

Elizabeth Anscombe's Challenge

An Adequate Philosophy of Psychology

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Abstract

This paper revisits Elizabeth Anscombe's call for an 'adequate philosophy of psychology' through the lens of contemporary psychology education. It argues that current curricula tend to institutionalize a predominantly causal-explanatory model of mind, in which the conceptual resources required to understand intentional action remain underdeveloped. Drawing on an illustrative analysis of selected European psychology programmes, the paper identifies a structural imbalance between empirical training and conceptual reflection. From an Anscombean perspective, this imbalance risks obscuring the distinction between causes and reasons, which is central to understanding human action. While contemporary psychology does engage with concepts such as intention and motivation, these often remain theoretically underexamined within a naturalistic framework. The paper concludes by proposing a cooperative model in which philosophical analysis and empirical research are integrated, thereby enriching both disciplines and contributing to a more adequate account of human agency.

Keywords: G. E. M. Anscombe, Philosophy of action, Psychology education, Intentional action, Absolute prohibitions.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1956, the University of Oxford proposed awarding former us President Harry S. Truman an honorary degree for his leadership in ending World War II. Elizabeth Anscombe—then a young Oxford fellow—opposed the decision, holding Truman responsible for one of the 20th century’s greatest massacres: the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On May 2 of that year, she addressed Convocation¹ arguing that deliberately killing innocents, whether as a means or an end, constitutes murder,² and that “one can share in the guilt of a bad action by praise and flattery, as also by defending it.”³ Proponents of Truman’s degree dismissed the bombings as a ‘mistake’ and minimized Truman’s responsibility for signing the order.⁴ Only three individuals—Margaret Hubbard, Philippa and Michael Foot—sided with Anscombe against the overwhelming majority. Truman received the degree months later.⁵

This story does not end here. Anscombe subsequently published a paper, *Mr Truman’s Degree*, in which she expressed her concern over philosophical confusion regarding action and moral responsibility.⁶ She followed this with a BBC radio talk, in which she subjected Oxford moral philosophy to sharp, often biting irony.⁷ In her seminal article *Modern Moral Philosophy* (1958), Anscombe traced this confusion to post-Sidgwick consequentialism and called for suspending ethical theory until an “adequate philosophy of psychology”⁸ has been developed—a task she had already undertaken in her monograph *Intention*.

This paper revisits Anscombe’s challenge through the lens of contemporary

¹The executive body of the University responsible, among other things, for honorary appointments. The proposals are submitted to a vote and are approved or rejected by the members of the various faculties.

²G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *War and Murder*, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics. The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. 3, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, p. 53.

³EADEM, *Mr Truman’s Degree*, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, cit., p. 70.

⁴*Ibidem*, p. 66.

⁵The incident received some international attention. See, for example, D. MIDDLETON, *Oxford Don Fights Honor for Truman*, «The New York Times», June 19, 1956, p. 3.

⁶Precisely, the defence had maintained that the only action performed by Truman was signing a piece of paper; and in her account of the events leading up to the vote on Truman’s honorary degree, she wrote: “The dons at St. John’s were simply told ‘The women are up to something in Convocation; we have to go and vote them down’. In Worcester, in All Souls, in New College, however, consciences were greatly exercised, as I have heard. A reason was found to satisfy them: It would be wrong to try to PUNISH Mr Truman! I must say I rather like St John’s” (G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Mr Truman’s Degree*, cit. p. 65).

⁷EADEM, *Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?*, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. by M. Geach, L. Gormally, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2005.

⁸EADEM, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, cit., p. 26 (henceforth, *MMP*)

psychology teaching. Section 1 (a) examines her rejection of consequentialism's confusion over the concepts of action and intention; (b) situates *Intention* as the groundwork for her philosophy of psychology; and (c) offers an exemplary development in that philosophy to support ethical theorizing. Section 2 provides a snapshot of current European Psychology Bachelor's programmes and highlights the tension between their structure and Anscombe's proposal. Section 3 explores how Anscombe's approach might be integrated with contemporary psychology studies, particularly by advancing philosophical insights on intention and action.

