MORAL PHILOSOPHY

What is moral philosophy? That is the question with which this important volume grapples. Its starting point is the famous critique made in 1958 by Elizabeth Anscombe, who argued that moral philosophy begins from a mistake: that it is fundamentally wrong about the sort of concept that the word 'moral' represents. Anscombe rejected moral philosophy as it was then (and mostly now still is) practised. She offered instead a blueprint for the task moral philosophers must embrace if they are to speak intelligibly to society about good and bad, right and wrong, duty and obligation. The chapters in this book are inspired by Anscombe's classic text. One of the most powerful voices here, among many authoritative voices, is that of Philippa Foot – Anscombe's lifelong friend – who asserts that 'any account of practical reason evacuated of an understanding of what human beings need to flourish is inadequate and must be rejected.'

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MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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FOREWORD

RACHAEL WISEMAN

G. E. M. Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' was published in 1958 by the Royal Institute's journal, *Philosophy*.[1] Sixty-years on, ethicists are still getting to grips with her deep and subtle critique of moral philosophy and have barely begun to work through its implications for the subject as we know it. This volume, and the 2002–3 Royal Institute of Philosophy lecture series that was its genesis, takes its name from Anscombe's essay. Though not a set of commentaries, the radical character of the moral philosophy the collection contains – presented in many cases quietly, cautiously and without swagger – is best seen against the background of Anscombe's intervention. For this reason, I begin this preface with an examination of Anscombe's essay and its import.

It tends to be taken for granted that we have an intuitive grasp of the subject matter of moral philosophy – that our mastery of ordinary language allows us roughly to identify the phenomena that it is the task of the moral philosopher to explain and understand. When a philosopher says that she is interested in moral as opposed to

[1] G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy, *Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 124 (1958), 1–19.

conventional obligation we seem to understand the sort of distinction she is making. When she declares that she wants to give an account of moral as opposed to prudential reasons we think she makes her topic clear. The distinction between the moral and the instrumental necessity of an action is one that we suppose can be grasped by simple common sense. The moral philosopher begins by indicating her topic with a few illustrative examples and then moves on to make a philosophical investigation of the area she thereby identifies. She may find that the boundary has been inaccurately drawn, or even that the existence of a hard border is after all chimerical. She may even discover that the area identified by the concept *moral* is empty. However, her starting point is an intuitive grasp of the subject at hand.

Anscombe argues, in 'Modern Moral Philosophy', that moral philosophy starts from a mistake. The error, as Anscombe's mentor Wittgenstein might have put it, is in the 'first step that altogether escapes our notice'.[2] We do not understand the character of the distinction that we draw when we oppose moral obligation, moral reasons and the moral necessity of an action to conventional obligation, prudential reasons and an action's psychological necessity. The moral philosopher, according to Anscombe, has not identified a fuzzy-edged area of investigation; she has identified no area at all. The problem, Anscombe thinks, is that the moral philosopher is mistaken about the sort of concept that the word 'moral' represents. We can compare this

[2] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), §308.

diagnosis to the one that Anscombe makes at the beginning of *Intention.* There she says that we do not understand the character of the concept that the word 'intention' represents and so do not understand the sort of distinction that we are drawing when we contrast expressions of intention with predictions or involuntary actions with intentional ones.[3] So too, thinks Anscombe, with the concept *moral.* Anscombe says that philosophers ought to stop using the word 'moral' until they are clear about the character of the concept it represents, and until they are clear about this, the very *subject matter* of moral philosophy remains elusive.

