# THE REDISCOVERY OF PRACTICAL SYLLOGISM IN G.E.M. ANSCOMBE'S PHILOSOPHY

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> «Our present situation is unique in philosophical history: our period is one of the intense philosophical activity, and also we are now in a position to read Aristotle critically and at the same time with sympathy – without either servility or hostility».[1]

The aim of the present essay is to analyse the role of Aristotle's model of practical syllogism in G.E.M. Anscombe's theory of action.

Before offering an outline of Anscombe's take on practical syllogism, including both its function within the theory of action and any criticisms, legitimate or not, that may be posed, it seems advisable to briefly go over the definition and structure found Aristotle's work, so as to comprehend in what way it can serve as an explanatory model for intentional action.

## 1. The Aristotelian perspective

The practical syllogism is the main method adopted by Aristotle for the study of action. In Book iv of the *Nicomachean Ethics* the term συλλογισμοὶ τῶν πρακτῶν appears, meaning literally "inferences of practicable actions"; in other words, an argument composed of two premises and a conclusion, just like in a syllogism in the technical sense.

The practical syllogism thus appears to be an explicative instrument for action, a unique method belonging to man's argumentation capable of providing a specific understanding human action and which, differently from other syllogisms, is not based on a causal explanation.

The practical syllogism includes a major premise affirming a universal truth, a minor premise affirming a particular truth, or the necessary means for achieving a specific end, and a conclusion revealing the action that is necessary to achieve the established end. The action cannot therefore but derive

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[1] G.E.M. Anscombe, *Aristotle: the Search for Substance*, in G.E.M. Anscombe - P.T. Geach, *Three Philosophers*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1961, p. 63.

from a principle, from an orientation towards the good. This is given as a premise, or better yet as the condition of possibility of the entire syllogism. What is striking about Aristotle's thought concerning action is that human action must have a rational foundation and therefore the area of interest here is not that of mere emotionality, intuition, or causality, although none of these elements is overlooked.

Let's consider now the examples that Aristotle uses to clarify what the practical syllogism consists in and, ultimately, how and what an action is. An example is illustrated in the following excerpt:

«But how is it that thought (viz. sense, imagination, and thought proper) is sometimes followed by action, sometimes not; sometimes by movement, sometimes not? What happens seems parallel to the case of thinking and referring about the immovable objects of science. There the end is the truth seen (for, when one conceives the two premisses, one at once conceives and comprehends the conclusion), but here the two premisses result in a conclusion which is an action – for example, one conceives that every man ought to walk, one is a man oneself: straightway one walks; or that, in this case, no man should walk, one is a man: straightway one remains at rest. And one so acts in the two cases provided that there is nothing in the one case to compel or in the other to prevent. Again, I ought to create a good, a house is good: straightway I make a house. I need a covering, a coat is a covering: I need a coat. What I need I ought to make, I need a coat: I make a coat. And the conclusion I must make a coat is an action. And the action goes back to the beginning or first step. If there is to be a coat, one must first have B, and if B then A, so one gets A to begin with. Now that the action is the conclusion is clear. But the premisses of action are of two kinds, of the good and of the possible. And as in some cases of speculative inquiry we suppress one premise so here the mind does not stop to consider at all an obvious minor premise; for example if walking is good for man, one does not dwell upon the minor 'I am a man'. And so what we do without reflection, we do quickly. For when a man actualizes himself in relation to his object either by perceiving, or imagining or conceiving it, what he desires he does at once. For the actualizing of desire is a substitute for inquiry or reflection. I want to drink, says appetite; this is drink, says sense or imagination or mind: straightway I drink».[2]

The conclusion of a practical syllogism is therefore always an action, and because it is an action it can ensue from the two premises (the action derives from the principle). The first premise is a statement concerning a universal truth, the second concerning a particular truth. The latter is essential to the purpose of the syllogism, as it identifies the means which enable the fulfillment of the end.