This paper argues that contemporary psychology curricula tend to institutionalize a predominantly causal-explanatory model of mind, in which the conceptual resources required to understand intentional action remain underdeveloped—thereby exemplifying, in an educational context, the absence of the 'adequate philosophy of psychology' identified by Anscombe.

2 ANSCOMBE'S CHALLENGE

2.1 *Anscombe's Anticonsequentialism*

Anscombe begins *MMP* by stating three theses:

- “It is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an *adequate philosophy of psychology*,⁹ in which we are conspicuously lacking;
- the concepts of obligation, and duty... and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of ‘ought’, ought to be jettisoned... because they are survivals... from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it...;
- the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.”¹⁰

From these theses, it is clear that Anscombe does not aim to propose a new moral theory. Rather, she seeks to avoid a style of discussion that distinguishes between the ‘morally good’ and the ‘right’ action, relies on “imaginary cases... in considering moral obligations,”¹¹ and presumes that one must always act “for the best overall consequences.”¹²

⁹Italics for emphasis, mine.

¹⁰*MMP*, p. 26.

¹¹EADEM, *Twenty Opinions Common among Anglo-American Philosophers*, in *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. by L. Gormally, M. Geach, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, p. 67.

¹²*Ibidem*, p. 68.

The primary target of her criticism is *consequentialism*—the philosophy of “[Henry Sidgwick] and every English academic moral philosopher since him”¹³—which considers that particular consequences of such an action [as the judicial punishment of the innocent] could ‘morally’ be taken into account by a man who was debating what to do; and... to decide: in such-and-such circumstances one ought to procure the judicial condemnation of the innocent.¹⁴

Anscombe’s rejection is not directed at the consideration of outcomes *per se*, but at the framework’s core postulate: the denial that certain acts—such as murder—are intrinsically unjust and categorically excluded from moral permissibility. As Frey emphasizes,¹⁵ this paradigm makes it extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to affirm the absolute wrongness of murder.

This issue arises from a distinctive conception of practical reasoning in which: (a) actions are primarily assessed by their outcomes; (b) agents are morally obligated to secure or maximize net good; (c) *intended* and *foreseen* consequences collapse, so responsibility follows predictions rather than the agent’s own understanding of what she is doing; and (d) no prohibition holds absolutely, as any candidate prohibition can be overridden in ‘hard cases’ where violating it averts extreme harm.

Anscombe thus observes that modern moral philosophy cannot satisfactorily explain why “an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one.”¹⁶ This failure stems from what she terms a ‘faulty conception’ of action and responsibility.¹⁷ It is against this flawed framework that her call for an adequate philosophy of psychology should be read—a project aimed at restoring conceptual clarity to our understanding of human action.

2.2 Anscombe’s Philosophy of Psychology

What does Anscombe mean by an ‘adequate philosophy of psychology’?¹⁸ For a contemporary reader, the phrase might evoke cognitive science, behavioural psy-

¹³MMP, p. 34.

¹⁴MMP, p. 42.

¹⁵J. A. FREY, *Revisiting Modern Moral Philosophy*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy», 87 (2020), p. 62.

¹⁶MMP, p. 29.

¹⁷MMP.

¹⁸It should be stated that the identification of Anscombe’s “adequate philosophy of psychology” with the philosophy of action is an interpretative choice made for reasons of scope. Other essays, such as *The Intentionality of Sensation* (in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind. The Collected Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*, vol. 2, Blackwell, Oxford 1981) and *Will and Emotion* («Grazer Philosophische Studien», 5/1 [1978], pp. 139-148) call for a broader reading. The present paper focuses on her philosophy of action because it is there that Anscombe’s critique of consequentialism is most directly developed, and because the conceptual distinction between causes and reasons—central to the curricular analysis in Section 3—is most directly articulated.

