

On the Non-Observational Character of Practical Knowledge

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Abstract

Anscombe's practical knowledge remains a hotly debated topic in the philosophy of action. Anscombe herself posits that when an agent performs an action intentionally, they are aware of doing so without the need for observation, underscoring the non-observational essence of practical knowledge. However, skepticism challenges this view, questioning whether practical knowledge persists in instances of action failure. Anscombe affirms it does, a stance that puzzles many scholars. This paper defends the non-observational nature of practical knowledge from two angles: Firstly, it distinguishes between practical and speculative knowledge by highlighting that practical knowledge catalyzes intentional action, making it the formal cause. This implies that practical knowledge's validity is independent of the action's outcome, thus rendering action failure irrelevant to its existence. Secondly, intentional action is characterized more as a continuum than a discrete event. Therefore, interruptions or failures do not denote the end but a continuation of the action process, allowing the notion of failure to be reconsidered within the broader framework of ongoing action.

Keywords

Intentional Action, Practical Knowledge, Non-Observational Knowledge, Formal Cause, Process, Event

1. Introduction

Anscombe's practical knowledge is a highly researched topic in the philosophy of action. Defined by G.E.M. Anscombe, practical knowledge refers to the agent's awareness of his or her intentional actions (See *Anscombe, 1957/2000: §28*). *Anscombe (1957/2000: §5)* describes intentional actions as those that answer the question "Why?". For instance, if asked, "Why are you standing by the road-

side?”, and I respond, “I’m waiting for a friend,” my action of standing on the side of the road is intentional. Anscombe asserted that an agent possesses knowledge of acting intentionally without the need for observation, highlighting the non-observational character of practical knowledge (Anscombe, 1957/2000: §28). However, this viewpoint encounters skepticism (Davidson, 2001; Donnellan & Morgenbesser, 1963) due to instances where intentional actions do not succeed, raising questions about the continuity of practical knowledge in the event of failure. For example, I close my eyes and write something intentionally on a piece of paper. I can say what I am writing. However, if something goes wrong with my pen, it is possible that what I say I am writing will not appear on the paper (for a similar case, see Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 53). Anscombe clarified, stating, “The mistake is in the performance, not in the judgment” (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 82) and “What you did was a mistake, because it was not in accordance with what you said” (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 57). This distinction sparks confusion as errors can arise in judgment, performance, or both when actions fail.

Anscombe’s supporters have proposed different strategies in response to the skeptics’ challenge (See Falvey, 2000; Paul, 2009; McDowell, 2010; Thompson, 2011; Schwenkler, 2015; Frost, 2019; Kietzmann, 2020). However, Anscombe’s opponents have also proposed new arguments to challenge the non-observational character of practical knowledge (See Kirley, 2023).

This paper defends the non-observational nature of practical knowledge from two angles. First, it’s often misconceived as speculative knowledge, which requires compatibility with the intentional action. Anscombe counters this by differentiating between practical and speculative knowledge, emphasizing that the former is ‘the cause of what it understands’ while the latter is ‘derived from the objects known’ (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 87). I propose that practical knowledge serves as the formal cause of intentional action, and constitutively the cause of such action. Thus, practical knowledge is not inherently linked to the successful outcome of the action it incites, indicating that failed actions do not undermine practical knowledge.

Second, I argue that intentional action should be viewed as a process rather than a discrete event. Consequently, when an action is disrupted or unsuccessful, it can still be considered as part of a broader continuance of action. This perspective suggests that interruptions do not signify the completion of an action but rather a persisting process, indicating that the action has not truly failed.

2. The Non-Observational Character of Practical Knowledge

When Anscombe says that practical knowledge is non-observational, she means that it does not stem from knowledge gained through senses that can be describable separately (e.g., sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch) nor from indirect knowledge obtained through inference based on observation. Anscombe articulates, “Where we can speak of separately describable sensations, having which is

in some sense our criterion for saying something, then we can speak of observing that thing; but that is not generally so when we know the position of our limbs.” (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 13) Here, Anscombe elucidates the non-observational nature of practical knowledge, particularly in the context of knowledge about limb position. Anscombe regards practical knowledge as self-knowledge concerning intentional action.

