ‘human action’.

¹⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., *Intention* §21.

the things I am doing without knowing or noticing that I am doing them (*Intention* §6) and for which I may nonetheless be accountable¹⁹ (see sections 2 and 3).

On the ground of the above passage from §46, we are left with (1) the nonetheless important observation of the logical co-dependency between ‘human action’ and a certain sense of the question ‘Why?’, and (2) consequently the rejection of an extensional characterization of human action understood as a subclass of ‘the movements of human bodies’.

The logical relation between human action and the question ‘Why?’ is illustrated by means of an analogy of the connection between a word or sentence and the question ‘What does it say?’. To a great extent the analogy is illuminating: the question ‘What does it say?’ is not relevant in the face of any scribble (say) that would *merely look like* a piece of written language²⁰. Something has to be recognized as a piece of language before we may ask ‘What does it say?’ and to ask ‘What does it say?’ about (say) some traces of ink on the paper simply *is* to treat them as language. The possibility of asking about their meaning is part of our concepts of words and sentences so that we cannot say that first there were words and then meaning or that first there was meaning and then words.

Analogously, we cannot say that first there was human action and then the possibility of asking why we do them or, conversely, that first there was the possibility of asking why we do some things, which brought ‘human action’ into existence. However, the case of ‘human action’ raises a further difficulty. Indeed, few people would dispute the fact that words and sentences are human creations. But, although human actions would, by definition, not exist if humans did not exist, more people, I suppose, would feel inclined to dispute the claim that ‘human actions’ are human *creations* – at least in the sense that words and sentences are. Fortunately, this is not quite what Anscombe is claiming here. For she does *not* say ‘*what* we are interested in... would not exist if our question “Why?” did not’; nor does she say that ‘*something as a human action* could not occur prior to the existence of the question “Why?”’. Rather she says, quite explicitly:

The *description of* what we are interested in is a *type of description* that would not exist if our question ‘Why?’ did not.

So the *description of something* as a human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question ‘Why?’, simply as a *kind of utterance* by which we were then obscurely prompted to address the question.

Thus ‘human action’ pertains to a ‘type of description’ of ‘*something*’; namely ‘*what we are interested in*’, and *this* is not just a piece of language, this is (as readers of *Intention* already know) *what happens* (considered under a description). To follow the analogy (properly understood), we could say that human action (and the question ‘Why?’) is to what happens²¹ what a word (and the question ‘What does it say?’) is to the marks on the paper or to its pronunciation²².

¹⁹ It is even more true if we stick to the ‘narrow’ sense of the question ‘Why?’ (*Intention* §16) which is only concerned with actions for which some sort of motive may be provided (i.e. intentional actions proper).

²⁰ This may remind us of Hilary Putnam’s drawing ant at the beginning of *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

²¹ I choose the phrase ‘what happens’ on purpose since, though it still is a description, it is (I hope) as neutral as possible, by contrast with, for example, ‘the movement of the molecules in a human being’ or ‘the movements of human bodies’ which pick out some specific aspect of what happens (either physiological or ethological).

²² It could be useful to compare the analogy with the formal (intentional)/material distinction Anscombe makes in various places. See, for instance, ‘The Intentionality of Sensation’ (henceforth IS – in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 3-20) and ‘The Two Kinds of Error in Action’ (henceforth TKEA – in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 3-9).

In other words, to the question, ‘Would there be human actions if the special question “Why?” did not exist?’ The answer is *no* (just as there would not be words without the question ‘What does it say?’), since ‘human action’ relates to a form of description (of something) which is logically dependent on the existence of the question ‘Why?’. And conversely the question ‘Why?’ would not exist without the descriptions of what we call human actions. Still people (perhaps we would not call them so) would *do* things, perhaps even some of the exact same things that they do (e.g. raising their arm) which we (on occasions) call ‘human action’. But they would not strictly speaking perform human actions.

Of course, like any thought experiment of a borderline situation, it is hard to figure out: perhaps they would never act for any particular reason²³ (*Intention* §20), perhaps we (who?) would understand what they do as the mere result of some blind process or mechanism, etc. The thought experiment is hard to figure out because it requires that we abstract from our possession of certain basic concepts in order to represent a situation in which these concepts (as well as all the representations and logical possibilities that they carry) would not exist. When we know the primitive character of practice in learning language and rules²⁴, this situation becomes indeed unimaginable. Anyhow, what the quotation says is that the concept of human action is meant to describe some aspect of what humans do which is more that intimately bound to (i.e. logically dependent on) the practice of giving and asking reasons for acting (even when there are actually none to be given).

With these remarks in hand, we now have grounds for further examination of human action.

Let’s turn back to the scholastic’s distinction between *actus humanus* and *actus hominis*. On its ground Anscombe says that philosophy of action has an interest in ‘human action’ as distinct not only from any other happening or event, but rather, as distinct from other things *people* do, namely other ‘acts of a human being’. The interesting insight here is that the difference does not merely have to do with the *kind* of agent – human as opposed to non-human – who performs it, since there are ‘acts of a human being’ (performed by a human agent) which are *not* ‘human actions’. As a human agent, not everything I do is a human action. Some things I do, such as scratching my head, *may* be mere acts of a human being, which means they are simply contingently performed by a human being (they could have been performed by a non-human being, for instance an animal) and they are, as mere acts of a human being, indifferent, as we shall see, to the question of their goodness or badness. But such examples are not *per se* mere acts of a human being. They may or may not be so, depending on the circumstances. There are indeed *circumstances* in which such descriptions as breathing, yawning or scratching one’s head, would qualify as human actions. For instance, if I yawn conspicuously in class, or if I am asked to breath by the doctor. This is another important consequence of Anscombe non-extensional characterisation of action: a description does not necessarily²⁵ in itself contain its belonging to the field of human action. And an action is human ‘under a description’ (in the same sense as an action is intentional ‘under a description’), which means that we need to consider the description of an action *and* its circumstances in order to decide whether it is a human action. Now how does an action description qualify as a human action?

