

NOTES, INSIGHTS AND FLASHES

Aquinas's Sheep: A Note on Anscombe on Freedom

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At the beginning of his paper “Anscombe on Freedom, Animals, and the Ability to Do Otherwise,” Denis F. Sullivan differentiates Elizabeth Anscombe’s position on freedom from that of both Aquinas and the Cartesian tradition. For both Aquinas and the Cartesian tradition, Sullivan says, freedom understood as the ability to do otherwise is possible only for creatures who have minds: more precisely, for Aquinas, for creatures who act from judgment informed not merely by instinct, but by reason (ST I, q. 83, a. 1); for the Cartesian tradition, for creatures who, by virtue of being immaterial minds, somehow escape the determinism that rules matter. For these thinkers, since among creatures only human beings have minds, it follows that human beings are the only creatures who enjoy freedom. Sullivan claims that Anscombe’s position is different as she holds “that not only human beings, but also at least some thoughtless brutes are free in the sense that they have the ability to do otherwise” (Sullivan 2007, 231). According to him, her reasoning is that “freedom in the sense of having the ability to do otherwise is a necessary condition for intentional action. But animals, other than human beings, also perform intentional actions. So these animals are also free.”

There are a number of interesting things to discuss here. First, I propose that we consider the meaning of freedom. In her paper “Causality and Determination,” Anscombe asserts, against the thesis that freedom and determinism are compatible, that

[t]he truth of physical indeterminism is...indispensable if we are to make anything of the claim to freedom. But certainly it [that is, the truth of physical indeterminism] is insufficient. The physically undetermined is not thereby “free.” For freedom at least involves the power of acting according to an idea.... (Anscombe 1981, 146)

(By the way, elsewhere she writes that “where [a] thing wanted is not even supposed to exist, as when it is a future state of affairs, we have to speak of an idea...” [Anscombe 1963, 70].) Sullivan claims that we have “good grounds...for believing that non-human animals can be free” (Sullivan 2007, 239), and that the reason that philosophers have failed to recognize these grounds is that they have confounded freedom with moral responsibility. According to Sullivan, non-human animals are not morally responsible since they lack reason; but “freedom is not a consequence of the use of reason but is a condition for its use,” and so the fact that non-human animals do not enjoy ethical freedom is no reason to deny that they enjoy with us “a broader and more basic form of freedom” (Sullivan 2007, 239). I am not so sure, however, and I am also not sure that Anscombe would agree with this interpretation of her work. To put my question in brief, what is this “broader and more basic form of freedom”? We might also wonder whether it would be more accurate to say that freedom is neither a consequence nor a condition of the use of reason, but rather is *realized* in the use of reason.

If I understand correctly, Sullivan holds that a “thoughtless brute” like a sheep, Aquinas’s example, may rightly be called free even if we agree with Aquinas that, “seeing the wolf, [the sheep] judges it a thing to be shunned, from a natural and not a free judgment,” where free means informed by reason, which Aquinas says “may follow opposite courses” (Aquinas 1922, 148 [ST I, q. 83, a. 1]). In other words, on my understanding, Sullivan agrees with Aquinas that the sheep does not act from free judgment informed by reason, but claims nevertheless that the sheep acts freely. My problem is that I do not see what the sheep’s freedom could be here for Sullivan, other than freedom *from* the causal chains that deterministic physics envisions as binding all movements. This “freedom *from*,” however, “certainly...is insufficient,” to use Anscombe’s words, to ground the claim that *the sheep itself* enjoys freedom or is free in any meaningful sense, narrow or broad. In other words, that an animal’s actions are free from physical determination does not warrant the claim that the animal itself is free or acts freely. Other things too, like bombs connected to Geiger counters placed near radioactive material (Anscombe’s example taken from Richard Feynman), are free from the causal chains envisioned by determin-

istic physics (Anscombe 1981, 144-145); but we are not tempted to attribute freedom to such things as a power that they themselves enjoy. More is needed to warrant attributing freedom to something than freedom *from* physical determination. The upshot is that it strikes me that Anscombe's position on freedom is in fact difficult to differentiate from Aquinas's; and I doubt whether Sullivan's distinction between "the form of freedom that involves the notion of moral responsibility" and "a broader and more basic form of freedom" can be sustained, at least in the way that he draws it (Sullivan 2007, 239).

The core claim of Sullivan's paper is that "freedom in the sense of having the ability to do otherwise is a necessary condition for intentional action" (Sullivan 2007, 231). Putting this claim in different words, he also says that, "if determinism turns out to be true, then all our talk about human actions and human agents... would be 'just a highly convenient, nay indispensable, *façon de parler*'" (Sullivan 2007, 236, quoting Anscombe 2005, 103); and "if one were to hold that a given movement were necessitated by prior perceptions, beliefs, desires, and intentions, then... there would be nothing for the intention embodied in that action to explain" and it would make no sense to count that movement as an intentional action (Sullivan 2007, 237). The conclusion that he draws from this last statement is that "if an action is intentional..., it is necessary that what happened in the action could have been otherwise," which is to say it must be the case that the agent is free. To recall the overarching argument of his paper, the next premise is that there are non-human animals that act intentionally (which I do not dispute); and the final conclusion is that these animals are free.

