

Modern Moral Philosophy Before and After Anscombe

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Abstract

This paper argues that there was considerably more philosophy of action in moral theory before 1958 (when Anscombe complained of its lack under the banner 'philosophy of psychology') than there has been since. This is in part because Anscombe influenced the formation of 'virtue theory' as yet another position within normative ethics, and Anscombe's work contributed to the fashioning of 'moral psychology' as an altogether distinct (and now increasingly empirical) branch of moral philosophy.

Prologue

This paper argues for the following three theses:

- i) There was considerably more philosophy of action in moral theory before 1958 (when Anscombe complained of its lack under the banner 'philosophy of psychology') than there has been since. This is in part because
- ii) Anscombe influenced the formation of 'virtue theory' as yet another position within normative ethics, and
- iii) Anscombe's work contributed to the fashioning of 'moral psychology' as an altogether distinct (and now increasingly empirical) branch of moral philosophy.

None of (i-iii) were foreseen—let alone intended—by Anscombe, who would have been displeased by this state of affairs, already evident at the time of her death in early 2001. The tragic irony of ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ (MMP), then, is that in many ways the past century of ethical theory makes more sense read backwards. My somewhat programmatic investigation into this predicament begins somewhere in the middle, with MMP, then proceeds to present what happened before and after in its light.

1. ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’

MMP remains as divisive today as it was when it was first published sixty years ago. Some hail it to be of huge philosophical and historical importance, not least by effectively giving birth to neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics as exemplified by Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John McDowell (Richter, 2011 Solomon, 2008: 110-111). Others present it as a dated or otherwise irritating text containing baffling and unsubstantiated claims, the deciphering of which is not worth the candle (e.g. Blackburn, 2005).

One recurring complaint has been that Anscombe is unfair in dismissing the ideas of dead white men with brief statements that contain more disrespect than they do argument. Bishop Butler is ‘ignorant’ (MMP 27), Immanuel Kant ‘useless’ and ‘absurd’ (ibid.), David Hume ‘sophistical’ (MMP 28), and J.S. Mill ‘stupid’ (MMP 33). These are the philosophers she likes. The rest of them are something much worse: ‘consequentialists’. Anscombe coined the term in MMP as a pejorative, but it was quickly reclaimed as a badge of honour by all its major proponents.

It is fashionable nowadays to remark that Anscombe meant something rather different by ‘consequentialism’ than we do today.¹ Yet her own characterisation of it as the view that the “right” action is that which produces the best possible consequences (MMP 33, quoted below) is one endorsed by most contemporary consequentialists.² The exegetical difficulty arises because Anscombe protects the utilitarian Mill from this particular charge yet includes ‘objectivists’ such as her near-contemporary W. D. Ross, best known for defending the view that actions can be wrong in virtue of their intrinsic value, regardless of their consequences:

There is a startling change that seems to have taken place between Mill and Moore. Mill assumes [...] that there is no question of calculating the particular

¹ See, for example, Diamond (1997), Teichmann (2008: 86), and Wiseman (2017: 18).

² Cf. M. Geach (2008: xvii).

consequences of an action such as murder or theft [...] In Moore and in subsequent academic moralists of England we find it taken to be pretty obvious that "the right action" is the action which produces the best possible consequences (reckoning among consequences the intrinsic values ascribed to certain kinds of act by some "Objectivists". (MMP 33)³

This double-move is key to understanding the last of three related theses that MMP famously sets out to defend. These have proven to be as hard to interpret as they are easy to state:

T1) It is not profitable for us at present [1958] 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.

T2) 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 survives, and are only harmful without it.

T3) The differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance. Anscombe. (MMP 26)⁴

What makes T3 true for Anscombe is that the philosophers in question are all 'consequentialists'. Henry Sidgwick's predecessor, Mill, is off the hook from this charge for two distinct reasons. First, he was careful (at least according to Anscombe) to distinguish *intended* from merely *foreseen* consequences of an action. To understand how this helps to

³ Entire papers could be written about the degree to which this passage offers plausible interpretations of either Mill or Moore. There is room for disagreement, for example, on whether murder and theft could ever fall under Mill's 'knotty points' (Mill, 1861: 25), the answer depending on whether he conceives of them as being unjust by definition (discussed further below).