²³ Actually the very concept of ‘not having reasons to act’ would be unintelligible in a situation in which people never had reasons to act, for the very concept of a reason to act would not exist.

²⁴ See Wittgenstein *PI* §7.

²⁵ However, some descriptions (which intrinsically refer to human practices) do. For instance, telephoning, signing, marrying, etc. (See *Intention* §47).

‘Human actions’, Anscombe claims, are a special kind of acts (performed by a human being) in that they ‘are *under the command of reason*’. We do not know yet what this means, but we know that it excludes some (but, as we shall see not all) idle actions, some things we do not even thinking of what we are doing²⁶.

In AIDE, Anscombe immediately relates this understanding of human action to two familiar (yet opaque) concepts:

1. ‘*Voluntary* action’: ‘human action = voluntary action’, in a sense that *excludes* ‘beasts and babies’ or ‘some human incapable of human action’ (like ‘a brain-damaged spastic cripple’) but which *includes* ‘uncalculated omissions’ and ‘sudden impulsive actions’²⁷ and
2. ‘*Moral* action’: in the sense that ‘All human action is moral action. It is all either good or bad. (It may be both).’²⁸

Later on in the paper, we recognize a third familiar concept:

3. ‘*Intentional* action’: ‘the extension of ‘human action’ is wider than that of ‘intentional human action’. That is to say: something may be a human action under a description under which it is not an intentional action. Acts of carelessness, negligence and omission may be of this character.’²⁹

These developments now indicate what remains to be done.

We must clarify how the combination of some sense of ‘voluntary’ with some understanding of ‘good and bad’ or ‘moral’ gives us the object of philosophy of action, namely ‘human action’.

To do so, in relation to 1 and 3, we need to explore (section 2) this specific sense of the voluntary, which is wider than that of ‘intentional action’ but still *excludes* ‘beasts and babies’ (which can, on the other hand, perform intentional actions – *Intention* §47). Correlatively, we need to explore what it means for an action to be “under the command of reason” while including non-deliberative acts such as ‘acts of carelessness, negligence and omission’.

We need to understand (section 3) Anscombe’s ‘thesis’ that ‘all human action is moral action’ in relation to her claim that the adjective ‘moral’ is redundant when applied to human action³⁰ and that ‘the concepts of (...) what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ought, ought to be jettisoned’³¹

²⁶ See Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, I-II q.1 a.1.

²⁷ Anscombe G.E.M. AIDE: 209. This latter point is related to (3) below, that the extension ‘human action’ or ‘voluntary action’ in this sense is wider than ‘intentional action’.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.: 213.

³⁰ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 203.

³¹ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (MMP), in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 26.

2. Human action = Voluntary action

Let us begin by exploring the sense in which ‘human action = voluntary action’³². This is Anscombe:

I am so using ‘human action’ that nothing is a human action unless it is a voluntary action on the part of a human agent. Otherwise, like digesting your food and breathing and sweating, your acts are the acts of a human agent but are not what I call human actions.³³

This quotation echoes the earlier mentioned scholastic distinction between the acts of a human being – *actus hominis* – (such as digesting, breathing, sweating, scratching one’s beard or head distractedly, etc.) and human actions – *actus humanus* – which are ‘under the command of reason’. Thus, human actions are not (unlike *actus hominis*) the simple movements of a body which happens to be that of a human, in the sense not only that the human body can act as an instrument (a mass, for example³⁴), but also in the sense that it is subject to the laws of physics and physiology, of reflex or mechanical movement, and so on. It is not contingent that human action is carried out by a ‘human agent’³⁵. It is contingent that the act of a human being is. However, in order to perform human actions, it is not enough to be a human agent, since not all human agents are capable of human actions: a baby or a ‘brain-damaged spastic cripple’³⁶ are human agents ‘incapable of human actions’ because they have ‘not (...) reached the stage of deliberation and choice’. Human actions are therefore made by human agents *capable of deliberation and choice*³⁷. That is not to say however that everything they do is, or should be, the result of deliberation or choice. But it does mean that all their voluntary actions, including those that can be described in a neutral way (i.e. without any connotation of good or bad), are likely to be qualified (as good or bad) according to their quality as human agents and the type of individual (virtuous or vicious) that they are (and choose to be in their behaviour).

When Anscombe says that ‘human action = voluntary action’ she is aiming at a special sense of ‘voluntary action’ which has the following features:

1. It is voluntary ‘*not* in a merely physiological sense’.³⁸

³² Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 208.

³³ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 203.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Although, as we shall see, we can imagine non-human agents performing human actions as soon as we describe what they do in a manner that involves that their actions are ‘under the command of reason’, ‘because of their visible likeness to what we produce’. This is the case of the examples of some writing appearing on a wall or some house raising up not made by men, which are ‘descriptions employing concepts of human action’ (*Intention* §46).

³⁶ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 197.

³⁷ We should add, capable of what Aristotle calls ‘practical truth’: ‘Practical truth is truth created by action in a sense in which neither branches nor dogs nor children are capable of action. (...) [I]t is truth brought about by a praxis resulting from deliberation – i.e. by an action (in fulfilment of a choice) which satisfies the description “doing well”.’ (Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Practical Truth’ (henceforth PT), in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 157) But this subject matter would take us too far astray from the considerations of the present paper.

³⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209.

2. It does not apply to beasts and babies³⁹, nor to or any ‘human incapable of human action’.⁴⁰
3. Unlike Aristotelian *praxis* it includes ‘omissions’ (including non-calculated omissions) and ‘sudden impulsive actions’⁴¹.