The aim of the practical syllogism is consequently to provide a formal representation of the thought process underlying human action, the actualiza-

[2] *De motu an.*, 7, 701 a.

tion of which is based upon a rational foundation. Therefore, human action does not only involve emotionality, intuition, and causality. Practical rationality, which differently from scientific rationality has an area of application, must also be taken into consideration.

Unlike scientific syllogisms, the conclusion of practical syllogisms is an action. Aristotle restates this in numerous passages, among which the following:

«Further, error in deliberation may be either about the universal or about the particular; we may fail to know either that all water that weighs heavy is bad, or that this particular water weighs heavy. That practical wisdom is not scientific knowledge is evident; for it is, as has been said, concerned with the ultimate particular fact, since the thing to be done is of this nature».[3]

What is interesting about the unique structure of the practical syllogism is that it contains a rational foundation from which everything originates, right up to practical knowledge. Without an orientation towards good, no action (right or wrong as it may be) can issue. The second premise concerns particular facts and within it sensation reigns supreme. One must further note that in order for an aim to be accomplished, it is not sufficient for there to simply be an aim or the means to accomplish such aim. It is necessary for the individual to be able to deliberate, to be able to calculate the necessary means for the accomplishment of that specific aim.[4] Let's consider the following passage drawn from the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

«Further, since there are two kinds of premisses, there is nothing to prevent a man's having both premisses and acting against his knowledge, provided that he is using only the universal premiss and not the particular; for it is particular acts that have to be done. And there are also two kinds of universal term; one is predicable of the agent, the other of the object; e.g. 'dry food is good for every man', 'I am a man', or 'such and such food is dry'; but whether 'this food is such and such', of this the incontinent man either has not or is not exercising the knowledge. There will, then, be, firstly, an enormous difference between these manners of knowing, so that to know in one way when we act incontinently would not seem anything strange, while to know in the other way would be extraordinary».[5]

And further:

[3] *Eth. Nic.*, VI, 1142 a 22-25.

[4] Concerning the Aristotelian sources that I refer to further on, the reader may notice that Aristotle presents the case of the incontinent, which is an exception; the incontinent is he who, though comprehending the syllogism in act, behaves according to other criteria. It should be noted that, for Aristotle, the discourse on the idleness of the incontinent's reason is a test bed that does not reach a decisive conclusion; the weakness of human faculties and the inconsistency of their interaction remains an open issue.

[5] *Eth. Nic.*, VII, 1147 a 1-10.

«The one opinion is universal, the other is concerned with the particular facts, and here we come to something within the sphere of perception; when a single opinion results from the two, the soul must in one type of case affirm the conclusion, while in the case of opinions concerned with production it must immediately act (e.g. if 'everything sweet ought to be tasted', and 'this is sweet', in the sense of being one of the particular sweet things, the man who can act and is not prevented must at the same time actually act accordingly)».[6]

The choice (*prohairesis*), however, does not issue only from deliberation (*bouleusis*), from the ability belonging to an individual to deliberate, to calculate the objective to reach, but also from the desire to reach the objective. Of all possible voluntary actions, not all are intentional choices: there can indeed be voluntary actions carried out by animals that operate under the sole influence of impulse and desire. Intentional choice pertains to individuals provided with reason, and it is the sum of desire and deliberation. Let's read the following relevant passage taken from *De anima*:

«Sensitive imagination, as we have said, is found in all animals, deliberative imagination only in those that are calculative: for whether this or that shall be enacted is already a task requiring calculation; and there must be a single standard to measure by, for that is pursued which is *greater*. It follows that what acts in this way must be able to make a unity out of several images.

This is the reason why imagination is held not to involve opinion, in that it does not involve opinion based on inference, though opinion involves imagination. Hence appetite contains no deliberative element. Sometimes it overpowers wish and sets it in movement: at times wish acts thus upon appetite, like one sphere imparting its movement to another, or appetite acts thus upon appetite, i.e. in the condition of moral weakness (though by *nature* the higher faculty is *always* more authoritative and gives rise to movement). Thus *three* modes of movement are possible.