⁴ Chappell (forthcoming) argues that Anscombe's main complaint is T3 and that T1 and T2 are 'little more than auxiliary theses'.

avoid ‘consequentialism’, one needs the ‘adequate philosophy of psychology’ required to reveal the role played by intention in determining the nature of any given action.⁵ Second, Mill explicitly states that utilitarianism can never conflict with justice, going out of his way to explain why his philosophy is compatible with Christian morality in particular (Mill, 1861: 27). He thus allows that *utilitarianism* lead us to re-evaluate whether acts of stealing or kidnapping must always be unjust, while rejecting the *consequentialist* conviction that an unjust act could ever be permissible, let alone obligatory:

Have mankind been under a delusion in thinking that justice is a more sacred thing than policy, and that the latter ought only to be listened to after the former has been satisfied? While I dispute the pretensions of any theory which sets up an imaginary standard of justice not grounded on utility, I account the justice which is grounded on utility to be the chief part, and incomparably the most sacred and binding part, of all morality. Justice is a name for certain classes of moral rules which concern the essentials of human well-being more nearly, and are therefore of more absolute obligation, than any other rules for the guidance of life [...] to save a life, it may not only be allowable, but a duty, to steal or take by force the necessary food or medicine, or to kidnap and compel to officiate the only qualified medical practitioner. In such cases, as we do not call anything justice which is not a virtue, we usually say, not that justice must give way to some other moral principle, but that what is just in ordinary cases is, by reason of that other principle, not just in the particular case. By this useful accommodation of language, the character of indefeasibility attributed to justice is kept up, and we are saved from the necessity of maintaining that there can be laudable injustice. (Mill, 1861: 57-58 & 62)

Is Mill paying mere lip service to justice here or does he take the thickness of the concept to entail that no plausible moral theory can be at odds with it? In not counting him as a ‘consequentialist’, Anscombe charitably opts for the latter understanding viz. that he would give no weight to unjust actions, no matter what their effects:

Mill assumes, as we saw [27], that there is no question of calculating particular consequences of an action such as murder or theft. (MMP 33)

⁵ This is partly because Anscombe primarily conceives of ‘consequentialism’ as a view regarding the sphere of personal responsibility (see Frey, 2019: 10-12). For more on Mill’s anti-consequentialist utilitarianism see Vogler (2001).

Yet Mill's view ultimately seems to be that any action prescribed by utilitarianism must be just *by definition*. If so, Anscombe would be wrong in her assessment that 'it did not occur to him that acts of murder and theft could be otherwise described' (MMP 27). Indeed, we may plausibly attribute to Mill the view that some thefts are just precisely because they can be described as the taking of *necessary* food or medicine. On this point, the difference between Mill and someone like Aquinas is more semantic than it is moral. Unlike Mill, Aquinas maintains that *all* theft is unjust, but he also asserts that in cases of dire emergency it is not theft to take from another's possessions:

When a person is in extreme need of material things, and there is no way of emerging from his extremity but by taking what belongs to another, the *surplus* which another possesses becomes common property, and the taker is not guilty of theft. (*ST*, IIaIIae.66.7)⁶

Anscombe's evaluation of Mill contrasts starkly with that of Ross, according to whom *any* 'intrinsic' property of action, including that of being unjust, may in principle be outweighed by sufficiently positive consequences:

Oxford Objectivists of course distinguish between 'consequences' and 'intrinsic values' and so produce a misleading appearance of not being consequentialists. But they do not hold – and Ross explicitly denies – that the gravity of, e.g., procuring the condemnation of the innocent is such that it cannot be outweighed by, e.g., national interest. Hence their distinction is of no importance. (MMP 33, f.n. 4.)

So understood, Ross allows that there are times when, all things considered, we are not only permitted but morally *obliged* to commit acts of murder, adultery, or whatever. Anscombe rejects his thesis that there is no value so sacred that it cannot in principle be trumped by the greater good as being 'consequentialist', despite the fact that Ross explicitly allows that this good may itself be outweighed by concerns of justice or honesty. As Christopher Coope has

⁶ I owe this reference to Sophie-Grace Chappell.

argued, she would have also rejected some of Hursthouse's views on the same grounds.⁷ Despite her own definition, then, Anscombe cannot ultimately view 'consequentialism' as the simple equation of 'rightness' with producing the best consequences. As Mary Geach puts it, one might hold the 'consequentialist' view that 'there is no act so bad [that] it might on occasion be justified by its consequences' while rejecting the consequentialist view that 'the right action is always that which produces the best consequences' (M. Geach, 2008: xvii).

In his 1956 article 'Good and Evil', Peter Geach denounces Ross' moral outlook for very similar reasons. I quote at some length:

I am deliberately ignoring the supposed distinction between the Right and the Good [...] Aquinas [...] finds it sufficient to talk of good and bad human acts. When Ross would say that there is a morally good action but not a right act, Aquinas would say that a good human intention had issued in what was, in fact, a bad action; and when Ross would say that there was a right act but not a morally good action, Aquinas would say that there was a bad human act performed in circumstances in which a similar act with a different intention would have been a good one (e.g. giving money to a beggar for the praise of men rather than for the relief of his misery) [...] [P]eople who think that doing right is something other than doing good will regard virtuous behaviour as consisting, not just in doing good and eschewing evil, but in doing, on every occasion, *the* right act for the occasion. This speciously strict doctrine leads in fact to quite laxist consequences. A man [...] if he knows that adultery is an evil act, will decide that (as Aristotle says) there can be no deliberating when or how or with whom to commit adultery. But a man who believes in discerning, on each occasion, the right act for the occasion, may well decide that on this occasion, all things considered, adultery is the right action. Sir David Ross explicitly tells us that on occasion the right act may be the judicial punishment of an innocent man "that the whole nation perish not" for in this case "the *prima facie* duty of consulting the general interest has proved more obligatory than the perfectly *distinct prima facie* duty of respecting the rights of those who have respected the rights of others." (P. Geach, 1956: 41-42)⁸