2.1. The physiologist’s sense of ‘voluntary’

This philosopher’s sense of ‘voluntary’, which characterises human action, must be distinguished from a broader (Aristotelian) sense, which is discussed in *Intention* (see more particularly §49). This broader sense would include ‘acts of a human being’ and ‘beasts and babies’ voluntary actions. It is worth looking at §49 in order to see the contrast between this sense of ‘voluntary’ and the one specific to human action:

The distinction between the voluntary and the intentional seems to be as follows:

- (1) Mere physical movements, to whose description our question ‘Why?’ is applicable, are called voluntary rather than intentional when (a) the answer is e.g. ‘I was fiddling’, ‘it was a casual movement’, or even ‘I don’t know why’⁴², (b) the movements are not considered by the agent, though he can say what they are if he does consider them. (...)
- (2) Something is voluntary though not intentional if it is the antecedently known concomitant result of one’s intentional action, so that one could have prevented it if one would have given up the action; but it is not intentional: one rejects the question ‘Why?’ in its connection. (...)
- (3) Things may be voluntary which are not one’s own doing at all, but which happen to one’s delight, so that one consents and does not protest or take steps against them (...).
- (4) Every intentional action is also voluntary (...).⁴³

The question is, which of these cases would count as ‘voluntary’ in what I called the philosopher’s sense (i.e. the sense that interests the philosopher of action whose research interest is human action)? In order to help us answer this question, we need to clarify what is voluntary ‘in a merely physiological sense’ (which is precisely *not* the philosopher’s sense). This additional passage of *Intention* will help:

I should like to reject a fashionable view of the terms ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’, which says that they are appropriately used only when a person has done something untoward. If anyone is tempted by this view, he should consider that physiologists

³⁹ Cf. ‘We might say that human action = voluntary action. (...) We are speaking of voluntary action *not* in a merely physiological sense. (...) Nor are we using “voluntary” as Aristotle (...) [f]or Aristotle says that beasts and babies have the voluntary, but we would not say so in the sense of “voluntary” that we are trying to introduce.’ (Ibid.).

⁴⁰ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 205.

⁴¹ ‘Aristotle too introduced a restricted sense of “action” – *praxis*, which beasts and babies don’t have. But it is a bit too limited for us. It wouldn’t include omissions unless calculated, or sudden impulsive actions.’ (Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209)

⁴² About this last answer see *Intention* §17.

⁴³ About (2) and (4), Anscombe adds that ‘from another point of view’ they can both ‘be called ‘involuntary’ if one ‘regrets having to do them’ or ‘feels “compelled”’ to do them. We shall leave this consideration aside for our present purpose.

are interested in voluntary action, and that they are not giving a special technical sense to the word. If you ask them what their criterion is, they say that if they are dealing with a grown human they ask him, and if with an animal, they take movements in which the animal is e.g. trying to get at something, say food. That is, the movement by which a dog cocked its ear at a sudden sound would not be used as an example.

This does not mean that every description of action in which its voluntariness can be considered is of interest to physiologists. Of course they are only interested in bodily movements. (*Intention* §7)

The physiologist's concept of voluntariness both includes and excludes cases that are of interest to the philosopher of action (i.e. which concern 'human action'). It includes some cases of human action insofar as it includes *any* 'bodily movement' which has the form of getting or trying to get at something (among which some will be human actions). It includes (1) and some cases of (4) at the exclusion of (2) and (3). Indeed it excludes cases, or one should say 'descriptions', of human action which concern any result or consequence which is at a distance from the agent's bodily movements (of which (2) is a particular case) and it excludes cases of happenings that the agent lets happen, consents to, or (as we shall see) omits to prevent, etc., which are, in other words, human actions *not* involving any bodily movement on the agent's part⁴⁴.

On the other hand, the physiologist's concept of 'voluntary' is broader than our concept of human action in that it includes not only 'acts of a human being' (which are bodily movements only *contingently* performed by a human agent and for no particular reason) but also concomitantly non-human (and more particularly animal) action, which can also be fully intentional (to the extent that they may aim at something which is at a distance from the movement itself).

From these considerations we can already draw various conclusions concerning the 'voluntary' in the philosopher's sense. First, any voluntary (broad sense) proceeding of a human agent is not always a human action. That it is done by a human agent is not a sufficient condition for an action to be a human action in the technical sense introduced by Anscombe. 'Voluntary' in this sense will include some but not all cases of (1) and (4). In other words, (1) certain bodily movements are human actions, but they are not human actions simply *qua* bodily movements. In order to understand what makes the description of a bodily movement a human action, we will need to turn to the question of the goodness or badness of such an action. This is the topic of section 3 below. With regards to (4), any intentional action performed by a human agent is a human action, with the exclusion of intentional actions performed by non-human (animal) agents, babies and humans 'incapable of human action' (i.e. of 'deliberation and choice').

On the other hand, (2) and (3) are excluded from the 'physiological sense' of 'voluntary' because they are either (2) known consequences or side-effects of an intentional action and are not in this respect physical movements, or (3), to quote Narboux, 'non-intentional voluntary passive motions'⁴⁵, which, by definition, require the absence of (voluntary) bodily movements. Both cases of known consequences or side-effects and non-intentional voluntary passive motions (and even more so voluntary omissions) will reveal central to the understanding of

⁴⁴ A distinction should be made between letting happen 'to one's delight' (*Intention* §49) – what Narboux ('Anscombe's Account of Voluntary Action in *Intention*', in *Enrahonar. An International Journal of Theoretical and Practical Reason* 64, 2020: 135-163) calls the 'passive voluntary' (case 3) and acts of carelessness, omissions, etc. Although both are 'human actions', omissions and carelessness can be cases of intentional (deliberated) actions or of guilty ignorance.