chology, neuropsychology, psychopathology, or AI. However, in *MMP* Anscombe adopts a far narrower and conceptually precise focus. She writes:

there are several concepts that need investigating simply as part of the philosophy of psychology and... to begin with: 'action', 'intention', 'pleasure', 'wanting.' More will probably turn up if we start with these. Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept 'virtue'; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics.¹⁹

Anscombe's philosophy of psychology begins by clarifying the conceptual foundations of agency: investigating action, intention, pleasure, and wanting, and their interconnections, as the conceptual groundwork for ethics.²⁰ For her, ethics is "closely tied up with problems of action-description and unsettlable without help from philosophy of mind."²¹ And so Anscombe's concern therefore lies at the intersection of moral philosophy and action theory,²² exploring the conceptual scaffolding necessary to understand human action and moral reasoning.

This approach differs sharply from the empirical or applied assumptions that contemporary readers might associate with the label 'philosophy of psychology.' Today, the term is often used to refer more narrowly to the philosophical analysis of cognition and mental processes. Moreover, as Constantine Sandis argues, contemporary philosophy has largely divorced ethics from action theory due to disciplinary specialization. He suggests that Anscombe "would have been much horrified by much of what falls under either of these 'branches' today than by anything she was objecting to in 1958."²³ This observation helps explain why, although "Anscombe's influence [has been] undeniably wide it has not obviously been deep."²⁴

Anscombe's monograph *Intention*, published a year before *MMP*, provides the philosophical groundwork she sought. In it, she carefully analyzes intentional action and practical reasoning.²⁵ She rejects the view that actions are mere events to which something extra—intention—is added as an afterthought. Rather, to characterize an event as intentional is to bring it under a description that generates the question 'Why?,' thereby revealing the agent's reasons and the teleological

¹⁹ *MMP*, p. 38.

²⁰ As noted in Footnote 18, this characterization is primarily one of emphasis rather than exclusion. *Intention* also develops Anscombe's accounts of practical knowledge, reasons for action, and the relation between perception and intentional action, all of which are integral to her philosophy of psychology.

²¹ G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Introduction*, in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, cit., p. viii.

²² C. SANDIS, *Modern Moral Philosophy Before and After Anscombe*, «Enrahonar. An international journal of theoretical and practical reason», 64 (2020), pp. 46-47.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

²⁴ J. A. FREY, *Revisiting Modern Moral Philosophy*, cit., p. 61.

²⁵ J. SCHWENKLER, *Anscombe's Intention: A Guide*, New York 2019, p. xvii: "[H]er project in *Intention* is ultimately in the service of combating these false doctrines."

means—end structure of the action.²⁶ To act is to direct oneself toward a practical good through means adopted under a description. These means are integral to the action itself, not detachable tools. Therefore, one cannot treat a chosen means as merely instrumental while denying its intentional character. As will be argued, this point is crucial because absolute prohibitions apply to both means and ends.

Anscombe's analysis carries profound ethical implications. If actions are intentional under descriptions that reveal their teleological order, then the moral character of an action cannot be detached from the agent's understanding of what she is doing. Consider the Truman example: to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki *as means* to force unconditional surrender is to intend the death of civilians. These deaths are not an unfortunate side-effect of a larger project; the bombing is performed under a description that constitutes murder. This description is not subject to revision by appealing to overall outcomes, such as ending World War II in the sense of net good. Rather, it defines what the agent is doing, for which he (Truman) bears responsibility.

2.3 *The Role of Absolute Prohibitions*

Anscombe's philosophy of psychology not only clarifies intentional action, but also exposes the emptiness of modern conceptions of the moral 'ought', which she argues should be abandoned as a relic of a divine-law ethics no longer viable in secular philosophy. At most, the term retains a merely psychological force—what Christopher Martin once termed the "fear of the ghost of the Lord."²⁷ Yet, as Simon Blackburn emphasized,²⁸ Anscombe does not abandon all deontic terminology. On the contrary, she insists that absolute prohibitions constitute the bedrock of ethics.²⁹

An absolute prohibition is a norm that excludes a certain type of act—such as intentionally killing innocents—under all circumstances. It admits no exceptions based on consequences or greater goods. Its form is categorical: this act must not be done, regardless of any appeal to net benefit or overall utility.

