

# Anscombe and Wittgenstein

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## Abstract

In this study, I have focussed on the importance of Wittgenstein in the thought of Elizabeth Anscombe. Although Anscombe detached herself from her master's approach, her encounter with him was extremely important in her own work. In particular, I will take into consideration common points and discrepancies between the two philosophers. I will also recall Anscombe's *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (first published in 1959) on its anniversary.

**Keywords:** Anscombe; Wittgenstein; reason; cause; intention; action; mentalism; behaviourism

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## Resum. *Anscombe i Wittgenstein*

En aquest estudi m'he centrat en la importància de Wittgenstein en el pensament d'Elizabeth Anscombe. Tot i que Anscombe es va separar de l'enfocament del seu mestre, la seva trobada amb ell va ser de gran importància per al seu propi treball. En particular, prendré en consideració punts comuns i discrepàncies entre ambdós filòsofs. També em referiré a *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's "Tractatus"*, llibre publicat per primera vegada el 1959 i el seixantè aniversari del qual es va celebrar l'any passat.

**Paraules clau:** Anscombe; Wittgenstein; raó; causa; intenció; acció; mentalisme; conductisme

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## Summary

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'No philosopher's work has assimilated Wittgenstein's insights in a more intimate and profound way than that of Anscombe',<sup>1</sup> says Anselm Müller, a pupil of Elizabeth Anscombe. However, while the philosophical closeness between Wittgenstein and Anscombe is indisputable, it should be noted that Anscombe distanced herself from her master's philosophy by developing her own. Müller goes on:

[...] Anscombe was Wittgenstein's pupil, not his disciple or follower: his teaching was her inspiration, not a belief to be accepted by the authority of her mentor, before his understanding and examination. On the contrary, given the kind of charisma and irresistible influence Wittgenstein evidently had on his students, and given the fact that what he had to say was after all original in an astonishing and remarkably well-articulated and argued way, Anscombe is to be admired for the independence of her thinking.<sup>2</sup>

In this brief study,<sup>3</sup> I will first show the relationship between Wittgenstein and Anscombe, highlighting how much the encounter with her teacher left a mark upon Anscombe's own work. Then I will discuss common points and discrepancies between the two philosophers.

## 1. Introduction

Anscombe devoted much attention to Wittgenstein's work throughout her research. While surpassing and detaching herself considerably from her master's thought, there are nevertheless essays and commentaries right up to the last years of his work. The only 'systematic' work about Wittgenstein is *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*.<sup>4</sup> However, the second phase of Wittgenstein's thought is decisive in Anscombe's own work.

Anscombe's philosophy, as Roger Teichmann recalls,<sup>5</sup> particularly in the more strictly moral sphere, is based mainly on three philosophers: Aristotle, Wittgenstein and Hume. Aristotle for the direction of thought, Wittgenstein for the philosophical method and Hume for his ability to raise important questions not easily discerned with the naked eye.

It is widely noted<sup>6</sup> that in his writings following *Tractatus* and after the 1930s, Wittgenstein's thinking changed. Consider only *The Blue Book*, *The Brown Book*, *Philosophische Bemerkungen*, *Philosophische Grammatik* and *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, etc.

1. Grimi (2014: 437).

2. *Ibidem*.

3. For this study I refer to ch. 2 'L'insegnamento di Wittgenstein', and ch. 4 'Intenzione', in Grimi (2014). Some parts of the text are taken from there and then reworked.

4. Anscombe (1965). For a detailed analysis of Anscombe's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* please read ch. 2 'L'insegnamento di Wittgenstein', cit., where I analyze the entire work in detail.

5. Teichmann (2008: 53).

6. Literature on this subject is constantly growing; the chapter *Transizione* by Marconi is interesting (1977: 59-101).

If many philosophers followed this two-phase approach to understanding Wittgenstein's thought, Anscombe, though certainly aware of the progress in his thought, chose to make a different interpretation of *Tractatus* that showed Wittgenstein's subsequent work as a continuous of the past. The shift from *Tractatus* to *Untersuchungen*, according to Anscombe's proposed interpretation, was not a passage from the ideal logic to ordinary language but a shift in the conception of the logic of language. Marconi notes in this regard:

Even the image of Wittgenstein that emerges from the literature specifically dedicated to his thought has changed several times, and profoundly, from the Thirties to today... Usually 1959 (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* by Elizabeth Anscombe) is the beginning of a different reading of the book from '22, in which it is less closely associated with neo-positivism and instead is related to the work of Frege and Russell, to which it explicitly refers. Anscombe, benefiting from a long personal custom with Wittgenstein and his explanations of *Tractatus*, could speak of the book as an episode in his philosophical path, without referring it to other theoretical experiences and emphasizing the influences explicitly recognised by Wittgenstein: in addition to Frege and Russell, and Schopenhauer as well.<sup>7</sup>

Wittgenstein's works following *Tractatus* are decisive in understanding the maturation of Anscombe's thought. In particular, there are two invaluable reflections in the famous masterpiece *Intention* that I shall briefly present here: the criticism of mentalism (and therefore the relative rejection of behaviourism), and the distinction between causes and reasons.

