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## **Action as the Conclusion of Practical Reasoning; The Critique of a Rödlian**

### **Account<sup>\*</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I take up the question of whether and in what sense action might be the conclusion of practical reasoning and argue against the answer provided by Sebastian Rödl's account of practical reasoning. Rödl's account aspires to steer a middle ground between the attitudinal and the neo-Aristotelian accounts of practical reasoning, by proposing that its conclusion is at once a thought and a movement. This account is worth considering for it promises to explain both practical reasoning's practicality (that it brings about action) and its rationality (that it is subject to thought governing norms) in one move. But, I argue in this paper, a Rödlian account -an account which grants Rödl's central theses- fails to deliver on its promise. The reason is that, like others, a Rödlian also assumes that the only sense in which practical reasoning is practical is the sense in which it has a conclusion. Challenging this assumption in the right way, I finally suggest, helps us reassess the task of explaining practical reasoning in a way that goes beyond Rödlian, attitudinal and neo-Aristotelian accounts alike.

### **Introduction**

On a common understanding, *practical reasoning* is reasoning which issues in a certain way in action. But what reasoning and action are and how exactly one issues in the other, or else what *practical* reasoning is, has been a matter of dispute. The dispute has taken many guises and focused on a variety of questions.<sup>1</sup> In one guise, it entertains the Aristotelian thought that practical reasoning *concludes* in action<sup>2</sup> and raises the question of whether and in what sense this might be true. The

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aim of this paper is to examine Sebastian Rödl's ambitious attempt to answer this question and argue that he fails to do so in a way that is instructive.

The Aristotelian thought that practical reasoning *concludes* in action appears controversial once we consider two intuitions about reasoning in general. On the first, reasoning is the passage from thought to thought. And on the second, this passage is governed by specific norms; norms whose function is to govern this passage. But if action is a form of movement,<sup>3</sup> then to concur with the Aristotelian thought would be to suggest that in reasoning we may pass from a thought to something which is not a thought. And then we would have to explain how norms whose function is to govern the passage from thought to thought may also govern the passage from thought to movement.

In line with these intuitions, the attitudinal accounts<sup>4</sup> reject the Aristotelian thought that practical reasoning may conclude in action. On their conception, practical reasoning is the passage from one or more propositional attitudes to a propositional attitude towards an action, which itself may or may not follow or accompany the reasoning. Depending on the view, these attitudes are evaluative beliefs, desires, judgments, intentions, etc.. And they are expressed by propositions of the form 'I should do A' or 'It is good/best/etc. to do A' or 'I shall/will do A', etc., where A is the action that may or may not follow or accompany this attitude. Now, if *thought* is understood broadly enough to include beliefs, judgments, desires, intentions, etc., the attitudinal accounts may accommodate the two intuitions above. For they can claim that the passage from propositional attitudes to propositional attitudes may indeed be governed by the norms whose function is to govern the passage from thought to thought. But, even so, the attitudinal accounts are hard-pressed to explain what in this passage brings about action when action does follow or accompany the agent's reasoning. Otherwise they cannot do justice to a third intuition concerning practical reasoning in particular. On this intuition, practical reasoning counts as *practical* in virtue of what it brings about and not in virtue of its subject matter.

In light of this intuition, the neo-Aristotelian accounts propose that to explain practical

reasoning's practicality we must take it that its conclusion just is the action.<sup>5</sup> In suggesting this they assume that the norms which govern the passage from thought to thought are (instances of) generic norms which may also govern the passage from thought to movement. In other words, these accounts accept that there are generic norms -norms which govern the passage from premises to conclusion- and suggest that these norms govern the passage from certain thoughts to a conclusion which may either be a thought or an action. And, thus, they can explain that practical reasoning is practical in virtue of what it brings about and not in virtue of its subject matter. But these neo-Aristotelian accounts are equally hard-pressed to explain when these generic norms (the norms which govern the passage from premises to conclusion) govern the passage from thought to thought and when they govern the passage from thought to action. Otherwise, to say, as they do, that reasoning is practical when its conclusion just is an action is to posit the existence of practical reasoning but not to explain its nature. And this would be to reawaken the original disquiet with the Aristotelian thought.<sup>6</sup>

In his book *Self-Consciousness*,<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Rödl aspires to free us from this oscillation and provide an account of practical reasoning which accommodates all three intuitions above. Against the neo-Aristotelian accounts, Rödl argues that the norms which govern the passage from premises to conclusion are indeed norms which govern the passage from thought to thought. But, against the attitudinal accounts, he also argues that the scope of thought is not restricted to contents of thoughts and psychological states or propositional attitudes, but extends all the way to actions themselves. Practical reasoning, on Rödl's account, is the passage from thoughts figuring in the premises to a thought which *is* the conclusion and whose reality is the same as the reality of the action. So that practical reasoning may both count as reasoning given the first two intuitions above -i.e. constitute the passage from thought to thought that is governed by specific norms- and count as practical given the third intuition above -i.e. be what *brings about* action and not merely what *concerns* action.