The faculty of knowing is never moved but remains at rest. Since the one premiss or judgement is universal and the other deals with the particular (for the first tells us that such and such a kind of man should do such and such a kind of act, and the second that *this* is an act of the kind meant, and I a person of the type intended), it is the latter opinion that really originates movement, not the universal; or rather it both, but the one does so while it remains in a state more like rest, while the other partakes in movement».[7]

If, to fulfill an end, a calculation of the necessary means is required, the importance of the role of choice in Aristotelian thought is now clear; it is no coincidence that the Aristotelian practical syllogism as a teleological, but not normative, model for action is presented by Anscombe in one of her most significant works, *Intention* (1957). Before tackling Anscombe's own interpre-

[6] *Eth. Nic.*, VII, 1147 a 26-30.

[7] *De anima*, III, 11, 434 a 1-21.

tation, a brief premise regarding the fallacy of the Aristotelian practical syllogism is in order.

## 2. A note on practical syllogism

Many are the studies that have described the merits and flaws of Aristotle's practical syllogism. In this paper, for obvious reasons of space, I will only offer a concise outline of the invalidity of practical syllogism, as found in the analysis made by Ebby Carli. Considering the example Aristotle provides in the *De Motu*, the following format emerges: I need A/ Every B is A/ I need B.

The invalidity of the conclusion immediately stands out. Indeed, if I happen to need a car and all Ferraris are cars the conclusion is not necessarily that what I need is a Ferrari (unless I find myself in a scenario in which a Ferrari the only car I consider worthy to drive). In other words, limits to the practical syllogism related to the analysis of human action emerge from Aristotle's treatment; it almost seems as though, for the syllogism to be valid, it is necessary to delimit the context it is referring to (a Ferrari is the only car I deem worthy to drive). However, Anscombe does not explicitly highlight the logical limits of the practical syllogism. Instead, she insists more heavily on the feature of logical non-necessity, considered from a teleological perspective and not from a normative one, as is found for instance in G.H. von Wright's analysis. This analysis is also accompanied by a study on modal logic, expressly 'deontic' logic.

It must further be stated that the groundwork of Aristotle's analysis (*De anima*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *De motu animalium, Metaphysics*) is a premise of 'political nature'.[8] If indeed in a practical syllogism the major premise is an orientation towards an end, precisely the good which virtue consists in, while the minor premise is the knowledge of some particular truth that occurs through *phronesis*, the following notion must be underlined: virtue is intended as the union between *orexis* and *logos* and it leads to the fulfillment of the end as a sort of universal judgement on a certain future state of things. It is the result of habit, therefore of education, of the tradition that an individual inherits from family and society, and ultimately of the respect one has for the laws of the *polis*. Noticeably, Anscombe's angle is rather that of maintaining a strictly analytical approach towards practical knowledge, in line with Wittgenstein's thought, allowing no space for possible ethical implications to be drawn. Let's continue on now to Anscombe's analysis.

## 3. The practical syllogism: one of Aristotle's most significant discoveries

In the second part of the volume *Intention* Anscombe retrieves the Aristotelian practical syllogism considering it a privileged model for describing human ac-

[8] *Eth. Nic.*, 1, 1094 b 11-12.

tion. Owing to the brevity of the present essay, however, it shall not be possible to go through all the steps that the author herself outlines; we will only be considering § *33* with some additional references to later passages. This necessary selection offers a satisfying account of Anscombe's interpretation of the practical syllogism as it brings to light key elements such as the structure, possible limits, and preference of the teleological orientation over the normative (completely absent in her treatise) one. As Berti[9] indeed stated, the practical syllogism enables a specific comprehension of human action since it captures its characteristic teleological element, its direction towards an end which is deliberately chosen by the agent.

Starting from the comprehension of intentional action, which is possible thanks to the explicit retrieval of Aristotle's model for practical knowledge, one can therefore follow the footsteps of Wittgenstein's pupil and come to understand the notion of intention, meaningfully chosen as the title of her book, through the description of the action in which it becomes manifest.