## 2. Criticism of mentalism and rejection of behaviourism

Wittgenstein observes that the confusion that reigns in empirical psychology is because concepts are uprooted from language. What is needed is a grammar of psychological terms, as we read at the end of *The Blue Book*:

[...] one may say that what we were concerned with in these investigations was the grammar of those words which describe what we are calling 'mental activities': seeing, hearing, feeling, etc. And this amounts to the same as saying that we are concerned with the grammar of 'phrases describing sense data'.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein claimed that 'the use of the word in practice is its meaning.'<sup>9</sup> Here, he introduces the notion that the concept for which a word acquires its meaning is closely connected with its use. So, in analysing the grammar of an expression such as 'This description is derived from my sensory data', one might wonder if there is continuity between the way several individuals use the expression and its meaning. Wittgenstein proposes the following example, a question that one could easily ask oneself on a critical

7. Marconi (1977: 6).

8. Wittgenstein (1958: 69).

9. *Ibid.*

level when faced with the phenomenon of colour blindness: 'I never know what the other person really means by "brown", or what he really sees by "brown", or what he really sees when he (truthfully) says he sees a brown object'. One of Wittgenstein's hypotheses would be to use two different words instead of the single word 'brown': one word for 'his particular expression' and another with the meaning that others, not only the subject in question, could also understand. However, Wittgenstein immediately observes that this solution is fallacious: there is, in fact, something wrong in the subject's conception of the meaning of the word 'brown'. Read this passage:

Saying: 'I derive a description of visual reality' cannot mean something analogous to 'I derive a description from what I see here'. I can, for example, see a table in which a coloured square is related to the word 'brown', and also a spot of the same colour elsewhere; and I could say: 'This table shows me that I must use the word "brown" to describe this stain.' This is how I can derive the word I need in my description. But it would be meaningless to say that I derive the word 'brown' from the particular chromatic impression I had.<sup>10</sup>

To Wittgenstein, therefore, the meaning of an expression depends on its use: mind, action and language seem to be predisposed to act in unison. Therefore, there is no need to resort to private language, to internal processes. Wittgenstein therefore criticises mentalism; Saul Kripke's text, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, is significant in this regard. Kripke retraces Wittgenstein's paradox from the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, pointing out the problem left open, namely how to prove that psychological terms do not refer to mental entities. Wittgenstein wrote in *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (§201): 'This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule'.<sup>11</sup> Kripke dedicates the second chapter of the aforementioned text, 'The Wittgensteinian Paradox', to this problem of Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox and formulates an arithmetic example. Suffice it to recall this passage here:

It simply is in the nature of a sense to determine a referent. But ultimately the sceptical problem cannot be evaded, and it arises precisely in the question of how the existence of any mental entity or idea in my mind can constitute 'grasping' one particular sense rather than another. The idea in my mind is a finite object: can it not be interpreted as determining a *quus* function, rather than a plus function? Of course, there may be another idea in my mind which is supposed to constitute its act of assigning a particular interpretation to the first idea; but then the problem obviously arises again at this new level. (A rule for interpreting a rule again.) And so on. For Wittgenstein, Platonism is largely an unhelpful evasion of the problem of how finite minds can give rules that are supposed to apply to an infinity of cases. Platonic objects may

10. Ivi, 74.

11. Wittgenstein (1953: §201, 81).

be self-interpreting, or rather, they may need no interpretation; but ultimately there must be some mental entity involved that raises the sceptical problem.<sup>12</sup>

Kripke is not in full agreement with Wittgenstein; in fact, he comments: '[...] my own linguistics do not entirely agree with Wittgenstein's remark', and continues, 'coming to understand, or learning, seems to me to be a "mental process" if anything is'.<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein's direct students, such as Anscombe<sup>14</sup> and von Wright, revisited the impasse that Kripke highlights in this passage; that is, they revisited that investigation of the mind left open by Wittgenstein. Significant in this regard is *Intention*, in which Anscombe conducts a detailed analysis of intentional action and related problems.

