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An Examination of Wanting in Anscombe's *Intention*

Mallory Dianne Kunz

Master of Arts, Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

In *Intention*, G.E.M. Anscombe sets out to examine the standard ways in which we use the word “intention”. To this end, she also examines desire and how desires play a role in our intentions. In the process, she divides desire into two distinct categories, those of weak and strong wanting. This distinction is quite different from ancient and modern views of desire, which are briefly discussed as a means of comparing Anscombe’s view to her predecessors. After she has made this distinction, Anscombe tries to establish what is required of this new category of strong wanting. These requirements include knowledge of the existence of the thing, movement towards it, and so forth. This thesis then seeks to examine whether Anscombe’s view is either well-developed or convincing. Through examination of Anscombe’s requirements of desirability characterization and utilization of practical reasoning, the conclusion appears to be that her view is neither thoroughly developed nor adequately supported.

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## INTRODUCTION

In G.E.M. Anscombe's groundbreaking work, *Intention*, Anscombe sets out to examine the standard uses of the word "intention" and the difficulties which arise from the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which we utilize it. In the process, Anscombe develops a unique view of desire, which will be the focus of this work. In exploring this topic, I hope to show how Anscombe has modified the views of her predecessors as well as argue that her position has serious defects.

Chapter One of this thesis will provide a broad overview of the Platonic and Aristotelian views of desire as well as a fairly standard modern view of desire and an action-based view. These views, which are quite distinct from one another, will assist in giving a rubric by which to measure and compare Anscombe's view. Further, they will allow us to see which, if any, of Anscombe's modifications are adequately defended as potential successors to their forbearers.

Chapter Two will examine Anscombe's view of desire in detail. It will begin with her modification of the standard use of desire and wanting and follow with what she believes is a coherent system which makes use of that modification. Next, it will examine the ideas of desirability characterizations and practical reasoning Anscombe employs in defending her view. Along the way, potential difficulties for Anscombe's view will be indicated, and they will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three of this thesis will attempt to show where the shortcomings in Anscombe's system are located, as well as to determine if any of these are fatal to her view. The most significant of these criticisms will center on her unusual use of the words "want" and "desire" as well as examining the consequences for her vagueness in explaining what qualifies as moving toward a want and what makes a desire intelligible. It is my hope that it will become clear that Anscombe's view, while potentially promising, is neither thoroughly developed nor cohesive enough to replace other views of desire.

## CHAPTER 1

### ANCIENT AND MODERN THEORIES OF DESIRE

Theories regarding the nature of desire have been around since the ancient philosophers, and we continue to grapple with explaining desire in a way which makes it intelligible. These theories have ranged from viewing desires as mental states which may or may not influence action to believing different parts of the soul correspond to different types of desires. While each position is distinct and often quite different from both its predecessors and successors, it is helpful to take note of the progression from one to the next. By evaluating older views of desire to determine what they seem to get right and trying to locate their deficiencies, we will be better able to see why new theories, such as Anscombe's view of desire, come about and whether or not they adequately explain desire. In this section I will discuss the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of desire as well as the modern standard view and the action-based view of desire to show the relevant features of the theories which helped shaped Anscombe's view of desire.

#### 1. The Platonic View of Desire

Plato presented an early view of desire which linked different desires to different parts of the soul, which allowed him to account for conflicting desires as well as for cases in which people acted on desires which were not in their best interest. Plato asserted that people often have conflicting desires, and conflicting desires imply different types of desires. Rational desires, which come from the rational part of the soul, contrast with non-rational desires, which

originate in the appetitive part of the soul. Terence Irwin presents the example of a person who desires an alcoholic beverage because he is thirsty while at the same time he desires not to drink because he recognizes that drinking such a beverage would make him unfit to drive (Irwin, 286). Under Plato's view of desire, the appetitive part of the soul is responsible for the non-rational desire to drink, and the rational part of the soul is the source of the rational desire not to drink. This distinction is due to the fact that rational desires can be influenced by reason and can change based on what one determines is best for oneself. Non-rational desires, those from the appetitive part of the soul, do not conform to reason and simply express what the desirer has an inclination for regardless of the goodness or virtue in the desire (Irwin, 286-87).

Two important facets of Plato's view which will be examined and followed through later views and also into Anscombe's view of desire are the roles both action and goodness play in desire. In the *Meno*, Socrates speaks of desires as desiring to get something, and Plato seems content with such a description. Such a description seems quite similar to the common use of desire as wanting something one does not have, and, as in the common usage, it does not require action toward the desire. Plato next addresses what is required of a desire in the *Protagoras*, in which Socrates argues that people only desire things which are either good or have the illusion of goodness (Irwin, 284-85). Under this view, when we act on desires for bad things rather than good ones, Irwin explains, "such actions simply result from ignorance about the comparative benefits. Since the short-term benefit of y will happen sooner than the long-term benefit of x, we mistakenly infer that y must be better than x, and so we choose y. Once we correct this error, we will choose x instead" (Irwin, 283-84). However, Irwin believes Plato rejects this view presented by Socrates, and instead Plato adopts the position that people who act on non-rational desires rather than rational ones are aware that they are acting in ways contrary to their own

good. However, because non-rational desires are not subject to logical reasoning, one can continue to hold and even act on his non-rational desires while simultaneously knowing that acting on those desires is not in his best interest (Irwin, 287). If these are both the case, Plato's view of desire simply seems to be that desires, which only indicate that one has an inclination toward some thing or state of affairs, conflict because they originate from different parts of the soul. When a person acts on a desire which is non-rational, or contrary to what is good for him, the person is not necessarily acting out of ignorance of the good but rather in defiance of what is good.

## 2. The Aristotelian View of Desire

Aristotle draws heavily on Plato's view of desire while also rejecting Plato's conclusion that people often act on non-rational desires while realizing that doing so is not in their best interest. Aristotle accepts Plato's distinction between rational and non-rational desires which emanate from different parts of the soul, and, "he agrees with Plato in believing that non-rational desires are necessary for incontinence; for they cause the incontinent person's ignorance" (Irwin, 296). However, Aristotle rejects Plato's view that people can act on non-rational desires while knowing that they are bad for themselves. Rather, Aristotle presents a more complex view in which there are virtuous and vicious people as well as continent and incontinent people. While the actions of each may overlap, there is a vast difference in how each of them reasons about desire and the role of desire in their subsequent behavior.

