G. E. M. ANSCOMBE AND THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

[1] APPROACH

We have a right to be sceptical of anyone who denies having felt the pull of the strange thought that consciousness, or mind, has no place in the 'natural order'.[1] But what is the correct philosophical—rather than, for example, aesthetic or religious—response to the feeling that the character of our subjective experience somehow transcends what we should expect from disenchanted nature?

For Anscombe, as for Wittgenstein, a sense that something mysterious is going on, that something must be and cannot be, is not an indication that we are on to a deep metaphysical truth. Rather, a sense of the uncanny arises when we are 'in the dark about the character of [a] concept',[2] and so make a mistake about the *kind* of statement that we make when we employ it[3]. Because the sense of mystery has its roots in a grammatical or conceptual error, the proper philosophical response will be to seek clarity about the relevant concept, with the aim of correcting our view of the kind of statement that we make when we employ it. In the current context, the project will not be to deny the reality of subjective experience but to understand what kind of distinction we make when apply the concepts 'subjective' and 'objective', so that it no longer seems that the only option for 'taking consciousness seriously'—as Chalmers puts it—is ontological inflation.[4]

If it sounds incredible to say that the hard problem of consciousness might be solved by conceptual or linguistic analysis, recall that for Anscombe—as for Wittgenstein—a description of the meaning of a concept goes far beyond lexicography. It includes the set of socio-historically located capacities—instinctive and learned—that is equivalent to the possession of that concept. It is only against the background of human activity, Anscombe thinks, that it can become clear what kind of statements we make—and what kind of distinction we mark—when we employ a word. One way of thinking about what is happening when such a description is offered is the following: everything that is fine, complex, distinctive, about the concept is located in the complexity of human linguistic practice (where 'linguistic practice' includes all those activities into which language is interwoven[5]). This means that what is essential to the concept need not be sought in a referent, where it might come to be pictured in terms of (for example) complex acts of mind, *sui generis* phenomena, or psycho-physical mechanisms.

In this chapter, I introduce—in brief, dogmatic, and controversial outline—Anscombe's enquiry into *action explanation*, and trace its implications for the hard problem of consciousness.

[2] THE HARD PROBLEM OF CONCSIOUSNESS

Anscombe's work in the philosophy of mind should be read as a sustained critique of post-Cartesian treatments of that topic, one which takes Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* as its starting point, and then develops detailed studies of psychological concepts alongside diagnoses of problems in the history of philosophy; in particular those which have their roots in Cartesian views of intention, Humean accounts of causation, and empiricist understandings of sensation and desire. As such, it would not be misleading to say that Anscombe's philosophy of mind in its entirety is concerned with diagnosing and undermining the philosophical framework within which the hard problem of consciousness is felt and articulated. Rather than making a hopeless attempt to summarise all of this material, I have limited my focus to one small area to which Anscombe gives her attention.

It might seem natural to explore Anscombe's relation to the problem of consciousness through her investigations into the subjectivity of sensation, self-consciousness, and mental events, or her discussion of Wittgenstein's private language argument.[6] However, I choose in this chapter to focus on

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[1] Chalmers (1996). *The Conscious Mind* (OUP), p. xi

[2] Anscombe (1957). *Intention*. 2nd Edition; 2nd Impression. (Blackwell), p. 1.

[3] Anscombe (1958). 'On Brute Facts', *Analysis*, 18:3, p. 69.

[4] Chalmers, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

[5] Anscombe (1976), 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism'. From 'Essays on Wittgenstein in honour of G. H. von Wright', *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 28, 1–3. Reprinted in Anscombe (1981), *From Parmenides to Wittegenstein* (Blackwell), p. 117.

[6] See especially, 'The First Person', 'The Subjectivity of Sensation', and 'Events in the Mind'. All in her (1981), *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* (Blackwell).

her investigation into action-causation explanation; and I do so for three reasons. First, the supposed subject matter of these kinds of statement figures in one of the canonical statements of the hard problem of consciousness:

> Why is the causation of behaviour accompanied by subjective experience? We have good reason to believe that consciousness arises from physical systems such as brains, but we have little idea how it arises, or why it exists at all.[7]

I hope to indicate how Anscombe's investigation into action-causation statements directly and explicitly challenges the idea that the causation of human behaviour can be explained in a way that leaves it open whether it is accompanied by subjective experience. Second—and this is something I can only gesture at—what Anscombe has to say about action is intimately connected with her views about the meaning of 'subjective', 'physical facts' and 'self-consciousness'; so what I sketch in this chapter can be a starting point for understanding these other relevant aspects of her philosophy. Finally, even if you find yourself in complete disagreement with Anscombe's analysis of action, it is useful to be reminded that the problem of consciousness is generated not just by the character of phenomenal consciousness, but equally by our philosophical understanding of human action, of nature, and of the relation between scientific explanation and other explanatory frameworks. A myopic focus on subjective experience and brain-states thus rules out a number of possible strategies for resolving the mystery of mind.