⁷ Coope (2006: 46 ff.) Whilst I agree with Coope on this point, I don't share the conception of justice he uses to frame it.

⁸ To this he sneeringly adds: 'We must charitably hope that for him the words of Caiaphas that he quotes just had the

Geach's outing of Ross as a crypto-consequentialist is, of course, directly linked to T3.⁹ His further rejection of Ross' distinction between goodness and rightness is closely tied to Anscombe's other two theses. In particular, his contention that we should make do without the concept of a 'right action' at all helps to explain why Anscombe keeps "the right action" within scare quotes. It also sheds light on her middle thesis (T2) that we must try to jettison the concept of a distinctly moral obligation. Terms like 'moral obligation' and 'morally right action' ought to be jettisoned because they are survivals of an earlier, quasi-legal conception of morality, and make no sense outside of the related contexts and practices that originally gave them meaning. This is not a rejection of morality, nor even of a *moral ought*, but only of the distinctively secular and mesmeric 'moral ought' that has been detached from the aforementioned conceptions.¹⁰

James Doyle (2018) has recently offered a more radical reading of T2. According to Doyle, Anscombe's claim is that the term 'moral' as ordinarily used is literally meaningless, standing for an empty pseudo-concept that provokes a certain feeling in us but has no content whatsoever.¹¹ Divine commands, on this understanding, neither describe nor create distinctly *moral* obligations, but only religious ones. Whatever the merits of the view itself (Doyle finds it more plausible than I do), we should be wary of it as an interpretation of what is going on in MMP, not least because there are plenty of later writings in which Anscombe endorses law conceptions of morality with no sign of having had the slightest change of mind.

vaguely hallowed associations of a Bible text, and that he did not remember whose judicial murder was being counselled.'

⁹ Geach and Anscombe would presumably be equally hostile to the moral particularist claim that there are no principles concerning right action (e.g. Dancy, 2004). But particularism at the level of *things done* may be combined with generalism at the level of character traits (Sandis, 2020, 2021; cf. Swanton, 2015). Were Anscombe open to a conceptual distinction between doings and things done (see §III) she could more easily allow for such a view, whose origins lie with Aristotle's thought that the mean is grasped through perception and not by reasoning (EN 1109b; but see Price, 2005).

¹⁰ Cf. Solomon (2008: 114) and Gremaschi (2017), the latter finding Anscombe's concerns much more parochial than the former.

¹¹ Cf. Richter (2019). Doyle has since revised his view, but still maintains that Anscombe thought—and was right to think—that nothing could count as understanding the word 'moral' (Doyle, 2019). This goes against the more natural reading of Anscombe's quasi-Nietzschean genealogy as having been at least partly motivated by Wittgenstein's thought that the meaning of any given term or expression is dependent upon the practices that give it life (see Sandis, 2019a; cf. Frey, 2018). Wittgenstein's influence on Anscombe's understanding of normativity is further made evident in her discussions of forcing and stopping modals (Anscombe, 1969, 1978a, 1978b).

In ‘Authority in Morals’(1962), Anscombe speaks of ‘moral conclusions’, ‘revelation of moral belief’, of a ‘moral truth’ concerning ‘what kinds of thing ought to be done and ought not to be done’ as well as of ‘the moral law’ as a ‘range’ and of taking one’s morality from someone else, concluding that ‘the *content* of moral law, i.e., the actions which are good and just, is not essentially a matter of revelation’. Similarly, in ‘The Moral Environment of the Child’, Anscombe states that ‘Catholic Christianity teaches a strict moral code’ and speaks, without scepticism, of ‘truth in the moral code’ and ‘our morality’ (231). This Christian morality is contrasted with ‘a morality which consisted solely of absolute prohibitions on fairly definitely described actions’ (presumably Kant’s).

The idea of two contrasting moralities forms the core of her short essay ‘Morality’(1982), in which she explicitly rejects the thought that there is such a thing as morality, not because she is a sceptic about moral concepts—she writes that ‘human beings have always had morality’ and talks of ‘that part of morality which is associated with duties to God’ (113)—but because she finds Christian morality *so* distinct from the consequentialist one that they amount to two entirely different moralities: one that prohibits murder, and one that not only permits—but can even demand—it.

