



ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE: GIANT OF CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT

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Nearly sixty years ago, an essay appeared which was to have far-reaching influence in the area of ethics. It was published in the January 1958 issue of *Philosophy*, and entitled, "[Modern Moral Philosophy](#)." The author was Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret [Anscombe](#).

This essay obliterated the secular basis for morality. In other words, only God could be the rationale for morals. Without God, there could never be any sort of morality. To demand so is simply confused thinking.

The same thing had been expounded by [Nietzsche](#) and [Dostoevsky](#) earlier, but their analysis had not been thorough, nor did it go after the philosophical traditions that facilitated a God-dependent, yet Godless morality.

Nietzsche lost his way in trying to understand what comes after God, while Dostoevsky could not, in fiction, do a thorough enough critique of atheism.

The brilliance of Anscombe is that she destroyed the very possibility of a secular rationale for morality, which leaves only two choices. Either morality is to be abandoned altogether, or it must return to its historical ground, namely, God, by way of Aristotelean [virtue-ethics](#).

Thus, why be good? Because God demands it of us, because it is good for us as human beings to be good.

What does all this mean? Before trying to understand Anscombe's argument, let us take a brief biographical turn, which will assist in the explanation, in that, there is a close link between action and ideas.

Anscombe was born in 1919, in Limerick, Ireland, the child of English parents. Her father was an army officer stationed there. She studied at Oxford and Cambridge. At Oxford, she met Peter Geach, also a philosopher, and the two were married in 1941 and would go on to have three sons and four daughters.

A year earlier, in 1940, she formerly converted to Roman Catholicism, and her faith guided her philosophy deeply. She remains one of the most important Christian philosophers of the modern era.

In 1942, she graduated and continued her studies at Cambridge, where she became a student of [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#). This would lead to a lifelong friendship between the two, until Wittgenstein's death in 1951. She became one of his executors, and also one of the leading scholars of his thought, famously translating his [Tractatus](#).

Many anecdotes are related of her rambunctious nature, such as, when told that women should not wear pants, she promptly took them off.

In 1951, she campaigned for Oxford University not to grant an honorary doctorate to President Harry Truman, because of his decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a decision she said was deeply immoral. She failed in this attempt.

Three years earlier, in 1948, while still a tutor, Anscombe rather infamously met the celebrated [C.S. Lewis](#) in a debate at the [Socratic Club](#) at Oxford.

Anscombe questioned Lewis's assumptions, since he tried to use philosophical concepts without properly explaining, or perhaps understanding, them. This led him to fallacies and mistakes.

Lewis made the claim that since [naturalism](#) asserts all thinking to be the result of irrational causes, naturalism itself is therefore irrational because it too is the result of thinking. There is confusion here between [ground](#) and [cause](#).

Anscombe corrected him. Although she too disagreed with naturalism, she did not find Lewis's refutation convincing.

Irrational causes may very well be founded on both rational and non-rational explanations, and thus to say that a ground (naturalism) is determined by just one type of cause (the irrational one) is simply false.

Rather, it is fairer to say that for naturalism all thinking is the result of irrational causes, but those causes cannot be just irrational alone (which is the mistake naturalism makes), since action is the result of so many things, including rationality and non-rationality.

This turn to psychology is crucial to Anscombe's thought, for she is considered to be the founder of the [philosophy of action](#), which is the attempt at understanding the psychology of human motivation by differentiating intention from intentionality.

Intention is linked to desire (wanting to do something), while intentionality is that large web of reasons which both make us do things and also explain why we do (or need to do) something.

As well, intention has two results - the desired one, and its unintended consequences.

For example, a man wants to cut the grass with his gas lawnmower because he wants a neat lawn. But his mowing (intention) has the unintended consequence of noise. The man does not mow in order to make a lot of noise, but his desire to mow his lawn creates the noise.

But she is far better known for her clarifications in the area of morality. In her 1958 essay mentioned above, she effectively dismantled the two pillars of ethical thinking, namely, [utilitarianism](#) and Kantian [deontology](#).

Utilitarianism may be summarized as doing that which brings the greatest good to the greatest number

of people. This means that doing a bad thing for the sake of good results is morally acceptable.

For example, a sniper who must shoot a terrorist who is about to blow up a building with lots of people inside it.

The sniper is doing, in a different way, the exact same thing that the terrorist is about to do - kill. However, the sniper is perceived to be doing a lesser sort of evil, which will have good results - the saving of many lives.

Such rationale, Anscombe calls, "consequentialism," whereby the consequences of human actions are the most important.