⁴⁵ Narboux 2020: 155.

human action. And the reason why these cases are important is that they bring into play a certain sense of duty proper to human actions. This sense of duty, however, does not depend on any act of the will, nor even necessarily on any implicit or explicit thought on the part of the agent. This sense of duty depends above all on the concepts of justice and responsibility of agents. But before considering this sense of duty, let us try to shed some light on this by first examining the question of what makes an action *performed by a human agent* a human action.

2.2. *Deliberation and choice: on human action and being human*

In the passages where Aquinas elaborates the distinction between *actus hominis* and *actus humanus*, he claims that the latter, contrary to the earlier, ‘proceed from a deliberate will’⁴⁶. The sense of ‘voluntary’ Anscombe is aiming at departs from Aquinas’ characterization of human action (and from Aristotle’s *praxis*) since her understanding of ‘voluntariness does not require that there be any act of will, any formation of intention, any choice of what is voluntary; or even any positive voluntary act’⁴⁷. She illustrates this point with an example of voluntary omission, whose status will prove paradigmatic, since, unlike non-intentional voluntary passive motions, it depends directly on a certain understanding of the *practical necessity* and *duty* specific to human action:

Voluntariness does not require that there be any act of will, any formation of intention, any choice of what is voluntary; or even any positive voluntary act. What you were able to do and it was needful you should do, if you omit it in forgetfulness or sloth, falling asleep perhaps and sleeping through the time when you should have been doing it – your omission is voluntary. Unless indeed you fell asleep because you were drugged without the slightest consent on your part. Consent may reside in not taking care when you could have and, in the nature of the case as available to your understanding, you needed to.⁴⁸

The case of omissions, either neglected by the philosophy of action or invoked in favour of a psychological account of action (where acting without moving – and perhaps action in general – would reduce to some kind of mental aiming), here takes an interesting colour.

There are indeed various kinds of omissions. For instance, there is a case of lying by omission, where the qualification of the act of lying almost requires that the liar *thinks* about the information that she omits to transmit. (Voluntary) abstention would be another sort of (if not omission) acting without doing anything, where the action actually consists in not doing something in a way that involves that the agent *thinks* that she is doing so. In this respect, there is a difference between abstention proper and simply forgetting (omitting) to vote by distraction or carelessness. Another example could be non-assistance to a person in danger. It could be an act of carelessness, when one did not but should have noticed that someone else was in danger. It could be plainly voluntary, when one was actually aware of the danger and could have done something but simply did not care or, for some reason, did not do anything⁴⁹. Carelessness also concerns the case of culpable ignorance, for example, of some man who marries a woman without taking the trouble to verify that his first wife died as he thinks she did. What is in question then is not simply what the man actually knew when he married that woman. For if that was the issue, then he could not be accused of being a bigamist. What is in question is what

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II q.1 a.1.

⁴⁷ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ This may remind us of the discussions concerning euthanasia and the famous examples illustrating the difference between killing and letting die.

the man *should* have known, what he *should* have made sure of before marrying his second wife, Jeanne (namely that his first wife, Mary, had indeed died)⁵⁰.

Anscombe's point however is not to undermine the relevance of the distinction between doing something and letting something happen. For, there are things we may let happen or even cause to happen without being liable for doing so (such as things that are far remote from what is in our power to do or, in certain circumstances, anticipated but unintentional consequences of our actions). For example, it would make no sense to suspect of murder every surgeon whose patient dies as a result of a delicate operation, even if the surgeon was aware of the risk of death. Here (unless further circumstances suggest otherwise) the death would be considered 'involuntary' on the ground that it was obviously an accident, an unfortunate and unintended consequence of the operation⁵¹. Such kind of cases raises a difficulty that goes beyond the point of the present paper. This difficulty lies in the question of how to determine whether or not the anticipated effect of a given action is voluntary⁵². The answer lies in examining the *circumstances* of the action⁵³.

For the present purpose, I shall concentrate on the point that sometimes, given the circumstances, letting happen or omitting to do is actually voluntary. To that extent, it enters the scope of what we do, of our actions in general. In other words, there need not be any physical movement or even any thought on our part for us to be *responsible* for something that happens or does not happen.

The word has been dropped, 'responsible', which leads to the question of what we *can* and what we *need* to do or not to do. With regard to human action, the question of voluntariness does not only concern explicitly deliberate actions or the effects of her action of which the agent is aware, it also concerns 'what you were *able* to do and it was *needful* you *should* do'; since 'consent may reside in not taking care when you *could* have and, in the nature of the case as available to your understanding, you *needed* to' (my emphasis)⁵⁴. All these modalities deserve careful attention.

But first, we must acknowledge that, although the concept of voluntary which is characteristic of human action (as distinct from *actus hominis*) appeals to the idea of a rational agent – since human actions are 'under the command of reason' – this does not entail that all human action *qua* human action must be the *result* of rational deliberation. In other words, being 'under the command of reason' simply means that the action is performed by an agent who has 'reached the stage of deliberation and choice'. So that various kinds of duties and needs (of sorts which do not reduce to so-called 'natural' constraints such as e.g. eating, sleeping, and all kinds of physical obstacles) are incumbent upon such an agent. For instance, if you are a cook, you ought not to put too much salt in your dishes; if you are a student, you ought not to

⁵⁰ Anscombe G.E.M., TKEA 5.

⁵¹ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 212-3.

⁵² The question has to do with an evaluation of the famous 'doctrine of double-effect'. See AIDE.

