

# ANSCOMBE AND PRACTICES: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

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**Abstract:** In this special issue, we present contributions that explore the significant influence of G.E.M. Anscombe's philosophical insights on both philosophy and social science. Anscombe, a leading 20th-century philosopher, extensively addressed topics from metaphysics to morality, playing a key role in reviving Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy. Deeply influenced by Wittgenstein, she emphasized language analysis and argued that morality should be grounded in human life and practices, rather than abstract principles. This issue highlights how her work, particularly her account of intentional action and her focus on the "grammar" of practical reasoning, offers valuable conceptual resources for analyzing social phenomena. The papers within this issue aim to bridge conceptual analysis with empirical inquiry, stimulating reflection among both philosophers and social scientists on how Anscombe's thought can inform concrete research.

**Key Words:** Anscombe; practices; social science; practical reason; reasons for action.

The concept of "practice" is central in contemporary social science research, offering a rich and nuanced framework for understanding the dynamics of social life. By examining how individuals, groups, and societies engage in practices, researchers can gain deeper insights into power relations, cultural change, and the interplay of agency and structure. The notion of "practice" has been of interest among philosophers as well, who have considered it more from a conceptual point of view. In this respect, after Ludwig Wittgenstein, one key figure that comes to mind is that of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe.

Anscombe was one of the leading philosophers of the 20th century, renowned for her wide-ranging intellectual pursuits, which encompassed a vast spectrum of philosophical topics, from the ancient Greeks to contemporary thinkers. Her work addressed fundamental questions in metaphysics, epistemology, language, mind, actions, morality, politics, and religion (see Anscombe 1981a, 1981b, 1981c).

<sup>†</sup> This special issue is part of the work of two research projects of Department of Legal Sciences of the University of Udine: "L'identità politica europea: governance e razionalità pratica di fronte alle sfide multiculturali" and "Razionalità pratica, normatività, interculturalità: fondamenti e metodi delle scienze sociali".

Anscombe's work has had a profound and enduring impact on a wide range of philosophical debates. Her contributions to the philosophy of action, ethics, and metaphysics continue to be central to contemporary discussions in philosophy. In particular, along with authors such, for instance, her husband Peter Geach, Anscombe played a key role in reviving Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy within the modern English-speaking philosophical tradition.

In response to the complex challenges of our time, Anscombe sought to rethink the foundations of moral philosophy. She returned to the roots of philosophical inquiry to offer more adequate answers than those provided by dominant contemporary approaches, such as deontology and consequentialism. Influenced by the philosophical method of her teacher Wittgenstein, which emphasized language analysis, as well as her deep engagement with Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, she attempted to uncover more robust and enduring principles of morality. In doing so, she diverged from the prevailing approach in contemporary analytic philosophy and reintroduced a methodology based on the interconnectedness of philosophical fields, rather than their compartmentalization.

A key theme that emerges from her writings and warrants deeper exploration is how human agency is related to *everyday practices*. We believe that focusing on practices offers a pathway to develop a deeper understanding of social phenomena. "Practice" is a concept that transcends disciplinary boundaries, appearing in fields as diverse as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and education. This interdisciplinary nature underscores the importance of reflecting on this topic to gain a clearer understanding of its multifaceted meaning. Indeed, a better understanding of the notion of "practice" can be put to work by providing the conceptual resources for more empirically oriented disciplines outside of philosophy.

### *1. Methodology and Philosophical Influences*

As is well known, Anscombe's philosophical method is deeply indebted to Wittgenstein's later work, particularly the grammatical approach developed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (PI, 1953). Wittgenstein's project begins with a critical reading of a passage from Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which he uses to exemplify the erroneous idea that language is essentially a representational system—an idea he himself had previously endorsed in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1961). In opposition to this view, Wittgenstein famously asserts: "For a large class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI: §43). Wittgenstein's insight is that language is not a free-floating, abstract system, but is instead deeply embedded in concrete social practices. The use of language is governed by rules, but these rules are not imposed externally—they emerge from within the practices that constitute a form

of life (*Lebensform*).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, words acquire meaning not in isolation, but through their use in diverse “language-games”, each tied to specific social contexts. Meaning is thus inherently normative, conditioned by what counts as correct or incorrect usage within a given community.

Anscombe adopts this view and applies it rigorously to philosophy of action and ethics. In her landmark essay *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958b, see also 1958a), she critiques the widespread commitment to what has come to be known as “Hume’s Law”. According to the most widely accepted interpretation, which gained prominence, particularly through the work of Richard Hare (1952, 1954-1955), Hume’s Law can be traced back to a well-known passage in David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2007a, book 3, part 1, sect. 1: 302; see also 2007b), commonly referred to as the “Is-Ought Paragraph”, according to which one cannot derive normative claims from descriptive premises. According to Hare, this is closely connected to G.E. Moore’s (1993) critique of the “naturalistic fallacy”, according to which moral properties like “good” cannot be reduced to any naturalistic or empirical terms.

