Elizabeth Anscombe on Rationalism

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0. Abstract.

Elizabeth Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” is rightly famous. In it, she argues explicitly for several theses and implicitly for several more; studying the essay, one gets the impression that these theses are related to one another by implication—but it’s not obvious precisely *how* they are related. In this chapter, I suggest—less controversially, perhaps—that at the heart of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is Anscombe’s rejection of what she calls “consequentialism.” I also suggest—more controversially, perhaps—that Anscombe is articulating a tension within consequentialism: the *form* of consequentialism presupposes the existence of a divine legislator, while the *content* of consequentialism presupposes the nonexistence of a divine legislator. In making this argument, I employ the work of David Solomon, a senior scholar of the work of Elizabeth Anscombe.

1. Introduction.

It seems uncontroversial to say that you’re responsible for whatever you do knowingly and freely. Indeed, this seems to be more or less a matter of definition.

Now, it ought surprise no one that what counts as knowledge and what counts as freedom are points of enormous controversy. But it may surprise some to learn that what counts as *doing* is also a point of enormous controversy: are you responsible for all that results from your action? According to what is sometimes called the “Doctrine of Double Effect,” the answer to this question is “no”: you’re responsible only for the results that you *intend*, whereas you’re *not* responsible for the results that you merely *foresee*. But how can you tell whether you intend a result that you foresee? Well, if the result *has* to occur for you to do what you intend to do—if, in other words, it is a means to your end, including in the degenerate case wherein it is itself your end—then you intend that result. Otherwise, though, you’re off the hook!

So runs the Doctrine of Double Effect, anyway. Now, there are many who deny it—and it isn’t hard to discern a reason to do so: if you freely do something that you know will have some set of results, then doesn’t it seem arbitrary to discriminate between some of those results and others? Indeed, one could ask, what could this do other than salve a guilty conscience?

Once one starts to think in this way, utilitarianism starts to seem the only rational ethical theory: if you are responsible for *all* of the results of what you do, then all that matters is whether those results are, on balance, good or bad. And this means that you’ll be tempted to do evil that good may come of it. Indeed, once you’ve started to think in this way, it’ll seem almost selfish to do otherwise—as though your integrity were more valuable than anything else whatsoever!

Not coincidentally, utilitarianism is the ethical theory implicit in the paradigm of modern rationality, economics; not coincidentally, it seems, John Stuart Mill—a paradigmatic utilitarian—was an economist. Nonetheless, Elizabeth Anscombe argues, utilitarianism is an ethical theory barely worth refutation: “If someone really thinks… that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Getting to this point, though, will take some doing. So, let’s begin at the beginning.

2. “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

It’s obvious that “Modern Moral Philosophy” is an astonishing essay; unfortunately, it’s rather less than obvious how to summarize it. Indeed, in his “Elizabeth Anscombe and the Late Twentieth-Century Revival of Virtue Ethics,” David Solomon suggests that it has no fewer than seven themes:

(1) It anticipates, and lays the groundwork for, the revival of virtue ethics a couple of decades in the future. (2) Along with Anscombe’s *Intention*, one of the classics of midcentury philosophy, published at approximately the same time, it inaugurates a new discussion of practical reason and largely invents the philosophical specialty of action theory. (3) It introduces the term—as well as the idea—of consequentialism into contemporary ethics. (4) It takes seriously the history of moral philosophy as well as the historical and cultural influence on ethical ideas in a dramatically new way and in a way that reinvigorates a serious interest in the history of moral philosophy among moral philosophers… (5) It argues… that the important differences in the history of moral philosophy are those between the modern and the classical, not the differences between modern traditions like Kantian rationalism and Benthamite utilitarianism that are merely minor variations on modern themes. (6) It raises serious questions about the coherence of the modern notion of “morality” as a distinctive and autonomous sphere of human life and evaluation. (7) It allows the voice of the moral philosopher to have a kind of moral content even when it is speaking from the perspective of the philosophical.[[2]](#endnote-2)

But it isn’t obvious—not initially, anyway—how these seven themes relate to one another. Solomon, for his part, doesn’t try to relate them as such. Instead, he merely reiterates what Anscombe herself takes to be its three themes, which she explains in this way:

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.[[3]](#endnote-3)