⁵³ As in the following example: '[I]t is unknowable whether "what I do now" will result in a greater sum of good altogether than anything else I might do instead. What *is* knowable is e.g. that not letting cakes burn is better for them than letting them burn. This is a true general observation. In a particular case in which the house is catching fire and one puts that fire out, 'not letting the cakes burn', as ordinarily understood, might however be *no* better for them because they will burn with the house if one attends to them and not to it. Anyway they don't matter in comparison with the house. In another case, not letting them burn will indeed be better for them but in the circumstances worse for some human being who staggers in choking on a bone and needs, say, to be stood on his head and shaken if he is not to choke to death. Meanwhile, the cakes burn. But they don't matter in comparison with the life of a human being.' (Anscombe G.E.M., 'The Controversy over a new morality' (henceforth CONM), in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 229)

⁵⁴ Still, the sense of 'voluntary' Anscombe is suggesting here could seem a bit far-fetched. For simply falling asleep without seeking in any way to do so really is a limit-case.

oversleep on the day of your exam; if you are a doctor, you ought to prescribe the right treatment; and so on. Which means that if you do not comply with these duties, in ‘sloth’, ‘forgetfulness’ or ‘carelessness’ (without extenuating circumstances), your omission is voluntary (in Anscombe’s sense). Note, for the moment, that these duties do not have to be interpreted as ‘moral’ duties, they may concern skills, rules, etiquette, professional conscience, etc⁵⁵. I will partly develop this point in what follows.

In fact, the oversleeping example illustrates the link of the concept of voluntary specific to human action to the concept of duty. The voluntary may constitute an explicit choice on your part; it is also what is done innocently (picking a flower, for example); but it is also (and in a distinctive way) what you have not done and should have done (for example, paying attention to a particular circumstance). And this does not necessarily apply only to the area of so-called ‘moral’ actions, but also, for example, to the following cases: ‘the athletes should keep in training, pregnant women should watch their weight, film stars their publicity, that one should brush one’s teeth’ (*Intention* §35), etc. It should be noted, however, that it is a sense of ‘voluntary’ that is crucial for moral philosophy, since it characterizes a duty which concerns specifically human action.

But before considering the relation of morality to human action, we may mention another case of ‘voluntary’ which is specific to human action but does not require deliberation and choice (see (2) at §49 above). This is the sense in which the extension of ‘human action’ (thus voluntary in what I called the ‘philosopher’s sense’) is greater than that of ‘intentional action’. In *Intention*, an action is indeed intentional in the broad sense when it can be accounted for by reasons for acting and is intentional in the narrow sense when it articulates means to ends. But I may be aware of circumstances of my action that are in no way part of my intentions and which are nevertheless, by the mere fact of such awareness, considered voluntary. Thus, when I walk somewhere, I wear out the soles of my shoes. This is not (usually) part of my intentional action: it is neither a means, nor an end of my action and I cannot provide any reasons for it. It is however voluntary insofar as I could have prevented it by giving up the action or by acting otherwise. It may be, in the same way, that an individual does not intend to poison anyone but simply to earn his salary, knowing that the water he distributes, simply by doing his job, is poisoned⁵⁶. At issue here, Anscombe insists, is not the ethical or legal verdict of indisputable guilt of the agent concerned, but the difference between what is part of the *means* and *ends* of the action and what the agent *knows* more generally about the *circumstances* of her action. From this point of view, wearing the soles of one’s shoes or poisoning people are voluntary rather than intentional actions, if they are not part of the plan of action⁵⁷.

It is therefore necessary to separate the good or bad character of an action from its voluntary character. Perhaps you should not have betrayed a secret, perhaps you should have been careful and perhaps, despite your ignorance, your betrayal of the secret is voluntary. But even if it were not, the description ‘betraying a secret’ suggests a bad action, although this

⁵⁵ See Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Rules, Rights and Promises’ (RRP – in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 97-103) and MMP.

⁵⁶ Anscombe G.E.M., *Intention* §23.

⁵⁷ The poisoner case, though his poisoning was voluntary, is parallel to the surgeon causing the death of his patient. The difference depends on the circumstances and on a device which the doctrine of double effect appeals to. In the surgeon’s case, his causing the death of his patient does not turn his action into a bad human action, for it counts as an involuntary consequence (it was merely probable and was the exact opposite of his aim, of the operation) and does not therefore undermine the goodness of the surgeon’s action *qua* human action. On the other hand, the poisoner knew he was (more than very likely) poisoning some people and, though (on one version of the example) it was not his aim, he did not care about doing so.

‘impression’ may ‘be contradicted by mentioning other circumstances’, circumstances in which, precisely, it may have been good or necessary to betray the secret.

Thus, while we necessarily start from a certain description to say whether and under what aspects an action is said to be good or bad, it is only in conjunction with its circumstances that an action can be said to be good or bad. Of course, the determination of the circumstances of the action is also a function of what the agent knows about it, of his goals, and of the type of individual he is. It is therefore impossible to judge the action only by the will that governs it. All the more so, as we have seen, that the voluntary is not reducible to any ‘act of the will’ and that, consequently, the criterion of choice and deliberation intervenes at the level of the circumstances of the action (and thus concerns the type of agent considered), and not necessarily as a triggering or even driving element of the action.

In this, Anscombe's moral philosophy is profoundly anti-Kantian. It is not possible to determine *a priori*, by virtue of its respect for a supposed moral law enacted by reason, whether a concrete action is good or bad. An action is not good or bad in itself or by virtue of the will that governs it, but it is good or bad as a virtuous or vicious action, i.e. to the extent that it can be described, for example, as just or innocent in all its aspects or, on the contrary, as unjust in certain aspects.

So far, the investigation of the special relation between human action and voluntary action has led us to the following conclusions. First, being a human agent is not enough to perform a human action, since there are ‘humans incapable of human action’ (like babies, etc.) who have not ‘reached the stage of deliberation and choice’.

