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► **To cite this version:**

Rémi Clot-Goudard. Intention and Mental Causation. Foundations of Science, In press. hal-01969454

**HAL Id: hal-01969454**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01969454>**

Submitted on 4 Jan 2019

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# Intention and Mental Causation

Abstract: Many philosophers nowadays take for granted a causalist view of action explanation, according to which intentional action is a movement caused by mental antecedents. For them, “the possibility of human agency evidently requires that our mental states – our beliefs, desires, and intentions – have causal effects in the physical world: in voluntary actions our beliefs and desires, or intentions and decisions, must somehow cause our limbs to move in appropriate ways” (Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2000 (1998), p. 31). The main question then is not to know whether there is mental causation at all, but how we should account for it. How can the mind move our body? In her 1983 paper, “The Causation of Action”, Elizabeth Anscombe shows how confused this way of putting things is. For her, if intentions or beliefs can indeed be taken to be causes of action, it is not in any metaphysically problematic sense. Seeing this requires us to distinguish clearly between two theses: (1) “to be done in execution of a certain intention” is not a causal relation between intention and action; (2) an intention may be said to cause something: but this pertains to a specific kind of causal history, different from that which is uncovered by physical enquiry. First, we will show how the metaphysical problem of mental causation arises from a given conception of action. Then, we will turn to Anscombe’s arguments in favour of the two aforementioned theses.

Keywords: action; intention; mental causation; explanation; Anscombe

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## 1. Introduction

Can intentions, beliefs or desires cause actions? Many philosophers nowadays would agree that such is the case and that we should take for granted a causalist view of action explanation, according to which an intentional action is a bodily movement caused by mental antecedents. It seems obvious that, as Jaegwon Kim writes:

The possibility of human agency evidently requires that our mental states – our beliefs, desires, and intentions – have causal effects in the physical world: in voluntary actions our beliefs and desires, or intentions and decisions, must somehow cause our limbs to move in appropriate ways (Kim, 2000, p. 31).

The main question then would not be *whether* and *in what sense* there is mental causation, but *how* we should account for it, metaphysically speaking.

I suspect this view to be somewhat confused, though undoubtedly it contains some truth. In her 1983 paper, “The Causation of Action”, Elizabeth Anscombe has given some arguments to this effect. According to her, if intentions or beliefs may indeed sometimes be taken to be causes of action, it is not in a sense of “cause” which is metaphysically problematic. She argues for two distinct claims: (1) *being done in execution of a certain intention* or *being done intentionally* is not a causal relation between intention and action; (2) an intention (or a belief, a desire, *etc.*) may be a cause of a later event: but this pertains to a causal history of a different kind than one traced back by an enquiry about the physiological causes of action. That is, different kinds of causal inquiries must be distinguished.

In the first section of this paper, I will show how the so-called metaphysical problem of mental causation arises from a dubious conception of action and action explanation. In the next two sections, I will turn to Anscombe’s arguments in favour of the two aforementioned claims, so as to show what I take to be the true insight which lies in the idea of “mental causation”.

## 2. The problem of mental causation: the source of puzzlement

As Julia Tanney remarked, the arguments developed by Davidson (1963) to the effect that *the primary reason of an action is its cause* are usually considered by

analytical philosophers “to have put to rest Wittgensteinian anxieties about an illicit conflation of explanatory paradigms implicit in the very notion of ‘mental causation’” (Tanney 1995). Indeed, those arguments have been so favourably received that they have deeply and durably reshaped philosophical debates about mind and action. Davidson thus helped to establish a *standard view* on action and its explanation<sup>1</sup> according to which: (1) an action is defined as a set of bodily movements caused by some mental antecedents; (2) explaining an action consists in citing the reason for which the agent performed it, which is the combination of mental antecedents that caused the action. He thus paved the way anew for metaphysical questions about the nature of mind and its causal powers, questions that had been formerly rendered suspect by Ryle’s and Wittgenstein’s critiques.

The premises of the *standard view* give rise again to the old problem of mental causation. How can intentions, desires or beliefs move the body?<sup>2</sup> This question, which already puzzled Descartes’s readers, has thus returned to the centre of analytical philosophers’ attention within the second half of the twentieth century. As Kim observed:

Giving an account of mental causation – in particular, explaining how it is possible for the mental to exercise causal influences in the physical world – has been one of the main preoccupations in the philosophy of mind over the past two decades (Kim 2000, p. 29).