As Mary Geach writes in a 2005 letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*,¹² Anscombe herself, of course, had no intention of jettisoning the concepts of moral obligation and duty, which are needed to frame her other principal claim, which is that certain things are forbidden, whatever the consequences.’ While Christian morality does indeed require us to embody certain virtues, the question of which virtues we *ought* to have may also be addressed from the point of view of what is *good* for us, qua human. In pointing this out, Anscombe is in no way abandoning deontic terminology in favour of the aretaic (see Coope, 2006: 22). The deontic and the aretaic are simply two different frameworks for talking about the very same goodness. By returning to Aristotle’s talk of human excellence and virtue, MMP thus seeks to find a common language through which religious and secular thinkers alike (including Anscombe and her friend Philippa Foot¹³) may converse about morality, and perhaps even reach agreement.¹⁴

¹² M. Geach (2005a; see also 2005b).

¹³ Indeed, MMP is based on lectures Anscombe gave the previous year in Oxford, at Foot’s request (see M. Geach, 2008: vii).

¹⁴ Anscombe became increasingly pessimistic about the latter happening on any kind of wide scale (see essays in Anscombe, 2005). Jennifer Frey informs me that Aquinas was far more sanguine on this front.

2. Moral Philosophy Since 1958

Anscombe's first thesis in MMP is that '[i]t is not profitable for us at present [1958] 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' (MMP 26). By 'philosophy of psychology', she is not referring to the philosophy of cognitive science that currently goes under that name today,¹⁵ nor to the philosophy of mind that used to share it,¹⁶ but to an investigation into the concepts of action, character, intention, motive, desire, pleasure, and the relations between them:¹⁷

In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one [...] it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology [...] This part of the subject matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we¹⁸ have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is - a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis - and how it relates to the action in which it is instanced [...] For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as "doing such-and-such" is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required (MMP 29).¹⁹

The blueprint for this philosophy of action had already been laid down by her the year before in her masterpiece *Intention*. This book had already made good on MMP's request for 'an

¹⁵ See, for example, Botterill and Caruthers (1999), Bermúdez (2005), Thagard (2007), and Weiskopf and Adams (2015).

¹⁶ For example, Block (1980).

¹⁷ Such investigations may be found across the entire history of modern moral philosophy (see essays in Sandis, 2019c). The most important discussions of them since Aquinas' *Treatise on Human Acts* (ST I-II,1-21) are to be found under the 'Morality' heading of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (PR §§ 105-141). For comparisons between Hegel and Anscombe see Taylor (1979 & 1983), Quante (1993), and Sandis (2010). For Aquinas and Anscombe, see Jensen (2010); cf. Boulter (2009).

¹⁸ See Sandis (2019b).

¹⁹ Anscombe's contention here remains unaffected by John Rawls' famous argument for the independence of moral theory from the sorts of issues he associates with epistemology and the philosophy of mind and language (Rawls, 1975). But even if Rawls' argument could be extended to show that many issues in moral theory are independent from philosophical psychology, we should not expect a theory of right *action* to remain silent on the relation of action to motive, intention, and consequence.

account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as “doing such-and-such” is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it’ (MMP 29).²⁰ Whether Anscombe herself thought she has already provided an adequate philosophy of psychology, or merely a sketch of one, is a moot point.

The term ‘philosophy of psychology’ has long since been hijacked by philosophers of cognitive science to describe what they do, leaving ‘philosophical psychology’ as the term of choice for those still interested in asking philosophical questions about human psychology, and ‘moral psychology’ and ‘philosophy of action’ for the areas covering the kinds of issues that Anscombe is referring to. Indeed, both these fields owe part of their existence as we know it to Anscombe. In the aftermath of *Intention* and MMP, the ‘philosophy of action’ developed into a subject in its own right, albeit more closely associated with the philosophy of mind than with ethics.²¹ Such branching-off comes at a heavy price, for ethics without philosophy of action is blind, and philosophy of action without ethics empty.

The philosophy of mind and action during the past sixty years has thus developed alongside that of normative ethics, with very little interaction between them. This has enabled philosophers to defend theories of ‘right action’ while remaining conspicuously silent about what actions are, or how to best conceive of their relation to intentions (on the one hand) and consequences (on the other). As a result of all this, contemporary moral philosophy has been neatly divided into the following four branches, which had yet to properly separate in 1958:

- a) Meta-ethics
- b) Normative Ethics (‘moral theory’)
- c) Practical or ‘applied’ ethics
- d) Moral Psychology

To be sure, theorists debate the extent to which views within (a-d) are interrelated, but they are generally content to teach them as separate ‘modules’ and have been known to profess expertise in any one of the above while claiming near-ignorance on the remaining three. People do, of course, defend philosophical positions according to which one cannot do (c) without (b) and/or (b) without (a), but even these are parasitic on the divisions in question. Most importantly, (d) is typically reserved for questions relating to agency, motivation, moral

²⁰ For an excellent account, see Wiseman (2016a: Ch. 2 & 2016b: §3).