At the beginning of § *33*, which we will now consider, Anscombe affirms the equality between "practical reasoning" and "practical syllogism". This is considered one of Aristotle's greatest discoveries. Let's investigate the reason that drives Anscombe to assign such importance to it. In the overall perspective of the text, practical syllogism seems to be the access key to the reflection on what intentional action consists in, how it is generated, and if and what pattern it follows. Below is one of Aristotle's[10] examples, as retrieved by Anscombe:

- Dry food suits any human
- Such-and-such food is dry
- I am a human
- This is a bit of such-and-such food
- This food suits me.

Anscombe follows Aristotle's example with one of her own:

- Do everything conducive to not having a car crash
- Such-and-such will be conducive to not having a car crash
- Do such-and-such.

The following noteworthy observation concerning the imperative form found in the first premise can be made: even though the action is necessitating, it doesn't seem to be followed by a concrete action. The critical point resides in the very element that is at the same time Aristotle's strong point; the fact that the conclusion is a concrete action. Indeed, there are hundreds of different and incompatible elements that may contribute to not having a car crash.

[9] E. Berti, *Aristotele nel Novecento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992, pp. 178-179.
[10] *Eth. Nic.*, vii, 1147 a 5-10.

Anscombe further explains that seeing a perfect dress in a shop window, a dress that perfectly matches one's taste and requirements, does not necessarily entail actually going into the shop and buying it (excluding contingent impediments). What is in question here is the deliberation that constitutes the certainty of the calculation of necessary means to reach a specific objective, as previously observed by Aristotle. The deliberation is in fact a "tipe of research" that cannot take place "without reasoning".[11] The choice is then fruit of a voluntary deliberation (*bouleusis*), and it is precisely through choice that an individual strives to obtain the object of his will (*boulesis*).[12]

Consequently, given the premises, a sure action does not necessarily follow. For instance I could give credit to the saying: "Those who own a Ferrari live a hundred years", and yet still not buy a Ferrari (excluding impediments). The conclusion, therefore, is not a sure action. What is sure is merely a formulation of a purpose that can orient one's action, but that is not sufficient to actually make it happen. What actually determine the action[13] are the choice and deliberation, and not only the end and purpose, for they entail the identification of the necessary means for achieving the end and realizing the action.

Anscombe eventually comes to assert that the disadvantage of the syllogism expressed in an imperative form is that its first universal premise is an *insane* premise that no one could accept even for an instant, if one really though of its meaning. Here Anscombe recalls Hare, according to whom in the conclusion of a valid inference there cannot be an imperative, unless there is at least one imperative in the premises or an imperative is contained implicitly in the premises (statement that is confirmed by logical considerations of general nature).[14]

According to Anscombe, Aristotle overlaps the level of reasoning that leads to action and the level of reasoning that instead seeks to ensure the truth of its conclusions, whereas in her perspective between these two levels lies a rigorous formal difference. Anscombe identifies the origin of such problem in Aristotle's own texts. Aristotle underlines that in both cases the same thing happens,[15] statement which for Anscombe may lead to a version of practical

[11] *Eth. Nic.*, VII, 1142 a 30-35; 1142 b 1-15.

[12] G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Thought and Action in Aristotle. What is 'Practical Truth'?*, in IDEM, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, Blackwell, Oxford 1981, p. 144.

[13] Referring to the practical syllogism, it is useful to remember the attention that Anscombe pays to the notion of 'practical truth', that is to say something that is operative, effective. See G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Thought and Action in Aristotle. What is 'Practical Truth'?*, in IDEM, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, cit., p. 77; *G.E.M. Anscombe "Practical Inference"*, in M. GEACH – L. GORMALLY (ed.), *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, St. Andrew's Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2005, p. 144.

[14] See R.M. HARE, *The Language of Morals*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952, cap 3, pp. 32-55.

[15] *De motu an.*, 7, 701 a.

reasoning that could even not imply an action, as is instead hoped for in Aristotle's own thought.

But what is entailed in the statement that the origin of such problem is to be traced back to Aristotle himself?