It’s obvious that Anscombe’s second and third themes correspond roughly to Solomon’s sixth and fifth themes, respectively; unfortunately, it’s not obvious—not initially, anyway—how her three themes relate to one another. Nonetheless, what follows is an interpretation of “Modern Moral Philosophy” according to which Anscombe’s three themes—and, for that matter, Solomon’s seven themes—are tightly integrated. According to my interpretation, the most important theme is Solomon’s third—that is, the problematization of what Anscombe calls “consequentialism.” One may be tempted to assume that, by this term, Anscombe means the doctrine that one ought act always to maximize good consequences—whatever consequences one assumes are good; utilitarianism is merely consequentialism that assumes that the pleasure of society—that is, according to John Stuart Mill, the satisfaction of its desires—is good. But reading her essay reveals that this doctrine, though not irrelevant to what Anscombe means by “consequentialism,” is not identical to it: she calls “consequentialists” some—W. D. Ross, for example—who are *not* consequentialists in *this* sense. Rather, by “consequentialism,” Anscombe seems to mean the doctrine that the consequences of an action are always *relevant* to whether it is right or wrong—such that *no* action is *absolutely* forbidden because, for each action, one can imagine *some* situation wherein it would be *obligatory*; while this doctrine is implied by the other—specifically, that one ought act always to maximize good consequences—the other does not imply it in turn.

According to my interpretation, the implicit thesis of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is that modern moral philosophers confront a dilemma: either there *isn’t* a moral sense of “ought”—in which case it makes no sense to say that one *ought* consider the consequences of every action—or there *is* a moral sense of “ought”—in which case it makes no sense to say that one ought consider the *consequences* of every action. Now, while the former horn of the dilemma is intuitive, the latter admittedly is not; it becomes more intuitive, though, when one considers Anscombe’s infamous argument that “ought” can have a moral sense—rather than, say, a prudential sense—only on the assumption that there is some legislator who imposes morality on us. Paradigmatically, such a legislator is divine; indeed, Anscombe suggests that we owe the moral sense of “ought” to Christianity—and, for that matter, to the Judaism and Stoicism that are its roots. According to Christianity, God commands us to do some things—or, at any rate, forbids us from doing some things—no matter the consequences: he forbids us absolutely from lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, and so on.

Now, theoretically, God *could* command us to do only one thing; presumably, he’d command us to do whatever it was that had the best consequences—when the situation was sufficiently dire, at any rate. Practically, though, it seems that he wouldn’t bother to command us to do this; at any rate, it seems that we wouldn’t bother to conceive of this as a divine command. For isn’t this what, barring legislation to the contrary, we’d do *anyway*?

3. A Millian Interlude.

In this regard, consider what John Stuart Mill, in his *Utilitarianism*, infamously calls his “proof” of the Principle of Utility:

The only proof capable of being given that an object is visible, is that people actually see it. The only proof that a sound is audible, is that people hear it: and so of the other sources of our experience. In like manner, I apprehend, the sole evidence it is possible to produce that anything is desirable, is that people do actually desire it.[[4]](#endnote-4)

According to the obvious way to interpret this argument, it’s wildly fallacious: while “visible” means *capable* of being seen and “audible” means *capable* of being heard, “desirable” means *worthy* of being desired—and though pleasure is obviously *capable* of being desired, the question is whether it’s therefore *worthy* of being desired. But there’s another way to interpret this argument—one less obvious, admittedly, but also such that the argument isn’t remotely fallacious: may it be that Mill *does* mean by “desirable” merely *capable* of being desired? In other words, may it be that Mill is denying that anything *is* worthy—or, for that matter, *unworthy*—of being desired? According to this interpretation, what Mill calls his “proof” is better understood as an inchoate articulation of an expressivist metaethics: the Principle of Utility is what *remains* when faith in a more-than-human lawgiver is no more—for what *else* would society demand of us other than that we satisfy its desires, whatever those happen to be?[[5]](#endnote-5) Indeed, this dovetails with what Mill says in his prior chapter concerning what he calls the “sanction” of morality: why would we maximize utility at some cost to ourselves unless society raised the cost of not doing so—whether by offering punishments and rewards appropriately or by brainwashing us into punishing and rewarding ourselves appropriately? Gone, in other words, is any suggestion that we can do what’s right *because* it’s right: motivated by pleasure and pain, we are merely animals—admittedly, especially smart and especially sympathetic animals.

This is, admittedly, a heterodox interpretation of Mill. Indeed, I’m not sure that Mill himself would like it: though it has the effect of making his doctrine more plausible, it also has the effect of making that doctrine more unsettling.[[6]](#endnote-6)