Take the examples of plucking dandelion flowers or throwing a pebble into a stream. Are these human actions on the part of just any human agent we care to imagine? Well, not if our human agent is a baby, for example, or some other human incapable of human action. That is to say, voluntariness is again seen not to be enough to give us good or bad human action.⁵⁸

Such humans (at least some) can perform intentional and voluntary actions in the sense that, for instance, animals do: they can ‘try to get at something’, we can ‘describe what *further* they are doing *in* doing something’ by appealing to ‘the two features, knowledge and enlarged description’ which ‘are quite characteristic of description of intention in acting’ (*Intention* §47), even can we say that their ‘action was intentional (or voluntary) under [a] description but not [...] another’⁵⁹. They do not yet perform human actions proper, in virtue of not being the right kind of agent.

Still, being a human agent, i.e. an agent who has ‘reached the stage of deliberation and choice’, is an important feature of human action, in the sense that to describe something as a human action is to suggest that it is performed by such an agent (normally a human agent). However, not everything such a human agent does will count as a human action. Part of what she does merely are ‘acts of a human being’. And, as we saw, an ‘act of a human being’ is only contingently performed by a human being.

Now, can a human action be performed by a non-human agent? The answer is yes:

So the description of something that goes on in the world as ‘building a house’ or ‘writing a sentence on a blackboard’ is a description employing concepts of human action. Even if writing appeared on a wall as at Belshazzar’s feast, or a house rose

⁵⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 205.

⁵⁹ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘Under a Description’ (henceforth UD), in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 210.

up not made by men, they would be identified as writing or a house because of their visible likeness to what we produce – writing and houses.⁶⁰

Such descriptions as ‘building a house’ or ‘writing a sentence’ employ ‘concepts of human action’, which means they suggest an agent capable of ‘deliberation and choice’⁶¹. At least they are represented in such a way that, if such extraordinary events occurred, we would treat them as human actions⁶², as we do when, in a fiction, human actions (talking, solving moral dilemmas, etc.) are attributed to normally inanimate beings.

More crucially, we saw that human action is voluntary action in reference to kinds of duties that are specifically human, which can turn sloth, carelessness and various kinds of omissions into voluntary deeds. What I said so far about these deeds is rather limited. Being human actions, they share the features I have just summed up. We now need to explore further how ‘duty’ relates to ‘human action’. We just saw that carelessness, for instance, can be voluntary *and* blameworthy (if one falls asleep when one should have been doing something else), but it can also be ‘morally neutral’ (e.g. using one’s shoe sole), the good or bad character of the negligence being to some extent a matter distinct from its voluntary character.

3. Human action = Moral action

In fact, the key to understanding human action and the concepts of ‘duty’ attached to it lies in the following statement:

All human action is moral action. It is all either good or bad. (It may be both).⁶³

This assertion legitimately raised some perplexities, especially in relation to the earlier quoted claim from ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ that ‘the concepts of (...) what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of ought, ought to be jettisoned’⁶⁴. It may sound as if, while rejecting the use of the adjective ‘moral’ for its redundancy, Anscombe is giving it an exaggerating importance. However, this moral sense of ought is exemplified by Kantian philosophy⁶⁵, to which Anscombe addresses the reproach of having isolated the concept of ‘duty’ from the practical attitude that consists in reasoning about what to do in particular circumstances. Anscombe’s recommendation to return to the original meaning of Aristotelian *ethics* (which should be contrasted with Kantian morality), is thus to reconsider the discussion about the goodness or badness of action in relation to *human* action, i.e., ‘voluntary action on the part of a human agent’, rather than to the abstract existence of pure rational will.

To say that ‘human action’ and ‘moral action (*sc.* of a human being)’ are equivalent is to say that all human action *in concreto* is either good or bad *simpliciter*. There is no need to insert ‘morally’ and say ‘morally good or bad’. The term ‘moral’ adds no sense to the phrase, because we are talking about human actions, and the ‘moral’ goodness of an action is nothing but its goodness as a human action.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Anscombe G.E.M., *Intention*, §46, p. 84.

⁶¹ Or perhaps a ‘self-conscious agent’ in the sense Anscombe develops in ‘The First Person’. But this would lead the discussion beyond the scope of the present paper.

⁶² See Descombes V. (2014) *Le parler de soi*, Paris, Gallimard: 180.

⁶³ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209.

⁶⁴ Anscombe G.E.M., MMP 169

⁶⁵ See Anscombe G.E.M. MMP and GBHA.

⁶⁶ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 214.

In other words, insofar as an action is ‘chosen’, i.e. voluntary in the sense that specifically concerns human action (and which should not be confused with a certain form of voluntarism, nor with a broader sense of ‘voluntary’ that extends beyond human action), it can be qualified (as good or bad) in relation to its contribution to the ‘flourishing’ of the human form of life, which is the object of ethics in the sense of Aristotle. Thus, far from rehabilitating a form of moralism that would consist in extending moral judgment to any proceeding of a human agent, according to the redundancy thesis, the expression ‘moral human action’ is redundant and the adjective ‘moral’ should therefore be dropped (in the name of its redundancy with ‘human’). The good or bad character of a human action being here not related to an alleged moral law, but to the human life form. In other words, Anscombe expresses her rejection of the idea of a morality that would result from the attempt of a ‘pure reason’ to resist the ‘sensuous impulses’, in order to bring the question of the judgment of action back to its human and earthly condition and to rehabilitate the central role of sensibility in the choice of action:

[D]esires and inclinations (...) are not the prostitute mother of a ‘moral’ *ought* who seduces the pure intelligible will into begetting it.⁶⁷

In other words, (moral) duty is not simply the result of a fight of reason against desires and inclinations. It is rather related to some broader understanding of human flourishing, where duties can be related to human needs and desires.