In Descartes’s thought, the problem of mind-body interaction resulted from two incompatible theses. On the one hand, Descartes opted for a causal analysis of human action which the standard view partly inherited. Each action can be broken down into two components, a will and a set of bodily movements, the first being the cause of the second. That appears clearly in his treatise on *The Passions of the Soul*, where Descartes defines wills as actions of the soul “that terminate in our body, as in this case, that we have only a will to walk, it follows that our legs must stir and we go” (Descartes 1989, Bk. I, §18). On the other hand, Descartes holds that the soul, of which wills are modes, is a substance that is actually distinguishable from the bodily substance. But if exerting a causal influence on a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sandis (2009), Introduction, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, the mental causation problem does not concern only the question of how the mind can move the body. A complete treatment of the problem should also include considerations about perception and about causal relations between so-called mental states (cf. Kim 2000, p. 31). But I will leave this out of the present discussion.

body involves sharing a contact point with it, as Descartes's mechanics implies, how is it possible for a non-spatial entity to modify what is essentially a portion of space? Mental causation was required by the analysis of action, but seemed to be excluded at the same time.

Although contemporary philosophy has largely rejected substance dualism in favour of a materialist metaphysical perspective, it still comes up against a similar difficulty, because it usually endorses a view of action that is very close to Descartes's and that is at the core of the *standard view*. Actually, as Kim has underlined, many philosophers since the end of the 1950s have been striving to find a place for the mind within the realm of nature. Of this current, *physicalism* has been and is probably still the prevailing expression. According to physicalism, all that exists is constituted by physical entities and their properties, which can be legitimately studied only by the physical sciences. Ultimately it falls to these to determine the overall framework for ontology as well as for any legitimate knowledge of reality. Yet physicalism seems to engender a dilemma threatening our common sense view of the world and of ourselves. According to Kim (2000), it is "an ultimate, nonnegotiable commitment" of common sense to claim that (a) *there is mental causation*: that the mind affects the body. But this claim seems to come into conflict with another principle of modern science, namely (b) *the causal closure of the physical world*. This principle holds that any physical change in the world can be adequately explained by a cause pertaining to the physical order itself.<sup>3</sup> Now, a human action is also a physical event or a set of such events, insofar as it consists in bodily movements. These movements must then be adequately explained in physical terms. But if so, what kind of explanatory role can be left to the "mental cause"? A conjunction of the commitment to mental causation, on the one hand, and of the causal closure principle, on the other hand, appears to force us into a disastrous dilemma. (1) Either we resort to the reductionist claim that mental states are nothing over and above physical states or properties. We may then become able to account for their causal efficacy: mental states are efficient *qua* physical states; but then we are committed to reduce any mental talk to a mere way of

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<sup>3</sup> But, from the fact that such is the case, does it follow that any explanation of a physical change must be of this sort? That is probably right as long as we want to do physics: if we're looking for physical explanations, then physics is enough. Certainly, our physical theories may meet difficulties sometimes in explaining such and such a fact; then they have to be improved; and in that case, the principle may just express the confidence that nothing *a priori* prevents us from improving them.

speaking and to say that mental *qua* mental has no effect on the world. (2) Or we maintain that mental properties or states do exist by themselves, but the question arises what allows us to say that they have any causal efficacy. In other words, either we reduce the mental to the physical, removing it from our ontology, or we reject this ontological reduction and we turn mental phenomena into mere epiphenomena. In either case, mental causation, which was supposed to be explained, has in fact been explained away.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with these difficulties which haunt the numerous theories on this subject (theories to the diversity and the ingenuity of which I naturally cannot do justice here), one is allowed, I think, to wonder whether the Wittgensteinian diagnosis should not receive more attention than it does in philosophical debates nowadays. Indeed, Davidson's arguments has been so widely accepted that few philosophers even consider the possibility that the mental causation problem might just be the result of conceptual confusion, rather than a genuine theoretical question. But how does the puzzle arise? It arises only if we accept a certain description of the way action explanations function and of the kind of explanatory work psychological concepts are meant to perform in those explanations. We are allowed to reject this description as confused if it turns out that it ignores or distorts differences which underlie the ordinary and meaningful use of these concepts – differences that may be called, after Wittgenstein, grammatical. Now, it is one thing to say that intentions and beliefs can *explain* actions (an assertion that nobody would dispute); another, to claim that psychological predicates *carry out their explanatory work by denoting internal states of the agent, states that exist independently of action, and that may be identified with physical or physiological states, properties or events and, hence, may be said to figure in physical causal chains.*<sup>5</sup> But if psychological predicates do not play such a role, they cannot denote causes and hence cannot raise the problem of their causal efficacy. We may perhaps still speak of “mental causation”, but it would not raise any metaphysical problems.