Aristotle's paragon of human action is the virtuous person whose character is such that he only desires good or appropriate ends. The virtuous person is constituted in such a way that his desires always align with producing virtue, and it is impossible for a virtuous person to desire the

wrong sort of ends. Furthermore, the virtuous person's deliberation always produces behavior which allows him to act on his virtue-producing desires. From this it follows that the virtuous person is neither able to desire the wrong sorts of things nor to act in a way which is not in accordance with virtue. As Irwin states, "the correct account of virtue must make it clear that the virtuous person's non-rational desires are not merely subordinate to and controlled by rational desires. They must also be in harmony with rational desires. Such harmony does not result from merely cognitive training. It must involve both rational understanding and the appropriate training of one's emotions" (Irwin, 290).

Aristotle's completely vicious person is the opposite of a completely virtuous person in that the vicious person desires only the wrong sort of things which do not lead to virtuous ends. Rather, the vicious person is constituted in such a way that his desires run contrary to desires which produce virtue. Furthermore, the vicious person's reasoning faculties function in such a way that he believes acting on his vicious desires is the reasonable course of action. While the vicious person's desires cannot produce virtue, the vicious person is satisfied with his desires and the resulting poor ends.

Aristotle next presents the continent individual as one who may have non-virtuous desires but who can adequately control his behavior and thus act in a way which appears to be virtuous. Such a person can have desires for ends which would be similar to those desired by the vicious person, but the continent person has been sufficiently morally developed to recognize that those desires would not produce good ends. The continent person is then able to adjust his behavior to correspond with the actions of the virtuous person. However, the difference between the merely continent person and the truly virtuous person is that the virtuous person only desires virtuous ends, whereas the continent person may also desire vicious ends but can control his desires

adequately enough to present the illusion of acting in accordance with virtue. Due to the disunion between the desires and actions of the continent person, this person's soul is not harmonious, despite the fact that he can engage in the right actions.

Aristotle's final characterization is that of the incontinent person, one who seems to grasp the concept of acting on the good but whose behavior does not mirror this knowledge. Aristotle claims in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the distinction between the incontinent person and the continent one is that, "the incontinent person knows that his actions are base, but does them because of the way he is affected; the continent person knows that his appetites are base, but because of reason does not follow them..." (qtd in Irwin 296). As such, an incontinent person may be mistaken about his situation or about the applicability of virtuous action regarding his specific desires and thus he acts contrary to virtuous action. Aristotle presents such a case as follows:

If, for instance, everything sweet must be tasted, and this- some one particular thing- is sweet, it is necessary for someone who is able and unhindered also to act on this at the same time. Suppose, then, that someone has the universal belief hindering him from tasting; he has the second belief, that everything sweet is pleasant and this is sweet, and this belief is active; he also has appetite. Hence the belief tells him to avoid this, but appetite leads him on, since it is capable of moving each of the <bodily> parts. The result, then, is that in a way reason and belief make him act incontinently. The belief is contrary to correct reason, but only coincidentally, not in itself. For it is the appetite, not the belief, that is contrary... And since the last premiss is a belief about something perceptible, and controls action, this must be what the incontinent person lacks when he is being affected. Or <rather> the way he has it is not knowledge of it, but, as we saw, saying the words, as the drunk says the words of Empedocles. (qtd in Irwin 207)

In cases such as these, the incontinent person seems to know what the right action is, but that knowledge has not been made a part of his soul in such a way that it can control his actions.

Rather, at the moment of action, the incontinent person's weaker beliefs about right action do not

have the force to motivate action, and the incontinent person's faculties present false premises about what would be the correct action regarding his beliefs.

If we accept this interpretation of Aristotle's view, it would appear that only perfectly virtuous individuals would always act toward the good in the correct way as their rational and non-rational desires would always be in harmony. Non-virtuous people, whether incontinent, continent, or vicious, would be subject to both rational and non-rational desires. There would be times when they act incorrectly, whether due to their ignorance of the good regarding their desires in certain situations or from not even having the correct desires.

While Aristotle speaks of rational and non-rational desires influencing one's action, he doesn't seem to hold any position which requires desire to entail action. It appears entirely coherent, under the Aristotelian view of desire, for one to have a multitude of rational and non-rational desires which one does not take any action toward fulfilling. Rather, for the virtuous person, desires would be indicative of things which the virtuous person wants to have or make happen, which, by the nature of a virtuous person, would be good-producing states or objects. For the non-virtuous person, desires may or may not align with goodness based on which part of the soul generates the desires. For either type of person, the motivation to act would be the result of deliberating on his desires, with the resulting outcome being dependent on which person we are speaking of. In the case of the virtuous person, there would surely be many things which he could desire but which could not all be acted on simply due to the fact that one cannot act on all of one's desires even when the desires are good and the desirer is virtuous. Rather, it would seem, the virtuous person would deliberate about which of the desires would produce the most good, and those are the desires the virtuous person would act on.

### 3. The Modern View of Desire

From the Platonic and Aristotelian views of desire, as well as many formulations which came after, there has come to be a somewhat standard view of desire which is held by many modern philosophers who study desire. Under this rather vague view, having a desire for something is simply a matter of having a certain type of dispositions, and these dispositions are the only necessary feature of the desire state of mind. Timothy Schroeder somewhat clarifies the view by saying, “a desire is just anything that plays the functional role characteristic of desires, which is that of tending to bring about the state of affairs which is the object of the desire... Wants, plans, intentions, acts of will, cravings, goals, and more are all types of desires” (Schroeder, 3-4).