Instead, Anscombe offers a clearer approach - morality is not about doing good according to the prevalent standards of human beings. Rather, morality is listening to, being guided by, the goodness that has been cultivated inside you.

This nurturing of goodness is done by practising virtues, which can only happen by obeying the laws of God, as warranted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Modern-day morality fails because it says goodness is to be found only in actions, and not in people. This is the basis of the plague of "[virtue-signaling](#)" that pervades our culture today, or even gun-control. Both of these concepts are founded in the belief that by denying people the ability (guns) to do bad things, then bad things will not happen.

Thus, morality, for consequentialists, turns into controlling people's actions and behavior by legislation, or otherwise (propaganda).

Anscombe also dismantles notions, such as, the social contract (that morality is what society agrees to, or demands), the common good (what's good for the goose is good for the gander), and even Kantian deontology (that we ought to do the right thing, which is simply a reworked version of the Golden Rule). But these are all consequentialist explanations, because they maintain humans do not, cannot, possess goodness, only their actions are good or bad.

Therefore human action must be controlled, since humans are morally empty and therefore prone to do anything, if given the means. Deny the means and you deny evil.

This sort of explanation is rooted in the "law conception of morality," as Anscombe points out, and this has empowered the state with legislative authority. In other words, the state has become God.

But since belief in the Christian God disappeared in the West from the 17th century onwards, trying to derive some sort of "morality" from a "source" (the state) which replaces God makes no sense, since what you end up with is judicial nitpicking that seeks to curtail behavior.

In this way, the state becomes an unregulated power, which facilitates all kinds of immorality because it is a corrupted version of "God."

In other words, morality can only come from God, and is the direct result of obeying His laws - and yet people do not want to believe in any of this, but they still want to be moral.

This is the contradiction, the great confusion of our age - you cannot be moral by observing the secular laws of the state, because they are designed to regulate, not to inculcate individual goodness. Therefore, human laws are always unequal - fair for some, unfair for others.

Thus, Christian morality has nothing to do with what makes us happy, or even trying to do those things that have good results.

On the contrary, Judeo-Christian morality is only concerned with obeying God's laws - no matter what the consequences, no matter how unpopular such obedience might be, or even how illegal.

These laws sustain a deep relationship of the individual with the transcendent (the Divine). Morality and goodness are the consequences of such a relationship.

Those that seek to follow a morality without God possess a "corrupt mind," says Anscombe, which means that such individuals easily do immoral things, thinking that they are doing the right thing.

Thus, abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, embryo-destructive research, and even gayness and gender-confusion are all products of "corrupt minds," for all of these actions are immoral, but are explained as good by the state.

In other words, it is the corrupt mind which feels the need to virtue-signal, while believing in nothing.

It is the corrupt mind that demands conformity of any kind, while advocating a belief in atheism.

It is a corrupt mind that demands justice while believing in no divine laws.

It is a corrupt mind that demands goodness while possessing no goodness of its own, or explaining what goodness is.

Indeed, well into her 80s, Anscombe was a tireless campaigner against abortion and led protests at abortion clinics, and even getting arrested. She ardently wrote against the misuse of sexuality in all its present-day perversions.

In response to the vast confusions that possesses society today, Anscombe suggests that society itself needs to be honest and abandon all concern with trying to be moral without God.

Instead, it should try to map out the psychology of why people want to do good things (philosophy of

action), which is a very, very difficult task. Secularism is not up to the challenge.

But Anscombe is not only a critic; she is also a true philosopher - she shows a way forward. She suggests that one way to start recovering morality in the modern, immoral world is to return to Aristotle's concept of virtue, which means learning how to be courageous, noble, temperate, and just.

By practising to bring these four virtues into our lives, we will begin to understand the need for morality, since none of these four virtues have anything to do with the laws of the secular state.

In this way, people might acquire the habit being truly virtuous, and this can then lead them to a desire for the good (God), and after that a desire for morality, which is the obeying God's commands.

Or, like Anscombe herself did, people can start believing in God again, and learn about Him, and then learn to love Him by obeying His laws.

We only corrupt ourselves if we try to be moral without personal virtue, or try to live without God.

Moral philosophy can no longer exist without first dealing with Anscombe's challenge. To try to do so is simply blindness and confusion.

But there is also hope, of course, because her ideas are leading people to virtue - on some [campuses](#), there are "Anscombe Societies."

Elizabeth Anscombe's thought is best summarized in the [words](#) of G.K. Chesterton, for "...it is entirely the praise of Life, the praise of Being, the praise of God as the Creator of the World."

The [photo](#) shows a portrait of the philosopher, Elizabeth Anscombe.