Consequently, it is necessary to have a closer look at the explanatory force of intentions or beliefs in order to understand in what sense we may take them to be causes of action. That is precisely, I think, both the diagnosis and the approach

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These remarks, though in need of further elaboration, may be enough to suggest that a modest, non-metaphysical reading of the causal closure principle is possible.

<sup>4</sup> See also Tim Crane (1995).

<sup>5</sup> The same point has been made by Tanney (2009).

defended by Elizabeth Anscombe in her 1983 paper “The Causation of Action”. In the following, I will explore her arguments to show how they allow us to disentangle questions about action whose conflation plunges us into bewilderment.

### **3. Explanation by intention as explanation of the intentional character of action**

One way to explain action is to state the intention with which the action is performed, or what the agent wants to attain by performing it. Let us imagine the following situation: someone walking along a wharf meets a fisherman who holds an octopus in his hand and is hitting it against the ground; the stroller then asks him: “Why are you hitting that octopus against the ground?” — “To make it tender.” The agent’s answer gives in a nutshell the intention with which he acts. According to the standard view, the explanatory power of citing an intention comes from the fact that an intention is regarded as an internal mental state of the agent that causes his movements. Anscombe objects that this analysis is flawed because it misconstrues the concept of an intention and its relation to an action:

The mistake is to think that the relation of *being done in execution of a certain intention* or *being done intentionally*, is a causal relation between act and intention. We see this to be a mistake if we note that an intention does not have to be a distinct psychological state which exists either prior to or even contemporaneously with the intentional action whose intention it is (Anscombe 1983, p. 95).

This argument deserves to be spelt out in more detail:

(1) A causal relation can hold only between two distinct and independent states (or events, *etc.*).

(2) An agent’s intention is not necessarily a distinct state or event independent of the performed action (so that saying what an agent intends to do by acting thus and so is not referring to an internal mental state).

Therefore, (3) saying that an action is intentional or done in execution of a certain intention does not amount to saying that the action is caused by this intention.

The first premise clarifies the concept of a causal relation. We shall give a more detailed analysis of it in the next section. Let us simply remark here that Anscombe relies on what Julia Tanney calls a “broadly Humean understanding”

of causality: that is, she takes it to be “a relation between two logically and temporally distinguishable events”.<sup>6</sup>

The second premise, however, is more contentious for it runs straight against the widespread view that an intention is a mental state preceding an action. Why is it a mistake to conceive intention that way? Anscombe invites us to observe what we actually do when we explain the intentional character of an action. Let us suppose, she says, that one of my phone’s keys is a bit jammed and that I put some extra force on it to dial a phone number. Is it an intentional action? Certainly: this is no involuntary movement of mine, as would appear in the fact that, if I was asked “Why did you do that?”, I would answer “To unjam it” or “I want to unjam the key”. But this does not imply that “I will unjam it” is a thought I would have formed prior to the action itself, nor that I form this thought while I am applying extra force on the key. My answer to the question is not an observational account or a description of what passed through my mind when I pressed the key: if I was asked about what I was conscious of at the moment, I might just answer “This seemed a bit jammed, so I tried to unjam it” – nothing more. Saying what I intend to do here is just giving another description of *what I am presently doing* in terms of the purported completed action, not giving a description of the contents of my conscious experience. “Saying so”, writes Anscombe, “does not add a new event to the record”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, in order to unpack the intentional character of an action *A* one need not refer to a second event, preceding the action, that would be denoted by an expression like “*X*’s intention to do *A*”.