It is also good to remember that Wittgenstein's philosophy also contains a criticism of behaviourism; that is, to Wittgenstein, it is not possible to access mental states by reducing them to behaviour. Wittgenstein writes: 'to see "this" does not mean: to have this reaction, because it is possible for me to see without having any reaction'.<sup>15</sup> As Eddy Carli also observes, with Wittgenstein it is correct to ask not whether thought, understanding or intention are mental processes, but under what circumstances you say 'I think', 'I know', 'I mean', etc. Here, not only is the relevance that Wittgenstein gives to the context evident, but we also begin to glimpse the basis of that first-person ethics that will later characterise the authors who will revisit the theme of virtues, including Anscombe (cfr. *The First Person*). Anscombe will also take up the antimentalism that characterises Wittgensteinian argumentation, as well as making the need for an 'adequate philosophy of psychology' one of her theses in *Modern Moral Philosophy*.

### 3. The distinction between causes and reasons

3.1. It is useful to highlight the close correlation between intention and action. In fact, in contemporary action theory, many theories have been put forward that can be traced mainly to two types of orientation: 1. the anti-causalist position, or 2. the causalist position, which then leads to naturalism. In both perspectives, intention is recognised as an important element of human action.

Eddy Carli<sup>16</sup> identifies the two major conceptual cores present in contemporary philosophy with an analytical orientation. The first current refers to Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Untersuchungen* and considers action connected to intentionality and subjectivity. In this perspective, to get an explanation of action, it is necessary to go back to logical and interpretative models unlike those used by the sciences: the reasons for action are not comparable to the

12. Kripke (1982: 54).

13. Ivi, 49-50.

14. Mary Geach notes that Anscombe did not accept Wittgenstein's interpretation of Kripke; see Anscombe (2011: XVII).

15. Wittgenstein (1980: §83).

16. Carli (2003: 33 and following).

causes that determine the movement of the natural world. We find some of Wittgenstein's students in this camp, among them Anscombe and von Wright. Compared to Wittgenstein's work, however, there is an additional element in their analyses, namely a systematic analysis of the mental state of intention and of those elements that consider action intentional, which is why it differs from simple body movements. Anscombe dealt with action based on a practical interest, without pursuing an interest in speculative knowledge or an ethical and normative investigation. It was precisely Anscombe who promoted the revival of the Aristotelian practical syllogism as a model of explanation of human action. In spite of the other syllogisms that have a causal foundation, practical syllogism captures the teleological element of the action, the direction towards an end deliberately chosen by the agent. The logic of action promoted by von Wright also takes this perspective, in that it is capable of directing human beings' intentional action by taking the normative aspects related to human action into account. According to von Wright, the teleological explanation of action must be 'logically conclusive':<sup>17</sup> 1. the agent intends to obtain *p*; 2. the agent realises that s/he cannot obtain *p* except by doing the action *a*; so 3. the agent is willing to do *a*.

Anscombe and von Wright are also staunch proponents of that 'Wittgensteinian antimentalism' according to which the intention or the will behind the external manifestations of action is not taken into account metaphorically, because in doing so they would be considered the causes of behaviour or action. The teleological explanation in such a perspective would thus dismiss a causal explanation and action equated with any natural phenomenon. Therefore, according to an anti-causalist position, it is possible to provide different descriptions of the same action, and they are precisely what characterise an action as intentional or not. To Anscombe, and to von Wright, an action is intentional under a particular description that characterises it. Therefore, from Anscombe's point of view, an action cannot be explained by the nomological-inferential model of scientific laws, since in doing so it is impossible to grasp its teleological aspect. With regard to Anscombe's proposal, Carli writes:

The logical character of practical reasoning, which characterises man's action, can only be grasped by Aristotle's *practical syllogism*. And it is for this reason that the method of practical inference becomes a true and proper explicative paradigm of human action and occupies a crucial position in the explanation of intentional action.<sup>18</sup>

There is also a second perspective that supports the possibility of providing a causal explanation of action, similar to an explanation of natural phenomena. The *causes* of an action here match the *reasons*, a distinction that will be very important to Anscombian action. We find W. V. O. Quine, D. Davidson

17. Von Wright (1971: §§ 8-10).

18. Carli (2003: 35).

and J. Hornsby in favour of a ruthless rationalisation of action. Davidson in particular has made or promoted a sort of naturalisation of intentional action.

A common note in these different orientations is the reference to intentional action, which is always postulated at the beginning of the argument, albeit on different grounds.