Rödl's account is worth considering, for it promises to explain both practical reasoning's

practicality (its causal efficacy) and its rationality (its subjection to norms of thought) without compromising any of the three intuitions above. In this paper I argue that his account fails to occupy the middle ground it aspires to in a way that is instructive. In the first part I explicate Rödl's conception of practical reasoning as the ground of a distinctive form of knowledge: what Anscombe calls *practical* knowledge. There I also suggest that if we abstract from certain elements of this conception we may get a weaker but perhaps more appealing version of his account; what I shall call *a Rödlian account*. In the second part I argue that a Rödlian account of practical reasoning cannot do justice to the facts of practical knowledge. The argument is roughly that such an account illegitimately restricts the scope of practical knowledge. For it does not leave room – as I argue it should – for the possibility of *practical* knowledge of one's action *in its description as what is done*. Finally, in the third part I suggest that the failure of a Rödlian account helps us see what is wrong with an assumption more widely shared. This is the assumption that practical reasoning is practical *only* in its conclusion. And I also propose that challenging this assumption in the right way leads to the reassessment of the task of explaining practical reasoning. Properly conceived, the task of explaining practical reasoning is the task of explaining: 1) in what sense practical reasoning may be said to have a *conclusion*, 2) in what sense practical reasoning may be said to have an *outcome*, and 3) how these two senses are senses of this one thing we call practical reasoning.

### **1. Rödl's conception of practical reasoning as the ground of practical knowledge and a Rödlian account**

Following Anscombe, Rödl takes the agent's knowledge of her action to be the knowledge that qualifies her action as intentional; what Anscombe calls *practical knowledge*.<sup>8</sup> This Anscombe distinguishes from observational or inferential knowledge of what one does.<sup>9</sup> On Anscombe's view, if an agent is doing something intentionally, she knows that she is doing it 'without observation'

and without having to infer it from something else she knows or believes to be true. So that if she is asked why she is doing A and she sincerely says ‘I did not know I was doing A’ or she knows it *only* because she observed it or inferred it from something else she knew or believed to be true, then this disqualifies her doing A as an intentional action. For instance, stepping on your foot would not be something I did intentionally if I did not know I was or knew I was *only* because I observed that your foot was under my foot or because I inferred that I was stepping on your foot from the fact that I heard you scream. In all these cases my knowledge of the action would disqualify it as intentional, for my knowledge would be *speculative* or *contemplative* in Anscombe’s terms; judged to be such by being in accordance with the facts.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, my knowledge qualifies my action as intentional, Anscombe thinks, when it is *practical*; i.e. when it brings about what it understands, to use her words again.<sup>11</sup> And, she also suggests, to understand this practical form of knowledge we must first understand what practical reasoning is; for practical reasoning is the ground of this practical form of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Thus, on the Anscombean view, to understand intentional action we must understand practical knowledge and to understand practical knowledge we must understand practical reasoning.

Embracing the spirit of this Anscombean conception, Rödl assumes that what qualifies practical knowledge as such is the agent’s practical reasoning. In other words, he assumes that when I have practical knowledge of what I am doing, the ground of this knowledge is my practical reasoning; i.e. the reasoning which brings about my action.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Rödl takes it that the philosopher’s task is to explain how practical reasoning may be the ground of practical knowledge. And he takes this to be the task of showing how practical reasoning may be both rational (i.e. subject to the specific norms which govern the passage from thought to thought) and practical (i.e. what brings about action).

To carry out this task, Rödl first considers the fact that, when things go well and a *true* explanation of intentional action is available, we explain the agent’s movement by citing her practical reasoning.<sup>14</sup> We say, for instance, that the agent did A *because* she wanted to do B and

thought that doing A was a means to doing B; where wanting to do B and thinking that doing A is the means to doing B are her premises for concluding that she should do A. And, Rödl argues, this explanation is possible, because when things go well the movement that is explained in the explanation of intentional action is the same reality as the thought that is the conclusion of the agent's practical reasoning. More explicitly:

*Rödl's Sameness Thesis:* When things go well and there is a true explanation of intentional action, the thought that is the *conclusion* of the agent's practical reasoning and the movement that is explained in the explanation of her action are the same reality.

This thesis opens the way for suggesting that an agent may know the movement explained in the explanation of intentional action by knowing (the thought that is) the conclusion of her practical reasoning. But in the typical case one knows the conclusion of one's reasoning simply by concluding one's reasoning. So that the agent may know the movement that is explained in the explanation of her intentional action by concluding her practical reasoning. And this, Rödl thinks, explains the sense in which practical reasoning is the ground of practical knowledge.