Anscombe sketches a genealogy to explain the deep confusion into which 'modern moral philosophy' has fallen. Aristotle located the concepts of goodness and badness in the context of a pattern created by the *human form of life.* Specifically, he explained the meaning of 'good' and 'bad' by reference to what a man or woman needs to be excellent of their kind. According to Aristotle, to speak of a good human is not to say that some individual has two properties, goodness and humanity, but rather to say that some individual is a good instance of the kind, *human.* 'Good', in 'Elizabeth is good' is attributive and not predicative, as Peter Geach would put it.[4] The sentence says that Elizabeth is good *qua* human. To be good *qua* knife is to be sharp; to be good *qua* oak tree is to produce acorns. What is it to be good *qua* human? Aristotle's answer is as profound as it is familiar: to be good *qua* human is to act well, in accordance

[3] G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Blackwell: Oxford, 1956), 1.
[4] Peter Geach, 'Good and Evil', *Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1956), 33–42.

with practical reason informed by an understanding of what humans need to flourish.

Among the things that humans need to flourish are goods that can be attained only through cooperation and collaboration in the context of conventional, political and institutional norms. As such, much of practical reason governs interaction with others and concerns the relation between the individual and her polis. The Aristotelian ethical framework makes no fundamental cleavage between egoism and altruism, morality and prudence, self-interest and justice, integrity and happiness. From its perspective the goodness that is the topic of ethics is, as Foot calls it in this volume, natural goodness: it is goodness that is understood in relation to human nature. The 'ought' that appears in 'You ought to keep your promise' represents the same concept as that in 'You ought to watch your weight', 'You ought to go to bed at a reasonable hour' or 'You ought to do what the teacher says'. Each concerns one's acting well *qua* human.

Intervening between us and Aristotle is the rise and fall of Judeo-Christianity as the dominant worldview. According to Anscombe's genealogy, Judeo-Christian ethics begins from Aristotle's picture but adds that vicious acts, as well as being bad for a human, are unlawful. This brings onto the scene an 'ought' that is generated not by the internal features of human life but by a Divine command. Noncompliance with such a command is seen as not merely bad for a human but also wrong because it is disobedient. Over the many centuries during which this worldview dominated, the language of good (*qua* human) and bad (*qua*

human) and that of right (lawful) and wrong (unlawful) became intertwined. As the actions that God commands are those that a good human would go in for, this makes no practical difference: that which is contrary to natural goodness is that which is unlawful, so to speak of vice as unlawful or virtue as right makes no trouble. But, Anscombe says, we are now living after the collapse of Judeo-Christianity as the dominant worldview, and in this context the mixing of these language games is no longer benign. We must expunge from our ethical language those parts that depend for their meaning on the existence of a Divine authority in whom we no longer believe. This, however, is something that atheistic modern moral philosophers have not done. Rather than recovering the language of natural goodness, virtue and practical reason, they have instead sought to preserve a concept that is an heir of the Christian concept of *unlawful*. In doing so they enshrine talk of '*moral* obligation and *moral* duty . . . and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought"' but cleave it from the form of life that would provide its content and the metaphysical background that would lend it force'.[5]

This brings us to Anscombe's final piece of diagnosis: a system of morals that is characterised by pseudo-commands is one that will necessarily degenerate toward the rejection of moral absolutes and the adoption of consequentialist and conventional thinking. How could we 'bind'

[5] Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 1.

ourselves to *musts*, *shoulds* and *oughts* that are opposed to those of prudence and self-interest, while being empty of content and lacking in force? It is inevitable that the visible rewards of 'doing evil that good may come' will prevail and so-called moral principles – the shadows of Divine commands – will become rules of thumb that an educated person will know when prudentially to ignore.

This background should put us in a position to understand the three theses with which Anscombe begins her essay:

> The first is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that it 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 difference between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.[6]

Anscombe's essay rejects moral philosophy as it was and – to a large degree – is still practised. It provides a blueprint for the task that philosophers must embrace if they are to provide philosophy and society at large with the concepts

[6] Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 1.

needed to speak intelligibly about good and bad, right and wrong, duty and obligation. The character of the concept *moral* is not illuminated by a search for a special sort of binding, motivating, obligation. What is needed is a description of the structure of practical reason and of the sorts of considerations that count, for humans, as deep, serious and even worth dying for. This is to begin moral philosophy again, from the position of knowing only that we do not yet know the character of the concept we are seeking to understand. This brings us to the present volume and its place today.