Of course, some of the worry concerning the redundancy thesis can also be alleviated by reminding that ‘human action’ does not concern *everything* a human agent does. Anscombe is indeed not claiming that any proceeding of a human agent is either good or bad. Rather she is claiming that what an agent does *qua* human action is (in virtue of what she means by human action) either good or bad. At least this is how the following two remarks should be understood:

‘[M]oral does not stand for an extra ingredient which some human actions have and some do not.’⁶⁸

[T]his equation [‘Human action = moral action of a human being’] is not a mere ‘extensional equivalence’ – two descriptions which happen to be true of the same thing. The descriptions are equivalent in content.⁶⁹

Hence the ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’⁷⁰ relevance of human action is integral to the qualification of an action as human. When we speak of human action, we speak of an action which is either good or bad with regard to its being a human action. But that does not mean that its goodness or badness is contained in the description of the action itself:

Not all human-action descriptions are moral action descriptions.⁷¹

Rather the goodness or badness of a human action, i.e. its liability to be described as good or bad, will depend on the *circumstances* of the action, which determine the various descriptions that apply to it. The point is difficult because we tend to think that to judge something is good or bad, and to make value judgement in general, is something we do upon (or in addition to) the consideration of some fact. But Anscombe’s claim precisely is that the goodness or badness

⁶⁷ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 206.

⁶⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 209.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 210.

⁷⁰ Anscombe uses these two adjectives interchangeably precisely for the reason that she does not think there is a domain of morality which would be describable separately from human action.

⁷¹ Ibid.

of the action is not some extra feature or ingredient that adds up to the consideration of what happens, if what happens is a human action. To that extent, there are, according to Anscombe, ‘moral facts’⁷², that is, a human action, if it is taking place or has taken place, is either good or bad.

Now, our remaining task is to clarify the sense in which ‘good and bad’ qualify human action. The task appears all the more crucial if we bear in mind the fact that the concept of human action that we are in the process of circumscribing constitutes the very object of the philosophy of action, although it is not the main topic of the philosophy of action to decide whether and which action in particular is either good or bad. To accomplish this task, we can help ourselves with a remark Anscombe makes about ‘responsibility’ at the beginning of ‘Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia’:

Responsibility has three levels. (1) The primary level is that at which a mere cause (for example, a stroke of lightning) or contributory condition (such as the temperature of the atmosphere) is said to be responsible for something happening. (2) At a higher level, where a rational agent is involved, responsibility also includes callability to account. Someone responsible in this sense may have to answer the question of guilt. (3) The third level is that of guilt itself.⁷³

Human action is concerned with levels 2 and 3 of responsibility: it involves ‘a rational agent’ and may include, for this reason, ‘a callability to account’ (which may result in a recognition of guilt). So human action is an action for which the question of responsibility can be raised, which does not mean that it would always make sense to raise it. In this sense, human action can be good or bad, not from the point of view of the exercise of a skill (such as the correct interpretation of a piece of music), but as it is chosen in relation to its good (or innocent) or, on the contrary, bad character:

‘They played that Rasumowsky Quartet very well – it was a good piece of playing; but it was bad on their part to play – or perhaps to play *it* in those circumstances’ – i.e. there was good playing but it was bad behaviour. Here it will be redundant to say: ‘You mean, it was *morally* bad’.⁷⁴

Here again, we can see that the ‘rationality’ at stake does not reduce to some rational aiming or will. In order to fully understand how an action can be voluntary without any act of will on the part of the agent, nor any intentional aim, we must return to the concept of duty. First, it is necessary to emancipate this concept from a strict moral connotation that tends precisely to reduce it to an act of rational will. As the philosopher points out, the concept of duty applies as well to the duties of a profession or a function, to those related to health, or to the rules (of a game, of grammar, of mathematics, of etiquette, etc.) and even to the human life form. It thus refers to an Aristotelian sense of necessity which Anscombe characterizes as follows:

Aristotle in his dictionary says that in one sense of ‘necessary’, the necessary is that without which good cannot be or come to be. (Of course the ‘cannot’ in that sentence, as he later indicates, is not the negation of the possibility that is correlative

⁷² About this, we need to remember Anscombe’s discussion about the relativity of ‘brute facts’ both in MMP and ‘On Brute Facts’ (BF – in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 22-25).

⁷³ Anscombe G.E.M., MME 261-2.

⁷⁴ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 204.

with this sense of ‘necessary’, but of the possibility correlative with absolute or ‘simple’ necessity; for this it does hold that ‘necessarily p’ implies ‘p’.⁷⁵

In the context of action, there is a kind of necessity that refers neither to a purely physical constraint, nor to a purely logical constraint (in the sense of the implication specific to logical deduction). This necessity is, one might say, of a practical nature. It may be due to existing rules (such as those of spelling) or to a concept of good in relation to particular skills (such as what is imposed on those who want to practice their profession well; for example, the good doctor, the good cook, the good teacher, etc.). But this necessity may also be imposed by norms relating to what might be called, in general, ‘good’ behaviour or ‘virtuous’ behaviour, such as avoiding injustice or even seeking to be as fair as possible, etc. And it is the set of these norms (relating to skills, but also to the form of human life in general or to human flourishing) that characterizes the duty in its practical or ethical sense.

Thus, one can distinguish, following Aristotle, good and bad action in relation to the exercise of intellectual virtues (of skills) or moral virtues (as human action). One can deliberately misspell a word in order to mislead someone. From this point of view, one’s action will be bad both from the point of view of the exercise of competences (the spelling) and as a human action. But ‘something can be a good human action, then, in spite of being a bad bit of spelling’⁷⁶: if, for example, the goal is to teach someone the correct spelling by having them correct mistakes.

The concept of ‘Aristotelian necessity’⁷⁷ refers to a concept of duty that applies to human action without being backed by a set of rules or laws that would pre-exist and that could be inferred from it, regardless of the practical circumstances of the action. It is this notion of duty that applies to human behaviour and by which we judge human actions. From this point of view, although there are what Anscombe calls ‘neutral action-descriptions’, as a human action, an action is always good (at least as innocent) or bad because it is chosen as such. Although this choice is not necessarily explicit; for instance, doing well may simply consist in refusing to do something that does not seem innocent. So, the duty which concerns human actions relates to what is good to do as a human being in particular circumstances. But we must leave open, in the context of this article, the question of *how* one determines whether a particular action is good or bad.