To fully spell out this account of practical reasoning Rödl proceeds to explain the nature of the conclusion of practical reasoning. Despite Anscombe's objections against the interpretation of practical reasoning as involving logical necessity,<sup>15</sup> Rödl takes practical reasoning to be an *inference*, which may roughly be represented by the schema:

I want to do B.

Doing A is a means to doing B.

I \*do A.

In this schema the formula ‘I \*do A’ expresses the logical necessity with which the conclusion follows from the premises (what Rödl calls the unity of premises and conclusion). In interpreting the normativity of practical reasoning as the logical necessity involved in inference, Rödl considers the objection that in the typical case practical reasoning is the calculation of merely sufficient and not necessary means of achieving what one wants, so that it is not right to say that practical reasoning involves logical necessity. But he responds that this objection overlooks the fact that it is the job of practical reasoning, like all reasoning, to proceed from something general and arrive at its specification. Given this, he argues, there are bound to be multiple ways (at least in principle) of specifying something general, other than the way the agent’s reasoning is each time specifying it. But this does not mean that each such specification does not take an inferential form.<sup>16</sup> The argument is rough and not as detailed as one might wish, but this won’t matter for the purposes of this paper. For, as I will suggest in what follows, we may abstract from this interpretation of practical reasoning as inference and still have a distinctively Rödlan account of the conclusion of practical reasoning; one that accepts the core of his central theses below.

In his explanation of practical reasoning as a form of inference, Rödl first makes a general point about the logical validity of any inference. The point is that logical validity is not separate from the consciousness of this validity. For as he himself puts it ‘inferring something from given premises is not just thinking it because one holds to the premises. It is thinking it on account of one’s recognition that the premises provide sufficient grounds for thinking it. This recognition is not, nor can it be, a further premise.’<sup>17</sup> This recognition cannot be a further premise, for if it were, it would start an infinite regress. And from this Rödl infers that ‘only an *act* that is valid in such a way as to be conscious of its validity can be the conclusion of an inference’,<sup>18</sup> and so also of practical inference, we may add. Thus, the formula ‘I \*do A’ in schema above represents the necessity with which the conclusion follows from the premises, because it also represents the agent’s recognition that the conclusion is ‘resting on the premises and is valid on that account.’<sup>19</sup> Thus, if we agree with Rödl that the validity of an inference just is the recognition of this validity, then we must also

suggest, together with Rödl, that the conclusion of practical reasoning must be an act of the mind.<sup>20</sup>

More explicitly:

*Rödl's Logical Necessity Thesis:* The conclusion of reasoning is an act of the mind - the consciousness of the necessitation with which the conclusion follows from the premises.<sup>21</sup>

On this picture, the conclusion of practical reasoning is at once the necessitation of the conclusion from the premises and the agent's consciousness of this necessitation. In the case of *speculative inference* this is the necessitation with which truth is transmitted from premises to conclusion. And in the case of *practical inference*, it is the necessitation with which goodness is transmitted from premises to conclusion.<sup>22</sup> Thus, on Rödl's account, the conclusion of a piece of *practical* reasoning is an act of the mind which is: a) subject to logical necessitation, b) the consciousness of this logical necessitation, and c) the consciousness of this logical necessitation as the necessitation to *do* rather than *assert* or *believe*. Thus, properly revised, Rödl's Logical Necessity Thesis would read:

*Rödl's Logico-Practical Necessity Thesis:* The conclusion of *practical* reasoning is an act of the mind –a consciousness of the necessitation with which the conclusion follows from the premises– expressed by the formula 'I should *do* A' or 'I \**do* A'.<sup>23</sup>

Given this thesis, Rödl's *Sameness Thesis* would ascertain that the movement explained in the explanation of intentional action is the same reality as the act of the mind which is the conclusion of practical reasoning; the reality represented by thoughts of the form 'I \*do A' or 'I should do A.' In Rödl's own words, 'If someone's doing something has a true action explanation, then her doing it and her thought that it is good to do are *the same reality*. An action expresses a thought about what



to do not in the sense of being its effect, but in the sense of being this thought. Actions do not point to a state of mind as to their cause. Acting intentionally *is* being of a certain mind.<sup>24</sup> Thus, from Rödl's *Logico-Practical Necessity Thesis*, we may extract the following:

*Rödl's Sameness Thesis Renewed:* When things go well and there is a true explanation of intentional action, *the act of the mind* which is the conclusion of practical inference (and is represented by thoughts of the form 'I \*do A') and the movement that is explained in the explanation of intentional action are the same reality.

