One of the central and most famous ideas in Elizabeth Anscombe’s book *Intention* is that intentional action is action *under a description* (Anscombe 1957, §11ff.). The idea is that one and the same action can be described in many different ways, and that the action may be intentional under some of those descriptions and not under others. For example, it may be that under the description ‘putting the book down on the table’ an action of mine is intentional, whereas it – the very same action – is unintentional under the description ‘putting the book down on a puddle of ink’ (Anscombe 1981, 208). Even if both descriptions are true descriptions of what I am doing, only the former captures my action *qua* intentional.

What consequences does this idea have? It is sometimes supposed that if intentional action is action under a description, then an action can be intentional only if the relevant description belongs to the linguistic repertoire of the agent. This would mean that an agent who is not acquainted with the description ‘putting a book down on a table’ (or with some non-English equivalent) could not put a book down on a table intentionally. Such an agent may put a book down on a table, all right – but if so, her putting the book down on the table cannot be intentional.

Ian Hacking is one who seems to think that this is a straightforward consequence of Anscombe’s view that intentional action is action under a description. Hacking writes:
The thesis that [intentional] action is action under a description has logical consequences [...]. When I decide to do something, and do it, I am acting intentionally. There may be many kinds of actions with which I am unacquainted, and of which I have no description. It seems to follow from [Anscombe’s] thesis that I cannot intend to perform those things. [...] The limitation is not a physical constraint or a moral prohibition. It is a trivial, logical fact that I cannot form those intentions. (Hacking 1994, 235-236)

Anscombe herself, however, appears to resist this sort of conclusion. In her 1979 paper, ‘Under a Description’, she seems to take issue precisely with the sort of reading that Hacking is advocating in the passage just quoted. This happens in her discussion of whether animals that have no language can have intentions and act intentionally. According to Anscombe, her claim that intentional action is action under a description in no way undermines the common sense idea that some creatures with no language can have certain intentions and perform certain actions intentionally. She writes:

[L]et’s suppose that a bird is landing on a twig so as to peck at bird-seed, but also that the twig is smeared with bird-lime. The bird wanted to land on the twig all right, but it did not want to land on a twig smeared with bird-lime. [...] Landing on the twig was landing on bird-lime – we aren’t considering two different landings. So, if we form the definite descriptions, ‘the action (then) of landing on the twig’, ‘the action (then) of landing on a twig with bird-lime on it’, we must say they are definite descriptions satisfied by the same occurrence, which was something that the bird did, but under one description it was intentional, under the other unintentional. That the bird is not a language-user has no bearing on this. (Anscombe 1981, 209-210.)
Several of Hacking’s critics have invoked precisely this passage as conclusive evidence that his reading of Anscombe is wrong (Haddock 2002, Sharrock and Leudar 2002). But no one has given due acknowledgement to how natural it is to read Anscombe in the way Hacking does. Even when faced with the just quoted passage, one may continue to feel the strong attraction of Hacking’s interpretation. Indeed, the attraction may be strong enough to make one want to explore the possibility that Hacking is in fact more faithful to Anscombe’s most valuable insights than Anscombe herself. Perhaps what Anscombe says about the bird is inconsistent with the idea that intentional action is action under a description, as that idea gets developed in *Intention*.

This proposal is of course uncharitable to Anscombe, and I will eventually reject it. My point is just that it cannot be rejected offhand. As a matter of fact, the claim that intentional action is possible only for someone who is acquainted with the description under which the action is intentional might quite easily seem to resonate with deep and central parts of Anscombe’s outlook.

In particular, this claim might seem to fit like a glove with Anscombe’s rejection of dualism and psychologism in the philosophy of action. As Hacking rightly notices, Anscombe ‘crisply argues that an intentional action is not, for example, an organized sequence of doings plus an inner, private, mental, intention’ (Hacking 1994, 235). It is quite natural to think that such a rejection of dualism is fuelled by the idea that an agent can Φ intentionally only if she is acquainted with the description ‘Φ’. After all, descriptions belong to some public, intersubjective and historically situated language. Hence, the idea that what an agent can do intentionally is determined by her linguistic repertoire seems congenial to the idea that intentions are not ‘private’ in any pernicious, dualist sense, but are necessarily parasitic on public linguistic resources. Indeed, one might even feel like asking: how could Anscombe not
subscribe to the idea that an agent can intentionally \( \Phi \) only by being acquainted with the description ‘\( \Phi \)’, since that idea seems to lend such direct and strong support to that anti-dualistic view of intentional action which is so central to her overall project in *Intention*?