²¹ For a brief period, philosophy of mind was also called ‘philosophy of psychology’ (see, for example, Block, 1980).

responsibility, akrasia, and so on that are thought to be largely independent of (a-c). In complete opposition to this, MMP's first thesis effectively tells us that one cannot do (a-c) *at all* without first doing (d). While Anscombe certainly cared for 'practical' issues relating to everyday life as well as to medical, military, and legal policies, she did not see these issues as remotely separable from either moral philosophy or the philosophy of psychology.²²

I shan't concern myself much with (a) and (c), save to recall that the contemporary obsession of engaging in (c) by comparing intuitions about increasingly absurd trolley-cases is an unintended consequence of an argument made by Foot in which she defends, against Hare's consequentialism, an original combination of the doctrine of double effect and the doctrine of doing and allowing.²³ Anscombe would have been much more horrified by much of what falls under either of these 'branches' today than anything she was objecting to in 1958. Hardly any of it can be attributed as an effect of MMP though. This is not the case with (2) and (4), so I shall focus on these. I begin with some paradigmatic mainstream positions within normative ethics or 'moral theory':

Act consequentialism is the claim that an **act is morally right if and only if** that act maximizes the good (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015).

An act is wrong if and only if it is forbidden by the code of rules whose internalization by the overwhelming majority of everyone everywhere in each new generation has maximum expected value in terms of well-being (Hooker, 2000: 32).

[A]n act is wrong if it would be disallowed by any *principle* that no one could reasonably respect. (Scanlon, 1998: 197)

²² This is evident across all her work in ethics, but particularly so in Anscombe (1957b; for which, see Wiseman 2016b).

²³ Foot (1967: 23 ff); for more context see Hacker-Wright (2013: 107-109) and Coope (2015). Anscombe anticipates and rejects a crucial component of trolley reasoning in MMP 40. Sixty years later, philosophy's most prominent appearance in popular culture is in the trolley-obsessed *The Good Place*, in which one of central characters (Chidi Anagonye) is a 'Professor of Ethics *and* Moral Philosophy'. The droll conjunction reminds me of the first time I taught 'Ethics' for *Florida Institute of Technology's* study abroad programme at Oxford. All of the other professors introduced themselves as teaching courses 'X' and 'Y' to great enthusiasm from the students. But when I introduced myself as the lecturer for 'Moral Philosophy', I was greeted with baffled silence, until one of the students hesitantly asked 'Do you mean "Ethics"?', to all-round relief.

An action is right iff it is what a virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances. (Hursthouse, 1999: 17, see also 28–29)

An act is wrong just when such acts are disallowed by the principles that are optimific, uniquely universally willable, and not reasonably rejectable. (Parfit, 2011: 413)²⁴

What **makes an action morally right is** that it originates in a person's good will. (Sullivan, 1989: 117)

[D]eontologists think that **acts are wrong because** of the **sorts** of acts they are. (Davis, 1991: 210)²⁵

It's hardly news that Anscombe would be particularly hostile to consequentialist theories, whose current division into several sub-species (act and rule focusing on actual, probable, expected, or intended consequences) has partly resulted as a response to some of Anscombe's arguments in MMP and elsewhere. But what about deontology and virtue ethics? Surely, as a believer in Divine Command Theory and the view that some actions are absolutely prohibited, Anscombe could have no problem with deontology? And was MMP not striving towards a kind of virtue ethics? My answer to both these questions is a negative one.

To begin with, the very issue of what all of the above theories are doing viz. attempt to provide accounts of 'the right action' is problematic, for two reasons. First, as we have already seen (§I), Anscombe follows Geach in being troubled by the very notion of an action being morally right or wrong, as opposed to good or bad. This worry relates to the larger question of what is meant by 'action' in the first place. Robert M. expresses a commonplace certainty when we writes that '[w]hat every competent user of "wrong" must know about wrongness is, first of all, that wrongness is a property of actions (perhaps also of intentions and various attitudes, but certainly of actions)' (Adams, 1979: 74). Accordingly, normative theorists feel licensed to remain silent on the question of what an action is. In fact, it is shocking quite how little they are

²⁴ The word 'virtue' cannot be found in any of the three volumes of Parfit's *On What Matters*.

²⁵ Andreas Lind has brought to my attention the fact that normative theories frequently conflate accounts of rightness *conditions* with accounts of right/wrong-*making*.

prepared to say on this topic.