Under this modern standard view, having a desire requires nothing of the person experiencing the desire. If one has a desire for a sandwich, it may be the case that one acts in such a way as to get oneself a sandwich. However, it is equally possible that one simply thinks about having a sandwich, wishes he had a sandwich, and so forth. For one to have a desire, one is not required to act on his desire in any way or intend to fulfill his desire. Further, desires are generally not divided into any type of subcategories because doing so would not garner any additional information. Calling a desire a wish rather than a craving or a want does not make it more or less likely to be acted on or more or less good, so these distinctions are rather meaningless under such a view of desire. Because the standard view of desire is so broad, it can be easily modified to fit almost any theory of desire, from action based theories to virtue based ones. Such modifications can simply alter what would count as an object of desire or, in the case of action-based theories, include more emphasis on the action-motivating powers of the desire.

#### 4. The Action-Based View of Desire

Within the class of modern, standard views, there is a modified theory that emphasizes action. I will call this theory the action-based view of desire. In the action-based view of desire, desire and belief combine to make one inclined to action. Under this system, when a person has a desire for something and a belief that X action would help him achieve his desire, he is inclined to act in X way. However, such a distinction may, in practice, not change the outcome of the desire. Wanting anything or any state of affairs would still qualify as a desire, but being inclined to act does not require one to actually do anything. One can be disposed to do any number of contradictory things without choosing to actually act on any of them due to things such as conflicting desires or the recognition that acting on the desire may not be the most prudent course of action.

Despite these potentially minimal changes in the outcome of desires, the action-based view is distinct from the standard view because it does identify the propensity to act, rather than simply the inclination to behave in certain ways (thinking about the object of the desire and so on), as the general outcome in the belief-desire model. Nevertheless, despite these differences, there are some similarities; like the standard view, this action based view puts no additional stipulations on what qualifies as a desire, with the result that wishes, wants, and so forth would continue to fall under the heading of desire. Additionally, the action-based view does not require an inherent view of goodness as a requirement for desire. As we shall see shortly, such views can be integrated into the action-based view of desire, but they are not necessary for a basic conception of it.

The possible positions to utilize for examining desire are clearly quite broad, and even those which seem to differ significantly from one another have commonalities which can help us make sense of desire. Where Plato and Aristotle viewed conflicting desires as arising from different parts of the soul, modern philosophers have taken to viewing them as mental states which can still produce conflicting desires. However, the ideas of incontinence when acting on desires which the ancients put forth will continue to be helpful as we next examine an action-based view of desire which also incorporates a view of goodness. We may also find that while modern philosophers may not speak of parts of the soul motivating different types of desires, the qualities such as appetite and reason which the ancients believed motivated desire may still be applicable to our discussion of it.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANSCOMBE'S VIEW OF DESIRE

In Chapter Two, my goal is to present G.E.M. Anscombe's view of desire, including her differentiation between types of wanting and the conditions she sets for them. As I hope to demonstrate, Anscombe's view is rather different from preceding views of desire, and she uses ideas of wanting and desire in ways which are somewhat contrary to both the philosophical and common uses of them. This position divides wanting into two classes, and Anscombe presents the latter class as being far removed from what we normally mean when we use the words "want" or "desire". I will thoroughly examine Anscombe's view in Part II and present several potential difficulties which may arise from it in the subsequent section.

#### 1. Intention

In one of her best known works, *Intention*, Anscombe sets out to examine the multiple ways in which we use the word "intention" and determine if it is appropriately used in each of those ways. Anscombe begins by presenting what she sees as the three primary views of intention. The first is the expression of the future intention to do a certain action, such as, "I am going to (or I intend to) go for a walk." The second is expressing intention as an intentional action, such as, "I intentionally put on my shoes." The third is intention as a means of describing with what intention an action was done, as when I say, "I went for a walk because I intend to get in better shape" (Anscombe, 1). The problem with this multiplicity, as Anscombe sees it, is that

there is no common thread through these different types of use of the word intention. We cannot say, for example, that the word intention always applies to future states or that it always acts as a prediction of some desired outcome. For example, while the first type of intention does express what a person intends to do in the future, the second and third type could refer to either an action one has already done or to some future action. This lack of coherence in our use of the word “intention” is troubling to Anscombe because we can, and often do, speak of our own intentions or the intentions of others when we are actually, as Anscombe says, “pretty much in the dark about the character of the concept which it represents” (Anscombe, 1). Thus, Anscombe’s goal becomes to examine the ways in which we use the word “intention” and develop a more cohesive view of how we ought to appropriately speak of intention.

## 2. Desire

One plausible candidate for what these different types of intention have in common is the notion of desire. As Anscombe describes the use of intention in explaining the goal (or intention) of one’s action, she introduces the questions, “What do you want?” and “With a view to what are you doing X,Y, and Z?” (Anscombe, 63). While these are seemingly very simple questions, they introduce the complicated notion of desire into Anscombe’s view of intention. From these questions it would appear that one’s intention in acting in whatever way being referred to in the relevant scenario is the satisfaction of whichever one of his desires he would present as his answer to, “What do you want?” Anscombe claims that generally, “we do not make much distinction between one sort of desire and another, and we should say: isn’t it desire in some sense- i.e. wanting- that prompts the action in all the cases?” (Anscombe,62). However, this basic view of desire which Anscombe claims we generally use is greatly at odds with the view she espouses a short time later.

While Anscombe believes most people are amenable to viewing all desires as generally equivalent, she quickly comes to establish certain types of wanting as distinct from other types, and possibly from the typical view of desire altogether. Anscombe again presents what she believes is a common view of wanting in which people can want anything at all; according to this view, wanting could even include such desires as idle wishes. This view appears to be the view held under the ancient views of desire as well as the modern standard and action-based views. She rejects this view because, “the chief mark of an idle wish is that a man does nothing-whether he could or no- towards the fulfillment of the wish” (Anscombe, 67). While she doesn’t dispute that people can desire these things, she does not regard them as equivalent to all kinds of wanting because some wants, under the view she is setting forth, prompt action, and these wishes do not.