The essays in this collection are each animated by the provocation of Anscombe's classic text and the theses it defends. It is this context that gives unity to an otherwise disparate set of topics: authority, promising, co-operation, practical inference and human nature to name just a handful. Authors tend not to focus on topics that might standardly appear in a volume of moral philosophy. No importance is placed on the distinction that is drawn between metaethics and normative ethics on Anscombe's picture, and so you will not find in this collection the usual stand-offs between realist, anti-realists, irrealists and quasi-realists; in the stead of disembodied 'ideally rational agents' are ordinary human beings at work in the world; there is little in this volume about 'states of affairs', so-called trolley-problems or altruism; when rights, duties and obligations are discussed, you will find authors carefully tread and do not assume that such things come in two flavours: moral and non-moral.

Even those writers least sympathetic to Anscombe's theses (Crisp, Pink, O'Neill) write in the context of the challenge that her essay poses to the very intelligibility of the project of moral philosophy. While those authors seek to domesticate aspects of Anscombe's project by rendering it less unfriendly to modern moral philosophy, others (Foot, Muller, Thompson, Chappell, Price, Teichmann, Oderberg, Lovibond) set to work on answering the questions raised by Anscombe's essay. How are we to understand the unity of the concepts represented by 'ought', 'should', 'must', etc.? How can it be rational to act against one's own self-interest? Isn't there a genuine conflict between flourishing and goodness in so-called tight corners? What role should consideration of the expected consequences of an action play in the exercise of practical reason? What place is there for pleasure in a theory of ethics? Can there be absolute prohibitions without Divine Command? What is the character of the concept *human*? What is the form of practical (as opposed to theoretical) reason?

These questions set the agenda for the subject area formally known as 'moral philosophy'. Work under this agenda echoes Anscombe's call for a return to the language of virtue in the context of an understanding of the genealogy just sketched. This understanding makes this research quite different from that done under the heading 'Virtue Ethics', a label Foot herself explicitly rejects in this volume (2). 'Virtue Ethics', now one of the triad of normative moral theories (alongside Deontology and Consequentialism), takes the 'first step' against which Anscombe warns. It takes as its subject matter *moral* virtues and *moral* character and in

doing so takes for granted just those conceptual dichotomies that 'Modern Moral Philosophy' throws into doubt. Though both Virtue Ethicists and – as we might call them – Unmodern Moral Philosophers are working with Aristotelian concepts (virtue, practical reason, character), only the latter are doing so with the understanding that our 'modern' psychology, our 'modern' theories of practical reason and our 'modern' conception of human life are all barriers to genuine insight into the sort of characteristic that a virtue is.

It is worth emphasising this point not least because a failure to do so has left philosophers slow to recognise the radical character of Philippa Foot's quiet and unshowy contribution to the dual topics of rationality and goodness, the relation between which she reflects on in this volume. Few philosophers have understood the seriousness of Anscombe's challenge to moral philosophy as well as Foot, who was Anscombe's colleague and lifelong friend. It is testament to this understanding that Foot dedicated her life's work to the problem of rational action 'in the tight corner' (4). In this volume Foot illustrates the problem using a letter written in 1944 by a farm boy from the Sudetenland:

> Dear parents: I must give you bad news: I have been condemned to death. I and Gustave G. We did not sign up for the SS, and so they condemned us to death . . . Both of us would rather die than stain our consciences with such deeds of horror. I know what the SS have to do. (2)

What Foot recognises is that modern instrumentalist theories of practical reason have to say that the farm boy's choice is irrational: they have to say that in choosing to die rather than

do some terrible thing, he acts against reason. Foot saw that this must be wrong. An account of practical reason that cannot recognise that the farm boy acts well, in accord with practical reason informed by an understanding of what humans need to flourish, is inadequate and must be rejected. An enquiry into the nature of practical reason, Foot holds, must be already oriented toward a substantive account of the human good. To approach practical reason in this way is to follow Anscombe in refusing the distinction that the 'modern moral philosopher' seeks to make when she contrasts moral and prudential reasons.