Here, one could raise the following objection. This argument appears to be committed to the view that one is conscious of all that passes through one’s mind; but are there not good reasons to think that the mental goes beyond the conscious, and thus to give up what looks like a Cartesian assumption? After all, psychoanalysts as well as cognitive scientists have said much in favour of the idea of unconscious thoughts (though not on the same grounds). Then, the fact that an agent could not observe anything in himself when he performed the action *A*

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<sup>6</sup> See Tanney (2009), p. 95. If the Humean conception has given rise to many disputes among philosophers concerning for instance what ontological category the terms of a causal relation belong to, or the question whether a causal relation involves any kind of regularity, all of them would certainly agree about the obvious fact Anscombe appeals to, namely that a cause can be distinguished from its effect as an independent existence.

<sup>7</sup> Anscombe (1983), p. 96.



cannot be invoked against the claim that an expression like “*X*’s intention to do *A*” denotes – at least implicitly – a state of *X* that would be (part of) the cause of his action.

Besides what could be said against the idea of “unconscious intentions” on which this objection depends, there is a more radical reason to reject what the standard view claims about the explanatory role of psychological predicates. Let us first remember that according to the causalist intentions or beliefs ascribed to the agent may truly explain what he does only if they are part of the efficient cause bringing about the bodily movements in which the action consists. This implies that there must be an internal state of the agent to which corresponds the ascribed psychological predicate – a state that may be considered as the cause we are looking for. Let us also note that in a materialist metaphysical outlook, such a state could not be conceived as a mode of the thinking soul, as Descartes held it to be. Hence, such a state cannot but be a complex physical state of the organism, or of the brain, that may be identified through appropriate empirical enquiry.

Now, what about this idea that intentions or beliefs may be correlated with internal states of the agent? According to Anscombe, this is just nonsense. No internal state of the agent can be correlated with any intention or belief, she argues, for no internal state can be a sufficient condition for the agent to have this intention or belief. Claiming the contrary would imply an absurdity. To see this, let us suppose that it is possible to identify some brain state (or some disjunction of brain states) so that being in such a state implies believing that, for instance, that the NatWest bank on High Street closes at five o’clock. This would mean that it should be logically possible for a human being to form this belief if his brain were to enter this particular state (or one of these states), be it by accident or by artificial means, *even though this human being lived in a world where no banks and no clocks could be found, not even as imaginary or legendary objects*. Imagine for instance that a caveman’s head is suddenly struck by lightning and that this modifies his brain so that it enters into the very state that we assume to be correlated with believing that the NatWest bank on High Street closes at five o’clock. Would he form this very thought right at that moment? Answering “Yes” would mean that it is logically possible for a subject to form a thought with concepts he does not actually possess and that would not find any ground in his world. And that is nonsense.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This argument, due to Peter Geach, is expounded by Descombes (1995), chs. 10 and 12.

The point of Anscombe's argument here is to draw our attention to one grammatical feature of psychological concepts. If intentions or beliefs may be called states of the agent, it cannot be in the same sense of the word as in "brain state". There is, between the two uses of the term "state", a difference that appears in the conditions that must be fulfilled for them to be correctly attributed. As Anscombe explains:

We take it that a state is supposed to be something holding of its subject here and now, or over a period of time, without reference to anything outside that of which it holds or the time at which it holds: in particular, without reference to the history of the thing whose state it is. If that is how we understand a state, we can suppose the same state of an object in quite different circumstances and with a completely different history. If the argument does not apply to mental states that must be because they are not 'states' in this same sense. But [...] we cannot ascribe a belief like that about the bank's opening hours, to someone not living in a world of banks and clocks. Indeed we are implicitly looking *away* from the individual and into his world if we ascribe *any* belief to him. This we don't have to do for the ascription of a brain-state.

The same point holds for wants, aims; [...] and the same goes for intentions, decisions, and thoughts [...] (Anscombe 1983, pp. 99-100).