The non-observational nature of practical knowledge encounters skepticism. Skeptics argue that Anscombe’s perspective is overly stringent and can be undermined by counterexamples. Notably, the carbon copy paper case presented by Donald Davidson serves as a significant counterexample. Davidson (2001) observes, “A man may even be doing something intentionally and not know that he is; so of course, he can be doing it without knowing that he is (A man may be making ten carbon copies as he writes, and this may be intentional; yet he may not know that he is; all he knows is that he is trying).” (Davidson, 2001: p. 50) Davidson’s example corresponds well to Anscombe’s description of intentional action but does not align with her conclusions.

Keith S. Donnellan & Sidney Morgenbesser were among the first to challenge the notion that practical knowledge is non-observational. They argued that if our understanding of our intentional actions necessarily lacks observation, then “the explanations that have been given of the expression ‘knowledge without observation’ are not wholly appropriate to the case of intentional actions.” (Donnellan & Morgenbesser, 1963: p. 402) The crux of Donnellan & Morgenbesser’s argument against the non-observational nature of practical knowledge is twofold:

First, they suggest that “knowledge without observation” and “knowledge not based on evidence” pertain to 1) first-person, present-tense psychological statements, like “I have a headache,” and 2) knowledge about the position of someone’s limbs.

Second, they contend that intentional action does not fit into these categories for two reasons. i) First-person mental statements are irrefutable and not subject to correction, whereas intentional actions can be mistaken, and thus, statements about them can be corrected. ii) Even when knowledge on a particular occasion does not rely on observation or evidence, the certainty in what is known is usually founded on evidence or observation.

Reason ii) lacks persuasiveness. Donnellan & Morgenbesser’s assertion that the agent’s certainty in what is known relies on prior evidence or observation overlooks the role of knowing-how in elucidating practical knowledge. Kieran Setiya argues that we are justified in forming beliefs without prior evidence, in part, through knowing how (See Setiya, 2017: p. 52).

However, reason i) is compelling. Typically, a person’s first-person statement about their mental state is authoritative (assuming sincerity). Therefore, such a statement cannot be incorrect. Conversely, intentional actions are prone to errors.

Subsequent assessments will explore various strategies to address the skeptical challenge to the non-observational nature of practical knowledge effectively.

3. Three Responses and Their Problems

There are three common responses to the challenge of skepticism. The first common response is the so-called Two-Factor Thesis, which posits that “a person typically knows without observation what he intends to be doing, while his knowledge of what he is actually doing must be based on observation” (Falvey, 2000: p. 21). However, this distinction between intention and action has been rejected by Anscombe, who describes such a strategy as “a mad account” (See Anscombe, 1957/2000: §29). Anscombe’s concept of intentional action does not align with a mere combination of intention plus action. Consequently, the Two-Factor Thesis is at odds with Anscombe’s fundamental understanding of practical knowledge.

The second strategy is known as the “Inferential Theory”. Paul (2009) asserts that “we normally know non-observationally what we are doing, while holding that this knowledge is not spontaneous, but evidently based on our knowledge of what we intend to be doing” (Paul, 2009: p. 4). According to Paul, an agent’s knowledge of his or her intentional action is inferred (often unconsciously) from intentions and background knowledge rather than derived from perceptual evidence. However, this approach struggles to circumvent skepticism, given the possibility of either the intentional actions or the inferences about them being incorrect. Relying solely on the knowledge of intention to act does not guarantee non-observational understanding of intentional actions.

The third strategy encompasses a form of Disjunctivism about Action, as discussed by McDowell (2010). McDowell examines Anscombe’s suggestion of a highest common factor in practical knowledge between successful and unsuccessful actions, advocating instead for a disjunctive notion. In this view, practical knowledge is present in successful actions (the good case), while in unsuccessful actions (the bad case), the agent is left with false beliefs formed from a first-person perspective alone. McDowell’s proposition highlights the contingency of practical knowledge and its non-observational nature on the success of the action, which seems a limited stance.

Given the deficiencies in the aforementioned strategies, it is evident that new approaches are required to defend the non-observational character of practical knowledge.