Foot is not the only author in this volume to have made a substantial contribution to this research agenda. Her student Michael Thompson's influential and important monograph *Life and Action* builds on the claim defended in this volume (in 'Apprehending Human Form'): that it is a mistake to think the life-form concepts are empirical concepts derived from experience.[7] As Thompson puts it in this volume: 'Against [the empiricist] I would like to claim that the concept *life form* is more akin to such logical or quasi-logical notions as *object*, *property*, *relation*, *fact*, or process' (63). In saying this, Thompson makes it possible to see that life-form judgments – judgments with species concepts like *human* in the subject-position – are not statistical generalizations (akin to 'Most humans have 32 teeth') but norms against which individual members of the species might be recognised as deficient or defective. Anselm Muller's 'Acting Well' (this volume) is part of a life's work influenced, as he says, by Anscombe and

[7] Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

Philippa Foot. Like Foot, Muller refuses to countenance an analysis of *human action* that does not take as its starting point *acting well*. Donald Davidson's analysis of action, for many years utterly dominant in English-language philosophy, is now seen by many as inadequate, precisely because it is unable to serve the agenda set by 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Roger Teichmann, Sophie Grace Chappel and Sabina Lovibond continue to contribute philosophy of psychology and metaphysics in service of a different sort of ethics.

It is good that this volume should be reissued this year, which is the centenary Anscombe's and Foot's births. Their work, and this volume, shows us the way in which history of philosophy is part of philosophy. The stories that tell ourselves and each other about where we came from and how we got here are not inconsequential to the philosophical theories we develop. What counts as intuitive and common sense reflects our muddled, contingent, careless assumptions about the genealogy of our concepts. As philosophers it is as much our job to examine those assumptions as it is to innovate and theorise. This sort of work is unglamorous and slow and rarely issues in theses that translate into slogans. But Foot's essay in this volume reminds us of its importance. Modern moral philosophy, and the society in which it still flourishes, begins from a 'prejudice in favour of the rationalizing force of self-interest' (13). This prejudice is one that we must collectively expunge before appeals to what is 'reasonable', 'practical', 'prudential' and 'realistic' usher our species into a future that is hostile to the human form of life.

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PREFACE

ANTHONY O'HEAR

The papers contained in this volume are based on the Royal Institute of Philosophy's annual lecture series for 2002–3. Many readers will be aware that the title of the series refers to a famous paper by Elizabeth Anscombe with the same title, which was itself published, appropriately enough, in the Royal Institute's own journal *Philosophy* in 1958. While this collection is not a commentary either on 'Modern Moral Philosophy' or on Anscombe's work more generally, it is a testament to the influence and potency of that article. Many of our contributors acknowledge its influence on them, and several take up the challenges Anscombe threw down in her original piece. In some quarters and in some ways moral philosophy was changed by Anscombe's article and, in the opinion of many, for the better. The collection as a whole reflects this state of affairs.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge the contributions of all those who gave lectures in the series, and who, collectively and unintentionally, have produced a remarkable, coherent volume. On behalf of the Royal Institute, I thank them all. But I am sure that no one would think it invidious if I were to single out one contribution in particular, that, namely, of Philippa Foot. Mrs Foot has herself been a

towering presence in moral philosophy over several decades, and, as she herself acknowledges, particularly in the early days, was greatly influenced by Anscombe. It was, therefore, especially fortunate for the Institute that she gave us considerable help in organising the series in the early stages. But over and above that, her own lecture was not just a model of what such a lecture could be; it was, she assures us, the last public lecture she will give. The Royal Institute considers itself privileged to have provided the setting for so significant an event.

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