Intention and belief are intentional states, in the sense that they enclose a thought by which they are identified as *this* intention or *that* particular belief. Ascribing an intentional state to a subject then requires that he masters the concepts combined in that very thought. But this supposes that he lives in a world where these concepts are used and where they have roots – were it only because they figure in legends people tell (as our concept of a *unicorn*). In other words, the contents of intentional states are not separable from a given social, institutional and historical context in which the agent lives, that is, from practices and reactions he shares with others, of which concepts are part. That is what Wittgenstein suggests when he writes:

An intention is embedded in a setting, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess. (Wittgenstein 1953, §337)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Descombes (1995, p. 304) comments on this point: "if this institution did not exist, no one would intend to play chess. Not because of an empirical impossibility, as if one only meant that the idea of playing chess wouldn't come to people's mind; but because of a logical impossibility: whatever comes to their mind, it would not be the idea of playing chess if playing chess was not an institution in their world" (my translation).

Intentional states are then, so to speak, *context-dependent*: the thoughts an agent can form essentially depend on the socio-historical context he lives in and the resources it offers him. Brain-states, on the contrary, are *internal* states of the agent in the sense that their characteristics are indifferent to the context so understood. It is logically possible that two subjects happen to be in the same brain-state whereas their history and the circumstances of their lives are wholly different; and this state may be (in principle at least) identified by a kind of inspection (say, a neurophysiological enquiry) that does not take into account the subjects' history or social world. That is why no internal state might be a sufficient condition for an agent to be in such and such an intentional state.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, a careful examination of psychological predicates' grammar shows that it is a mistake to think that explaining the intentional character of an action implies referring to some internal state that may be identified as its cause. Expressions of an intention (or belief) do not necessarily denote a psychological state or event beyond the action itself. And if an intention may be called an agent's state, this is not in the sense in which we talk of brain-states: since their identity conditions differ, it would be senseless to think that ascribing an intention may be equivalent to ascribing an internal state, as is required by the causalist conception of action explanation.

#### **4. In what sense can an intention be a cause? The irreducible plurality of causal inquiries**

Though explaining the intentional character of an action does not amount to pointing to its cause, there is a sense in which an intention may be mentioned as a cause of further actions. Let us follow Anscombe again:

Not that the existence in a man of a belief, a desire, an aim, an intention, may not be causes of various things that later come about. Indeed they may, and the effect of an intention may even be

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<sup>10</sup> This does not amount, however, to saying that the human abilities to act or to think have nothing to do with the proper functioning of the brain or of the central nervous system. It is an empirical fact that brain injuries can disrupt the exercise of some subjective powers; but this only shows that proper functioning of the brain is a necessary condition for possessing these abilities exhibited in conduct; it does not show that they must be identified with some neurophysiological mechanisms. Actually, it would be a category mistake to identify powers with mechanisms because, as Kenny (1989) explained it, that would be conflating a *power* and its *vehicle*.

an action in execution of that intention! E.g. suppose I have a standing intention of never talking to the Press. Why, someone asks, did I refuse to see the representative of *Time* magazine? – and he is told of that long-standing resolution. ‘It makes her reject such approaches without thinking about the particular cases’. This is ‘causal’ because it says ‘It makes her...’: it derives the action from a previous state. (Anscombe (1983), p. 95)

Here, one may wonder whether such an assertion does not re-introduce the metaphysical problem of mental causation. Would it not then be necessary to account for the causal powers of intentions? No. To put it briefly, Anscombe’s thesis here is that there are many irreducible types of causal explanations. If an intention, a belief or any other intentional state may cause something happening some time later and hence be used to explain its happening, this causal history pertains to a different type to which physical or physiological enquiry does not belong. The metaphysical problem of the causal efficacy of the mental is due to a conflation of two types of causal explanation.

Let us first come back to what Anscombe says about causality.<sup>11</sup> What does *A*’s being the cause of *B* consist in? Hume’s analysis has popularized the view that cause and effect are two separate and logically independent existences, such that an *A*-type occurrence is always followed by a *B*-type occurrence. Anscombe agrees with the first feature, but she denies that causality requires exceptionless generalization or even necessitation. True, some causes are necessitating causes, but not all; and not all causal relations involve universal regularity. In fact, the core of our concept of causality lies in something elementary that tends to pass unnoticed:

There is something to observe here, that lies under our noses. It is little attended to, and yet still so obvious as to seem trite. It is this: causality consists in the derivativeness of an effect from its causes. This is the core, the common feature, of causality in its various kinds. Effects derive from, arise out of, come of, their causes. For example, everyone will grant that physical parenthood is a causal relation. Here the derivation is material, by fission. (Anscombe (1983), p. 136)

The concept of *being a cause of...* is then far more indeterminate than is generally supposed by philosophers. Saying that *A* caused *B* is only saying that *B* derives or comes from *A*. In some cases, the way in which *B* comes from *A* is obvious. But it

happens of course that we wonder how *A* contributes to bringing about *B*, that is, which *mode of causation* is at work. But answering this question does not always amount to looking for regularities under which *A* and *B* would fall.