3.2. The main characteristic of Anscombe's philosophy is revisiting the distinction between causes and reasons<sup>19</sup> of the action placed in a teleological horizon. The relationship between causes and reasons in significant action is discussed in the numerous paragraphs in *Intention* (§§10-19) that Anscombe dedicates to wondering if reasons are also causes of actions or if they are different from causes, supporting an anti-causalistic position with respect to the explanation of intentional action and revisiting the teleological aspect inherent in intention. This perspective was strongly criticised by Donald Davidson in a 1963 essay entitled 'Action, Reason and Causes'.<sup>20</sup>

In §16, Anscombe proposes summary definitions of the core elements of the usual theory of action. In particular:

- Intentional actions: a sub-class of events in a person's history which are known to that person *not* just because s/he observes them.
- Mental causality: characterised by being known without observation and excluded from the above category.
- The question 'Why?': it applies to intentional actions. The question 'Why?' is not an 'intentional criterion' if the answer is evidence to expresses a cause, including mental cause.
- Answer to the question 'Why?' (the question is given the correct meaning and the question 'Why?' applies; there is an intentional criterion when one of the following three conditions applies):

a) simply mention past history	the answer is already characterised as a reason for acting, i.e., as an answer to the question 'Why?' in the requisite sense
b) give an interpretation of the action	the answer is already characterised as a reason for acting, i.e., as an answer to the question 'Why?' in the requisite sense
c) mention something future	it is an answer to that question if the ideas of good or harm are involved in its meaning as an answer, or if further enquiry elicits that it is connected with 'interpretative' motive, or intention <i>with which</i>

From this summary, the role played by intentional action is central. Anscombe says: 'We do not mention any extra feature attaching to an action at the time it is done by calling it intentional. Proof of this is supposing there is

19. See Carli (2002).

20. Davidson (1980).

such a feature'.<sup>21</sup> Anscombe then wonders: what makes an intentional action? Calling an action intentional means assigning it to the class of intentional actions. However, it is necessary to give a description under which an action is intentional in order to be able to assert the intentional nature of the action; the same action may be intentional under one description but not under another. Candace Vogler, commenting on this paragraph<sup>22</sup>, highlights the Anscombian question of whether a description can show what should accompany or be added to an action in order to make it an intentional action, i.e., whether such a description can provide the basis for distinguishing between actions and mere behaviour. Anscombe says no. Vogler continues by observing a critical point in the narrative which she leaves partially open: on the one hand is the mind, on the other is the action. What we want to know is the relationship between them, or rather how the mind forms action. Vogler writes: 'In order to give shape to the action, the mind must choose those descriptions according to which the action will be intentional'.<sup>23</sup> Also interesting in this respect is P. Geach's comments on this passage:

It seems absurd that an intention should steal upon one unawares, like a fit of anger or fear. On the other hand, how can there be a voluntary act of intending? [...] People have sometimes identified as acts of intending what are perfectly genuine acts of the mind, namely acts of 'saying in one's heart' something like, 'What I am about (to do) is so-and-so'. But such performances will not fulfil the role of intention. For one thing, in ever so many cases of intentional action, nothing like this is 'said in the heart' at the time. Theories of acts of intention cover up such awkward cases by such phrases as 'virtual intention' or 'habitual intention'. [...] Again, as regards what I say in my heart, just as much as what I say aloud, the question may be raised whether I really meant it. [...] But something as to which we can again ask what was meant and how it was meant cannot fulfil the role of determining the way an outward act is meant.<sup>24</sup>

Anscombe continues her argument by stating that intentional action must be considered in its unity, for intention is not something that sticks to an act *ad hoc*; she writes:

And in describing intentional actions as such, it will be a mistake to look for the fundamental description of what occurs such as the movements of muscles or molecules – and then think of intention as something, perhaps very complicated, which qualifies this. The only events to consider are intentional actions themselves, and to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it.<sup>25</sup>

21. Anscombe (2000: §19).

22. Vogler, (2010: 203-215).

23. Ivi, 207.

24. Geach (2000: 73-74).

25. Anscombe (2000: § 19).



It is interesting here to recall Eddy Carli's exposition of the anticausalistic thesis of Anscombe's intentional action on the following three topics: 1. the topic of the question 'Why?', 2. the topic of logical connection, 3. the 'general' topic of intention. Anscombe criticizes the thesis that intentional actions are actions (or movements) caused by mental states and events, the occurrence of which explains the occurrence of the action.

