

G.E.M Anscombe's theory of Intention and Mr. Truman's Degree Hope Elizabeth May

Objective: To introduce G.E.M. Anscombe theory of intention, and its connection to her critique of Oxford University's decision (in 1955) to award Harry Truman an Honorary Doctorate.

I. What do we mean by "Intention"? (*Motive Volition Purpose Aim Goal Objective*)

"Bundle Concept": "Intention" tied up with Praise/Blame/Responsibility for *actions*

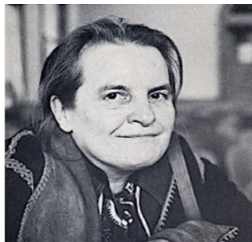
- Praiseworthy** action (virtue) [intention] vs. **Blameworthy** action (vice/fault) [intention]
Virtuous/Morally Right/Supererogatory Immoral/Illegal/Criminal

It's Complicated (disease metaphor)

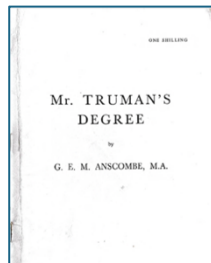
- There are several forms of blameworthy intent (legal traditions help to unearth the nuance) (intent to harm **vs.** don't intend to harm but see that it may happen and say "so be it")
- There are other blameworthy states of mind besides "faulty intent" (negligence, etc.).

Keep in mind there are two aspects of the same action: **objective** (what is seen externally) and **subjective** (how the agent understands and describes what one is doing). Both are important.

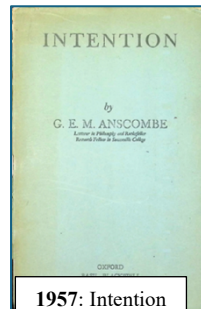
II. Anscombe's Intention and "Mr. Truman's Degree":



G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe
(1919-2001)



1956: Mr. Truman's Degree



1957: Intention



1958: Modern Moral Philosophy

III. Anscombe: An 'Intention' is an answer to the question "Why are you doing _____"

- Your 'Why' and "Final Causality" vs. "Efficient Causality"
From Aristotle (384-322, BC), reintroduced by Anscombe (1919-2001)

- Final Causality:** (the 'why') "the that" for the sake of which an action is done
- Efficient Causality:** (billiard balls) A is the efficient cause of B if the motion of A sets in motion B (our 'garden variety' notion of causality)



'intention' ≠ a private mental event that causes action (i.e., as an efficient cause).

Rather "intention" = an agent's **description** about the *WHY*-of-action (i.e., pertains to the *final cause*._

an agent's **description** about the *WHY*-of-action = an **ordered series of descriptions** (of ends and means) by which one understands one's action. "Intention" refers to this ordered series:

Why are you sitting there? To listen? Why are you listening? To learn? Why do desire to learn? To acquire wisdom? Why do you desire to acquire wisdom? I just do ! Ultimately, the ordered series terminates in something desired ('desirability characterization'). Descriptions matter and engage our physiology (e.g., 'tarantula' or 'small crab' ?)



IV. If we ask President Truman for his “Why” of using nuclear weapons, he would probably use the these descriptions:

(1) I am using nuclear weapons to save American lives and end the war

And if we further ask, “Why do you want to save American lives and end the war?”:

(2) I want to save American lives and end the war because it is duty to protect the nation.

And, “Why do you want to do your duty to protect the nation”

(3) Because I do/this is the good I am pursuing (desirability condition – the chain of descriptions stops. His ultimate “why” is described as “protecting the nation”.

Intention does not just include the ends (saving lives, ending the war, protecting the nation) but also includes the means, which are part of the description of the action. So:

T: I am using nuclear weapons to save American lives and end the war

Q: Why do you believe nuclear weapons will save American lives and end the war?

T: Because nuclear weapons are capable of unprecedented destruction

Q: Unprecedented destruction?

T: Blast radius is miles wide

Q: So innocents might be killed?

T: We are just targeting military installations, but yes.

V. Anscombe: Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons was blameworthy. He intended to kill innocents (part of the logic of his intentional action), and intentional killing of innocents is murder.

VI. Mr. Truman’s Degree: In Anscombe’s view, Oxford’s honorary degree is a public act of *moral approbation*. By honoring Truman, Oxford encourages others to see him as praiseworthy, rather than blameworthy or morally ambiguous. Again, because “unprecedented destruction” includes the killing of innocents, this is blameworthy. Praising a blameworthy act contaminates our reasoning and thinking.

VII. “But I didn’t intend to kill non-combatants” and the “doctrine of double effect”

- A. Aquinas (1225-1274): “*Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention*” [Application to Self-Defense, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 64, ART. 7]
- B. The above appears to be a sort of “trick of the mind” – dividing up a unified action with foreseeable consequences into categories to avoid responsibility (“compartmentalization”).

VIII. *Bonum Est Multiplex, Malum Est Multiplex* (The Good is Manifold, Badness is Manifold) (

- A. One’s descriptions can be faulty, evince moral blindness, and this is a form of blameworthiness Further, one’s value hierarchy may be blameworthy (American lives more than Japanese lives, etc.).

We need to be mindful of the entire sequence of descriptions of means and ends behind intentional action. We should be mindful of the *descriptions* **and** the *hierarchy of values* assumed (self defense: my life is more valuable than the attackers; American lives are more important than Japanese lives, or some such.) Dialogue with diverse perspectives can educate our “desirability characterizations” and make us more conscious of our value hierarchies, reducing the propensity for moral blindness and error.

- B. We can begin to assess descriptions and value hierarchies - this is part of evaluating one’s practical reason, which is part of ethics (which is part of philosophy)
- C. LAW: In some cases, law is concerned with descriptions and value hierarchies, but it is a different framework/different vocabulary, as we shall see. Just as our descriptions matter (tarantula vs. small crab), so do legal descriptions. As we shall see legal descriptions must be prove and adjudicated (is it cutting off supply lines? or intentionally starving an ethnic population in order to destroy it)? Tribunals are an exercise in considered/reflective description of actions.