4. Practical Knowledge as Formal Cause of Action

I will first offer arguments in support of practical knowledge as the formal cause of action. The reason I argue that practical knowledge is a formal cause of intentional action is to articulate that practical knowledge is not conceptually dependent on the success of the action to which it leads. In other words, the success of an action is not a criterion for judging practical knowledge. Therefore, the failure of an action does not pose a threat to practical knowledge. Thus, the challenge from the skeptics is resolved, and the non-observational character of practical knowledge is defended. Then, I will consider various other interpretations

of practical knowledge and causation.

One reason why practical knowledge is non-observational is that it is self-knowledge about the intentional action of the agent. In Anscombe's view, the agent has first-person authority over his or her own intentional actions. But this is not a compelling reason, especially when the action is outside the physical boundaries. How is practical knowledge non-observational when the intentional action takes place outside of someone's bodily boundaries? When an agent does something intentionally, for example, opening a window or painting a wall yellow, how does she know that she is doing it without observation? Anscombe's response is "I do what happens" (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 52). "What happens" must be under the description "I am doing something intentionally." "What I do" and "what happens" are the same thing. However, Anscombe's slogan "I do what happens" is not entirely satisfactory because "doing something" and "something happening" are not necessarily the same thing. "Doing" and "happening" have different functions. In one sense, it is correct to say that "there is no difference between what I do and what happens"; but in another sense, it is not, because Anscombe needs to distinguish between "what I do" and "what happens" to avoid the evolution of practical knowledge into speculative knowledge about what happens.

Another reason lies in the fact that practical knowledge is practical in its form of knowledge. Practical knowledge is not only knowledge related to practical things, but it is also a distinct form of knowledge. Anscombe distinguishes between practical knowledge and speculative knowledge. She says, "Practical knowledge is 'the cause of what it understands', unlike 'speculative' knowledge, which 'is derived from the objects known'" (Anscombe, 1957/2000: p. 87). Speculative knowledge is about what the world is, and speculative knowledge must comply with its object; facts, reality, determine speculative knowledge. Practical knowledge, on the other hand, determines its object.

In what sense is practical knowledge the cause of intentional action? The first main view is that practical knowledge is the "formal cause" of intentional action. This is the position that I will support, as seen in the works of Moran (2004), Schwenkler (2015), and Setiya (2017). Richard Moran argues that practical knowledge constitutively leads to action, serving to make such-and-such an action the agent's intentional action. Moran concludes that "the sense of the phrase from Aquinas is not about the efficient causal role of intention in producing movements but rather concerns the formal or constitutive role of descriptions embodied in one's practical knowledge making it the case that this description counts as a description of the person's intentional action" (Moran, 2004: p. 54).

Moran's interpretation aligns with Anscombe's position and is the position that this paper supports. As Anscombe points out, "This means more than that practical knowledge is observed to be a necessary condition of the production of various results; it means that without it, what happens does not come under the description—execution of intentions—whose characteristics we have been investigating" (Anscombe, 1957/2000: pp. 87-88). However, Moran's interpretation

may face challenges, such as the concern raised by O'Connell (2020) regarding the productivity of practical knowledge and its epistemic credentials, particularly its allegedly non-observational character. Zhu (2020) offers a response: practical knowledge is an internalist formal cause of intentional action, making intentional action have a teleological structure.

There are various interpretations of practical knowledge and causation, but not all provide convincing explanations. One major view is that practical knowledge is the "efficient cause" of intentional action, aligned with the Davidsonian theory of event causation. However, this understanding conflicts with Anscombe's definition of intentional action as an internalist approach, where the intentionality of action is rooted in the action itself. Sarah Paul points out that practical knowledge cannot be understood as the efficient cause of intentional action (Paul, 2009: p. 2).

The other major view is that practical knowledge is both a formal and an efficient cause of intentional action. Schwenkler initially argues that practical knowledge is merely the formal cause but later asserts that it is both a formal and an efficient cause. His explanation invokes the Aristotelian notion of formal cause and the role of skill (or knowing-how) as the efficient cause, as described by Aristotle and Aquinas. However, this synthesis, as argued by Schwenkler (2019) and Teichman (2022), contrasts with Anscombe's internalist approach by making practical knowledge external to intentional action.