The first argument that we summarise here refers to the question 'Why?', as Anscombe understands it, i.e., as a question followed by an answer that provides the reason for acting. There are cases in which this question cannot be applied, and therefore what we have is a simple indication of the cause of the action and not the reason for the action; think of the case of involuntary actions. One can also give the case in which the question 'Why?' is answered by giving the mental cause of the action and not the reason, for example if one is suddenly frightened by a scary face and the jolt causes the glass in one's hand to break after dropping to the ground. Obviously, the glass does not fall and break due to an intentional action. In this case, Anscombe denies that the mental causes can be linked to the intentional action. She does not deny, however, and it is good to take note here, that there are mental causes of particular events, or that such events can cause actions.

The second argument in support of the anticausalist thesis is 'logical connection'. Carli always reminds us that a causal relationship can be discovered only inductively, and never through a conceptual analysis; therefore, since the relationship between reason and action is logical-conceptual, there is no causal connection between reasons and actions. In short: 'Since there is a logical relationship between the intention *I* of an agent *X* to do *A* and his/her doing *A*, *A* cannot be an effect of *I*'.<sup>26</sup> Carli gives the following example: let's suppose that a person is running towards a departing train with the intention of getting on that 9:00 a.m. train bound for Venice, and with the belief that that is a train. The action is recognised as an intentional action of which an intentional description is given of the reasons it was carried out. In conclusion, therefore, it can be said that 'between the propositional content of the intentional states explaining the action and the description by which that action is described there is therefore a conceptual and not causal connection'.<sup>27</sup>

The third and final argument is a general argument against any causalistic version of the mind and intentional action. It criticises causalism and mentalism; it denies that 'intentional action can depend on introspection, that is to say on any distinct or psychological action that exists prior to intentional action and that it is therefore the cause of it'.<sup>28</sup> Carli observes that Anscombe's criticism of introspection is greatly influenced by Wittgenstein's investigations elaborated in the *Philosophische Untersuchungen*.

26. Carli (2003: 98).

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

In conclusion, it is good to recall Davidson's position<sup>29</sup> that causes and reasons are identical in support of a causal analysis of intentional action and therefore in opposition to Anscombe's perspective.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

As Mary Geach observes in the introduction to one of the last posthumous collections of Anscombe's essays, if we compare the two philosophies of Wittgenstein, Anscombe was more linked to the second one. It was precisely his love for truth that led Wittgenstein, notes Geach, to recognise that the theories contained in *Tractatus* did not adequately describe language. Anscombe found a great deal in this famous writing, so much that she wrote a book about it, agreeing, for example, with the criticism that there is such a thing as causal connection.<sup>31</sup> However, such a study must not obscure her main focal point, which, as Geach observes, came to converge in the works in the second part of his thought, although she then distanced herself from it. In this sense, in order to understand the Anscombian oeuvre as a whole, it is necessary to have Wittgenstein's thought in mind, in addition to the debate around the author then in vogue in England, which was influenced by the major philosophical trends (think of the developments since the Vienna Circle, for example), as well as the situation that was raging in Europe.

Therefore, while the professional, affective and historical context in which Anscombe worked cannot be overlooked, the originality factor that characterises her work should also be noted, as she was as attentive to the real as the innovative in her research; as attentive to training students as lively yet critical debate in the dialogue between colleagues.

The way Wittgenstein's work and Anscombe's thought are related is so complex that it would require an entire study. Here, we wanted to present only the main points of Wittgenstein's philosophy, which are necessary to understand Anscombe's thought, thus giving more space to the work that she dedicated to it, which changed the interpretation with which we discuss and read *Tractatus*.

Below is a list of the essays that Anscombe dedicated to Wittgenstein. Obviously, her relationship with this brilliant thinker cannot be reduced to a *collection* of articles, let alone a summary; in this sense, I trust that the list below can serve as a good springboard for further research aimed at new developments.

29. See J. Hornsby (2011: 105-127), which compares Anscombe and Davidson's two different positions with respect to the cause-reason relationship.

30. For a detailed analysis, please see Davidson (1980); E. Carli (2003, ch. VI).

31. Cfr. Ivi, XVI. As Geach points out, the theme of causality was one of the main issues dear to the author. See also notes Anscombe's interest in Hume and his essay from the same collection, 'Hume on Causality: Introductory', in Anscombe (2011: 95-123).

1952

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1953

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1954

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1956

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1959

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- 'Wittgenstein the Elusive' [Letter to the Editor], in *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 May 1959, p. 321.

1961

- Translation: L. Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1961.

1962

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1965

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1967

- Translation: L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1967.

1969

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1970

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1973

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1974

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- ‘Wittgenstein’ [Letter to the Editor], in *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 Jan. 1974, p. 55.

1977

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1978

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1981

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1982

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1984

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1985

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1989

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1991

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1993

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1995

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