The optimistic assumption is that one can simply ‘plug in’ one’s favourite account of action, without this affecting the plausibility of the theory in question, let alone what it would even mean for an action to be right.²⁶ One explanation for this might be that there is nothing to puzzle over here. As H.A. Prichard notes:

The question ‘What is acting or doing something?’ seems at first unreal, i.e. a question to which we already know the answer. For it looks as though everyone knows what doing something is and would be ready to offer instances. No one, for instance, would hesitate to say to another ‘You ought to go to bed’, on the ground that neither he nor the other knows the kind of thing meant by ‘going to bed’. Yet, when we consider instances that would be offered, we do not find it easy to state the common character which we think they had which led us to call them actions. (Prichard, 1945: 272)

On occasion, a moral theorist may say something about whether take actions to be events, or whether they are talking of act ‘types’ or ‘tokens’.²⁷ By and large, however, one finds little conceptual exploration of the relation between motive, intention, action, and consequence, save perhaps on questions of merely adjacent interest to the main event, such as the ‘doctrine of double effect’ or ‘the doctrine of doing and allowing’.

In the second half of the 20th century, the prevailing view of actions was Davidson’s (Anscombe-inspired) contention that they are a sub-set of events.²⁸ Yet hardly anyone seems to care about what it might mean for an event to be right or wrong (morally or otherwise) or, for that matter, *morally* good or bad.²⁹ Proponents of all sides share a related tendency to draw a hard distinction between the deontic and the evaluative, focusing their interest in action on its rightness or wrongness, and reserving terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for its motives and/or consequences. From this big leap, it is but a small step to the conclusion that that normative ethics is in the business of providing deontic accounts, leaving evaluative concerns to the

²⁶ See Sandis (2017). Schapiro (2001 & 2021) and Hurley (2018) also argue that different *conceptions of action* render competing normative views plausible, but what they really have in mind are different *theories of agency*.

²⁷ Cf. Wetzel (2006: § 2.2) and Hanser (2008).

²⁸ Davidson (1963).

²⁹ By contrast, we know what it is for an event to be good or bad *tout court* viz. to have positive or negative value.

‘branch’ that is moral psychology.³⁰ Anyone who insists otherwise is branded a virtue-ethicist.

Should we not at least rejoice in the post-MMP ‘the revival of virtue ethics’?³¹ For some the writing was on the wall from the outset:

[W]hen the phrase ‘virtue ethics’ first came on the scene a number of people, I suspect, must have had a certain sinking feeling—without perhaps quite realizing why. The thing, we supposed, was almost bound to go to the bad. This gloomy assessment has I think proved quite realistic (Coope, 2006: 20).

Anscombe argued that a philosophical concern with virtue should permeate moral philosophy. Instead, it has led to just one more theory, competing with deontology, consequentialism, and contractualism to provide the best account of *right and wrong action*.³² Julia Annas laments:

Doing the right thing turns out not to be so central in an ethics in which virtue is central. A virtue ethical theory will be interested in *virtuous* action, but will not get much out of the notion of *right* action. (Annas, 2011: 47)

No one has done more than Rosalind Hursthouse to put forward virtue ethics on the map as ‘a genuine rival to utilitarianism and deontology’ which can ‘give an account of right action in such a way as to provide action guidance’ (Hursthouse, 1999: 26 & 28; see also Hursthouse, 1996). While she did well to emphasise the guiding power of being concerned with virtue, the offering of a normative theory of right action could not be further removed from what Anscombe was hoping to achieve with MMP.³³ This may serve to explain Hursthouse’s ambivalence towards this aspect of her own work. She may boast that virtue ethics ‘is at least a possible rival to deontological and utilitarian theories’—one that ‘can come up with an account of’ right action,—but she tellingly adds that it only does this ‘under pressure, only in order to maintain a fruitful dialogue with the overwhelming majority of modern philosophers for whom “*right action*” is the natural phrase’ (Hursthouse, 1999: 223 & 69; cf. Swanton, 2003:

³⁰ Consequentialism and other mainstream normative theories involve the *promotion* of goodness (see Korsgaard, 1993), while virtue ethics sees goodness as a (not necessarily causal) *mark* of right action, but neither approach offers accounts of good action.

³¹ See Baril & Hazlett (2019).

³² Cf. Solomon (1988 & 2003) and Coope (2015).

³³ The point is put forth with a panoply of arguments by Coope (2006: 26-39).

245).³⁴ It's as if the wimpy school nerd feels reassured to have finally been accepted by those big nasty bullies, experiencing just a shade of residual resentment.

Virtue ethics thus solidifies itself as just one more position *within* moral theory, offering an account of right action in terms of what the virtuous agent would characteristically do in the circumstances. Such theories allow one to ask whether virtue ethics and consequentialism might be compatible. It is, after all, conceivable that the virtuous person is one disposed to perform whichever actions are expected to promote the greatest amount of good.³⁵ If this is what constitutes moral philosophy then Anscombe is not making a move *within* it. Her morality is not in direct competition with other normative theories, because it isn't in the business of producing a theory of right action at all. Needless to say, this does not imply that Anscombe's account of action and intention is neutral with regard to all such theories. Far from it.