Such a perspective has led to the dominance of the so-called “Fact-Value Distinction” in contemporary moral philosophy, resulting in the rejection of the classical teleological worldview inherited from Aristotle and Aquinas. According to this classical tradition, every being has an intrinsic purpose or *telos*, and human flourishing consists of realizing this purpose through deliberate action. In modernity, this view has been displaced by deontological (especially Kantian) and consequentialist frameworks. Anscombe critiques both approaches for lacking a substantive grounding in human life and practice. In contrast, Anscombe proposes a return to virtue ethics, inspired by Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and Aquinas’s *beatitudo*, both of which conceive the good life in teleological terms.<sup>2</sup> Human flourishing, on this account, is achieved by actualizing one’s inherent capacities within a form of life. Morality is not a matter of following abstract principles, but of cultivating the virtues necessary for realizing one’s nature.

Anscombe’s aim, therefore, is not to discard normativity but to reconfigure it. In place of the modern question, “What ought I to do?”, she substitutes the classical inquiry: “What is good for me as a human being?” This shift in perspective grounds ethical reflection in practices and forms of life, enabling a richer understanding of human action.

Anscombe’s work has inspired key developments in what are now referred to as “neo-Aristotelianism” and “Analytical Thomism” (Haldane 1997, 1999, 2002), terms that describe contemporary efforts to rehabilitate the philosophical insights of Aristotle and Aquinas within the analytic tradition.<sup>3</sup> Notably, her thought has

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that one of the authors who significantly revisited and developed this concept is Thompson (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For Aristotle, see, in particular, Aristotle 2009; for Aquinas, see, in particular, Aquinas 1993, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> It should be highlighted that Anscombe was not the only author to propose a reconsideration of Aristotle and Aquinas in contemporary English-language philosophical debate. Special mention

shaped the work of philosophers, such as, Philippa Foot (1978, 2001, 2002) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1988, 1990, 1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2016), the latter of whom placed central importance on the notion of “practices” in his revival of Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics.

## 2. A Possible Influence on Social Science

Building on Wittgenstein’s conception of language, Anscombe develops a parallel account of human action. Actions, like words, derive their meaning from the practices in which they are embedded. Far from being arbitrary or conventional, practices are rooted in the teleological structure of human life and thus provide the normative background against which actions can be understood and evaluated (1957, 1958a, 1958b). This perspective holds significant promise for social science. In particular, it offers a powerful framework for interpretative methodologies that seek to understand human behavior by situating it within cultural, institutional, and linguistic contexts, without reducing ethics to mere social convention.

A central methodological debate in social science concerns what we can dub “the continuity thesis”: the idea that social reality can be studied using the same methods as natural sciences, primarily through quantitative and causal analysis. Proponents of this thesis, such as J.S. Mill (*A System of Logic*, 1843, Book VI, Ch. I), argue that the goal of social science is explanation, understood in terms of discovering regularities. Mill, following Hume, conceives of causation in terms of constant conjunctions rather than necessary connections. Anscombe, in *Causality and Determination* (1971), challenges this Humean view, thereby making her account *prima facie* incompatible with naturalist explanations of human actions. Instead, her philosophy aligns more closely with interpretative approaches, which emphasize understanding rather than explaining, that is, grasping the meanings and reasons that social actors themselves attach to their behavior.

Within interpretivist circles, however, there are tensions. On the one hand, anti-realists tend to view culture as a construct of the observer, often leading to extreme forms of relativism that threaten to collapse the distinction, for instance, between ethnography and fiction (Hammersley 1992: 43; Risjord 2022: 47-48). A more robust alternative may be found in focusing on practices as the central object of inquiry. Practices, unlike abstract beliefs or values, have a concrete social reality and normative structure. For example, Peter Winch (1964, 2008), another thinker influenced by Wittgenstein, famously argued that social science must understand the internal logic of a form of life. However, his interpretation

should also be made, for instance, of her husband Peter Geach (see, e.g., 1956), who, like Anscombe, has influenced several authors.

of Wittgenstein leads to strong relativism: rationality, for Winch, is entirely context-bound.<sup>4</sup>

Anscombe, by contrast, offers a middle path. Her account of practices is grounded in a conception of human nature that transcends cultural differences, but, at the same time, it doesn't ignore the differences and the role of the first-person perspective within social communities. Drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, she holds that practices are not mere conventions, but are oriented toward human flourishing. This provides a universal standard by which practices can be evaluated, without collapsing into either cultural relativism or naïve realism.

### *3. Why This Special Issue*

The reasons considered so far are but some that have led us to explore the influence that Anscombe's account of practices could have not only on philosophy but also on social science. Following her insights, we would like to suggest that, while expressions of human life may vary, there is an underlying, universal human reality against which forms of life can ultimately be evaluated, thereby avoiding relativism.