This is to say that there is an act of the mind which just is a movement. Or, in other words, that there is a kind of reasoning (practical inference) which is at once the *suis generis* act of drawing a conclusion and a movement. Which in turn is to say that practical reasoning is practical (i.e. that it brings about action) in being an inferential act (i.e. in being logically necessitated to pass from the premises to the conclusion).

But this last point about the inferential nature of practical reasoning should not distract us. For Rödl's main point concerning the nature of the conclusion of practical reasoning applies even to non-inferential interpretations of it. I said above that Rödl thinks that the logical validity of an inference is not separate from the consciousness of this validity; for if it were, it would start an infinite regress. And that Rödl infers from this that 'only an *act* that is valid in such a way as to be conscious of its validity can be the conclusion of an inference'.<sup>25</sup> But, this point can be extended to non inferential interpretations of practical reasoning as well. One may suggest that Rödl's point constitutes a minimal condition for counting any passage of thought as reasoning in general. Thus, on a revised Rödlian account, we may say that the *normativity* involved in the conclusion of practical reasoning – on any interpretation of this normativity – should not be conceived as separate from the recognition of this normativity. To paraphrase Rödl we might say that *to reach the conclusion of reasoning in general* is not just to think something because one holds to the premises,

but to think it because one recognizes that the premises provide sufficient grounds for thinking it. But if this sounds plausible then it is also plausible to think together with Rödl that the conclusion of reasoning can only be an act of the mind that is subject to the normativity of thought in such a way as to be conscious of this very subjection.

Thus, what I want to consider in what follows is not the validity of Rödl's inferential account, but the validity of any account which accepts the core of Rödl's theses above. The validity, that is, of any account on which the conclusion of practical reasoning is an act of the mind which is: a) subject to the normativity of thought, b) the consciousness of its subjection to this normativity, c) the consciousness of this normativity as the normativity of what one should do and *not* what one should assert or believe, and d) the same reality as the action. For any such account promises to explain both the practicality and the rationality of practical reasoning without reverting back to the attitudinal or the neo-Aristotelian accounts.

But if the conclusion of practical reasoning is an act of the mind, then the reality of the action which is the same as the reality of the conclusion of practical reasoning must be a reality in its progressive (what one is doing) as opposed to its perfective description (what one has done). This is a distinction Comrie<sup>26</sup> first introduced into contemporary discussions of action in the 70s and Thompson put back into circulation thirty years later.<sup>27</sup> On this distinction, action descriptions can be either perfective ('I wrote "I am a fool" on the board') or progressive ('I am writing "I am a fool" on the board', 'I was writing "I am a fool" on the board'). From the perfective 'I wrote "I am a fool" on the board' it follows that at some point the phrase 'I am a fool' appeared on the board, but from the progressive 'I was writing "I am a fool" on the board' this does not follow; perhaps the chalk was not working or I was interrupted. Action in the progressive is action in its description as underway and action in the perfective is action in its description as completed. According to Comrie, the progressive description 'is crucially concerned with the internal structure of the situation, since it can both look backwards towards the start of the situation, and look forward to the end of the situation'<sup>28</sup>, whereas an action in the perfective is presented 'as a single unanalysable

whole, with beginning, middle, and end rolled into one'<sup>29</sup>. Thinking that what has been completed can no longer be brought about, some Anscombeans<sup>30</sup> assume that when action is known in its description as what is done, it may be known receptively but not practically. In contrast, these Anscombeans think that action in its progressive description may be known practically because the progressive description is characterized by a) incompleteness (in doing A, I may have not yet done A, as, for instance, when I'm crossing the street but have not crossed it yet); b) openness (I may count as doing A even though I may be interrupted and never actually do A); c) broadness (I may count as doing A [e.g. cooking] even when I am *observably* doing something else [e.g. speaking on the phone]); and d) regard for the action's internal structure (in describing an action as a case of *doing A*, the action is described as being the kind of thing which has a beginning, middle and end).<sup>31</sup>

A Rödlian embraces this thought,<sup>32</sup> but brings it in sharper focus. Thus, on a Rödlian account, the action explained in the explanation of intentional action is action in its progressive description, because a) action is the conclusion of reasoning which is the same reality as an act of the mind, and b) an act of the mind is essentially always underway. But in the next section I will argue that we have to make room for the possibility of *practical* knowledge of action in its perfective description -action in its description as what one *has done*- and not only action in its progressive description -action in its descriptions as what one *is doing*. So that if the ground of practical knowledge is practical reasoning as Anscombe urges and if the conclusion of reasoning is an act of the mind as Rödl urges, then there must be a sense in which practical reasoning brings about action which differs from the sense in which it has a conclusion. Seeing this, I shall suggest in the final section, helps us re-assess the task of explaining practical reasoning.