To someone who conceives of Anscombe’s reasons for rejecting dualism in such terms, what she says about the bird will seem utterly puzzling. The puzzle is this: By accepting the notion that the bird intentionally lands on the twig so as to peck at bird-seed, isn’t Anscombe accepting precisely that conception of non-linguistic, pre-linguistic intentions that underlies that dualist view of intentional action which she has been working so hard to undermine?

Anscombe’s answer to this question is clearly ‘No!’ In fact, her view of the dialectical situation is quite opposite to the one I have just rehearsed. It is not just that she denies the connection between the idea that intentional action is action under a description, and the idea that intentional action requires that the relevant description belongs to the linguistic repertoire of the agent. Turning the whole allegedly anti-dualist argument given above on its head, she suggests that the view that there is such a connection actually manifests a failure to free oneself from the view of intentional action as involving a spurious ‘inner process’. Anscombe suggests that it is the one who thinks that there *is* such a connection who falls prey to psychologistic fantasies. For, she argues, someone who sees a connection here must be taking the claim that an action is intentional under a description to imply that the relevant description ‘is in some sense written into something inside the agent’, and that ‘the agent ha[s] a thought *about* a description’ (Anscombe 1981, 209). Against this way of reasoning, Anscombe insists that we can say of a bird that it lands intentionally on a twig; that we can say that it does so in order to peck at bird-seed; and that ‘[t]his way of talking does not presuppose that the bird has any thoughts about descriptions’ (ibid.).

Now, is this a powerful counterargument? *Must* someone like Hacking be a dualist or psychologist in disguise, by tacitly presupposing that the description under which the action is
intentional ‘is in some sense written into something inside the agent’, and that ‘the agent ha[s] a thought about [the] description’? The answer, I think, is clearly no. Anscombe is being much too impatient here. It is of course true that there is a gap in Hacking’s argument: it does not follow immediately from the claim that intentional action is action under a description that the description must belong to the linguistic repertoire of the agent. However, the gap can certainly be filled otherwise than by adding a premise to the effect that the agent must be thinking about the description, or must have the description somehow written into something inside her.

In fact, what Anscombe herself says early on in Intention about the distinguishing feature of intentional action might be seen to lend further support to Hacking’s reading, by providing the material for a much more satisfactory way of filling the gap in his argument. What I have in mind is an idea for which Anscombe is well known and which is absolutely central to her whole approach – namely, the idea that ‘[w]hat distinguishes actions which are intentional from those that are not […] is that they are actions to which a certain sense of the question “Why?” is given application; the sense is of course that in which the answer, if positive, gives reason for acting’ (Anscombe 1957, §5).

In this passage, Anscombe seems to tie the intentionality of action very closely to what happens in linguistic exchange of a certain sort – linguistic exchange in which someone asks the agent why she is performing a certain action, and the agent can answer by giving reasons for so acting. Again, thinking of intentional action in terms of the possibility of this sort of linguistic exchange characterizes Anscombe’s whole method, and part of her motivation for this method is precisely that it is designed to avoid the dead-end of postulating spuriously ‘private’ intentions (1957, §4). Now, someone like Hacking may well want to argue that it is precisely this tie between intentional action and the ability to understand and answer the ‘Why?’-question that shows why intentional action is possible only if the agent is acquainted
with the description under which the action is intentional. After all, if the agent were not acquainted with the description, she could not participate in the envisaged sort of linguistic exchange – and hence, according to what may seem like Anscombe’s own methodological standards, there would be no substantive reason to ascribe any determinate intentions to the agent.

Thus, it might seem that in order to defend Hacking’s reading, there is no need to suppose that the agent has the description somehow ‘written into something inside her’. Nor is there any need for the idea that the agent ‘thinks about’ the description. Rather, the crucial point is one that Anscombe herself appears to insist on: namely, that the agent is able to tell us about her intentions if we ask her why she is doing such-and-such. Judging from the pivotal paragraphs 4 and 5 of Intention, Anscombe might seem to think that intentions that could not come to the surface in such a linguistic exchange is indeed spuriously ‘private’, and cannot be part of a sound conception of intentional action.