Several commentators have highlighted that this is best understood by distinguishing, in Anscombe's texts, between reasons and *logoi*.³⁰ Reasons, in her

²⁶G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Intention*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2001², § 5, p. 9.

²⁷C. MARTIN, *Virtues, Motivation and the End of Life*, in *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. by L. Gormally, Four Courts Press, Blackrock 1994, p. 113.

²⁸S. BLACKBURN, *Simply wrong*, «The Times Literary Supplement», 5347 (2005), p. 11, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200524849/TLSH?u=tlssacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH&id=a7a311e3>.

²⁹G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *War and Murder*, cit., p. 58.

³⁰For further discussion, see K. NIESWANDT, *Anscombe on the Sources of Normativity*, «The Journal of Value Inquiry», 51/1 (2017), pp. 141-163; M. BIERSON, J. SCHWENKLER, *Rules, Rights, and Hedges*, «Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy», 13 (2026), pp. 321-351.

sense, are naturally intelligible: they are considerations that count in favour of or against an action—for example, ‘the shelf is going to fall’ counts against a certain movement. Logoi, by contrast, structure the space of permissible options within a practice, defining what counts as a legitimate or intelligible move. Absolute prohibitions, such as the proscription against murder, operate at this level: they set the boundaries that make practical reasoning sound.

On this reading, prohibitions thus shape the space of deliberation from the outset. They exclude certain acts—murder, for instance—from considerations as genuine options for deliberation, rather than treating them as just another factor in cost–benefit calculation. When an agent seriously entertains such an act, this signals a failure of sound practical reasoning: the deliberation may be intelligible in form, even instrumentally coherent (‘if I want X, killing Y will achieve it’), yet defective from the standpoint of moral understanding. Although internally consistent, the agent’s reasoning fails as sound practical deliberation because it proceeds within an evaluative framework that disregards the constraints imposed by absolute prohibitions.

Absolute prohibitions are therefore not justified instrumentally—as though their authority derived from promoting human flourishing in a broadly utilitarian sense—but from the intrinsic wrongness of the acts they forbid and the worth or dignity of human beings, against whom such acts are directed.³¹ Some actions are wrong not because they produce bad overall outcomes, but because they directly violate that dignity.³² Their intrinsic grounding is not fully capturable by empirical or calculative reasoning, but calls for the kind of conceptual clarification that Anscombe regarded as the task for an adequate philosophy of psychology.

In this sense, absolute prohibitions are foundational to ethics. They are neither the product of maximizing reasoning nor merely especially strong reasons; they are categorical exclusions grounded in the intrinsic worth of persons. They define the conditions under which practical reasoning itself is sound.

The notions of intention and absolute moral prohibition discussed here are,

³¹Some authors have sought to preserve the force of absolute prohibitions independently of a Divine Command framework—see, e.g., E. J. WIELENBERG, *Divine Commands Are Unnecessary for Moral Obligation*, «Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy», 21/1 (2022), pp. 142–149; S. LOVIBOND, *Absolute Prohibitions without Divine Promises*, «Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements», 54 (2004), pp. 141–158. Others doubt the doctrine survives secularization: S. CREMASCHI, *Elizabeth Anscombe on Consequentialism and Absolute Prohibitions*, «Danish Yearbook of Philosophy», 47 (2012), pp. 7–39, argues that Anscombe’s absolute prohibitions remain tied to a medieval theological picture in tension with her own account of action under a description.

³²This should be understood as an interpretative claim rather than one Anscombe explicitly formulates. Although she does not develop a systematic theory of dignity, several of her essays on medical ethics contain remarks about the intrinsic worth of human life that support such a reading. Recent work by Haase develops this interpretation (see M. HAASE, *Anscombe on the Dignity of the Human Being*, in *The Anscombean Mind*, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 469–491).

of course, closely connected with broader questions concerning meaning, moral responsibility, practical knowledge, and action description, each of which would require separate treatment. The present discussion has therefore been limited to reconstructing those aspects of Anscombe's account that are essential to her call for an adequate philosophy of psychology.