## **2. A counterexample: Practical knowledge of intentional action in its description as *what is done***

## 2.1 The dilemma for a Rödlian account

As we saw above, a Rödlian thinks that the object of practical knowledge and so the reality which is the same as the conclusion of practical reasoning by the lights of the Rödlian *Sameness Thesis* may only be action in its progressive description; i.e. action in its description as what one is *doing*. But in this section I shall argue that to save the phenomena of practical knowledge we have to discard this suggestion. We have to make room for practical knowledge of intentional action in its description as what *is done* or *completed*. So that, if we want to preserve a picture of practical reasoning as the ground of practical knowledge, we will have to make room for the claim that practical reasoning may bring about action in its description as *what is done* or *completed*.

To carry out this argument I will use a counterexample similar to Davidson's 'carbon copy' example.<sup>33</sup> But, I will do so *not* in order to deny the essential connection between action and knowledge, as Davidson does. I will do so in order to show that we should make room for the possibility of practical knowledge of one's action in its description as what one *has done* as opposed to what one *is doing*. To do this I will appropriate Anscombe's example.<sup>34</sup> Say that an agent is writing 'I am a fool' on the board with her eyes shut because she wants to make a point and thinks that to do so she should write 'I am a fool' on the board with her eyes shut. Intuitively, it makes sense to distinguish between two possible scenarios. In the good scenario, the agent opens her eyes and sees that the phrase 'I am a fool' has been written on the board. Whereas in the bad scenario she opens her eyes and sees that nothing has been written on the board (say the chalk is, unbeknownst to her, a fake chalk).

Now consider the good scenario. While the agent still has her eyes shut things go well. The agent is in fact writing 'I am a fool' on the board. Moreover, we may assume that the agent is concluding her practical reasoning by thinking a thought of the form 'I should write "I am a fool" on the board', which, by the lights of the Rödlian *Logico-Practical Necessity Thesis*, should count as the conclusion of her practical reasoning when things go well. But when things go well and there

is a true action explanation, then we should, by Rödlian lights, say that the agent has full practical knowledge of her action: knowledge she has by concluding that she herself should write ‘I am a fool’ on the board. And yet, even in the good scenario, we hesitate to attribute full practical knowledge of the action to the agent while she still has her eyes shut. We hesitate, that is, to attribute full practical knowledge of an action in way that is entirely independent of its successful execution. In the face of this hesitation a Rödlian may either 1.) bite the bullet and suggest that the agent does have full practical knowledge of what she is doing while she has her eyes shut, or 2.) grant this hesitation and argue that while she has her eyes shut the agent does not have full practical knowledge of her action in its progressive description because she has not yet *completed* her overall practical reasoning and so has not yet concluded her more general reasoning to the effect that she should do A or \*do A. But, I will argue now, the first option is problematic for it does away with the sense in which things may go badly *in acting*. And, I will then argue, a Rödlian who opts for the second option will have to admit a sense in which practical reasoning brings about action which goes beyond the sense in which it has a conclusion.

## 2.2 The first horn of the dilemma

Consider the first option: suggesting that in the good scenario the agent has full practical knowledge of what she is doing while her eyes are shut. Certain Anscombeans<sup>35</sup> propose that practical knowledge is tied to practical reasoning in a way that makes claims to practical knowledge independent of the success of the action. On their understanding, it may be true to say that the agent needs to open her eyes to see whether what she was writing got written. But this is because she is indeed writing on the chalkboard.<sup>36</sup> The agent needs to open her eyes because she needs to know *whether what she was doing was successful or not* - and not because she needs to know *what she was doing*. On this view, what the agent was doing and the success of her doing are two different

things which are known by different powers. What the agent was doing is the object of her practical knowledge and the success of her doing is the object of her speculative or non practical knowledge. For, as these Anscombeans repeatedly stress, the progressive description may be true independently of the truth of the perfective description of the action. Given this understanding of practical knowledge, a Rödlian could insist that in the good scenario the agent has full practical knowledge of what she is doing even while her eyes are shut.

But given this description of the good case it is hard to see how we may ever have a bad case. Here is why. If we thus sever practical knowledge of one's action from knowledge of its success, we should suggest that both in the good and the bad scenario the agent has full practical knowledge of what she is doing. Only in each case the agent thereby knows different things, because in each case different things actually happen. Thus, when the agent knows that she is writing in the good case, what she knows includes things such as holding a pen, standing facing the board, pressing the pen against the surface of the board, etc. and words appearing on the board. Whereas in the bad case when the agent knows that she is writing, what she knows includes things such as holding a pen, standing facing the board, pressing the pen against the surface of the board, etc. but *not* words appearing on the board. But if practical knowledge is knowledge of one's action only in its description as being underway and it is entirely independent from knowledge of the success of the action, then we risk losing the sense in which things may go badly *in acting*. For, after all, there is nothing wrong with doing and knowing less in the so-called bad scenario in which no words appear on the board, if one does not thereby do and know less *than one should*. But to say that in the bad scenario one knows less *than one should* would be to say that the agent's knowledge is not as it should be because it *cannot* include the success of the action in the things it knows.