So, it might seem as if we have managed to identify a tension between some of the most fundamental ideas in Intention, and what Anscombe says about the bird in her 1979 ‘Under a Description’ paper. In the paper she argues that it is true to say of the bird that it lands on a twig intentionally, and that it does so in order to pick at birdseed. She also argues that the bird’s behavior was unintentional qua landing on a twig smeared with birdlime. Against this, the following, seemingly Anscombian counterargument seems possible: since the bird is not a language-user, the distinction between what it does intentionally and what it does unintentionally will not be possible to draw in terms of answers to the questions, ‘Why did you land on the twig?’ and ‘Why did you land on a twig smeared with bird-lime?’. A language-using creature could have given us the requisite answers in terms of which we could draw the distinction: such a language-using creature could have answered that it landed on the twig in order to pick at bird-seed, and that it didn’t know it was landing on a twig smeared
with bird-lime. However, since the bird is not a language-user it cannot give such answers, and cannot understand our questions.

So, from Anscombe’s own perspective, should not the distinction between intentional and unintentional action lack application in the case of the bird?

Now, since he is unaware of Anscombe’s discussion of the bird, Hacking feels no need to deliver this defense of his reading. But I do think the argument is natural and have considerable appeal, given that one wants to try to defend Hacking’s conclusion by making points that at least prima facie seem like ones that Anscombe herself would agree with. So, the interest of the argument is that it makes the following questions urgent: Why does Anscombe insist that the distinction between intentional and unintentional action applies to the behavior of the bird? Isn’t that claim just inconsistent with what she says in Intention? And if it is not: What is it about her conception that we have failed to take into account if we find inconsistency here?

To answer these questions we must look closer at what Anscombe actually says in §§4 and 5 of Intention. In fact, her discussion in these paragraphs is much more complex and nuanced than I have just made it seem. For one thing, she never says that the question ‘Why?’ must always be directed at and answered by the agent. It is true that in the cases she discusses in the book, it is usually the agent who is being asked and who is expected to answer the ‘Why?’-question. But Anscombe never excludes the possibility that this question can sometimes legitimately be directed at an onlooker, who can answer the question on behalf of the agent.

Moreover, Anscombe points out that on many occasions, we do not have to ask the ‘Why?’-question at all in order to identify under what description an action – be it human or non-human – is intentional. On many occasions, we can simply see what an agent is doing intentionally. As Anscombe puts it: ‘I am sitting in a chair writing, and anyone grown to the
age of reason in the same world would know this as soon as he saw me’. What is and is not an agent’s intention will in many cases ‘be clear without asking him’ (§4).

These points are intimately connected with Anscombe’s very delicate and difficult handling of the issue of first-person authority in relation to intentional action. According to Anscombe, there is such authority, but with many qualifications; the authority is not absolute. This subject requires a separate study; all I want to point out here is that what Anscombe in fact says about the role of the ‘Why?’-question in §§4 and 5 of *Intention* does not stand in any obvious conflict with her 1979 claim that a bird may intentionally land on a twig in order to peck at bird-seed. In fact, a careful reading shows that what she says in these paragraphs is entirely compatible with the view that the bird’s behavior is intentional, since her remarks leave open the following possibility: *we* can simply *see* that the bird intentionally lands on a twig in order to pick at bird-seed, and so the ‘Why?’-question has application even if the bird cannot understand it. Due to what we can observe in the bird’s behavior, we can legitimately answer the question on the bird’s behalf. We can ask ourselves: ‘Why did the bird land on the twig?’, and truthfully answer: ‘It did so in order to pick at bird-seed’. Similarly, we can ask: ‘Why did the bird land on bird-lime?’, and truthfully answer: ‘It didn’t know it was doing that’.

But is this Anscombe’s view, really? Isn’t it quite a strange conception, that the intentional character of the bird’s behavior is something we can just *see*? It is of course true that this idea fits quite well with ordinary linguistic practice. In everyday life, we wouldn’t hesitate to say of a bird that we see that it is landing on a twig in order to peck at bird-seed. But isn’t it plausible that this is just a bad habit - a piece of illegitimate and pre-scientific anthropomorphism?