We believe that a field particularly well suited for applying Anscombe's ideas could be, for instance, *practice theory*, an approach based on the philosophical work of Heidegger and the late Wittgenstein, and most famously developed by authors such as Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1990, 1998), Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984), and Schatzky (1996, 2002, 2010). On such account, society and culture are explained not just through abstract structures or individual minds, but by focusing on routine, embodied activities and habits that people engage in daily. It emphasizes the dynamic, circular relationship in which human actions both shape and are shaped by the social environment, suggesting that what we perceive as "culture" emerges from these ongoing practices.

Focusing on practices makes it easier to account for normativity. As we have seen, according to Hume's Law, facts and values belong to sharply distinct realms. However, as Wittgenstein and Anscombe have emphasized, the notion of "practice", being strongly related to that of following a rule, has normativity built in from the very beginning, implying that normativity is to be inferred from facts inherent to our shared ways of acting and reasoning. Furthermore, drawing attention to practices makes explanations of normativity more epistemically plausible: values, on this account, are acquired through the learning of practices; participating in social life, without any need to postulate problematic non-natural properties of goodness and special "receptors" allowing us to get to know them (see Moore 1993).

Moreover, focusing on practices allows to give a more fine-grained analysis of the otherwise monolithic notion of "culture". Indeed, one could be led to think

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Winch's (1964) critique of Evans-Pritchard's (1937) position regarding the Azande magic. See Hollis (1968) for a different take from Winch, especially his notion of "bridge-head".

that all individuals belonging to a given culture are somehow the same, downplaying in this way the role of disagreement and conflict within a social group. On the practice approach, instead, culture can be analyzed as a set of overlapping practices that people take part in, and, at the same time, acknowledging the dynamic, situated, and often contradictory ways in which people actually live.

In light of these considerations, we have conceived this special issue, entitled “Anscombe and Practices: Between Philosophy and Social Science”, with the purpose of highlighting Anscombe’s account of practices and spreading it beyond the boundaries of philosophical debates. This proposal has led to the publication of an issue featuring contributions from authors who have thoroughly examined Anscombe’s account of practices, highlighting the possible influence that her thinking can have in social science. Thus, we hope that this issue will stimulate reflection not only among philosophers but also among social scientists.

We would like to thank the authors who contributed to this special issue for their hard work and valuable collaboration. Their contributions are presented below.

Ana Barreira’s paper, “Across Intention: How Everyday Practices Provide Meaning to Actions”, explores how everyday practices, through intention, give meaning to actions, drawing on Wittgenstein and Anscombe. The article argues that intentional action cannot be reduced to a simple causal relationship between a mental intention and a physical action, nor can it be defined in isolation from the action itself. Barreira examines concepts such as “forms of life”, “language-game”, and “tacit normativity” to understand intentional action, its meaning, and its role. The paper concludes that intention functions as a tacit rule of action within a social context, structuring and adjusting actions within practices.

Chiara Pellegrini’s paper, “Relational Practices: Remarks Starting from G.E.M. Anscombe’s Philosophical Proceeding”, explores the concept of relational practices through the lens of Anscombe’s philosophical contributions. The paper aims to provide a clearer framework for understanding relationality and its “grammar” by drawing on Anscombe’s approach. Pellegrini discusses how a relational reading of Anscombe’s work offers tools to investigate relationality within the human form of life and introduces the idea of “shadow-implications” linked to relationality, such as asymmetry and abuse of power. The paper delves into Anscombe’s grammatical method, her analysis of “brute facts”, and how these concepts illuminate the nature of relational practices, especially concerning the relationship between different descriptions of actions and the answers to the question “Why?”.

Florian Rieger’s paper, “Methodological aspects of Elizabeth Anscombe’s ‘The Reality of the Past’”, argues that Anscombe exposes philosophical confusion about the past by analyzing a specific language-game, demonstrating how our thinking can be misled by analogies. The paper aims to clarify Anscombe’s methodological stance, shedding light on her conception of philosophical investigation and the role of conceptual analysis in addressing profound

problems. It emphasizes that understanding our linguistic practices and the “grammar” of our language is key to resolving such confusions, rather than seeking deeper explanations for phenomena like the past.

Allyn Fives’ paper, “Whether *Akrasia* Is Simply an Error in Practical Reasoning: Elizabeth Anscombe on Brute Facts, Aristotle, and Intention”, critiques Anscombe’s ambivalent stance on *akrasia* (weakness of will) while acknowledging her valuable insights. Fives argues that Anscombe, despite criticizing Aristotle for not fully accounting for clear-headed akratic intention, ultimately aligns with him in concluding that akratic intentions are irrational because they do not conform to what one “regards as doing well”. Fives challenges this by asserting that an intention can be rational even if it is not a conclusive reason or if it conflicts with more weighty reasons, drawing on Anscombe’s own analogy of intention to an order. The paper concludes that akratic intentions are rational and a valid part of everyday practice, as long as there is a binding reason to act, even if conflicting and more important reasons exist.