In dealing with an objection to her own account of practical knowledge, Anscombe says that when things go wrong in the case of practical knowledge the mistake is in the performance.<sup>37</sup> So perhaps, a Rödlian could respond to my objection above in a similar way. He could suggest that what goes wrong in the bad scenario is not to be found in the relevant knowledge but in the

performance. But now if the performance is the action (or part of the action) and the action counts as the action it is (intentional) in virtue of the agent's special knowledge of it (the agent's practical knowledge); then, if there is something wrong with the performance, there should also be something wrong with the knowledge of this performance (the agent's practical knowledge). If on the other hand the performance Anscombe talks about is not the action (or part of the action), then to say that the mistake is in the performance would be to say that the mistake is in something external to that which makes intentional action intentional. But this would be to once more miss the sense in which things may go badly *in acting*.

Alternatively, a Rödlian following other Anscombeans<sup>38</sup> could suggest that to explain the sense in which things go badly in the bad scenario we should assume that the agent's action fails by the standards of the further, instrumental norm that one ought to complete one's doing. But if practical knowledge is what qualifies an action as intentional, and if practical knowledge is knowledge of one's action in its progressive description, then the norm demanding the completion of one's doing must be external to what makes an action intentional. In fact, these Anscombeans for instance suppose that this norm has its root in metaphysical facts about events and processes in the world at large.<sup>39</sup> But if this norm is external to what makes an action *intentional* or *an object of practical knowledge*, then the unfinished action may be defective *qua* event but it will not be defective *qua* intentional action or *qua* practical object. And so we once more do away with the sense in which things may go badly *in acting*.

### **2.3 The second horn of the dilemma**

To avoid this radical consequence a Rödlian may choose the second option above and suggest that while the agent has her eyes shut, she does not have full practical knowledge of her action in its progressive description, for she has not yet concluded her overall practical reasoning;

even though she may have concluded a series of more specific reasonings. This response rests on a distinction in the scope of practical reasoning. This is the distinction between wide-scope reasoning which concerns the action in its most general description (e.g. writing ‘I am a fool’ on the board with my eyes shut); and narrow-scope reasoning which concerns the action in its more specific description as each of its phases (e.g. finding a pen, facing the board, pressing the pen on the surface of the board, etc.). Armed with this distinction, a Rödlian might claim that the agent is progressively performing the action in its most general description by performing the action in its most specific descriptions. And that the agent is concluding the more general practical reasoning (represented by ‘I should write “I am a fool” on the board with my eyes shut’) as she is concluding one after the other the less general pieces of practical reasoning (represented by ‘I should move the chalk towards the board’, ‘I should not write one letter on top of another’, ‘I should write in a horizontal line’, etc., and finally, ‘I should open my eyes to see whether what I have been writing has indeed been written’). A Rödlian may then suggest that the agent is concluding her most general practical reasoning—thereby acquiring practical knowledge of the action in its most general description—only as she is concluding the last piece of her more specific reasoning. In this sense, the agent in the good case would come to *fully* know what *she was doing* in opening her eyes. Because only then would she be concluding the last piece of her more specific practical reasoning and so also of her most general practical reasoning.

This move has its merits. A real agent in the real world knows that her actions are subject to frustration. She knows that to do something, oftentimes she must check to see whether it was done or not, and some times repeat a step or all of it. And she may count the entire process of trying, checking, correcting or repeating, etc., as the performance of the action. But, in our example, the agent’s act of opening her eyes to see what she did has a peculiarity when compared to other cases of acting by checking. In our example, opening the eyes to see what happened is not *merely* a second phase of the entire action; as is the case, for instance, with an architect who first makes the designs for a house, then hands them over to the construction agents and then has to check to see



whether the plans are being executed or not. When the architect is checking to see whether the plans are being executed or not, she is checking to see whether this *very* phase of her action (the execution of the plans by the construction workers) is successful or not. But in our example, when the agent is checking to see whether what she wanted to write got written, she is checking to see whether the *previous* phase of her action in its most general description was successful or not. In our example, the second phase is a way of knowing of the first phase of the action whether it was completed or not. So that when an agent knows (in the second phase of the action) that the first phase of the action was completed, the agent knows the first phase of the action *in its description as done or completed*. And now this knowledge must count as practical. For if this last bit of more specific reasoning and knowledge is the conclusion of the agent's most general *practical* reasoning and *practical* knowledge, then it should also count as practical.