3 CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGY AND THE NATURALISTIC MODEL

Before turning to the curricular analysis, it is helpful to situate Anscombe's diagnosis within a broader critique of naturalism in the study of human action. Although developed from different perspectives, a number of twentieth-century thinkers have argued that the social sciences risk misunderstanding their subject matter when they adopt the explanatory ideals of the natural sciences without examining the philosophical assumptions on which those ideals rest.³³

Magda Arnold articulated this concern in *The Human Person* (1954). She argued that mechanical interpretations may serve as useful methodological tools in the experimental sciences, but only when their object is inanimate. Such an assumption, she noted, "is not reached *after* evidence has been collected, but before it."³⁴ It therefore expresses not scientific findings but the 'philosophy of the scientist.' She also insisted that the problem requires a philosophical method of inquiry, since the alternative chosen will determine the basic assumptions guiding scientific research. In her view, psychologists often fall prey to the illusion that they can leave philosophy and metaphysics aside, when in fact they are already making metaphysical claims about the nature, origin, and destiny of the human being. Thus, when reasoning is redefined as problem-solving, or desires as drives or needs, such language is not neutral but already shaped by philosophical assumptions.³⁵

This reading of Anscombe has also been advanced by Alejandro Llano and José María Torralba. They interpret her critique as directed against the reduction of practical knowledge to theoretical and causal categories. On their reading, this reduction obscures the distinctive intelligibility of human action, which is not simply another natural phenomenon to be explained causally, but an object of practical knowledge understood through the agent's reasoning rather than through the observation of an inner mental event.³⁶

³³See for instance C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1989.

³⁴M. ARNOLD, *Basic Assumptions in Psychology*, in *The Human Person. An Approach to an Integral Theory of Personality*, ed. by M. Arnold, J. A. Gasson, Ronald Press, New York 1954, p. 29.

³⁵*Ibidem*, p. 6.

³⁶J. M. TORRALBA, A. LLANO, *Representación y conocimiento práctico*, «Thémata. Revista de Filosofía», 43 (2010), p. 436.

3.1 Context and Sample

As of March 2026, the website *Bachelorsportal.com* lists 1,145 psychology-related Bachelor's programmes across Europe, including non-EU countries such as the UK and Iceland.³⁷ While no single EU-wide database provides a definitive count, national and portal-level data indicate well over 700 programmes within EU countries alone. For example, Germany hosts a large number of psychology-related degree programmes, including both standard psychology and applied variants,³⁸ though a precise count is difficult to obtain; while Spain reports over 100 degrees (including graduate courses) across more than 25 universities.³⁹ Taken together, the total number of psychology-related university programmes in the EU likely falls in the high hundreds to over 1,000, though precise aggregation remains unavailable.

This section does not aim to provide a comprehensive or statistically representative account of European psychology curricula. Rather, it offers an exploratory analysis of a small, purposively selected sample, intended to identify recurring structural tendencies. The goal is heuristic: to highlight patterns that are philosophically suggestive in light of Anscombe's diagnosis, rather than to establish generalizable conclusions.

The selection was guided by four criteria:

- EU scope: Only universities within the EU were included, ensuring a common framework, as all programmes adhere to the *Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area* (QF-EHEA), established through the Bologna Process.⁴⁰
- Geographical diversity: Institutions were drawn from seven countries representing Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, France), Central Europe (Germany), Northern Europe (Netherlands, Sweden), and Eastern Europe (Poland), allowing for regional comparison.
- Academic standing and data availability: All selected universities rank within the top 200 for Psychology in both the *QS World University Rankings* (2025, subject-specific) and *Times Higher Education* (2026),⁴¹ and provide fully available curricula detailing course structures, ECTS allocations, and competency frameworks.

