

Gem Anscombe Modern Moral Philosophy

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Modern Moral Philosophy

G. E. M. Anscombe

I will begin by stating three theses which I present in this paper. The first is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty – moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say – and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of “ought,” ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible, because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My third thesis is that the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

Anyone who has read Aristotle's *Ethics* and has also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them. The concepts which are prominent among the moderns seem to be lacking, or at any rate buried or far in the background, in Aristotle. Most noticeably, the term “moral” itself, which we have by direct inheritance from Aristotle, just doesn't seem to fit, in its modern sense, into an account of Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle distinguishes virtues as moral and intellectual. Have some of what he calls “intellectual” virtues what we should call a “moral” aspect? It would seem

so; the criterion is presumably that a failure in an “intellectual” virtue – like that of having good judgment in calculating how to bring about something useful, say in municipal government – may be *blameworthy*. But – it may reasonably be asked – cannot any failure be made a matter of blame or reproach? Any derogatory criticism, say of the workmanship of a product or the design of a machine, can be called blame or reproach. So we want to put in the word “morally” again: sometimes such a failure may be *morally* blameworthy, sometimes not. Now has Aristotle got this idea of moral blame, as opposed to any other? If he has, why isn't it more central? There are some mistakes, he says, which are causes, not of involuntariness in actions, but of scoundrelism, and for which a man is blamed. Does this mean that there is a moral obligation not to make certain intellectual mistakes? Why doesn't he discuss obligation in general, and this obligation in particular? If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about “moral” such-and-such, he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don't come together in a proper bite.

We cannot, then, look to Aristotle for any elucidation of the modern way of talking about “moral” goodness, obligation, etc. And all the best-known writers on ethics in modern times, from Butler to Mill, appear to me to have faults as thinkers on the subject which make it impossible to hope for any direct light on it from them. I

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Gem Anscombe modern moral philosophy has significantly shaped contemporary ethical discussions and continues to influence debates in moral theory. Elizabeth Anscombe, known as Gem Anscombe, was a British philosopher whose work in the 20th century challenged the prevailing utilitarian and consequentialist paradigms. Her writings emphasized the importance of intention, action, and moral reasoning, providing a robust framework for understanding ethical behavior. This article will explore Anscombe's contributions to modern moral philosophy, her critique of contemporary moral theories, and the continuing relevance of her work today.

Introduction to Gem Anscombe

Elizabeth Anscombe (1919–2001) was a prominent philosopher known for her

profound insights into ethics, philosophy of action, and philosophy of language. A student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Anscombe's intellectual lineage heavily influenced her approach to philosophical questions. Her most famous work, "Modern Moral Philosophy," published in 1958, is a critical examination of the state of moral philosophy in the modern era.

Key Contributions of Anscombe to Modern Moral Philosophy

Anscombe's contributions can be categorized into several key themes:

1. Critique of Consequentialism

One of Anscombe's most significant critiques is directed at consequentialist theories, which judge the morality of actions based on their outcomes. In "Modern Moral Philosophy," she argues that such approaches are fundamentally flawed because they lack a coherent understanding of moral obligation and intention.

- **Moral Context:** Anscombe emphasizes that moral actions cannot be assessed solely on outcomes; the intention behind an action plays a crucial role in determining its moral worth.
- **Example of Consequentialism:** She critiques the idea that a morally right action is one that maximizes overall good, highlighting the potential for such reasoning to justify immoral acts if they lead to perceived benefits.

2. The Importance of Intention in Moral Philosophy

Anscombe posits that understanding an action requires examining the agent's intention. She argues that intentions are integral to moral assessment and cannot be divorced from the actions themselves.

- **Moral Agency:** Anscombe argues that moral agents must be recognized as beings capable of intention and reasoning. This perspective challenges the idea that humans can be reduced to mere calculators of outcomes.
- **Practical Ethics:** By focusing on intentions, Anscombe's approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of ethical behavior, where the agent's motivations are considered alongside the act itself.

3. Reviving Virtue Ethics

In contrast to the dominant utilitarian and deontological frameworks, Anscombe's work contributed to the revival of virtue ethics. She advocates for an ethical framework that emphasizes character and the virtues that shape moral behavior.

- **Character over Consequence:** Anscombe argues that ethics should focus on what it means to be a good person, rather than merely evaluating the morality of specific actions based on their outcomes.
- **Influence on Later Thinkers:** Her emphasis on virtue ethics paved the way

for philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Philippa Foot, who expanded on her ideas in their own works.