[3] CAUSATION OF BEHAVIOUR

An enquiry into the causation of behaviour is made when we ask 'Why did X happen?' where 'X' is a description of a human's—or an animal's—voluntary action. An answer to a 'Why?' question begins 'Because …'. One recurring theme of Anscombe's work on causation and philosophy of action is that there are many different kinds of *why?–because* patterns of enquiry, each with its own formal order—that is, its own rules about the kinds of answer that count as an intelligible next step in an explanatory pattern. Each formal order, Anscombe holds, identifies a different species of causation, or—as is equivalent for her—a different aspect of concept of causation.[8] In the case of action explanation, Anscombe holds that we must distinguish (at least) three kinds of enquiry: physiological, historical, and intentional. Each involves, she says, 'recognising a pattern of a different sort'[9].

Physiological enquiry concerns 'how the human mechanism works'. The 'unit of physiological investigation' is the individual human being (or animal).[10] For example, suppose we wish to explain Jones' shutting the door. A physiological investigation will treat Jones as a complex mechanism, and enquire into the causal processes by which the auditory signal (which was N's order 'Shut the door Jones!') is transmitted into the brain then translated into a signal to a muscle, and so forth. The investigation, Anscombe says, takes us, 'in and in'.[11]

A historical explanation takes us 'back and back', into the 'history of actions' that lead up to the explanandum. To remain with the current example, on finding out that Jones shut the door because of N's order, we may want to know why N ordered Jones to shut the door, and why Jones was inclined to obey. This enquiry will be into the 'history of actions, i.e. dealings of Jones and N with each other and with other people, of beliefs and wishes and decisions'.[12] It is usual—at least, in post seventeenth-century western philosophy—to think that this explanation involves the same kind of causality that characterises physiological explanation, and that any apparent differences arise only because historical explanation is both rougher, and reaches further back in time to include physiological processes in other units of explanation—that is, other people. We might imagine the two units of physiological explanation—N and Jones—knocking up against one another, billiard-ball like, at the point at which the sound-waves emitted by N impinge on the eardrum of Jones. However, Anscombe insists that the historical explanation involves a different species of causation altogether. She gives two main reasons.

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[7] This is a slightly amended version of Chalmers' statement of the problem, *op. cit.*, p. xi.
[8] Anscombe remarks: 'We may be reminded of Aristotle's four causes: at least he recognised some variety. But four is not enough'. Anscombe (1983), 'The Causation of Action'. In C. Ginet (ed.), *Knowledge and Mind* (OUP), pp. 174-90. Reprinted in Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (eds), *Human Life, Action, and Ethics* (Imprint Academia), p. 91
[9] *Ibid*, p. 93.
[10] *Ibid*, p. 102.
[11] *Ibid*, p. 93.
[12] *ibid*, p. 102

First, the historical enquiry necessarily involves 'looking *away* from the individual and into his world',[13] whereas the physiological enquiry requires us to look only at the individual (or individuals, if we have more than one individual in our physiological explanation). Anscombe says this because she holds, as did Wittgenstein, that we cannot ascribe a belief, intention, desire, or action to an individual without knowing about his form of life: 'whether what a human being is doing is, say, signing a check, a petition, or a death warrant is not to be revealed by a physical investigation of what goes on in him'.[14] If brain-states (or indeed any physiological states) were sufficient for a psychological state like, the belief that 'such-and-such a bank in –cester is open at 5.00 p. m. on Thursdays' then, Anscombe points out, we would have to make the 'absurd inference' from an artificially produced brain state to the conclusion that the subject had a belief with that content; even in a case in which 'neither –cester nor banks nor clocks nor days of the week ever came into his life before'.[15] This is not to say that a person with such a belief won't be in some particular brain state—of course she will—but, rather that while a belief about, e.g., clocks can only be ascribed to a person living in a very particular kind of world, on which highly particular forms of social institution and shared practices, the ascription of a brain state needs no such background. This implies that the unit of historical investigation is what Wittgenstein called 'the natural history of mankind', and not just the particular history of an individual or individuals.