To substantiate this worry, let us think a little harder about what Anscombe says about the case when she can immediately be seen to be sitting in a chair, writing. To repeat, she
says: ‘anyone grown to the age of reason in the same world would know this as soon as he saw me’. Now, isn’t the problem about ascribing intentions to the bird precisely that we cannot be said to live ‘in the same world’ as such a speechless brute? Of course we live on the same planet, in the same physical environment. But the relevant notion of ‘sameness’ is not such a merely extensional one. What Anscombe must mean is that she and I live in the same world, intensionally speaking. It is because we conceive of our environment in similar terms that I can see that she is intentionally sitting in a chair writing. And now the worry about the bird is that it cannot be said to share a world with us in that intensional sense, and, hence, that we cannot ascribe any intentions to it without being guilty of illegitimate anthropomorphizing.

Donald Davidson’s work offers an instructive way of spelling out this kind of worry. Davidson inherits from Anscombe the view that one and the same action can be described in different ways, and that an action can be intentional under one description and not intentional under another: ‘If, for example, I intentionally spill the contents of my cup, mistakenly thinking it is tea when it is coffee, then spilling the coffee is something I do [...] though I do not do it intentionally’ (Davidson 1980, 45). For Davidson, however, just like for Hacking, this leads to the claim that only language-using creatures can have intentions and act intentionally. But Davidson is much clearer than Hacking about the reasoning he uses to reach that conclusion. To begin with, Davidson argues that since intentional action is action under a description, and since ascriptions of intentions create intensional contexts, a creature credited with intentions (and other propositional attitudes) must be ascribed a discriminative capacity that is hard to make sense of unless we think of the creature as a language-user. Hence, Davidson claims, ‘if a creature cannot speak, it is unclear that intensionality can be maintained in the description of its purported beliefs and other attitudes’ (Davidson 2001, 99). Or, as he puts it elsewhere:
One can believe that Scott is not the author of *Waverley* while not doubting that Scott is Scott; one can want to be the discoverer of a creature with a heart without wanting to be the discoverer of a creature with a kidney. One can intend to bite into the apple in the hand without intending to bite into the only apple with a worm in it; and so forth. The intensionality we make so much of in the attribution of thoughts is very hard to make much of when speech is not present. The dog, we say, knows that its master is home. But does it know that Mr Smith (who is his master) is home, or that the president of the bank (who is his master), is home? We have no real idea how to settle, or make sense of, these questions. (Davidson 1984, 163)

Why, then, are these questions hard to make sense of? After all, one might think that we *can* say of the dog that it knows that its master is home, even if we cannot say of it that it knows that Mr Smith or the president of the bank is home. Of course, the dog’s conception of his master is not as rich as it would be for a grown-up human being. But why isn’t a less rich conception sufficient for intensionality and for intentionality? At least *prima facie*, it does not seem unreasonable to think that there are low-level, unsophisticated conceptions in terms of which even a speechless brute such as a dog can know, believe, intend, want, and so forth. But Davidson is categorically negative on this point: ‘such creatures do not actually have propositional attitudes’ (Davidson 2001, 102).

The pillar on which Davidson’s skepticism rests is his radical *holism* of interpretation. Consider his response to Norman Malcolm’s famous example of a dog who is chasing a cat, and who, as Malcolm puts it, ‘thinks the cat went up [an] oak tree’ – for the dog ‘rears up on his hind feet, paws at the trunk as if trying to scale it, and barks excitedly into the branches
Davidson questions Malcolm’s attribution of a thought to the dog. According to Davidson, if Malcolm is right,

the dog must believe, under some description of the tree, that the cat went up that tree.

But what kind of description would suit the dog? For example, can the dog believe of an object that it is a tree? This would seem impossible unless we suppose the dog has many general beliefs about trees: that they are growing things, that they need soil and water, that they have leaves or needles, that they burn. There is no fixed list of things someone with the concept of a tree must believe, but without many general beliefs, there would be no reason to identify a belief as a belief about a tree, much less an oak tree. Similar considerations apply to the dog’s supposed thinking about the cat. (Davidson 2001, 98)

Davidson would apply the same argument to Anscombe’s bird: We cannot say of the bird that it lands intentionally on a twig so as to peck at bird-seed, if we do not also ascribe to it a host of other attitudes, among which will be many general beliefs about twigs, trees, plants, nourishment, and so on and so forth. And Davidson’s crucial point is that this set of beliefs will have to include beliefs of such sophistication that it will seem utterly gratuitous to say of a creature that has no language that it has those beliefs: ‘no matter where we start, we very soon come to beliefs such that we have no idea at all how to tell whether a dog has them, and yet such that, without them, our confident first attribution looks shaky’ (Davidson 2001, 98).