Anscombe’s view gets even more complicated when she makes the claim that, “wanting may of course be applied to the prick of desire at the thought or sight of an object, even though a man then does nothing towards getting the object... The more the thing is envisaged as a likelihood, the more wishing turns into wanting... But, wanting, in the sense of the prick of desire, is compatible with one’s doing nothing at all towards getting what one wants, even though one could do something” (Anscombe, 67). The difference between this sort of want and mere wishing is apparently only in the duration or vivacity of our desires for the wanted thing, and neither wishes nor these types of wants motivate one to do anything to achieve the object of desire.

Anscombe will treat this category of wants, what I will call weak wants, as being of the same type as wishing, hoping, and so on. As such, any further discussion of weak wanting will also apply to these other types of desires. Anscombe claims she is not concerned with this sort

of weak wanting, so she devotes very little time to discussing what such wanting would entail. However, it initially seems as though these weak wants would be any desires which one does not act on. Anscombe also provides no explanation for why one does not act on these desires. We could speculate that, perhaps, the desirer does not see the desires as good, attainable, or so forth, but Anscombe is not forthcoming with her own explanation for this. As we will see shortly, strong wanting requires some sort of belief regarding the existence of the wanted thing, but Anscombe makes no claims regarding the existence of weak wants. It would appear that the objects of weak wants could exist, but this existence is not required, and the desirer would not be required to have knowledge of its existence or its absence. Anscombe's lack of discussion regarding weak wants is somewhat frustrating because we are left unsure of why the distinction between weak and strong wanting is necessary, as well as what, exactly, are the distinguishing factors between the two.

### 3. Strong Wanting

After Anscombe establishes the category of weak wants, she puts forward another type of wants, what I will call strong wants, which are quite different from the standard view of both wanting and desire. Anscombe describes this strong wanting as, "neither wishing nor hoping nor the feeling of desire, and [it] cannot be said to exist in a man who does nothing towards getting what he wants" (Anscombe, 67-8). Further, "The primitive sign of wanting is *trying to get*... Thus there are two features present in wanting; movement towards a thing and knowledge (or at least opinion) that the thing is there" (Anscombe, 68).

Notice that there are two new elements here. First, there is now a requirement for knowledge of the existence of the wanted thing. Second, there is now a requirement that strong

wanting requires movement toward the wanted object. This is far more stringent than the standard action-based view of desire, which claims desire simply makes one disposed to take the actions he believes will help him fulfill his desire. However, where the action-based view actually requires no action from the desirer, only the inclination toward action when desire and belief combine, the strong wanting view requires some sort of vague “movement towards” the object of wanting.

Anscombe’s stipulation that strong wanting requires not only movement toward the wanted thing but also knowledge, or opinion, that the thing exists also needs to be explored in greater detail due to Anscombe’s vagueness of what exactly this requirement entails. It seems apparent that knowledge of the existence of the object of the strong want would be ideal. However, Anscombe appears to recognize that actual knowledge, with whatever criteria that would entail, is not always possible. To remedy this, she allows for one to simply be of the opinion that such a thing exists.

The problem with this is, quite simply, that one can be of the opinion that anything exists, whether that opinion is justified or not. For example, I could be of the opinion when the doorbell rings that a delivery man will be there with a package I am expecting because I was told to expect it on that certain date. When I go to the door to open it, it will be with the opinion that I am doing so to get my package from the delivery man outside my door. However, it is entirely possible that my opinion is incorrect, and, in going to the door, I will actually be opening it to a traveling salesman intent on selling me a vacuum cleaner I am not interested in purchasing. Clearly my opinion regarding who would be on the other side of the door would be mistaken, and my resulting actions would not be reflective of attaining my strong want.

Anscombe also allows for wanting some future state of affairs or object by saying that in such a case one would somehow be moving towards the idea of the thing or state of affairs, rather than towards the thing itself. In these situations, one would apparently have the notion of something he wants in the future, and the idea of this thing and the possibility of its future existence takes the place of knowledge of its present existence. In cases such as the delivery man, I may have the idea of a delivery man who will be bringing my package later in the day, but I will only have a general idea of him until I open my door and see him. When I am moving toward my desire to get my package from the deliveryman outside my door, I will actually be moving toward the idea of him, and, as we have seen, my opinion that he is there will have been incorrect. While these modifications are apparently added to make the strong wanting view applicable to a wider variety of situations and their corresponding wants, they simultaneously appear to make the object of a strong want far more vague: nearly anything could be the object of a strong want provided that the person wanting it is operating under the belief that the thing exists, whether that belief is justified or not.

#### 4. Desirability Characterizations

In addition to the knowledge and movement requirements Anscombe places on strong wanting, she also specifies what sort of things one can want, or, more specifically, what one would have to do to accurately call something a want of this sort. Anscombe again acknowledges that some philosophers hold a view of desire in which a person can desire anything at all, and such a view would not require any explanation from the desirer regarding what they see as desirable in the object of their desire. However, Anscombe soundly rejects this view, and she instead presents a much more comprehensive view of what can actually be strongly wanted. While a person can certainly say, “I want such-and-such,” and be referring to

anything at all, his want is only coherent as a strong want if he can also provide what Anscombe calls a desirability characterization. Such a characterization must provide an answer to the questions, “Why do you want it?” or, “For what do you want it?” For Anscombe’s conception of strong wanting, “To say, ‘I merely want this’ without any characterisation is to deprive the word of sense” (Anscombe, 71).