But if knowledge of the agent's action in its description as completed must count as practical, then action in its description as completed must also be what practical reasoning brings about. And it must be brought about by practical reasoning in a sense that goes beyond what is meant in saying that practical reasoning concludes in action. For if Rödl is right to think that the conclusion of practical reasoning is an act of the mind, then an act of the mind may only have the same reality as action in its progressive description, as we saw in the previous section. To this a Rödlian might object that on his view it makes sense to understand even a thing done as what one should do or what one *\*do*. Take the following example: I've just turned in my midterm grades, and my academic supervisor complains that the grades are too high. 'Why have you given all your students such good grades?' my supervisor asks. I respond, 'Because I should reward and not punish my students.' In this case, a Rödlian might claim, thought of one's completed action is suitably expressed as itself part of a task or end which is rightly described as essentially underway. This is because the task is infinite and so may be rightly represented as subject to the normativity expressed in thoughts of the form I should do or I *\*do*.

However, the philosophical interest of the blackboard example is not that it shows that one

may have practical knowledge of what one has done period. But that one may have practical knowledge of what one has done *in its description as what one has done*. For, in the example, I must know my writing in its descriptions as *finished* and so as *done* if I am to know it in its description as the *previous* phase of my action. And this knowledge of mine must count as practical if this less general piece of practical reasoning is what concludes my most general *practical* reasoning.

Thus, we may very well think that practical reasoning may be productive of an action *in its conclusion*; but this will only hold good of action in its progressive description. But, if it must also be possible to have practical knowledge of action in its description as done or completed, then, unless we want to deny that practical reasoning is the ground of practical knowledge, we must look for a *further* sense in which it might be said that practical reasoning is productive of an action.

### **3. Conclusion; the need to re-conceive the task of explaining practical reasoning**

On a Rödlian account, to understand practical reasoning as practical *in its conclusion* is to take the reality of the action to be the same as the reality of an act of the mind. And to take the reality of the action to be the same as the reality of an act of the mind is to understand this reality in its progressive description. So that if practical reasoning is the ground of practical knowledge, then practical knowledge must be knowledge of an action in its progressive description. But if the argument above works, it shows that we must make room for practical knowledge of intentional action as a reality in its perfective description; so that a Rödlian account of practical reasoning fails because it cannot admit this possibility. But the Rödlian failure is instructive. It helps us see what is wrong with the Aristotelian thought (that practical reasoning concludes in action) if it is taken to mean that there is only one sense in which practical reasoning is practical (the sense in which it has a conclusion): it does not allow for the possibility of practical knowledge of an action in its perfective description.

But is this a real possibility? An Anscombean will object that if we admit the possibility of

practical knowledge of action in its perfective description, and want to retain the conception of practical reasoning as the ground of practical knowledge, we risk losing the sense in which practical knowledge is *practical*; i.e. productive of action. For how, an Anscombean may ask, are we going to make sense of knowledge as practical, if we assume that it may produce something in its description as already done? But this objection sounds urgent exactly because we assume all along that practical reasoning is practical only *in* its conclusion and therefore that practical knowledge is practical only when it is knowledge of the action as the conclusion of one's reasoning. In fact, we may agree with a Rödlan or an Anscombean that when I know of the writing on the board as the *conclusion* of my practical reasoning, I may know it only in its progressive description. But, if the argument of this paper works, we must also think that there is a *further* sense in which I could be said to have practical knowledge of the writing on the board. For instance, I could be said to know the writing on the board as the *outcome* of my practical reasoning; and thus have practical knowledge of my action in its perfective description. For to know something as the outcome of something else is to know it as done. But to suggest something like this one would have to explain how there might be two senses in which it could be said that practical reasoning is practical. That is, one would have to explain what these two senses are and why they count as two senses of this one thing we call practical reasoning.

But this is the task for another paper. The aim of this paper was to urge us to re-conceive the task of explaining practical reasoning. The task of giving an account of practical reasoning is not the task of identifying a special form of reasoning – say practical inference – such that it is both rational and practical, like Rödl thinks. Nor is it the task of explaining how the thought which is the conclusion of ordinary speculative reasoning may bring about action, like the attitudinal accounts of practical reasoning have us think. Nor is it the task of figuring out when the generic norms that govern the passage from premises to conclusion govern the passage from thought to thought and when they govern the passage from thought to action, like the neo-Aristotelian accounts have us think. If the argument of this paper works, then the task of explaining practical reasoning is the task

of figuring out the following: 1) in what sense practical reasoning may be said to have a *conclusion*, 2) in what sense practical reasoning may be said to have an *outcome*, and 3) how these two senses are senses of this one thing we call practical reasoning. In other words, it is the task of distinguishing between the different senses in which we may speak of practical knowledge of an action and explaining the sense in which they are all grounded in this one thing we call practical reasoning.