Second, though historical explanation is 'causal', Anscombe says it is so in 'a sense of "causality" [which] is so far from accommodating itself to Hume's explanation that those who believe Hume pretty well dealt with the topic of causality would leave it entirely out of their calculations'.[16] This is in contrast with the kind of causality that is found in the physiological story. Humeans would leave historical-causality out because the descriptions in the links in the chain of the 'back-and-back' enquiry are connected neither by constant conjunction nor necessity. It is consistent with the explanation: 'Jones shut the door because he had the desire to please N' that Jones had desired to please N before, in relevantly similar circumstances, and had not been caused to shut the door. The explanation is also consistent with the fact that Jones could, had he been so inclined, have refrained from doing as N asked.

The third kind of explanation Anscombe describes is explanation by *intention*. Here, answers to the question 'Why?' give 'reasons for action', where a reason-giving explanation is one in terms of something wanted '*at a distance*'[17]—that is, it is ends-oriented explanation. This form of the 'because' is equivalent to 'in order to' and is the topic of Anscombe's difficult monograph *Intention* and, she says, Aristotle's discussion of practical reason.[18] Again, it is common to suppose—at least, in post seventeenth-century western philosophy—that this kind of explanation is equivalent to another, in this case, historical explanation.[19] When I explain, 'Jones shut the door because he wanted to obey N's order', this could be an explanation of Jones' action in terms of his mental history: namely his prior mental state of desiring to obey N caused him to shut the door. On this view, intention explanation is a species of historical explanation. Anscombe denies this. She acknowledges that to give a past desire as an answer to a 'Why?' question is *sometimes* to give an historical explanation; our desires, like our emotions, thoughts, and other mental events, may cause us to behave in certain ways, as when my desire to impress you causes me to make a fool of myself. But a description of something wanted is often a means to specify an object of desire, that *for which* one acts, rather than to report a past mental event; in which case it functions to introduce and end and not a historical cause.[20]

When a philosopher asks, 'Why is the *causation of behaviour* accompanied by *subjective experience*?', she is thinking of the absence of subjective experience in the 'in and in' story. Here is an example from Chalmers:

> My telephone receives an incoming call, an internal device vibrates, a complex wave is set up in the air and eventually reaches my eardrum, and somehow, almost magically, I hear a *ring*. Nothing

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[13] *Ibid*, p. 100
[14] 'The Casuation of Action', 102.
[15] *ibid*, p. 99. Of course many people would now claim not find this inference absurd.
[16] Anscombe (1957), p. 16.
[17] *Ibid*, p. 79.
[18] *Ibid*, p. 80.
[19] Indeed, it is common to collapse all three forms of explanation into one which, as Davidson put it, only admits of the form of causation known to science (Davidson (1978) 'Intending'. In his *Essays on Actions and Events*. Oxford University Press (2001)), p. 83).
[20] See, especially, Anscombe (1957), pp. 16-20.

> about the quality of the ring seems to correspond directly to any structure in the world … But why should that waveform, or event these neural firings, have given rise to a sound like *that*?[21]

It must surely be right that no matter how detailed a story we give about the inner workings of an individual human being, no such story will include how things seemed to the subject, nor any physiological states that we have reason to suppose might give rise to that experience. If what it is for 'the quality of the ring' to 'correspond to any structure in the world',[22] is it to figure in *this* explanation, then Chalmers must be right that no such correspondence can be expected. It is on these grounds that we might conclude that the 'quality of the ring' has no place in the 'natural order'.

The suggestion to take from Anscombe is that the reason we cannot find the 'quality of the ring' when we complete the 'in and in' story, is that descriptions of how things looked, sounded, felt, and seemed, belong in the other dimensions of explanation, what we are calling historical-causal and intentional explanation.

In [4] I'll come to the question of whether the patterns that belong to these forms of explanation can really be said to 'correspond to … structure in the world', or represent a 'natural order'. But first, a more pressing problem. In order for Anscombe's suggestion to have any interest, she must be able to resist the strong pull to say that the patterns of historical and intentional explanation are ultimately translatable into physiological explanation, so that the appearance of three distinct orders—and of two species of causality and one non-causal explanatory order—is a sign of nothing more than epistemic limitation. Anscombe gives this objection to an interlocutor. He agrees that though it may be true that *as things stand* we need to recognise two kinds of causal pattern, and *as things stand* we do not have a full account of how to map, e.g. mental states onto physiological states, this is merely 'a methodological fact about our present situation. When we've got all the information we want, we shan't need to step back'[23]—that is, we shan't need to 'look[…] *away* from the individual and into his world'.