However, this requirement calls into question Anscombe’s claim that strong wants are distinct from feelings of desire. If this were the case, it would be nonsense to require someone to explain what he saw as desirable in an object if he actually did not have a feeling of desire toward it. While it has generally been accepted in both the ancient and modern views that wanting is a subset of desire, Anscombe instead puts wanting in a class distinct from general desire. Moran and Stone claim that under this view Anscombe thinks of strong wanting, “as what we conclude when we deliberate on what to do-‘that is what I want to do’-which may not be something we desire or find pleasant” (Moran and Stone, 29). However, if we accept Moran and Stone’s interpretation, we may want something which we do not desire. This is troublesome as it is peculiar, at least under our ordinary use of “want” and “desire”, to say, “I want X, but I do not desire it.” The first problem which arises here is that there doesn’t appear to be a way to speak of wanting something without using either the word “desire” or the ideas we associate with it, but this problem will be more thoroughly addressed in Part Three. The second problem which arises is that Anscombe wants wanting to be distinct from desire, but she still requires that we should be able to explain what we see as desirable in the object of our want

If we accept Anscombe’s requirement of a desirability characterization, we must examine what information she would find suitable for such a characterization. Such a description must not only show what the desirer sees as good in the want; it must also make the

desire comprehensible to others. Anscombe presents a quite famous example of such a characterization which makes the idea of a desirability characterization more clear. In the example, we are to imagine that a group of Nazis is aware of their impending death, and they decide to spend their last hour devising a way to kill a group of Jewish children. When asked why they are doing such a thing, the Nazis would say it befits a Nazi who is about to die to kill as many Jewish children as possible. While most people would find the actions of the Nazis abhorrent, those people could still, according to Anscombe, understand the appeal to duty which motivated the Nazis actions. Conversely, if someone claims to want something innocuous, such as a pin, but the only explanation she can provide when asked why she wants it is, “For pleasure,” we cannot reasonably call her desire a strong want because it is not apparent what pleasure one would get from simply possessing a pin. We could press her on her desire and perhaps she would tell us she enjoys collecting different types of pins and she gets pleasure out of examining their differences. If this were the case, we could perhaps understand her desire for the pin, even if we have never had the desire to collect pins ourselves.

However, we must consider how Anscombe would respond to the woman if she maintains that she only wants the pin for the pleasure of it. If this is the only answer the woman can give us, Anscombe would require us to say that the woman only thinks she wants the pin, but that she is actually mistaken and such a desire is not a strong want. Without a desirability characterization, strong wanting cannot occur because there is not a sufficient answer to the why question. Anscombe is comfortable with this conclusion, but accepting it does seem to put us in the position of sometimes telling people that they don't really want what they believe they want. This concern will be further discussed in Chapter Three, but Anscombe is rather unsympathetic to this objection.

An additional concern which can arise when a desirability characterization is required for any object or state of affairs one wants is that, it would seem, for such characterizations to be coherent, we must have some idea of goodness which is generally shared between all people. As Talbot Brewer explains, “When we attempt to bring agency into view, we must assume a partial community of shared or at least mutually intelligible values. Put another way, we must draw upon a substantive rather than a merely formal conception of practical rationality” (Brewer, 27). Anscombe dismisses this notion because, for her, “the notion of ‘good’ that has to be introduced in an account of wanting is not that of what is really good but of what the agent conceives to be good; what the agent wants would have to be characterisable as good by him” (Anscombe, 76). Whether this response is sufficient will be determined shortly, but Anscombe seems confident that such an objection is well refuted by her position.

Besides claiming that strong wanting includes an end which can be characterized as good, Anscombe also believes that strong wanting involves practical reasoning. She believes practical reasoning must be utilized because, under her conception of strong wanting, this type of wanting requires movement towards the wanted object or state of affairs, and practical reasoning gives one reasons to act in this way rather than that way. However, she is quite clear that, “the role of ‘wanting’ in the practical syllogism is quite different from that of a premise. It is that whatever is described in the proposition that is the starting-point of the argument must be wanted in order for the reasoning to lead to any action” (Anscombe, 66). If this is the case, one would start with a certain want and practical reasoning would explain how one should act on that want.

Anscombe’s common example of practical reasoning begins with the desire for a cow. This desire starts the practical reasoning process, but it is not a premise. Rather, the corresponding premise would be, “They have cows at the market.” The conclusion one would

draw from this would be, “So, I will go to the market.” Thus, because someone already has a desire for a cow, and practical reasoning has demonstrated that he could get a cow from the market, he concludes that he will go to the market.

## 5. Contrasting Anscombe’s View of Practical Reasoning With the Ancient and Modern Views

As previously stated, practical reasoning is essential to Anscombe’s view because her conception of strong wanting requires moving towards the wanted thing, and, as she presents it, practical reasoning would lead to such a conclusion. If we follow the progression Anscombe sets forth, when we begin with a strong want we have some object or state of affairs which we want to attain. If it is, in fact, a strong want, we should also be able to produce a desirability characterization for the wanted thing to make our wanting of it intelligible. If we are able to do this, our want has also initiated practical reasoning. Through practical reasoning we would present reasons for our action, with the conclusion being the action we have desired to do. Anscombe seems to believe that if someone begins with his want for something and utilizes practical reasoning to show what actions one should take to satisfy his desire, movement towards the want would be the natural conclusion. In these situations, a desirability characterization shows what someone sees as good in his desire and practical reasoning demonstrates the action he should take to satisfy that desire.

It should be noted that the view of practical reasoning Anscombe presents is quite different from the standard view of practical reasoning. Maria Alvarez presents the standard view of practical reasoning, which she views as incorrect, as one in which, “I want to X,” is the first premise of practical reasoning, with the second premise being, “I believe Y-ing is a means

to X-ing,” and the conclusion indicating, “So, I should Y” (Alvarez, 359). This view of practical reasoning seems applicable in both the ancient and action-based views of desire.

However, Alvarez agrees with Anscombe that this view of practical reasoning is not accurate and that the object of one’s wanting should not be included as a premise in practical reasoning because wanting to do something is not, or at least should not be, included as a reason for doing it. However, the truth of this is not entirely apparent. While one’s desire to do something should, perhaps, not be one’s only reason for doing it, it does seem plausible that one’s desire could be a contributing reason for doing it.