David Finkelstein has criticized Davidson’s use of holism to prove that speechless brutes cannot have propositional attitudes. According to Finkelstein, the problem is not with the holism per se: it seems right that if we say of dog that it thinks that a cat is up a tree, we thereby ascribe to the dog a lot of other beliefs about trees and cats. However, as Davidson himself notes, there is no fixed list of such beliefs, and no well-determined point at which we
have to say that a suggested set of beliefs does not suffice to have the concept of a tree. A corollary seems to be that, according to the holistic view, having a concept such as the concept of a tree is not an all-or-nothing matter, but something rough-and-ready that can come in degrees. But if so, what can stop us from conceiving of the dog as having a concept of a tree? – a concept that is in many ways less rich and more primitive than ours, but which is still sufficiently similar to be recognizable as a concept of a tree. After all, as Finkelstein notes, the dog’s concept is not completely barren, for the dog knows plenty of things about trees: ‘that squirrels climb them, that cats climb them, that squirrels jump from one to another, that there is often dog urine on them, that leashes can get wrapped around them, that they are outside, and so forth’ (Finkelstein 2007, 271). Certainly, the dog’s concepts of cats, squirrels, lashes and urine will also be less developed than ours. But why should that be a problem, if holism is taken fully seriously? The dog’s network of concepts will not be as extensive as ours, but why assume that that would stop it from qualifying as a network of concepts at all? At least, Finkelstein argues, the burden of proof seems to be Davidson’s:

[H]ow are we to say how many general beliefs about trees a creature must have in order to think of something as a tree? If we merely rely on our intuitions here, we’ll probably say that however many general beliefs a dog has is enough. (After all, the skeptical conclusion isn’t intuitively appealing.) (Finkelstein 2007, 271.)

Let us return to the worry about Anscombe’s bird. The problem was that, unlike in the case of a fellow human being of whom we can know simply by seeing him that he is intentionally sitting in a chair writing, it is not clear that the bird shares a world with us in the intensional sense required for such observational knowledge to be possible. Davidson’s holistic argument can be seen as spelling out this worry. According to Davidson, we can share
a world in the required, intensional sense only with another language-user. Now Finkelstein’s objection can be put as follows: if we think through the holistic viewpoint, we find that the relevant notion of ‘sharing a world’ is not an all-or-nothing matter, and that nothing in the holistic conception should stop us from accepting the common sense notion that we share enough of a world with a dog or even a bird to say of such a creature that it can think ‘that a cat is up a tree’, or that it can intentionally ‘land on a twig so as to peck at bird-seed’. The fact that the creature has no language does have a bearing on how rich the dog’s or the bird’s world can be, but it does not mean that there is no world for us to share.

If this is right, holism offers no genuine threat against the ordinary view that a bird can intentionally land on a twig in order to peck at bird-seed. Rather, it shows us why such a description may be all right, whereas a more sophisticated description – say, that the bird intentionally lands on the 23rd twig from the top of London’s oldest oak tree, so as to watch the 125th episode of South Park on the TV in the neighboring flat – is crazy.

Notice, however, that in her 1979 paper, the sort of distinction Anscombe claims that we can make between what the bird does intentionally and what it does unintentionally is not a distinction between a ‘primitive’ and a ‘sophisticated’ action description in this sense. The descriptions that figure in Anscombe’s example – ‘the action of landing on the twig’, ‘the action of landing on a twig with bird-lime on it’ – are both ‘primitive’: if one is within the conceptual reach of the bird, then so is the other. Or, if the notion of ‘bird-lime’ sounds too sophisticated, just replace it with the notion of ‘sticky substance’ – such replacement makes no difference to the sort of point Anscombe wants to make. Her point is this: Even when we have two such primitive descriptions of what the bird does, we can say that the bird’s action is intentional under one description and not under the other. And the question becomes: On what ground can we make this distinction?
Even Finkelstein is right in his criticism of Davidson, his argument is of no help here. Indeed, with respect to cases such as Anscombe’s bird, Davidsonian and Hackingian worries about the fact that the bird has no language seems to return, and with a vengeance. The question remains: How on earth are we going to decide what the bird does intentionally and what it does unintentionally, if there is no such thing as asking the bird about it?