4. A Return to “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

In any case, my aim in this essay is to interpret Anscombe, not Mill. Again, according to my interpretation of her “Modern Moral Philosophy,” the essay turns on what Anscombe calls “consequentialism”: it’s because they all agree about consequentialism that the disagreements among modern moral philosophers are trivial—and they all agree about consequentialism because they’ve lost faith in a more-than-human legislator. However, faith in such a legislator is required for the moral sense of “ought” implicit in consequentialism to make any sense. These correspond, of course, to the second and third of Anscombe’s themes; she approaches her first theme—that we’ve no adequate philosophy of psychology—by arguing that, without faith in a divine legislator, we have to exchange an ethics of law for one of virtue.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In other words, if the idea of doing what’s right merely because it’s right assumes a faith that we’ve forsaken, then the only reason for us to do what’s right at some cost to ourselves is because doing so is the only way to become virtuous—and because only by becoming virtuous can we flourish. As Anscombe notes, though, we’ve lost any conception of flourishing according to which this is plausible; we’d have to reconstruct such a conception—which is, as Solomon notes with his first theme, precisely what those who call themselves “virtue ethicists” have done since the publication of “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

So much for Anscombe’s three themes—and, for that matter, Solomon’s first, fifth, and sixth themes. So much also for Solomon’s third theme, the introduction of “consequentialism” into moral philosophy: as I’ve argued, Anscombe’s essay makes most sense when one understands her frustration with consequentialism as the heart of that essay. So much as well for Solomon’s fourth theme, the reintroduction of history into moral philosophy: one understands best that consequentialism is wrong, Anscombe argues, when one understands it partially as a survival of Christianity—as it presupposes a moral sense of “ought,” which makes sense only insofar as one assumes the existence of a divine legislator. (Again, Anscombe seems to imply, the issue with consequentialism is that, while its *form* presupposes the existence of a divine legislator, its *content* presupposes the nonexistence of a divine legislator.)

But what about Solomon’s second and seventh themes? Well, the latter—that, basically, there’s no disconnection between normative ethics and metaethics—seems to emerge trivially from the revival of virtue ethics; indeed, Anscombe herself says as much. For example, one may insist that some actions are always morally wrong without thereby learning whether, say, punishing the innocent is always morally wrong. Indeed, this seems to explain the initial plausibility of intuitionism in metaethics: those who lose faith in a divine legislator but who nonetheless still experience “ought” as having a moral sense ask themselves what it *is* that they ought do—and yet, since they’ve lost faith in a divine legislator who *tells* them what to do, they’ve no way to answer this question!

Once one returns from an ethics of law to an ethics of virtue, though, one can ask only whether punishing the innocent is always *unjust*—and this, as Anscombe argues, is hardly a question at all:

If a procedure is one of judicially punishing a man for what he is clearly understood not to have done, there can be absolutely no argument about the description of this as unjust. No circumstances, and no expected consequences, which do *not* modify the description of the procedure as one of judicially punishing a man for what he is known not to have done can modify the description of it as unjust. Someone who attempted to dispute this would only be pretending not to know what “unjust” means: for this is a paradigm case of injustice.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Matters are more complicated, though, regarding the second theme mentioned by Solomon. As he argues, Anscombe reinvigorates action theory—not only in her “Modern Moral Philosophy” but also in her *Intention*, which had been published the previous year. While I’ve not room to discuss the latter text here, attentive readers may note that denying consequentialism seems by itself to commit Anscombe to a particular doctrine in action theory—that is, to the Doctrine of Double Effect: were you are responsible for *all* that results from your action, the *only* sane ethical theory would be utilitarianism—for, were every action good in many ways *and* bad in many *other* ways, what else could you do other than maximize the good and minimize the bad?[[9]](#endnote-9) After all, isn’t it better to do *less* evil than to do to *more* evil? But it’s easy to confuse this doctrine—which is, admittedly, more or less a matter of definition—with the doctrine that one ought to do evil so long as it’s less than the good that comes of it.

In other words, denying the Doctrine of Double Effect seems to imply consequentialism. In denying consequentialism, therefore, Anscombe is implying the Doctrine of Double Effect.[[10]](#endnote-10)

5. “Mr. Truman’s Degree.”

Consequentialism is misleading, Anscombe argues, in a way that is obvious: it tells us to do evil that good may come of it. But consequentialism is also misleading, she argues, in a way that is less obvious: it implies that, when we are tempted to do evil that good may come of it, our only options are *either* to do the evil *or* to forgo the good that would come of it. But our options, she says, are rarely so few as this: “The most important thing about the way in which cases like this are invented in discussions, is the assumption that only two courses are open: here, compliance and open defiance. No one can say in advance of such a situation what the possibilities are going to be.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Consider, relevantly, the conclusion of the Second World War: we Allies told ourselves that our only options were *either* to incinerate countless civilians, terrifying the Empire of Japan into capitulation, *or* to allow the deaths of many more in an invasion of the Home Islands—but in reality there were other options, such as allowing a *conditional* surrender. It’s only that our Bomb made us too zealous to consider them.