To support both her own view and Anscombe’s rejecting desire as a premise for practical reasoning, Alvarez presents Aristotle’s view of practical syllogisms as means-end reasoning, in which one uses reasoning to determine means which would help him attain what he desires. If this is the case, a premise in which one puts forth his desire is not conducive to helping one achieve his desire (Alvarez, 364). However, as Anscombe says, practical reasoning will only terminate in action when someone begins the reasoning with the desire for something and then presents premises for how to achieve their desire. So, while a want is a starting place of sorts, it is not an actual premise. As such, reasoning of the same form can be done by anyone, even someone without the particular want, but that reasoning would only lead to the conclusion that, if he were to want that certain object or state of affairs, he should act in the way indicated by his practical reasoning (Anscombe, 66). The conclusion reached by one who does not hold the certain desire seems more in line with the one someone who engages in Aristotle’s view of practical reasoning would reach. Anscombe presents what she believes the conclusion of Aristotelian practical reasoning to be generally of the type, “What’s here is good for me,” or “I should do X thing,” (Anscombe, 61), but this is not the conclusion of Anscombe’s practical

reasoning. Rather, Anscombe's conclusion is not that I should do X thing, but that I will do X thing. Thus, Anscombe believes the conclusion of practical reasoning is an action, not a should or ought statement, as Aristotle seems to indicate. This difference between these conclusions seems to create a sort of bridge between the Aristotelian view and the action-based view in that Anscombe is utilizing Aristotelian style practical reasoning, but she believes her variety of practical reasoning results in action as a conclusion.

In Chapter Three, I will examine several criticisms of Anscombe's view as well as their defenses. With this discussion, some of Anscombe's views may become clearer to the reader, particularly the idea of wanting independent of desire. Furthermore, the notions of desirability characterization and practical reasoning will be examined in more detail, and the potential concerns that may arise from them will be discussed at length.

## CHAPTER 3

### DIFFICULTIES FOR ANSCOMBE'S THEORY OF DESIRE

As we have seen, Anscombe presents a view of wanting in which there are weak wants, wishes, hopes, and so forth, which do not require any action, and strong wants, which require both knowledge or at least opinion that the wanted thing exists and movement on the part of the desirer toward the wanted thing. This view also requires that strong wants are able to be made intelligible to others and that one utilizes practical reasoning to motivate action toward his strong want.

In this part of my thesis, I will argue that this view radically modifies both ancient and modern views of desire in potentially problematic ways, and that there are several difficulties Anscombe neglects to resolve with her conception of wanting. These potential problems include her vague and uncustomary use of the words desire and wanting as well as her failure to specify what is required when we say one must be moving toward the object of his desire for it to qualify as a strong want. I will also examine what the implications are for Anscombe's system given the breadth of what may qualify as the object of a strong want under the qualifications she provides. Finally, I will discuss the problems we must address when implementing Anscombe's requirements for desirability characterizations and practical reasoning for strong wants. At the minimum, these concerns seem to merit further discussion of what Anscombe's intentions are with her qualifications for strong wanting. However, some of the difficulties are so troublesome that there doesn't seem to be any way to save her system as a whole.

## 1. The Distinction Between Weak and Strong Wanting

We have seen that Anscombe makes a distinction between weak wanting, which includes desires such as wishes and hopes, and strong wanting, which has far more stringent qualifications. The only requirement for weak wanting is that one has any sort of desire, of any strength, for a thing or state of affairs. Strong Wanting requires, at the minimum, both knowledge, or opinion, that the wanted thing exists, and movement toward the thing or state of affairs. Anscombe also requires that a desirability characterization be provided to indicate what one sees as the good in the object of their strong want, as well as the utilization of practical reasoning to indicate a means to achieving the strong want.

The first difficulty for Anscombe arises when we consider what she means by her view of strong wanting and why this modified view of desire is necessary. This is not a division which is present in either of the ancient views I have discussed or in the standard or action-based views, so it would have been helpful for Anscombe to be more forthcoming in explaining why such a distinction is necessary. When she divides wanting into strong and weak forms, she claims that she is only interested in strong wanting which is, “neither wishing nor hoping nor the feeling of desire, and cannot be said to exist in a man who does nothing towards getting what he wants” (Anscombe, 68). However, the distinctions she makes in types of wanting and the way she uses both wanting and desire seems questionable and presents multiple difficulties for her view.

The problem with this distinction is that, both in philosophy and in everyday use, the notions of wanting and desire are typically used in reference to one another. To desire something is to want to have the desired thing or to want to make a certain state of affairs obtain. Similarly, when a person wants an object, they desire to possess that object. While we can

certainly speak of different strengths of desires or wanting some things more and other things less, making strong wanting something distinct from desire and its categories of wishing, hoping, and so forth seems to require a nonsensical definition of wanting which would require us to say something like, “To want is to want to have,” which clearly gives us no indication of why wanting is distinct from what we usually mean by desire. Rather, under Anscombe’s view, desire seems to be a subset of wanting instead of wanting being a type of desire.

This distinction seems particularly odd since, on Anscombe’s view, wanting seems to encompass belief and action, despite the fact that Anscombe gives us no reason why we should treat strong wanting as anything but a mental state on the same level as we typically describe desire. For Anscombe’s view that strong wanting is distinct from standard desire to be coherent, Anscombe needs to present a more convincing explanation of why it makes sense to treat strong wanting as necessarily motivating action despite the fact that neither desire nor wanting typically have that connotation.

## 2. What Does “Moving Towards” Require?

A crucial facet of Anscombe’s view of strong wanting is that “the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get” (Anscombe, 68). Because Anscombe is concerned with investigating action, and particularly intentional action, her interest in the types of desire which motivate action is reasonable. As I have discussed, Anscombe’s view of wanting is quite a modification of our standard use of the word wanting, and claiming that wanting requires trying to get appears to mean that Anscombe needs this to be a sign of wanting for her view to make sense. Anscombe makes this claim as though wanting always requires trying to get, but standard views of wanting do not seem to require any such thing. This view is not present in the Platonic, Aristotelian, or

standard views of desire, and it is more forceful than the action-based view under which desire may simply motivate trying to get.

The trouble with this requirement arises when we examine how it becomes the case that strong wanting requires action. While strong wanting requires both this movement toward the wanted thing and knowledge or opinion that the thing exists, this movement towards the wanted thing seems to be the distinguishing feature between strong wanting and weak wanting as in both cases one can believe the wanted thing exists. If this is the case, the strong want must include action, in the form of “moving towards”, before it can accurately be called a strong want. However, for one to be moving towards a want, it must be a strong want rather than any of the varieties of weak wants. Anscombe uses the notion of action to explain how strong wants differ from weak wants, but she then uses the notion of strong wants to explain action. This is problematic because it is difficult to see if the action is caused by the want being a strong want or if the want becomes a strong want because an action has taken place.