The little I have said in introducing these patterns indicated two lines of Anscombe's argument against this idea: first, she develops the argument that the unit of physiological explanation is different from the unit of historical or intentional explanation;[24] second, she sets out, in painstaking detail, the formal structure of each kind of explanation. This she does by describing the criteria which govern the kinds of answers that count as intelligible next steps in each explanatory pattern. In doing so, she displays their incommensurability; for example, by making *non observational knowledge* essential to the orders of historical and intentional explanation.[25] It is in these two areas of development that Anscombe's work on action intersects with that on the subjectivity of sensation, the concept of a physical facts, and the relation between self-consciousness and the use of 'I'.

There is no space here to set out that work in detail, but I want close by focussing in on the conclusion of Anscombe's investigation into the third kind of explanation—explanation by intention—in order to show how analysis closes down the 'Why?' question connected with the hard problem of consciousness.

[4] HUMAN ACTION AND THE MOVEMENTS OF MOLECULES

Toward the end of *Intention*, Anscombe returns to a question she posed earlier in the book, one which has some resonance with the question pressed above about consciousness. Her question is: 'Why are some events amenable to explanation by intention and others are not?' Having described the formal structure of explanation by intention she now answers:

> It is not that certain things, namely the movements of humans, are for some undiscovered reason subject to the question 'Why?'. So too, it is not just that certain appearances of chalk on the blackboard are subject to the question 'What does it say?' It is of a word or sentence that we ask 'What does it say?'; and the description of something as a world or sentence at all could not occur

[21] Chalmers (1996), p. 7
[22] *Ibid*, p. 7
[23] Anscombe (1958), pp. 94-5.
[24] See especially 'Events in the Mind'.
[25] See especially her 1957, pp. 14-15 and 49-57. See also 'The First Person'.

> prior to the fact that words or sentences have meaning. So the description of something as human action could not occur prior to the existence of the question 'Why?'.[26]

Anscombe's conclusion, in that book, is that the physiological and historical-causal forms of explanation are formally dependent on the intentional form of explanation, because it is the latter that gives the criteria for the application of the concept 'human action'. Without that concept, there would be no subject matter for historical explanation, and no reason to take a 'special interest in the movements of these molecules—namely the ones in a human being'.[27]

Consider again the 'Why?' question with which we began: 'Why is the *causation of behaviour* accompanied by *subjective experience*? In Chalmers' view, these words identify a deep mystery. The causation of behaviour belongs to the natural order, an order we can observe, theorise, and describe. Subjective experience does not show up in physiological explanation, and so it seems possible to imagine a world in which the physiological explanation was true, but there was no subjective experience. If we want to deny this—if we want to insist that subjective experience is somehow *essential*—then it seems we will need to locate consciousness in the physiological story. And how we might do so is a complete mystery.

What Anscombe sets out to show is that the imaginary exercise Chalmers recommends to motivate this sense of mystery is incoherent; her argument is approximately transcendental in structure. We share a world of human action, and we have different ways of investigating the events picked out by that concept (viz. human action). One of those ways—that taken up by the physiologist—involves bracketing that world in the course of making investigations. If we want to insist that only those descriptions and explanatory patterns that occur in this restricted enquiry are 'natural' or 'physical', we may; but Anscombe says, 'when you say that … you are not saying anything substantial, but helping to fix the meaning of the term'.[28] However we choose to describe what the physiologist is doing (that is, whether we want to grant her enquiry, and her enquiry alone, the status of an investigation into the 'natural order') it remains the case, argues Anscombe, that the very existence of his object of enquiry depends on the possibility of removing those brackets.[29] If Anscombe is right, then the question 'Why is the *causation of behaviour* accompanied by *subjective experience*?' is akin to the question 'Why do words have meaning?': to identify of a mark as a word, or a physical event as behaviour, is to identify it as meaningful, and as the movement of a conscious being. A graphologist may bracket meaning in order to pursue her enquiry, but there would be no such thing as graphology were it not for the fact that words have meanings.

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[26] Anscombe (1957), p. 83

[27] *Ibid*, p. 83

[28] Anscombe (1969), 'On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*', *Critica*, 3: 7/8. Reprinted in her (1981) *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Blackwell), p. 11. That paper, along with 'On Brute Facts', demonstrate how artificial this way of restricting the application of these terms really is.

[29] Something similar can be said about the relation between Mary's investigation of colour, and the practices of humans in a colour-world. See, 'The Subjectivity of Sensation' for Anscombe's views on the 'metaphysical status of colours', p. 44.