Key Works and Ideas

Anscombe's philosophical contributions extend beyond "Modern Moral Philosophy." Other notable works include:

1. "Intention" (1957)

In this book, Anscombe explores the concept of intention in depth, arguing that understanding intention is essential for any moral evaluation. She distinguishes between different types of intentions and their implications for moral philosophy.

2. "The First Person" (1975)

In this work, Anscombe delves into the philosophy of language and the nature of self-reference, adding to her exploration of action and intention.

3. "Causality and Determination" (1971)

This work addresses the relationship between causality and moral responsibility, further developing her critique of the mechanistic view of human action prevalent in contemporary philosophy.

Impact on Contemporary Moral Philosophy

Anscombe's critique of modern moral philosophy has had lasting effects on ethical discourse. Her insistence on the importance of intention and virtue has led to a renewed interest in Aristotelian ethics and the moral implications of character.

1. Influence on Contemporary Thinkers

Many contemporary philosophers have drawn upon Anscombe's ideas, including:

- Alasdair MacIntyre: His work "After Virtue" reflects Anscombe's emphasis on virtue ethics and the shortcomings of modern moral theories.
- Philippa Foot: Foot has expanded on Anscombe's insights regarding moral virtues and has contributed to the development of contemporary virtue ethics.

2. Relevance in Ethical Debates

Anscombe's emphasis on intention and character remains relevant in various ethical debates, including:

- **Bioethics:** In discussions surrounding medical ethics, the intention behind actions (such as euthanasia or assisted suicide) is crucial in determining their moral standing.
- **Business Ethics:** The focus on character and virtue is increasingly recognized in corporate governance and ethical business practices, where intention and integrity play critical roles.

3. Critiques and Challenges

While Anscombe's ideas have been influential, they have also faced critiques:

- **Utilitarian Defense:** Proponents of utilitarianism argue that focusing on outcomes can lead to a more objective assessment of morality.
- **Complexity of Intention:** Critics contend that intentions can be ambiguous, making it challenging to assess moral actions solely based on intent.

The Lasting Legacy of Gem Anscombe

Gem Anscombe's contributions to modern moral philosophy have left an indelible mark on the field. Her critique of consequentialism, emphasis on intention, and revival of virtue ethics have reshaped moral discourse. As contemporary philosophers continue to grapple with ethical questions, Anscombe's insights remain a valuable resource, challenging us to consider the deeper implications of our moral choices.

Conclusion

In summary, Gem Anscombe's modern moral philosophy invites us to reflect on the complexities of moral reasoning. By prioritizing intention and character, she challenges us to think critically about ethical behavior in a world often dominated by utilitarian calculations. Her work not only critiques contemporary moral theories but also offers a compelling alternative rooted in the rich tradition of virtue ethics. As we navigate the moral landscape of the 21st century, Anscombe's philosophy serves as a guiding light, urging us to consider the moral implications of our actions and the intentions that drive them.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes of G.E.M. Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy'?

The main themes include a critique of contemporary moral philosophy, a focus on virtue ethics, and the importance of intention in moral actions. Anscombe

argues for a return to Aristotelian ethics and emphasizes the need for a moral framework grounded in human nature.

How does Anscombe critique the concept of moral obligation in modern ethics?

Anscombe critiques the notion of moral obligation by arguing that it is often disconnected from a coherent understanding of human actions and intentions. She believes that modern moral theories, particularly those that rely on categorical imperatives, fail to account for the complexities of moral situations.

In what way does Anscombe's work relate to the concept of intention?

Anscombe places significant emphasis on the role of intention in moral philosophy. She argues that understanding a person's intentions is crucial for evaluating their actions morally, suggesting that moral assessment cannot be divorced from the context and motivations behind actions.

What is the significance of virtue ethics in Anscombe's philosophy?

Virtue ethics is central to Anscombe's philosophy as she advocates for a return to character and virtues as the foundation of moral reasoning. She believes that modern ethics has neglected the importance of moral character, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding of moral behavior.

How has Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' influenced contemporary ethical discussions?

Anscombe's work has influenced contemporary ethical discussions by prompting a revival of interest in virtue ethics and the importance of intentions in moral philosophy. Her critiques of modern ethical frameworks have encouraged philosophers to reconsider the foundations of moral reasoning and to explore alternative approaches.

What impact did Anscombe's views have on the development of feminist ethics?

Anscombe's emphasis on the relational aspects of morality and the significance of personal intention and character has informed feminist ethics by highlighting the importance of context and the complexities of moral agency. Her work encourages a more nuanced understanding of ethical issues, particularly those affecting women.

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Explore Gem Anscombe's influence on modern moral philosophy and its enduring impact on ethical thought. Learn more about her groundbreaking ideas!

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