³⁷Bachelorsportal, <https://www.bachelorsportal.com>.

³⁸Hochschulkompass, <https://www.hochschulkompass.de>.

³⁹Consejo General de la Psicología de España, <https://www.cop.es>.

⁴⁰EHEA, <https://ehea.info/bologna-policy/qualification-frameworks/>.

⁴¹QS World University Rankings by Subject: Psychology, <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-subject-rankings/psychology> (accessed 2 February 2026); Times Higher Education, *World University Rankings by Subject 2026: Psychology*, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2026/subject-ranking/psychology> (accessed 2 February 2026).

- Structural comparability: All programs follow the Bologna framework (180-240 ECTS credits) and align with competency guidelines established by the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EuroPsy) competency guidelines.

The resulting stratified sample (n=9) includes: Spain's Universitat de Barcelona (UB) and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM); Italy's Sapienza University of Rome; France's Université Paris Cité; Germany's LMU Munich; the Netherlands' University of Amsterdam and Radboud University Nijmegen; Sweden's Lund University; and Poland's swps University Warsaw.

The sample is sufficient to suggest the presence of recurring curricular patterns. For example, Northern European programs tend to allocate approximately 25-30% of coursework to research methods, while Southern programs place greater emphasis on ethics and the historical foundations of psychology. Accordingly, the claims that follow should be read as indicative rather than definitive.

3.2 *Curricular Patterns*

The analysis of the nine curricula reveals a notable degree of structural uniformity, largely attributable to the standardizing influence of the Bologna Process and the QF-EHEA framework. On average, programmes devote approximately 55-70% of their content to empirical domains, with an additional 20-30 ECTS credits allocated to research methods and statistics. By contrast, explicitly philosophical or conceptual components remain marginal, typically below 5% of the total curriculum.

Empirical domains—including biological, cognitive, social, developmental, personality, clinical—occupy an average of 71 ECTS credits, forming the unquestioned core of all programmes. As causal-explanatory content increases, opportunities for conceptual or abstract reflection correspondingly diminish. Methods and statistics, averaging 24 ECTS credits, are tightly integrated with biological and neuroscientific subjects, creating a unified methodological framework in which psychological phenomena are primarily approached through measurement, quantification and causal modelling.

Early integration of research—through methods training and lab work—reinforces the empirical orientation. Northern programmes, in particular, prioritize data production and validation. Yet this emphasis raises a philosophical concern: the increasing sophistication of empirical methods is not matched by a corresponding development of conceptual clarity regarding the phenomena that is being measured.

Abstract disciplines—such as ethics of practice, history of psychology, and philosophy of psychology—are reduced to roughly 9 ECTS, with little evidence

of sustained engagement with core concepts such as action, intention, or pleasure. From an Anscombean perspective, this absence is decisive: these concepts are not peripheral, and their omission creates a gap in which empirical findings lack adequate conceptual interpretation. While Southern European programmes offer greater elective flexibility—up to 60 ECTS, partially due to longer degree durations—this space functions more as a marginal zone than a structural counterbalance. Similarly, clinical psychology remains limited and often elective, despite its reliance on understanding reasons and intentions—the dimensions least developed in the curriculum. Personality and developmental psychology remain stable (12 ECTS average), frequently addressing motivation and behaviour, but predominantly framed in causal terms.

3.3 *Philosophical Implications of Contemporary Curricula*

Approximately 62% of coursework is devoted to causal-explanatory domains, while only around 5% addresses conceptual or philosophical questions. This imbalance indicates that psychology programmes prioritize measurement, quantification, and causal interpretation over reflection on the nature of human phenomena. This is not a critique of the scientific method itself, but an observation that institutionalized curricula implicitly endorse a theoretical picture of human behaviour emphasizing empirical data and causal explanation.

From an Anscombean perspective, this reflects a largely unarticulated philosophical framework—the type of oversight Anscombe sought to address. While indispensable for scientific inquiry, such approaches risk obscuring a fundamental philosophical distinction: the difference between causes and reasons. Understanding human action requires reference not only to causal mechanisms but also to intentions, purposes, and justifications. The marginalization of philosophical inquiry within psychology curricula results in a partial account of the human subject—one capable of describing and predicting behaviour but not fully interpreting it.