The second problem with Anscombe’s stipulation that strong wanting requires movement is that she never clarifies how the notion of “moving toward” is related to intentionality. As previously discussed in Chapter Two, strong wanting requires the one doing the wanting to utilize practical reasoning to provide reasons why acting on his want would be a good thing for him to do. This reasoning begins with a desire to do X, and premises are presented for why doing X would be good for the desirer. The conclusion for such reasoning should be something like, “I will do X,” which states the desirer’s intention to do X. While this is quite straightforward, it is not apparent under Anscombe’s system that the intention to do X is adequate for one to be moving toward X. Perhaps one could be said to be intending to move toward X, but as Moran and Stone indicate, intending to act is a mental state which may remain

pure and, as such, would not influence one's actions (Moran and Stone, 40). Anscombe may, perhaps, consider intention some sort of mental action, such that intending would be something like planning, which could perhaps be a facet of moving one toward what he wants. However, I am inclined to say intention is not adequate for moving towards one's want because people so frequently have pure intentions, but Anscombe's lack of clarity regarding what can be considered as moving toward a want raises this concern.

### 3. What Can Qualify as an Object of Strong Wanting?

As previously discussed, for the object of a desire to qualify as a strong want, the person who wants it must either have knowledge of the thing's existence, or be of the opinion that the thing exists. Knowledge of its existence would clearly be ideal, but is not always possible given factors such as strong wanting for things which may not currently exist. To compensate for this, Anscombe allows that one can be of the opinion that the thing exists and be moving toward it for it to be a strong want.

However, a problem raised by Anscombe's ambiguity regarding moving toward a want is whether it is meaningful to move toward something which doesn't actually exist. This is potentially problematic because it applies both to things which may not exist at all as well as to things which one supposes will exist in the future. Anscombe believes the problem of wanting non-existent objects can be settled in the following way: "wanting a cow need not involve a belief, 'some cow is -'; and still less does wanting a wife involve a belief 'some wife of mine is -'. A similar difficulty can indeed arise for animals too: we say the cat is waiting for a mouse at a mousehole, but suppose there is *no* mouse? Here, however, it *is* reasonable enough to introduce belief and say that the cat *thinks* there is a mouse" (Anscombe, 69). We see in this quotation that

Anscombe seems to think misguided belief in the existence of a thing or the possibility of future existence is adequate for opinion that the thing exists.

However, allowing for misguided belief or belief in the possible existence of future existence is problematic for the notion of strong wanting because one can be of the opinion that absolutely anything exists. As in the cat and mouse example, the mouse does not actually have to exist for the cat to want it, so one can clearly want things which one only believes to exist. Anscombe, however, does not simply think that the cat has a false belief, but, rather, she thinks that the cat is actually moving towards the object of its want- and this doesn't seem to be the case at all. It seems to be absolute nonsense to say a person, or cat, is moving towards a strong want when the wanted thing doesn't actually exist as it is impossible to move toward a thing which isn't there. One can certainly believe they are moving toward the thing, but believing one is doing something is clearly not the same as actually doing it.

Kieran Setiya recognizes this as a concern for Anscombe and presents as a possible substitute the condition that, "when an agent acts intentionally, there must be something he does intentionally (and does not merely try to do) in the belief that he is doing it" (Setiya, 344). According to Setiya, a person must actually be doing the action he is intending to do to achieve his strong want. Such a condition does a better job accounting for cases such as the cat and mouse example in which one believes he is moving toward a want but, in fact, is not.

Setiya's argument also resolves a problem which may arise in which one wants to do X and is doing Y, which is a means to do X, but without the knowledge that Y will lead to X. Setiya presents an example he borrowed from Donald Davidson in which X intends to murder Y by shooting him. However, X misses Y and instead creates a stampede of wild pigs that trample

Y to death. While X intended to kill Y, under Setiya's view, X did not intentionally kill Y because X's actions were not performed in the way X intended for them to be performed to kill Y (Setiya, 363). While Anscombe's view is ambiguous on whether or not such an action would be considered moving towards the object of the desire, Setiya's distinction is an important one as it rules out cases in which one may unintentionally act in ways which would move one toward one's strong desire.

#### 4. Problems with Desirability Characterizations and Practical Reasoning

Anscombe's view of strong wanting contains the requirement that the person who has the strong want must be able to present what Anscombe calls a desirability characterization if we are to call his want intelligible. Such a characterization should provide an explanation of what someone sees as desirable in his want as well as answering why he wants the object of his strong want. As the previously discussed Nazi example shows, Anscombe believes answers such as, "It befits a Nazi, if he must die, to spend his last hour exterminating Jews" (Anscombe, 72), are adequate because they appeal to things like a sense of duty which is recognizable as good even if the duty required is abhorrent. Anscombe believes, "the notion of 'good' that has to be introduced in an account of wanting is not that of what is really good but of what the agent conceives to be good; what the agent wants would have to be characterisable as good by him" (Anscombe, 76).

If we accept Anscombe's description of desirability as she presents it, her view doesn't seem to require that the objective good of desires to be made intelligible to others; however, the failure to make objective good a requirement is a mistake. In the Nazi case, for us to see the Nazi killing Jewish children in his final hour as good for him, we would have to recognize a

commitment to one's duty as good for his desirability characterization to be intelligible to us. This would appear to be the case with any want at all as we cannot understand the motivation behind a desire if we are unable to see the motivating factor, be it pleasure, duty, etc. as good. The only conclusion that appears reasonable from this is that we must share some set of beliefs about what is inherently good for desirability characterizations to be sensible on this view, but Anscombe denies that such a conclusion is necessary.