So Anscombe argues in “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” anyway. Famously, in bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Harry Truman incinerated countless civilians so as not to invade the Home Islands—did evil, in other words, so that good would come of it; because of this, Anscombe argues, he ought not be awarded an honorary degree from the University of Oxford. Indeed, this puts it mildly: she presents her boycott of the relevant ceremony in prudential terms, quipping that she fears “to go, in case God’s patience suddenly ends.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Her agnosticism in “Modern Moral Philosophy,” it seems, was professional rather than personal. Which is another way, of course, in which Anscombe was at odds with modern rationality.

6. Conclusion.

Better fewer dead than more, no? After all, it’s only rational!

Invariably, it seems, introductory courses in ethics discuss what’s called the “trolley problem”: why does it seem obviously right to redirect an out-of-control trolley from a track on which five people happen to be to a track on which only one person happens to be—whereas it seems obviously wrong to push one person in front of an out-of-control trolley in order to prevent it from continuing on a track on which five people happen to be? The answer, it seems, is the Doctrine of Double Effect: in the latter case, the death of the one is intended—for it’s a means to saving the five—whereas, in the former case, the death of the one is merely foreseen. Nonetheless, many philosophers reject this answer.[[13]](#endnote-13) Indeed, some of them argue that our intuitions in the two cases differ only because the latter involves what the former does not—specifically, pushing someone in front of an out-of-control trolley, which is *quite* unpleasant. The obvious implication of this argument is that, insofar as our intuitions in the two cases differ, we’re irrational: don’t the same number of people die, after all, in each case?

Obviously, Anscombe couldn’t approve of this answer to the trolley problem. Indeed, insofar as this answer is tempting, she disapproves of discussing the trolley problem at all:

The point of considering hypothetical situations, perhaps very improbable ones, *seems* to be to elicit from yourself or someone else a hypothetical decision to do something of a bad kind. I don’t doubt that this has the effect of predisposing people—who will never get into the situations for which they have made the hypothetical choices—to consent to similar bad actions, or to praise or flatter those who do them, so long as their crowd does so too, when the desperate circumstances imagined don’t hold at all.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Her worry seems to be that, once one convinces oneself that it’s only rational to do much evil that *more* good may come of it, it becomes easier for one to convince oneself that it’s only rational to do much evil that *some* good—especially, one supposes, some good for *oneself*—may come of it. When it comes to introductory courses in ethics, I’ve no idea whether she’s right—though, as a teacher of introductory courses in ethics, I’ll admit that her argument makes me anxious. Whether she’s right when it comes to American foreign policy—whether, in other words, murdering many civilians in order to save more civilians became, eventually, murdering many civilians in order to advance our national interest—is an exercise that I’ll leave to the reader.

1. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. W. David Solomon, “Elizabeth Anscombe and the Late Twentieth-Century Revival of Virtue Ethics,” in *Beyond the Self: Virtue Ethics and the Problem of Culture*, ed. Raymond Hain (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 227. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2nd edition, ed. George Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), § 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I argue that David Hume, in the relevant *Enquiry*, articulates a similar metaethics—indeed, articulates it better than Mill does—but this is arguably a topic for another time! [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, if our only reason to do what’s right—other than the punishments and rewards offered by society—is that we’ve been brainwashed into punishing and rewarding ourselves appropriately, then don’t we owe it to ourselves—in a prudential sense—to defy our feelings of guilt? It seems to me no coincidence that Friedrich Nietzsche implies thisvin his *Genealogy of Morality*—but this too is arguably a topic for another time! [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For whatever it’s worth, this seems to me too quick by half: one may not have faith in a divine legislator, but couldn’t one nonetheless have faith in another legislator who is more than human—such as a noumenal self? On that note, it seems to me that Anscombe interprets Immanuel Kant with not nearly enough charity; once again, though, this is arguably a topic for another time! [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Whether one should maximize total utility or average utility—and, assuming the latter, whether one should maximize *mean* or *median* utility—are questions without obvious answers. Fortunately, neither Anscombe nor I are utilitarians—so neither of us is obliged to answer them! [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. While I’ve no room to go into detail here, the Doctrine of Double Effect is implied in another way by Anscombe in her *Intention*, wherein she argues—in an exercise in ordinary language philosophy—that there is no such thing as intending an action as such. Rather, one intends an action only under some descriptions—and, therefore, doesn’t intend that action under some other descriptions: for example, one may intend to operate a particular pump while *not* intending thereby to make a particular noise—even though the two are, in *some* sense, one and the same act. Of course, if this is so, then consequentialism implies a false conception of action: it implies that each action is simultaneously intended under every true description of the relevant act—and so is done by no one in particular, since, for each act, there are infinitely many true descriptions. See G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. G. E. M. Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 71. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem,” *The Yale Law Journal* 94 (1984): 1395–1415. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)