Overall, contemporary European psychology curricula institutionalize a naturalist model of mind that emphasizes causal explanation while offering limited grounding in the conceptual understanding of human action. From an Anscombean perspective, this gap is decisive: human beings act for reasons, not merely in accordance with physical laws. The teleological dimension—central to understanding agency, purpose, and intentionality—is largely absent, leaving students well-prepared to analyze behaviour empirically but not to interpret it meaningfully.

A natural objection is that contemporary psychology does, in fact, engage with concepts such as intention, motivation, and meaning, particularly in fields such as cognitive, social, and clinical psychology. However, these concepts are

typically marginal and theoretically underexamined within a predominantly causal framework. They are presupposed rather than systematically analyzed or integrated into the methodological core of the discipline, limiting students' capacity to interpret human action conceptually and therefore exemplifying the conceptual gap Anscombe's call for an adequate philosophy of psychology is designed to address.

4 TOWARDS A COOPERATIVE MODEL

The apparent opposition between empirical psychology and philosophical analysis is not inevitable. As Magda Arnold observed, psychology cannot dispense with philosophy, for every account of human action already presupposes philosophical commitments about the nature of the human person and the intelligibility of action. Rather than opposing scientific inquiry, this insight points to the need for a deeper, more integrated approach—one that acknowledges both the indispensability of scientific methods and the foundational role of conceptual clarification. If Anscombe's diagnosis is correct, contemporary psychology's naturalistic orientation leaves a conceptual vacuum at its core: it can measure and predict behaviour, but struggles to interpret it in terms of meaning, intention, and moral responsibility.

A genuinely cooperative model does not require that psychology becomes philosophy, nor that philosophical analysis dissolve into empirical science. Instead, it fosters a dialogue in which each discipline clarifies its own commitments while drawing on the strengths of the other. Empirical psychology excels at identifying correlations and causes—in neural circuits, behaviour patterns, outcomes of interventions. Yet, as Anscombe argues, such explanations presuppose intelligible concepts like intention, action, and reason: categories that empirical science alone cannot generate or define. Without philosophical reflection, psychology risks treating these concepts as 'black boxes'—useful for organizing data, but never themselves subject to scrutiny or refinement.

This concern is not merely theoretical. Consider the study of voluntary action in neuroscience: experiments may track neural activity preceding a button press, but the question of when and how the action becomes 'intentional' cannot be settled by brain scans alone.⁴² As Anscombe stresses in *Intention*, what makes an event an intentional action is the agent's ability to answer the question 'Why?'—giving reasons under a particular description. Without this conceptual framework, empirical results risk misinterpretation: neural correlates of 'decisions' may be mistaken for agency itself, when true agency is constituted by reason-giving and self-understanding. The omission is not neutral; it presup-

⁴²G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *The Causation of Action*, in *Human Life*, cit., pp. 94-95.

poses a view of human beings as objects of causal descriptions rather than as reason-giving agents.

A cooperative model for psychology education would require several reforms. First, curricula should include sustained engagement with the philosophy of action, mind and perception—not as a token elective, but as a structural component on par with methods and statistics. Students should engage with the concepts of intention, reason, and action, learning to distinguish between causal explanations and teleological descriptions. This does not undermine scientific rigour; it strengthens it. Philosophical training equips future psychologists with conceptual discipline: the ability to clarify the terms and ideas guiding both experiment design and data interpretation. For instance, distinguishing between the intended and foreseen consequences of an intentional action, which is crucial in both ethics and empirical research.