While someone could object that we could, perhaps, appreciate how the Nazi would see killing Jewish children as good given his worldview without seeing it as good ourselves, such an objection doesn't seem terribly damaging to this criticism. For us to appreciate how a Nazi could see such an action as good, we would need to know, according to Anscombe, what he saw as good in it. In this case, it would be that the Nazi felt it was his duty, as a Nazi, to kill Jewish children in his last hour. However, if the Nazi simply said I'm a Nazi so I should kill Jewish children, it appears we could continue to ask why such a thing is the case until we do reach a base answer of something like, "It is my duty as a Nazi to do such a thing." At this point we would identify adhering to duty as the good he is appealing to, and we could make his actions intelligible. However, to do this, we would still be appealing to some commonly shared view of what is good.

Another concern which arises when we require a desirability characterization for strong wants is that we can, according to Anscombe, dismiss some of the wants of others as not being real wants. As Anscombe says, "When out of the blue someone says 'I want a pin' and denies wanting it *for* anything, let us suppose we give it to him and see what he does with it. He takes it, let us say, he smiles and says 'Thank you. My want is gratified' - but what does he do with the pin? If he puts it down and forgets about it, in what sense was it true to say he wanted the pin?..."

To say ‘I *merely* want this’ without any characterisation is to deprive the word of sense” (Anscombe, 71). While it does seem odd for someone to want something simply to have it, it seems even odder to follow Anscombe and say that someone is misguided about his own wants. Desire is typically viewed as a mental state, and it seems utterly misguided to tell someone that he is incorrect about his own mental state. We could perhaps tell him he shouldn’t want to have a pin because there is no sense in having a pin just to have it, but we surely wouldn’t tell him that he is wrong when he says he wants it. Such a case would appear to be the same as a person saying, “I feel sick today,” and someone else trying to convince him that he actually doesn’t feel sick. Anscombe has clearly tried to distance her view of wanting from the standard view of desire, but it still seems as though we would be mistaken in telling someone he is wrong about his own wants simply because we cannot see, or he cannot convey to us, what he sees as desirable in it.

Another problem with Anscombe’s view is that she mistakenly requires the person giving a desirability characterization to be able to explain what they see as good in their desire. While it seems true that we generally do things because we see them as good, Setiya claims, “it is an unfortunate fact that we do not always act for good reasons. We may not be aware of the considerations that count as reasons; we may be aware of them, and yet unmoved; and we may be moved to act by considerations that are *not* good reasons” (Setiya 346). In these cases, the person acting may have reasons to act, but they may not see anything good in acting for which they can provide a desirability characterization. This concern can play a role both in presenting desirability characterizations as well as utilizing practical reasoning to give reasons to act. In either case, we may know that we do not have a good reason to do something, but we act anyway.

For example, I may choose to call in sick to work one day because I would like to stay home and relax rather than going to work. While I may desire to be home more than I desire to be at work, I would still be aware that going to work would be the more responsible and prudent thing to do while also recognizing that laziness was motivating my desire to stay at home. In such a case, I would be aware that going to work would be the better choice of actions, but staying at home could still be more appealing. I may even be aware that I will be disgusted with myself for shirking my responsibilities and choosing to yield to a desire which I recognize is not good. In cases such as these, providing a desirability characterization seems problematic because it would appear my desire for staying home is motivated by a desire to not do what I recognize as good for me. If I were to provide an honest desirability characterization, it would be something like, "Staying home would be good for me because I'm feeling lazy, and I don't feel like going to work today." While this characterization would certainly explain why I want to stay home, it wouldn't show what good I see in staying home. Rather, it would appeal to something I actually see as bad, laziness, as well as shirking my responsibility. Thus, I could clearly desire to stay home while also recognizing that my desire to stay home is not a good desire for me to have. This desire is perfectly coherent, and I have explained why I do not want to go to work, but I am still appealing to something, in this case laziness, which I do not see as good but which I still desire.

## 5. Summary of Problems

Anscombe clearly believes she has created a coherent system of wanting in which strong wanting is something more than simple desire and can motivate intentional action, but her view is lacking in both coherence and completeness. The most troubling component of her view is her requirement that strong wanting requires moving toward the wanted thing, but what can be

considered moving towards is never adequately discussed. Under a modified action-based view of wanting, the idea of moving toward could encompass a great deal of things, from simply having an intention to act to actual intentional action, but Anscombe is not clear about what her view requires it to be. Further, it is not clear exactly what can constitute an object of strong wanting. Anscombe initially seems rather precise when she requires that one must have knowledge that the wanted thing exists, but that stipulation decays into opinion that the wanted thing exists. However, as one can be of the opinion that anything at all can exist, this condition becomes rather meaningless. This is especially apparent when we consider that Anscombe requires movement toward the wanted thing, but movement toward something which does not exist is not actually possible. Even though Anscombe requires a desirability characterization to make one's desire intelligible and the use of practical reasoning to give reasons why one should act, such conditions will not eliminate the problem. After all, one can provide both even when referring to wanting a thing which very possibly doesn't exist.

## CONCLUSION

It has been my aim in this thesis to examine Anscombe's position on weak and strong wanting both through examination of her own view and through the modifications she has made to ancient and modern views of desire. I hope to have shown that Anscombe's view, while useful in examining some ideas of action and intention, has too many unresolved flaws to make it a coherent system for explaining desire. While there are certainly difficulties involved in her ideas of desirability characterizations and utilizing practical reasoning to produce action, the greatest faults lie in the basic tenets of the position.

For Anscombe's view to be complete, her conditions concerning both knowledge and movement in relation to a strong want would need to be expanded and clarified. To say that we must have knowledge of something for it to qualify as a possible strong want but to then diminish knowledge down to opinion, makes the bar for strong wanting barely distinct from that of weak wanting. Further, the requirements for "movement toward" a strong want in Anscombe's view are so vague that almost anything could count as movement. Finally, Anscombe is never adequately clear on why the distinction between weak and strong wanting is necessary or helpful, nor how we can explain wanting independent from desire. Were these problems to be resolved, Anscombe's view may be somewhat strengthened, but some of the flaws are so deeply ingrained in the system that they may not be able to be adequately amended without significantly altering the entire position.

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