One may try to handle this worry by arguing that there is something like the ‘natural expression’ of the bird’s intention, and that this natural expression is what functions as the basis for the distinction between intentional and unintentional bird-behavior. The notion of ‘the natural expression of an intention’ is used by Wittgenstein, in Philosophical Investigations, §647:

What is the natural expression of an intention? – Look at a cat when it stalks a bird; or a beast when it wants to escape.

However, it is far from clear how this Wittgensteinian notion can help us. What, more precisely, would be the relevant intentions in the bird example, and what would be a plausible candidate for their ‘natural expression’?

Here is one suggestion. The bird is landing on the twig. The question is with what right we can say that it does so with the intention to peck at bird-seed, rather than with the intention to get stuck at bird-lime. Given this way of structuring the example, the Wittgenstein-inspired idea would be that there is such a thing as the bird’s ‘natural expression’ of the intention to peck at bird-seed, and that that natural expression is what provides the legitimate basis for our answer.

But it is still unclear what the ‘natural expression’ would be in this case. Is it the landing on the twig that would be the natural expression of the intention to peck at bird-seed? But the
bird might have landed on the twig even without the further intention to peck at bird-seed. So, is it some ensuing behavior on the bird’s part – say, its stretching its neck toward the seed, and perhaps even its eating it – that is supposed to express the intention in question? Or does the expression consist of the bird’s landing on the twig plus such ensuing behavior?

Well, but remember: the bird gets stuck on bird-lime. So, we can assume that it never comes to engage in these ensuing behaviors. Once stuck, its every effort is directed toward getting loose from the lime. And yet it seems we can rightly say that it landed on the twig so as to peck at bird-seed. This suggests that we are bypassing something essential in Anscombe’s discussion. Consider the point that even if there were no bird-seed around – even in the case where the bird just lands on the twig without any further intention – we often want to say that it landed on the twig intentionally. This point serves to emphasize that Anscombe’s concern here is with intentional action, not just with the further intentions with which an action is performed.

So, what if we ignore the bird-seed and just ask: why does Anscombe think we can say of the bird that landing on the twig was something that it did intentionally, whereas landing on bird-lime was something it did unintentionally? At this point, it becomes even more difficult to see how Wittgenstein’s notion of the ‘natural expression of an intention’ can be of any relevance. What would be the ‘natural expression’ that makes a landing on a twig intentional? Is it that the bird has a certain amount of visible control over the landing? But you can land intentionally even if you lack a certain control over the process; and in any case, the notion of ‘having control’ over something is just as intentional as the notion of ‘intending’, so we will not have come any closer to a solution of the problem. One might of course try to explain the notion of ‘natural expression’ in a reductionist fashion, and argue that there are criteria of intentionality that can be fully determined in non-intentional terms.
But such reductionism seems hopeless, and also entirely foreign to both Anscombe and Wittgenstein. I don’t want to consider it any further here.

Interestingly, Anscombe explicitly criticizes Wittgenstein’s notion of a ‘natural expression of an intention’. In *Intention* §2, she writes:

> Intention appears to be something we can express, but which brutes [...] can have, though lacking any distinct expression of intention. For a cat’s movements in stalking a bird are hardly to be called an expression of intention. [...] Intention is unlike emotion in this respect, that the expression of it is purely conventional; we might say ‘linguistic’, if we will allow certain bodily movements with a conventional meaning to be included in the language. Wittgenstein seems to me to go wrong in speaking of the ‘natural expression of intention’.

This passage has puzzled many commentators, and I will not try to give anything like a full interpretation of it (for an excellent discussion, see Stone and Moran 2009). Rather, I want to end by identifying a feature of Anscombe’s philosophy that I think is of central importance for the adequate interpretation of the passage. It is a feature that is more Aristotelian than Wittgensteinian, and which is absolutely crucial to her treatment of the issues that I have been discussing in this paper.