Second, empirical research should be informed by and responsive to philosophical analysis. Interdisciplinary seminars and collaborative projects could bring psychologists and philosophers into regular dialogue, ensuring conceptual issues are addressed as part of the scientific process. Understanding action requires categories distinct from those used to describe natural events. As Martin Rhonheimer observes, ethics cannot be reduced to a theoretical study of anthropology.⁴³ Human action is irreducibly teleological: change is explained through means and ends, not mere causation. Action begins in deliberate decision, an exercise of self-referential agency, as Alejandro Vigo notes.⁴⁴ To use Anscombe's words, to choose is to direct oneself toward what is apprehended "under the aspect of some good."⁴⁵

Moreover, the notion of absolute prohibitions highlights a distinctive feature of human action. While desires and instrumental reasoning often guide our choices, our actions can also be constrained by categorical moral limits. Certain acts are wrong regardless of their consequences—not because of their causal effects, but because they violate standards that agents recognize as binding in their moral understanding of good and right. Recognizing absolute prohibitions underscores the importance of conceptual analysis: it allows psychology to consider not only what motivates behaviour, but also what agents choose not to do out of ethical conviction. In this way, empirical research into human action gains richer meaning when interpreted against the backdrop of moral reasoning and normative boundaries, showing how people may act coherently—even rationally—while

⁴³M. RHONHEIMER, *The Perspective of Morality. Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*, trans. by G. Malsbary, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, DC 2011, p. 40.

⁴⁴A. G. VIGO, *Incontinencia, carácter y razón según Aristóteles*, «Anuario Filosófico», 32/63 (1999), p. 87.

⁴⁵G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, *Intention*, cit., § 39, p. 75.

still failing in their ethical commitments.

Finally, a cooperative model must preserve the moral dimension at the heart of Anscombe's challenge. Psychology, in explaining behaviour, must not lose sight of the fact that some acts—such as the intentional killing of innocents—are not merely empirical generalizations or outcomes of cost-benefit reasoning, but structural features of practical reason itself. Absolute prohibitions define the boundaries within which empirical knowledge of motivation and desire can operate ethically. In a naturalistic framework that treats all behaviour as causally explicable, the very sense of such limits risks disappearing. Philosophical reflection thus remains indispensable: it ensures that psychological explanations of action do not dissolve the space of moral responsibility marked out by absolute prohibitions.

On the whole, bridging the gap between psychology and philosophy requires more than curricular tinkering. It demands a fundamental reorientation: recognizing that empirical and conceptual inquiry are not rivals, but partners in the study of human action. Such cooperation begins to meet Anscombe's challenge, enriching both disciplines while grounding the study of human action in a more adequate conceptual framework—one that respects the difference between causes and reasons and avoids an oversimplistic interpretation of agency.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has revisited Anscombe's challenge to contemporary moral philosophy and examined its relevance for psychology education. Anscombe's insistence on clarifying the concepts of action, intention, and pleasure highlights a conceptual vacuum in current psychology curricula,⁴⁶ which overwhelmingly prioritize causal-explanatory methods over reflection on meaning, purpose, and moral responsibility. By institutionalizing measurement, quantification, and outcome-based reasoning, these programs risk obscuring the distinction between causes and reasons—a distinction essential for understanding human agency.

A cooperative model that integrates philosophical reflection with empirical research can address this gap. Curricula should emphasize conceptual analysis alongside methodological training, enabling students to distinguish intentional actions from mere causal events, and to recognize ethical boundaries in practical reasoning. Empirical research, informed by philosophical insight, can then be interpreted with a richer understanding of human behaviour, acknowledging both what agents do and what they choose not to do.

⁴⁶It is worth noting that the analysis is based on a purposive sample of nine European psychology programmes. The sample is intended heuristically to highlight recurring curricular patterns, not to provide statistically representative findings, and results should be interpreted accordingly.

Ultimately, bridging philosophy and psychology requires more than curricular adjustments; it demands a fundamental reorientation that recognizes empirical and conceptual inquiry as complementary rather than competing. Implementing such a model will not only strengthen the rigor of psychology education but also honour Anscombe's vision of an adequate philosophy of psychology—one that conceptualizes human action with clarity, precision, and moral awareness.⁴⁷

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⁴⁷I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