Thus we see that the failure of a Rödlian account is instructive in a further sense: it helps us appreciate that the task of explaining practical reasoning must go beyond the task of explaining the sense in which it may be said to have a conclusion.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the nature of instrumental reasoning, the relation between motivation and justification, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, *De Anima* (434a18–21), *Nicomachean Ethics* (1147a27–28), and *De Motu Animalium* (701a8–20) in Aristotle 1984.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term *movement* as a generic for bodily movement, change in the world, event, happening, etc.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Audi 1989; Raz 1978; Broome 2002; Paul 2013.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Dancy 2004; Tenenbaum 2007.

<sup>6</sup> For a systematic explanation of the intuition that the major premise of a syllogism must be of the same form as its conclusion see Wiland 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Rödl 2007.

<sup>8</sup> For in depth interpretations of Anscombe's account of practical knowledge see for instance Moran 2004; Falvey 2000; Setiya 2011; and Setiya *forthcoming*; McDowell *unpublished*; etc.

<sup>9</sup> Anscombe 1963: e.g. § 28.

<sup>10</sup> 'Certainly in modern philosophy we have an incorrigibly contemplative conception of knowledge. Knowledge must be something that is judged as such by being in accordance with the facts.' (Anscombe 1963: 57)

<sup>11</sup> 'Practical knowledge is "the cause of what it understands", unlike "speculative" knowledge, which "is derived from the objects known".' (Anscombe 1963: 87)

<sup>12</sup> 'The notion of "practical knowledge" can only be understood if we first understand "practical reasoning".' (Anscombe 1963: 57).

<sup>13</sup> In Rödl's own words 'That the will is practical reason must mean that its causality is constituted by practical reasoning' (Rödl 2010: 145) or 'Movement and activity whose unity is constituted by reasoning spring from the will, for the will is a power to act through reasoning' (Rödl 2011:218).

<sup>14</sup> See Rödl 2007: 45. In his terminology, '...the same system which, looked at from one side, is the system of answers to the question what to do of practical reasoning is, seen from the other side, the system of answers to the question 'why?' of the explanation of intentional action.'

<sup>15</sup> Anscombe 1963: e.g. § 33.

<sup>16</sup> For the argument in more detail see Rödl 2007: 22. In what follows I will offer an argument against his account that does not rest on whether he is right or wrong about this interpretation of the normativity of practical reasoning.

<sup>17</sup> Rödl 2011: 233.

<sup>18</sup> Rödl 2011: 233.

<sup>19</sup> Rödl 2011: 233.

<sup>20</sup> In Rödl's terminology, an inference 'is not only a unity of acts of the mind; rather this unity is itself an act of the mind.' (Rödl 2011: 222).

<sup>21</sup> Rödl 2011: 18.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, to be more precise, for Rödl the quality which is transmitted from premises to conclusion in practical inference is the normativity of what he calls infinite ends or else the normativity of categorical or moral ends. These are

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ends which are never exhausted or done when they are achieved; but are *to be done* even as they are achieved. The claim is interesting and controversial, but its full presentation here would take me far afield.

<sup>23</sup> Rödl 2011: 18.

<sup>24</sup> Anscombe 1963: 49.

<sup>25</sup> Rödl 2011: 233.

<sup>26</sup> Comrie 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson 2008. For a further explication of the openness and broadness of the progressive, see Falvey 2000; Paul 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Comrie 1976: 4.

<sup>29</sup> Comrie 1976: 3.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Stoutland says that ‘that of which an agent has practical knowledge is what he is presently doing’ (Stoutland 2011: 30), and Thompson that ‘Anscombe’s illustrations [of intentional action] are unrelentingly present, and for this reason always imperfective in character: the content of practical knowledge is progressive, imperfective, in medias res’ (Thompson 2011: 205, 209). But, as Setiya points out, Anscombe herself is unfazed by the transition from present progressive to perfective past. (Setiya *forthcoming*: 165).

<sup>31</sup> For an explication of the openness and broadness of the progressive, see Thompson 2008; Falvey 2000; Paul 2009.

<sup>32</sup> In his own words, ‘An intention, “I \*do A”, joins them [subject and action form] *progressively*, guiding the process of the action’ (Rödl 2007: 35).

<sup>33</sup> ‘In writing heavily on this page I may be intending to produce ten legible carbon copies. I do not know, or believe with any confidence, that I am succeeding. But if I am producing ten legible carbon copies, I am certainly doing it intentionally’ (Davidson 1978: 92).

<sup>34</sup> Anscombe 1963: 82-83.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance Ford 2011.

<sup>36</sup> See Thompson’s argument against Davidson’s similar counterexample in Thompson 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Anscombe 1963: § 32.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance Valaris 2012.

<sup>39</sup> This view is based on Thompson 2008.