Practical knowledge is a genuine form of knowledge, distinct from the speculative knowledge rooted in modern philosophy's contemplative understanding. As Anscombe suggests, practical knowledge overcomes the dogma of conceiving knowledge as "an incorrigibly contemplative conception" (See Anscombe, 1957/2000: §32). Practical knowledge, then, is the formal cause of intentional action and constitutively leads to intentional action. This constitutes a conceptual defense of the non-observational character of practical knowledge and arguably an a priori defense.

5. Action as Process

I will begin by presenting arguments in favor of considering action as a process. The reason I argue that action is a process is to emphasize that the failure of an event does not pose a threat to practical knowledge. The criteria for applying the concept of intentional action differ from those for applying the concept of mere events (See Makin, 2024: p. 223). When an action is interrupted, it is not considered a completed event but a continuing process, and thus not yet a failure. This perspective resolves the challenge from skeptics and defends the non-observational character of practical knowledge.

Intentional action possesses both an intrinsic teleological structure and a temporal structure. It unfolds in the world in one of two ways: either as an event or as a process. The distinction is mirrored in language; for example, "I made a pot of tea" denotes a completed event in perfective aspect, while "I am making tea" indicates an ongoing process in imperfective aspect.

The common assumption in action theory that actions are events is being increasingly challenged. Researchers have often taken for granted that actions are events, without defending this stance. Davidson, notably, described action as an event, proposing that causes of action are beliefs and attitudes that rationalize action, forming the so-called standard view of event-causal nature of actions. However, issues such as deviant causal chains have called this assumption into question.

Several researchers argue against the perception of actions as events, including Bach (1980), Alvarez & Hyman (1998), Hornsby (2012), Steward (2012), and Stout (2018), advocating for the view of action as a process.

This paper posits that action is indeed a process. To comprehend bodily action theoretically, it is essential to differentiate between process and event. Neglecting this distinction overlooks actions that are in progress but not completed. As Thompson (2011: p. 205) articulates, Davidson's doctrine misses the actions in progress—the things that didn't happen but were happening. The oversight of the distinction between process and event by researchers could be attributed to two reasons: the broad concept of event includes both processes and activities, and some researchers perceive little significance in differentiating between action as an event and as a process. Nonetheless, distinguishing between processes and events is crucial because the criteria for applying the concept of intentional action differ significantly from those for applying the concept of an event.

The temporal structure of intentional action encompasses both pause and completion. Small (2012) distinguishes between purposeful assertions, which account for the pausing/finishing contrast, and non-purposeful assertions, which do not. Purposeful assertions allow for interruption, which can be transformed by assigning a purpose, either an objective goal or a time frame.

In summary, viewing action as a process, in light of the temporal structure of intentional action, enriches our understanding of practical knowledge. The criteria for applying the concept of intentional action, distinct from those for mere events, mean that an interrupted or cancelled action-in-progress does not compromise the agent's judgment about what he is doing. Even preparatory actions, though not immediately pursued, contribute to the broader framework of doing.

6. Conclusion

The non-observational character of practical knowledge faces challenges from skepticism. This paper defends Anscombe from two perspectives: Firstly, the non-observational character of practical knowledge is derived from the fact that practical knowledge is a distinct form of knowledge. It is the formal cause of intentional action and inherently leads to such action. Notably, practical knowledge does not rely conceptually on the success of the action it initiates. This constitutes a conceptual or a priori defense. Secondly, actions should be understood as processes rather than mere events. Viewing actions as events may omit ongoing actions yet to come to fruition; conversely, perceiving them as processes accommodates the non-observational character of practical knowledge.

The debate concerning the non-observational character of practical knowledge continues to develop. Some related topics are also being studied intensively, such as the relationship between practical knowledge and bodily self-knowledge, and the relationship between practical knowledge and knowing how. Practical knowledge is a distinctive explanation of human action, and I think the growth of interest in this topic demonstrates its philosophical importance. As John Schwenkler puts it, “There is every reason to believe that further pursuit of these issues will be worth the while” (Schwenkler, 2012: p. 738).

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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