With what right can we say of the bird that its behavior is intentional *qua* landing on the twig so as to peck at bird-seed, whereas its behavior is not intentional *qua* landing on a twig smeared with bird-lime? From Anscombe’s point of view, the piece missing so far in our discussion is this: We can say of the bird that it intentionally lands on a twig so as to peck at bird-seed, because it belongs to our understanding of what it is to be a bird that it is good for the bird, as bird – it befits a bird – to land on twigs and peck at bird-seed. It is part of the
bird’s nature, in something like the Aristotelian sense, to land on twigs so as to peck at bird-seed. That’s the kind of animal that a bird is. By contrast, getting stuck in bird-lime is not something that can be conceived of as in the interest of a bird *qua* bird. Rather, it is something that hinders it from carrying out its natural tasks. Hence, under that description, the bird’s behavior is not intentional.

So, like Wittgenstein, Anscombe is working with a notion of what is ‘natural’. But Anscombe’s notion is not one that fits well with Wittgenstein’s conception of a ‘natural expression of intention’. Rather, Anscombe’s idea is that our conception of intentionality, when it is applied to creatures with no language, is inextricably bound up with a conception of what belongs to birds *as birds*, dogs *as dogs*, cats *as cats*, and so on. Her view is that it is only by reference to such a notion of the nature of a bird that we can say of a given bird that it is intentionally landing on a twig so as to peck at bird-seed. In general, as long as the agent has no language, Anscombe thinks that talk of intentional action can get a grip only because we have a conception of what befits the agent *qua* member of a certain species. And our ordinary, unhesitating attribution of intentionality to animals shows how absolutely fundamental such a conception is in our relationship to them. Indeed, I think Anscombe would argue that it is not just our ordinary, pre-scientific view of animals that is permeated by such a conception, but that this sort of conception is an indispensable part of biological science *qua* biology.

It has often been noticed that Anscombe has this sort of neo-Aristotelian view of the realm of the living. This sort of view has been further developed by contemporary philosophers inspired by Anscombe, such as Philippa Foot and, most daringly and extensively, by Michael Thompson (Foot 2001, Thompson 2008). What has not been sufficiently appreciated is the connection between this view and Anscombe’s views about animal action and intentionality. A failure to appreciate this connection makes readings such as Hacking’s seem more plausible than they actually are.
But then, what difference does language make? What, according to Anscombe, happens when the possibility of conventional expressions of intention becomes available? Well; its not that intentional action becomes possible for the first time. Nor is the difference simply an increase in complexity or sophistication: it is not just that human agents can have more fine-grained and in other ways more advanced intentions than animals. Rather – and here Anscombe’s view seems to involve a break with traditional forms of Aristotelianism – with language comes the possibility of intentions that are not strictly determined by something called ‘human nature’. Whereas Anscombe thinks a bird’s nature qua bird fixes what the bird can be said to do intentionally, she sharply rejects the idea that desires ‘which relate to human good as such (in contrast with the good of film stars or shopkeepers) [must] be in some obscure ways compulsive’ (Anscombe 1957, §39). She explicitly claims that it is ‘perfectly possible to say: “At this moment I lose all interest in doing what befits a man”’(1957, p. 74, n. 1). For example, she argues that it is perfectly intelligible that a Nazi’s killing a group of Jewish children is the conclusion of a valid practical syllogism that has as its first premise a desirability characterization to the effect that it befits a Nazi to kill Jewish children. Certainly, she argues, the premise is ethically monstrous. However, she insists, such considerations have no bearing when it comes to understanding the intentional character of the action (§ 38).

To sum up, the fact that an agent is a language-user makes a huge difference for Anscombe. But the difference is not the one that Hacking and Davidson propose: it is not that intentions are possible only when language is present. Rather, what language makes possible is a certain freedom from the strictures of nature. Language allows one to pursue goals that are not determined by the fact that one belongs to a given biological species. Anscombe’s bird and Wittgenstein’s cat can act intentionally, but what they can do intentionally is strictly limited by the fact that the bird is a bird and the cat is a cat. That is how nature matters in the determination of the intentional actions of speechless brutes, according to Anscombe; not in
there being something like ‘natural expressions’ of their intentions. The expression of intention is a conventional matter, a matter of language, and it makes possible a kind of freedom that is distinctively human.

References