The Stagirite distinguishes between demonstrative reasoning (demonstrative syllogism) and practical reasoning (practical syllogism). The former is scientific and concerns that which is invariable; it revolves around the truth of a conclusion. The latter is connected with what could happen differently without believing its content to be sufficient to be reasoned upon practically; in other words, it is a reasoning that leads to action.

Now, Aristotle underlined the similarity between the two reasonings, by affirming that what "happens" is the same in both cases. In both cases the conclusion is "dictated" by the mind that infers it.

Let's consider the famous Aristotelian example, previously mentioned and according to which:

- I need a covering, a coat is a covering: I need a coat.
- What I need I ought to make, I need a coat: I make a coat.

The conclusion, that is the fact of having to make a coat, would be an action. Aristotle also applies the practical syllogism to those cases in which the conclusion of the reasoning is to abstain from an action.

For Anscombe, instead, practical syllogisms are technically only those in which the conclusion is an action; furthermore this action is to be demonstrated by the premises that are hence, so to say, "on active service" for the action. Thus the difference has been identified.

Reflecting on the Aristotelian perspective, Anscombe asserts the existence of both the theoretical syllogism, which is demonstrative and scientific, and the practical syllogism, which in turn branches out into "idle practical syllogism" and "proper practical syllogism". Let's see what that means now. The author offers the following example:

- John will drive from Chartres to Paris at an average of sixty m.p.h.
- He starts around five
- Paris is sixty miles from Chartres
- John will arrive at about six

This is an example of an idle practical syllogism, or better yet the practical syllogism appears to be closely connected with 'what could happen differently'. It is indeed possible for some unforeseen event to occur to John, such as a change in route, an arrival at a later time than expected, etc.

The conclusion of a strictly practical reasoning (in view of an action) is an action of which the main point is demonstrated by the premises "on active service" and in regards to this it is interesting to point out the importance

of the 'context'. The inspiration underlying the Wittgensteinian argumentation here appears clearly since the retrieval of Aristotle's practical syllogism, considered a privileged model for the analysis of action, is chiefly limited to the formal aspects of the procedure. However, Anscombe does not seem to fully grasp the general ethical and political setting in which the Aristotelian analysis is developed. Anscombe further writes: «When Aristotle says that what happens is the same, he seems to mean that it is always the same psychical mechanism by which a conclusion is elicited. He also displays practical syllogisms so as to make them look as parallel as possible to proof syllogisms».[16]

The philosopher from Limerick then underlines that the interpretation many contemporary philosophers tend to give is that a practical syllogism must lead to the conclusion: "I have to do such and such" (see Hare). These authors have conceived syllogism as the demonstration of a conclusion and have been primarily concerned with the validity of the inference.

Furthermore Anscombe identifies two more forms in the proper practical syllogism: the technical syllogism and the ethical syllogism, to which the reasonings of *techne* and *phronesis* refer to respectively. Ever proper truly practical syllogism is therefore also an ethical syllogism; human action is always oriented towards the ultimate end (or happiness). The technical syllogism is subordinate to the ethical one; for example, a mechanic who needs to repair a car initially ponders on the best strategy to get the job done (technical syllogism) and to do this he taps into *techne*. However, he also refers to an action, *praxis*, which pertains to the ethical syllogism. The critical point here is thus to determine the relationship between practical reason and moral philosophy; indeed, technical reasoning works perfectly regardless of whether the action is good or not.

The proper practical syllogism ends with an action. The ability to accomplish an action, however, does not reside in the syllogism but in the desire to reach an aim, an end.

Nevertheless, a conclusion of this nature does not in itself entail an action – even considering the case in which "have to" is contained in the premises – and so it cannot be the conclusion of a strictly practical reasoning, that is to say a reasoning that provides knowledge of what needs to be done, in other words of an action. The type of reasoning that seeks the truth of a statement is essentially different from the type of reasoning that is made when it is time to actualise it.

Anscombe relates an Aristotelian example, paraphrasing it in modern language. She writes:

[16] *Intention*, § 33.