Dario Compagno’s paper, “A Counterfactual View of Intention”, proposes a method to infer intention from observation and theoretical assumptions, grounded in counterfactual reasoning similar to contemporary causal research. The paper distinguishes between causal questions (asking for efficient mechanisms) and final questions (asking for an agent’s end goal), building on Anscombe’s work. Compagno introduces the concepts of “final model” and “want-operator” to formally represent interventions on causal systems by identifying their intended effects. Compagno argues that teleological inference is equally counterfactual, meaning that understanding an action involves questioning what would happen if the agent did not want a specific effect. The paper emphasizes that only a subset of an action’s causal effects are intended, and that intention is not reducible to causation, as causes bring about all their effects indifferently, while intention selectively “listens to” certain effects. Ultimately, Compagno suggests that intention and causation are complementary concepts, with causal relations grounding means-ends relations, and that teleological hypotheses can be empirically tested by adopting an intentional stance.

Blandine Lagrut’s paper, “Anscombe on Dignity: a Practical Turn”, explores Anscombe’s analysis of human dignity, particularly through a hypothetical scenario where gestation no longer occurs in the womb. Lagrut argues that Anscombe’s approach, influenced by Wittgenstein, shifts the understanding of dignity to the realm of “grammar”, meaning it is understood not through theoretical presuppositions but by recognizing an “impossible question” about human beings: the question of ownership. This “impossible question” highlights that a human being is always born of other human beings and cannot be reduced to property, thus establishing radical equality and inalienable dignity. The paper emphasizes that this understanding of dignity is rooted in the “natural history of humans” and the constitutive rules of procreation, which are reflected in our linguistic practices and ethical imperatives.

Yunyan Deng's paper, "Anscombe on Promising and Human Linguistic Practice", examines Anscombe's theory of promises, specifically how new obligations are generated from them. The paper addresses a seeming contradiction in Anscombe's discussion of promises, which involves two types of necessity: conventional necessity (obligations based on conventions and not naturally intelligible) and Aristotelian necessity (obligations without which some good cannot be attained). Deng argues that Anscombe resolves this by introducing the notion of "human linguistic practice", where these two seemingly contradictory kinds of necessity can harmoniously coexist, forming a complete understanding of promises. This concept demonstrates how the use of language, as a human action, is deeply intertwined with moral life, guiding conduct toward human flourishing.

Raphaël Künstler's paper, "Understanding The Actions Of Milgram's Subjects In Terms Of Anscombe's Conception Of Practices", proposes a normative interpretation of the Milgram experiment, arguing that participants' behavior is driven by their adherence to explicit and justified rules rather than simple obedience to authority. Künstler utilizes Anscombe's concept of "practice" to clarify the notion of normative necessity, suggesting that the subjects were applying rules within the experimental framework, which itself functions as a practice with rules justified by a perceived common good. The paper aims to provide a more precise, normative explanation of the subjects' behavior, moving beyond purely psychological interpretations, and frames Anscombe's philosophy of practice as a contribution to social ontology.

Diane Proudfoot and Emma Maurice's paper, "Anscombe, Practice, and Indigenous Agency: Intention in Ngāi Tahu Letters, 1850-1950", applies Anscombe's and Wittgenstein's concepts of human practices and intention to analyze letters written by members of the Ngāi Tahu tribe in colonial-era Aotearoa in New Zealand. The paper argues that these letters, often seemingly mundane, represent sophisticated intentional actions within their historical context, including the "institutions" of colonization and Indigeneity. By examining the "language-games" and "forms of life" in which these letters are embedded, Proudfoot and Maurice reveal how Ngāi Tahu writers extended traditional Māori oratory (*whaikōrero*) into new mediums like newspapers to assert cultural authority, preserve ancestral narratives (*whakapapa*), and resist colonial pressures. The analysis demonstrates that these letter-writers were performing acts of cultural resistance and preservation, adapting colonial technologies to maintain their distinctive cultural traditions and worldviews.

We think that the contributions in this special issue offer promising ways to extend Anscombe's philosophical insights into empirical social research. Her conception of intentional action, her focus on the grammar of practical reasoning, and her broader account of human practices provide useful conceptual resources for analyzing social phenomena. By translating these ideas into tools for investigating norms, institutions, and forms of life, social scientists can sharpen their methodological frameworks and enrich their interpretations of agency and

meaning. The challenge lies in clarifying how Anscombe's thought can inform concrete research and bridge the gap between conceptual analysis and empirical inquiry. With this special issue, we hope to have taken the first step in this direction.

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