There are two questions to consider here, though they are difficult to answer apart from one another: first, whether Sullivan has Anscombe's position right on the relevance of intentional action to freedom; and second, whether he has Anscombe right or not, whether we ought to agree with him that intention is in fact relevant to the question of free will (Anscombe reports that Wittgenstein, for what it's worth, appeared to think it isn't [Anscombe 1963, 7]). Again to reiterate, Sullivan claims that, "if one were to hold that a given movement were necessitated by prior perceptions, beliefs, desires, and intentions, then... there would be nothing for the intention embodied in that action to explain" and

it would make no sense to count that movement as an intentional action (Sullivan 2007, 237). This is an interesting claim, but I do not find warrant for it in Anscombe's writings, and it is not obvious to me that it is true. Freedom and determinism may not be compatible; but are ascriptions of intention, say to Aquinas's poor sheep fleeing a wolf so as to live another day, incompatible with our saying that the sheep could not do otherwise? Anscombe writes in *Intention* that "the term 'intentional' has reference to a form of description of events" and that "[w]hat is essential to this form" is displayed by the application that we give to the question "Why?" (Anscombe 1963, 84). If we answer "in order to" or "because" in a sense that, in her words, "go[es] beyond physics," then typically we are dealing with this form of description (Anscombe 1963, 85–86). The question to ask is whether using this "form of description" in a way that is more than just a *façon de parler* commits us to denying that the events could be explained, at least in principle, precisely in the terms of physics, which is to say in the terms of some reductive form of explanation that makes no room for freedom. This strikes me as a worthwhile question for further consideration. To make an initial contribution, Anscombe's remark that it is a "mistake to think that the relation of *being done in execution of a certain intention, or being done intentionally*, is a causal relation" suggests that describing an action as intentional does not rule out giving a causal explanation of it in different terms (Anscombe 2005, 95).¹

To close, I want to consider briefly Anscombe's oft-cited remark that

there is nothing unacceptable about the idea that [the] "physical hazard" should be the only physical correlate of human freedom of action; and perhaps also of the voluntariness and intentionality in the conduct of other animals which we do not call "free."

(Anscombe 1981, 146)

This remark strikes me as opaque, and at the very least in need of elaboration. If I understand correctly, Sullivan takes her point to be that free actions may be understood as the effects of so-called non-necessitating causes: namely, the kind of cause, in Anscombe's words, "that can fail of its effect without the intervention of anything to frustrate it" (Anscombe 1981, 144). Sullivan also claims that,

if one accepts the notion of non-necessitating causes, and [if] one recognizes the immensely complicated nature of the processes that go on in the brain, [then] it is reasonable to assume that in anything like the causal processes leading from the light striking the eye to the contraction of muscles in pushing [a] button [in an experiment], there are non-necessitating causes. (Sullivan 2007, 235)

The upshot is that an action such as pushing a button upon seeing a particular color may be free for the reason that it didn't need to happen, though it was not causeless: after all, some agent did it (compare Sullivan 2007, 233–234). My final question is whether this way of trying to make sense of freedom does not extend the Cartesian tradition of conceiving of human beings as, in John Dupré's words, "putative exceptions to an otherwise seamless web of causal connection" (Dupré 2001, 157). Perhaps what we need to do instead, and here I follow Dupré, who himself draws from Anscombe, is to think out the consequences of the fact that "indeterminism anywhere, by virtue of the variety of causal chains that might be initiated by an indeterministic event, is liable to infect putatively deterministic phenomena anywhere" (Dupré 2001, 168–169).² One consequence is that "[c]ausal regularity is a much rarer feature of the world than is generally supposed." Another might be that the "solution to the problem of freedom of the will" lies not in finding ways that human beings escape the so-called "web of causal connection," but in realizing that human beings, and other animals as well, "are in fact dense concentrations of causal power in a world where this is in short supply" (Dupré 2001, 157).

Notes

1. Anscombe explains: "[A]n intention does not have to be a distinct psychological state which exists either prior to or even contemporaneously with the intentional action whose intention it is." In a given action, it may be the case that "there was...no prior formation of intention, nor is the intention a mental state that accompanies the action.... The teleology of conscious action is not to be explained as efficient causality by a condition, or state, or desire. Remembering that *that* was 'what I did ... for,' does not have to involve remembering such a state" (Anscombe 2005, 95–96).
2. See also Dupré's earlier and more technical account in *The Disorder of Things: Metaphysical Foundations of the Disunity of Science* (Dupré 1993, 187–193).

Compare Anscombe in “Causality and Determination”: “it has often been supposed that [indeterministic physics] makes little difference to the assumption of macroscopic determinism: as if underdeterminedness were always encapsulated in systems whose internal workings could be described only by statistical laws, but where the total upshot, and in particular the outward effect, was as near as makes no difference always the same.... Feynman’s example of the bomb and Geiger counter smashes this conception...” (Anscombe 1981, 146–147).

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