- Vitamin X is good for all men over 60
- Pigs' tripes are full of vitamin X
- I'm a man over 60
- Here's some pigs' tripes.

One can deduce that the man will take the tripes. However, that this is a good thing for me is not in itself enough to ensure a conclusion. There are many other possibilities.

The universal premise 'it is necessary for all men over 60 to eat all food containing vitamin X they find before them', is an *insane* premise. Only negative universal premises can hope to avoid such label of insanity.

Therefore the 'major premise' in practical syllogism cannot be a positive norm such as "always do X" or "always doing X is good, necessary, convenient, useful, appropriate, etc" (where X describes a specific action) and no one will do such a thing when it is time to decide what to do in a concrete situation, because this type of premise always refer to absurd cases such as «all dry food should be eaten».[17]

The proper practical syllogism only occurs when there is something to be obtained, that is when desire comes into play, and it consists in the agent's reasoning on how to attain what he desires. In this sense the desired object is the principle of the action, it is what moves the agent, and it should be the reasoning's destination. The purpose of the reasoning is not to discover how to reach the desired object, but to reach it.

What can be retained from this discussion is that, in order to achieve an end, the following elements are all essential: the end itself, the means to reach it, and the ability to deliberate that is characteristic of man and that is based on the fact that *bonum est multiplex*, good is multiform, as Anscombe later observes in a reflection on will, stating that even «goodness is ascribed to wanting in virtue of the goodness (not the actualisation) of what is wanted».[18] What is required is, we can dare to say, a return to action, that essential characteristic of practical knowledge in which the causal relationship between action and intention is neither for Aristotle nor for Anscombe mediated by normative categories such as "duty" or "necessity". Here Anscombe seems to capture the truth of Aristotle's argument on practical reasoning, which states that when reason says that an action is immediately practicable and desire tends towards it as it is good, the individual acts immediately.[19] Aristotele writes: «For in the case of things made the principle is in the maker – it is either reason or art or some faculty, while in the case of things done it is in the doer – viz. will, for

[17] See *Eth. Nic.*, VII, 1147 a 1-10.

[18] *Intention*, § 40.

[19] See E. CARLI, *Mente e azione. Un'indagine nella filosofia analitica. Wittgenstein, Anscombe, von Wright, Davidson*, Il Poligrafo, Padova 2003, p. 187.

that which is done and that which is willed are the same».[20] A correct action ends up being the truth of wisdom (*phronesis*), the end of which is acting well and it is this very end that desire tends towards. As Kenny also states, it appears possible to conclude that theoretical reasoning is a reasoning that moves «from true to true», whereas practical reasoning goes from the goodness of something mentioned in the premises to a good conclusion, so the movement is «good to good».[21]

Despite the limits that have been revealed and the consideration that the practical syllogism is not issue of ethical nature, the merit of Anscombe's reflection is that of having outlined a model for the comprehension and explanation of human action, the origin of which lies in the action itself, in the desired object, in that orientation without which it would not be possible to draw the following conclusion: «Hence choice is either desiderative reason or ratiocinative desire, and such an origin of action is a man».[22]

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[20] *Metaphysics,* VI (E), 1, 1025 b 20-30.

[21] A. Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will*, Duckworth, London 1979, p. 146.

[22] *Eth. Nic.*, VI, 2, 1139 b 5.

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Abstract: *The present paper proposes to analyse the role of the practical syllogism in G.E.M. Anscombe's theory of action. To this end, I have first of all chosen to examine, even if in broad terms, the conception of practical syllogism as it is present in the Aristotelian doctrine, and to reveal/delineate some critical points found within it. The following section is the central part of the paper, where, starting from § 33 of Intention, a reflection is carried out on the practical syllogism, which is among Aristotle's most significant discoveries, chiefly bringing into focus its teleological prospective. Action, in Anscombe's thought, almost seems be the cornerstone of a profound, and in a certain sense "contextual", comprehension of the subject.*

Keywords: *G.E.M. Anscombe, Aristotle, Ethics, practical syllogism.*