G. E. M. Anscombe: 'Modern Moral Philosophy

The aim of the next week and a half: consider the articles we read, both in their own right, and how they relate to Aristotle; is what they say about Aristotle, right? do the objections they raise actually bite against him?

MMP is a badass paper; it crystallized a growing dissatisfaction with the going consequentialist and deontological ethical theories on offer at the time; it was incredibly influential, both immediately and to this day

Perhaps the central claim of Anscombe's paper is that the notions of 'moral obligation' 'moral ought' 'morally required', and really just 'moral' generally, can not work in a secular framework

Important to get the three main 'modern moral philosophies' on the table

- Consequentalism: An action is good/right/morally required if and only if and because it maximizes value

- Deontology: An action is good/right/morally required iff and because it is in accord with a universal law

- Contractualism: ...iff and because it is in accord with some agreement

There is also serious debate as to what the ultimate upshot of Anscombe's article is supposed to be

- Straightforward rejection of these moral theories, in favor of one that also dispenses with a law-giver, and also gets rid of those notions which, outside of the legalistic framework, have no content

- As a *reductio* in *favor* of a religiously based ethical theory

  - The idea would be the MMP is a carefully crafted argued aimed to show what would be needed to give a viable alternative to a religiously based ethical theory, and that such a thing would be impossible

  - In particular, Anscombe, here and elsewhere, raises serious doubts about getting actually clear on a notion of human flourishing

  - And, we know from elsewhere that she was a believer and did believe in absolute prohibitions

First main claim she makes about Aristotle: the notion of 'moral', in the sense of 'moral' responsibility, or 'morally' blameworthy, just doesn't seem to fit

She says, 'we have the term moral by direct inheritance from Aristotle', but that doesn't seem to be right

- From Latin: *moralis*, related to *mos*, *mor-*; plural *mores*: custom, habits, mores

- Cicero coined the term in *On Fate* to translate '*ethikê*'

'We cannot, then, look to Arisottle for any elucidation of the modern way of talking about 'moral' goodness, obligation, etc.'

***The notion of 'brute fact' is somewhat difficult to glean, but it seems to be something like: that just is what it is to owe X amount of money; it's not an analysis of the notion

xyz (carted potatoes to house; left there) brute relative to A (supplied me with potatoes); there can be other facts, abc, that are also brute relative to A (e.g. put potatoes on plane, mailed them, and so on)***

So, what we should talk about: the terms 'should', 'ought' 'needs' relate to good and bad; but not in a moral sense; but, now they have a technical sense: 'i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man)

These terms are part of a 'law conception of ethics'; they are equated with ideas like 'is obliged', 'is bound', 'is required to', in the sense in which someone can be required by law

How: VIA CHRISTIANITY and it's 'law conception of ethics': to think that failure to act in conformity with the virtues makes you bad *qua* man requires the idea that it is **REQUIRED BY DIVINE LAW; REQUIRES GOD AS LAWGIVER**

And, in many contemporary moral theories (cons. and deont.), don't invoke God to derive obligation, but still use the term; and it becomes somewhat sppoky

Here we have: 'the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one'

Going from is to 'morally ought', is, indeed problematic; it is as if a verdict is being reached; but for that very notion to be intelligible, it has to beagainst the backdrop of a law and a judge

So, she thinks that the central defect of MMP is that it invokes a notion: morally ought; that only makes sense within a framework that they reject (or, at least, that they don't invoke in their moral theory)

But, we don't need such a thing to do ethics; instead of 'morally wrong' we should just appeal to virtue and vice genera

Indeed, just do away with talk of right and wrong all together: just ask, was it just/unjust, chaste/unchaste and so on

The crucial similarity between all academic moral philosophers is a hard consequentialist line; inability to say that certain things are wrong or right, irrespective of the consequences

There are, in fact, no prohibitions or doing-orders; it's all just relative value

So, there is no sense of a law conception of ethics on consequentialism: the kinds of things that would have been fawned upon the ethical agent by 'wives and flatterers' become moral principles

Is there a way to retain the law conception of ethics in a secular world view?

- Maybe appeal to self-legislator? I ought to phi because that conforms with the law I set myself
  - But, the idea is that you are looking for the law following which guarantees right/good action; but, as is clear, self-legislation will only lead to good action based on its content
- Perhaps contractualism?
  - But, the awareness for being bound to a contract rises higher than the level of being bound by a law

Aristotelian style: look for 'norms' in human nature; perhaps, given human nature, humans have certain virtues 'in them'; but, this isn't really 'law'

What we should just do is talk of action, intention, pleasure, wanting, virtue; start ethics by studying this notion

She then closes by examining some upshots of abandoning taught of morally right and morally wrong

One thing: we don't get confused in certain cases; there are cases where something is obviously unjust, no matter what, but we can always ask whether it might be 'morally right'

P 17: 'But if someone really thinks, *in advance*, 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'

Question: doesn't this just raise the question 'well, ought I do the unjust thing'? if 'unjust' applies, strictly in virtue of the facts, without bringing wrong in; can't it be a reasonable question to ask whether it can be right to do the unjust thing?

What is this sense of 'ought'; 'would be morally right/wrong to?' outside of a divine law-giver notion of ethics; within it, we can make sense of saying that it is wrong to do injustice; it is divine law that obliges; but, without that; what are we actually asking?

Anscombe: it has no *content* just spcyhological potency

So, sum up the two understandings of this article:

- Modus Ponens
  - (1) If religiously based ethics is false, then virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy ought to be developed.
  - (2a) Religious based ethics is false (at least for her interlocutors)
  - (3a) Therefore, virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy should be developed.
- Modus Tollens
  - (1) If religiously based ethics is false, then virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy ought to be developed.
  - (2b) It is not the case that virtue ethics is the way to develop moral philosophy
  - (3b) Therefore, it is not the case that religiously based ethics is false.