Anscombe (1983) points to the variety of causal enquiries through the following example: a door shuts so that we wonder why this happened (“What made that door shut?”). Many answers are available: there was a draught; an apparatus fixed to the door closed it; it shuts due to its own weight; a powerful magnet; Jones shut it; the dog pushed it shut; and so on. Each of these possible answers can give rise to new questions, notably about how the cause brings about its effect. If the operations of some causes are quite easy to understand (the draught, for instance), some others may require us to look for a theory and hence for specific laws (how the magnet operates, for instance) or to inquire into some internal mechanism (the apparatus fixed to the door).

Concerning animated beings, Anscombe points out that there are at least two ways of understanding the question how they “function” or (to put it in a more Aristotelian fashion) *what makes them move* – and hence, two kinds of enquiry into the causes of their actions. The first kind expresses our interest in how the bodily mechanisms function: it deals with a *physiological causal enquiry*. For instance, Jones shut the door by pushing it. We are quite familiar with what pushing something consists in, but we may be curious about “how it works”. Two directions of enquiry are available here: we could first try to trace back a causal chain in time, to identify the preliminary steps which lead to the event (the *back and back* direction of enquiry): “the door moved because of the placing of the hand and the extension of the arm; this, because of the contraction of some muscles; this, because of some neural impulses; *etc.*”. But we could also want to improve our understanding of the connection between two established links of the chain (the *in and in* direction of enquiry) by asking “How *this* does affect *that*?”: “How does the neural impulse affect muscles and make them contract? — Because such and such chemical reaction obtains, and so on.” We want then to specify what is the mode of causation of such and such physiological cause.

Besides these questions, there is another kind of causal enquiry which puts us on a different track, as shown by the kind of descriptions used:

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Anscombe (1971).

How does a human – or other similar – animal work? By looking for food, by recognizing danger and responding with flight or fight, by obeying orders, by calculating how to attain various ends. (Anscombe (1983), p. 94)

Here, our interest is different. We consider the “human animal” not as a complex machine, but in its specific form of life: the ends he wants to attain, the abilities he exhibits, his natural or acquired reactions, his relations to his surrounding world in which his abilities are exercised, and so on. To this *historical causal enquiry* pertain descriptions of agents’ conduct that mention intentions, beliefs or desires.

The reason why the puzzle of mental causation appears is that psychological predicates pertaining to the historical enquiry are wrongly associated with those figuring in a physiological enquiry. Anscombe incidentally locates quite precisely the origin of this mistake. In our physiological investigation, we can be stopped by what seems to be a gap in the causal chain. For instance, once it is known that the contraction of muscles is caused by a set of neural impulses coming from the brain, it is difficult to see how our investigation is to proceed any further. We may want to know, for instance, that Jones *obeyed an order* so as to judge that his behaviour was a reaction to an external stimulus and thus be able to resume tracing back the causal chain (“some neural impulses came from the ear to the brain, and this, because of the air vibrating, and so on”). We have to “step back” to see it, Anscombe says. That is, we have to shift to an intentional description.

But could we not imagine a way to fill in the initial gap? After all, it may be suggested that we could ask what happened in Jones’s head when he obeyed the command:

In connection with these things we can certainly ask what goes on in the brain and nervous system; what is their state, when an animal is in one of these psychological states [...] When we have the information we want, there will be no need of ‘stepping back’ and that especially striking gap in our causal chain, which we found in the physiological enquiry, will be filled, in some case, presumably, with the brain states corresponding to beliefs and wants. (Anscombe 1983, pp. 94-95)

But that this view is mistaken is now clear from the argument we presented in the second part of this paper, according to which it is logically impossible to have an agent’s intentional states square with his internal brain states. That does not mean that it is impossible to fill the explanatory gap in the physiological enquiry, though

it may be empirically difficult to discover the missing links. Anscombe's argument only means the following:

No way of filling it up [...] will fill it up with intentions, beliefs, wants, aims, volitions, or desires. For you are in pursuit of a type of causal history in which those things do not belong *at all*. (Anscombe 1983, p. 100)

Intentions or beliefs belong only to the *historical* kind of enquiry corresponding to our interest in the teleological and other circumstantial features of human actions. They may appear as causes only within stories we build up along this line of enquiry, insofar as some actions or reactions come from them. Anscombe gives the following example:

Henry VIII longed for a son; the death of many children made him believe he had sinned in marrying Queen Catherine; he formed the intention of marrying Anne Boleyn. All this led to, helped to produce, the Act of Supremacy, to his decision to break with Rome. (Anscombe 1983, p. 100)

It is worth noting here the difference between *historical causal explanation* (when some action "is derived from" a former state) and *explanation of the intentional character of an action*, which does not belong to the causal kind. As a matter of fact, the questions those two kinds of explanation answer are distinct. The first kind of explanation (the historical one) deals with the question what events, what circumstances, what states of mind, what resolutions (and so on) have played a part in an agent's conduct. It is about determining what made the agent perform such and such an act, be it intentional or not. The second one, on the other hand, concerns the question what it is an agent intends to do in acting thus and so. What is then at stake is the identity of the action performed – the descriptions under which what he does is intentional.

Why are we prone to conflate those questions? Anscombe thinks that three things should be here remembered:

- 1) An action may be explained by the intention with which an agent performed it.
- 2) One may have an intention *before* acting upon it.
- 3) In a causal explanation, the cause is normally thought to obtain prior to the effect.

But, as Anscombe remarks, mentioning some *prior* intention to explain the intentional character of an action is *not eo ipso* causally explaining it:

[...] explanation by intention does not get a new character just because the intention existed before. It is just the same as when the intention is, so to speak, embodied in the action, and is not ever or only afterwards distinctly thought of. (Anscombe 1983, p. 101)

In other words, an intentional action is not the execution of a prior intention *because it is caused by* this very intention. But this does not rule out that an intention be sometimes mentioned as the cause of what an agent does (be this intentional or not).

## 5. Conclusion

If Anscombe is right, understanding the “causal power” of intentions does not require solving a theoretical problem concerning how physical and mental states are to be related. It requires us only to see that psychological predicates pertain to a mode of description whose grammar cannot be squared with the grammar of physical descriptions. This intentional mode of description is the one in which we state the intentions exhibited by human conduct and it allows us to build stories tracing back their concatenations. Such histories may be called *causal* without difficulty, for the core of the concept of causality is nothing but the idea that effects derive from their causes, irrespective of any particular mode of causation. The view that some causal relation can only obtain between physical states comes from an unwarranted prior metaphysical decision revealing, as is suggested by Vincent Descombes, “the will to square the form of psychological ascriptions with the form of physical ascriptions” (Descombes 1995, p. 282).

It would be erroneous to regard this distinction between modes of description as an *ontological* one, that is, to think that they refer to different levels of reality. For Anscombe as well as for Wittgenstein, concepts express our interests, and we are especially interested in describing how human beings behave and how their conduct depends on what they care for. But we are interested as well in tracing back the whole chain of physiological events that happen during an action. The difference between types of causal enquiries only reflects that our curiosity is



aroused by different aspects of what we are.<sup>12</sup> But it does not imply that such different kinds of enquiry are in competition or mutually exclusive, only that they are heterogeneous.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Anscombe (1983), p. 102: "When we consider 'the causation of action' we need to decide which sort of enquiry we are engaged in. Is it the physiological investigation of voluntary movements? I.e. do we want to know how the human mechanism works when, at a signal, the hand pushes a pen, or perhaps a door shut? It is an enormously interesting enquiry. But that will not be our enquiry into the causation of action where our interests are in the following sort of question: What led to Jones' shutting the door then? We ascertain that he shuts the door in order to have a private conversation with N. What history of actions, i.e. dealings of Jones and N with each other and with other people, of beliefs and wishes and decisions, led up to this action of shutting the door? That might be another interesting enquiry, an historical one to which knowledge of the detailed results of the first one is hardly ever pertinent."

<sup>13</sup> I am very grateful to Roger Teichmann and to Severin Schroeder for their linguistic help and comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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