However, something needs to be said about how the circumstances help determine whether an action is good or bad. Indeed, the equation ‘human action = moral action of a human being’, does not entail that every human action *description* is a moral action-description. In other words, the claim that all human action is ‘either good or bad’ (in the sense of a ‘callability to account’: a rational human agent must be accountable for her actions), does not entail that all human action description suggests goodness or badness. There are, in fact, ‘moral action-descriptions’ and ‘neutral or indifferent action-descriptions’ (like ‘walking’ or ‘picking a flower’):

[W]hen I speak of moral action-descriptions, I mean ones which suggest, at least suggest, good or bad — unlike neutral or indifferent action-descriptions, which suggest nothing either way.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘On Promising and Its Justice’ (OPJ), in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981: 15.

⁷⁶ Anscombe G.E.M., GBHA 204.

⁷⁷ Cf. Foot Ph. (2003) *Natural Goodness*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 15.

⁷⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 213.

However, the fact that there are neutral action-descriptions does not undermine the fact that ‘All human action (...) is either good or bad’:

This fact, that there are indifferent human-action descriptions, might lead someone to think that there are indifferent human actions. But that does not follow at all. It is the *particular* action that is always good or bad.⁷⁹

Take an action description like ‘killing’. The killing may be caused by a non-human agent. Just like ‘a stone can’t lie in ambush waiting to trip you up’ (PT 149), if a rolling stone ends up on someone’s head and kills one, the killing is not a human action, but a mere accident (level 1 of responsibility). It is not even the act of a human being, although this is contingent. It would have been the act of a human being if it so happened that the killing instrument were a human body. For instance, if someone gets pushed and kills someone else by sheer accident⁸⁰, but here again, ‘only in the sense in which “responsibility” means “causality” was he responsible’⁸¹. However, ‘if I kill someone by an accident in driving my car – I reverse it by mistake, say, and kill a small child standing behind it’⁸², it is a human action (and a bad one unless further attenuating circumstances may show otherwise).

In other words, *no* description is *intrinsically* a human action description and no description is intrinsically the description of an act of a human being. That is to say, (1) the action-description itself, even if it is a moral-action description (i.e. if it does suggest good or bad⁸³), is not enough to say whether or not it is a human action. And (2) if the action-description does in fact describe a human action, even if it is a moral action-description, it is not enough to say whether or not it is a *good or bad* human action:

It is not even true that every *moral* action-description, as a description of a particular human action, entails that that particular action was good, or again, that it was bad. It may only entail that the action was, say, good unless some aspect makes it bad. Or was bad, unless some excuse or justification either lets it have a certain goodness in as much as it is an action which is not wicked, or actually renders it specifically good.⁸⁴

Recall the surgeon example, whose action of trying to save lives may ‘by sheer accident’ be the ‘cause of some evil’. His action is not bad *qua* human action, ‘for being the involuntary cause of something does not belong to it as a human act’⁸⁵. ‘Sheer accident’ means that there is a sense in which the agent’s responsibility stands at the primary level: ‘a mere cause (...) or contributory condition (...) is said to be responsible for something happening’. ‘Justified amputation’ is another example of an evil which turns out to be a good human action. The goodness and badness of a particular action⁸⁶, and with them the bounds of responsibility, are a matter of circumstances. Further, a human action which has ‘*nothing* bad about it’ is good by

⁷⁹ Ibid. 210.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. 215

⁸² Ibid. 210

⁸³ Ibid. 210-11, 213.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 211.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 212.

⁸⁶ That Anscombe distinguishes from ‘the generic goodness of any action as being an action’ (Ibid. 214).

default. By contrast, a human action ‘is bad if there is *something* wrong with it’ *qua* human action⁸⁷.

To conclude, we may return to our initial considerations regarding the logical relationship between ‘human action’ as characterised in relation to the concept of ‘responsibility’ and ‘callability to account’ and ‘intentional action’ as characterised in relation to the question ‘Why?’ (in the broad sense, including cases like the ‘no reason’-cases).

From considering good and bad, we see that the extension of ‘human action’ is wider than that of ‘intentional human action’.⁸⁸

Although they entertain some grammatical kinship, and although one would not exist without the other, the two requests of a ‘callability to account’ (which implies the consideration of good and bad) and of the ‘applicability of the question “Why?”’ do not fully overlap. First, it is important here that Anscombe says ‘intentional *human action*’ and not just ‘intentional action’, for, if it were the case, we could say that ‘human action’ is less extensive. Indeed, as we saw, the question ‘Why?’ also has an application in the third person *only*, when it concerns animals, infants, etc., which is not the case of the ‘callability to account’ (which concerns the agent’s capacity to endorse her own doings). Now the ‘callability to account’ is more extensive than the question ‘Why?’ in that it may concern ignorance (‘I did not know I was doing this’⁸⁹ or ‘I knew I was doing that, but only because I observed it’⁹⁰), which has been excluded from acceptable answers to the question ‘Why?’; sloth, carelessness, etc., i.e. the non-intentional voluntary. If a human action is the cause of some evil, it will be bad if it is the voluntary cause of it (in the sense including ignorance, carelessness, etc.). But a human action is not bad from being the involuntary cause of some evil, for ‘the involuntariness does mean that the badness is not in a respect belonging to it as a human action’⁹¹.

⁸⁷ Anscombe G.E.M., ‘The Controversy over a new morality’ (CONM), in M. Geach & L. Gormally (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, Exeter: Imprint Academics, 2005: 235.

⁸⁸ Anscombe G.E.M., AIDE 213.

⁸⁹ Anscombe G.E.M., *Intention* §6.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* §8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

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