So much for moral philosophy after *Intention* and MMP. Ironically, before these interventions British moral theorists were *less* inclined to separate their defence of any particular account of 'right action' from their views in moral and philosophical psychology.

3. Moral Philosophy Before 1957

There was considerably more philosophy of action and psychology within moral theory before 1957, than there has been ever since.³⁶ Curiously, much of it was conducted by a number of Anscombe's explicit or implicit targets (including Moore, 1903; Ross, 1930; Ewing, 1938; Macmurray, 1938; Prichard, 1949), though it is present across the entire history of modern moral philosophy. In this final section I highlight some of their insights, with a central focus on the much maligned W. D. Ross (see §I), who was among other things an Aristotle scholar and a translator of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

³⁴ Cf. Annas (2011: 47, f.n. 36).

³⁵ See M. Geach (2008: xvii-xviii). Roger Crisp has argued for a 'Utilitarianism of the Virtues' according to which the virtuous agent lives 'in such a way that the total amount of utility in the history of the world is brought as close as possible to the maximum.' (Crisp, 1992: 154; cf. Hursthouse, 1999: 5 & 7-8). More recently, Crisp has defended the additional view that if we understand virtue ethics as providing an account of right and wrong action (as Hursthouse does), then it collapses into a form of deontology. He suggests, further, that this can be avoided by focusing on the question of the *value* of virtue, as opposed to the notion of right action (Crisp, 2015 & 2019: 142-145; cf. Baron, 1997 and Singleton, 1999). Anscombe's insight, by contrast, is that we cannot even begin to answer questions concerning *right* action without understanding what it is to act virtuously. It would be a mistake, however, to attempt to transform such an understanding into a normative theory.

³⁶ See note 17.

Ross defends the proto-Anscombean view that ‘any act may be correctly described in an indefinite, and in principle infinite, number of ways’ and that what I do could, for instance, be truthfully described as ‘fulfilling my promise’, ‘putting the book into our friend’s possession’, and ‘the packing and posting of a book’:

[A]ny of the acts we do has countless effects [...] Every act therefore, viewed in some aspects, will be prima facie right, and viewed in others prima facie wrong. [...] any act may be correctly described in an indefinite, and in principle infinite, number of ways. An act is the production of a change in the state of affairs [...] I may have promised, for instance, to return a book to a friend [...] to send it by a messenger or to hand it to his servant or to send it by post...in each of these cases what I *do* directly is worthless in itself [...] this is *not* what we should describe, strictly, as our duty; our duty is to fulfil our promise, i.e. to put the book into our friend's possession [...] What I do is as truly describable in this way as by saying that it is the packing and posting of a book [...] And if we ask ourselves whether it is right *qua* the packing or posting of a book, or *qua* the securing of my friend’s getting what I have promised to return to him, it is clear that it is in the second capacity that it is right [...] by its own nature and not because of its consequences. (Ross, 1930: 41-4)³⁷

Reading the above, one can’t help thinking that far from dismissing Ross’ moral philosophy Anscombe was heavily influenced by it. Indeed, she would later even apply the same preposition (‘qua’) to distinguish her view that actions may be intentional under a description from the nonsensical claim that actions-under-a-description are intentional (Anscombe, 1979). So why did Anscombe dismiss Ross’ work in such strong terms? His ‘objectivism’ may have lapsed into a form of ‘consequentialism’ so anathema to Christian morality (see §I) that she didn’t want to debate its details under the guise of doing ‘moral philosophy’,³⁸ but this is not in itself a reason to dismiss an entire method of doing moral philosophy that is uncannily similar to her own. A clue to our answer may be found in an earlier passage of *The Right and the Good*. Ross writes:

³⁷ Compare: ‘The only events to consider are intentional actions themselves, and to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it [...] there is no distinction between my doing and the thing’s happening’ (Anscombe, 1957a: §§ 19 & 29).

³⁸ Cf. Wiseman (2016b: 10-11).

[G]reat confusion [...] has been introduced into ethics by the phrase 'a right action' being used sometimes of the initiation of a certain change in the state of affairs irrespective of motive, and at other times of such initiation from some particular motive, such as sense of duty or benevolence. I would further suggest that additional clearness would be gained if we used 'act' of the thing done, the initiation of change, and 'action' of the doing of it, the initiating of change, from a certain motive. We should then talk of a right act but not of a right action, of a morally good action but not of a morally good act. And it may be added that the doing of a wrong act may be a morally good action; for 'right' and 'wrong' refer entirely to the thing done, 'morally good' and 'morally bad' entirely to the motive from which it is done. (Ross, 1930: 6-7; cf. Sidgwick, 1874: Book III, Ch. 12 and Macmurray, 1938)

From all this he concludes, in a deliberately provocative and paradoxical manner:

[N]othing that ought to be done is ever morally good [...] the only acts that are morally good are those that proceed from a good motive [...] action from a good motive is never morally obligatory [...] what is morally good is never right [...] That action from a good motive is never obligatory follows from the Kantian principle [...] that 'I ought' implies 'I can'. [...] however carelessly I pack or dispatch the book, if it comes to hand I have done my duty, and however carefully I acted, if the book does not come to hand I have not done my duty. Of course I should deserve more praise in the second case than in the first. (Ross, 1930: 132)

Anscombe has little time for this sort of distinction between what is done and the doing of it from a certain motive. She is consequently disinclined to relate the former to the right and the latter to the good, a disposition strengthened by her independent suspicion of the very distinction between good and right action (see §I). It is worth recalling, at this juncture, that Anscombe's objection was not that moral philosophers lacked a philosophy of psychology or action *per se*, only that they were in desperate need of one that was 'sound', or at least 'adequate'.

So perhaps she simply found Ross' argument to the conclusion that an action that is good can never be right (and vice versa) to be 'unsound' because it fails to capture the correct relation between motive, intention, action, and duty. Whatever the explanation, she seems to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. For there is a sound and morally

important difference to be made between the things we do and our doings of them, especially in relation to questions concerning intention, foresight, consequences, and intrinsic wrongness.³⁹

Ross's point about the rightness of an action being divorceable from the goodness or badness of one's performing is a sensible and important one, sharing affinities with Mill's stance that 'a right action does not necessarily indicate a virtuous character' and that 'actions which are blameable often proceed from qualities entitled to praise'. (Mill, 1863: 18-20).⁴⁰ Yet Anscombe's view that the things we do are physical happenings or events (1957a, §29, 1964: 4, 1969: 10-11, 1979: 208-210) with morally pertinent descriptions⁴¹ seems to leave no space for it. This is because it rules out the possibility that two people can do the very same thing, even though only one of them is acting from a good motive.⁴² In this she goes against her teacher, Wittgenstein, who cites this very possibility as an explanation for why self-understanding can be so difficult to achieve at times:

It is hard to understand yourself properly since something that you might be doing out of generosity & goodness is the same as you may be doing out of cowardice or indifference. To be sure, one may act in such & such a way from true love, but also from deceitfulness & from a cold heart too (CV p. 54 [MS 131 38: 14.8.1946]; cf. PI §§ 253-254).

One may be tempted to object here that 'A did the same thing as B' simply amounts to there being *some* description of what A did which is also true of what B did (e.g. 'give money to X', or 'show off to his friends'). But it would be a category mistake to think that such descriptions apply to things done, as opposed to our doings of them. If A *murdered* X then we can indeed describe this very thing that A did by saying (with some loss in specificity) that A *killed* X, for the latter is a sub-set of the former. But if A *gave money* to X, we cannot truthfully describe the thing done (give money) as showing off, since one can do this very same thing without even intending to showing off in the process.

³⁹ See Hornsby (1993).

⁴⁰ For contrast see Kant (1788: 5, 147-148).

⁴¹ See note 37.

⁴² Strictly speaking, one could defend an identity theory between action-event and thing done while allowing for the subtler distinction between one's *doing* X from and event *of* one's doing X from (see Sandis, 2012: 33), but the stance would be eccentric.

For sure, a particular *instance* of giving money may be truthfully describable as showing off, but the things we do, in the sense in which two people can do the same thing, are not instances of anything. In the case of the person whose donating a large sum of money is a case of showing off, then, there is not one single thing done that is good under one description and bad under another but, rather, one event of someone acting badly in doing two distinct things (one right, the other wrong). Hursthouse writes:

[A]ct honestly, charitably, generously; do not act dishonestly, etc. [...] the adverbs connote not only doing what the virtuous agent would do, but also doing it 'in the way' she would do it, which includes 'for the same sort(s) of reason(s)',⁴³ [...] What is misleading about this phrase is that it obscures the fact that, in one way, the agent is not 'doing the right thing'. What she is doing is, say, trying to impress the onlookers, or hurting someone's feelings, or avoiding punishment. (Hursthouse, 1999: 29, f.n. 7 & 125)

But while one's act of donating to charity may also be correctly described as one's trying to impress the onlookers, this doesn't give us a reason to deny that in so acting a person may do (at least) two things: donate to charity and impress the onlookers, one of which is right and the other wrong. Anscombe can, of course, allow that one can donate to charity with the (bad) intention of impressing the onlookers. On her view, however, this provides a true description of *what was done*, thereby leaving no space for the view that one can do the right thing with a bad intention. This forces us to say that what was done was right under one description and wrong under another.

Anscombe's underlying account of action as a happening contrasts with that of Prichard, according to whom to do something is to bring about a change:

It is, no doubt, not easy to say what we mean by 'an action' or by 'doing something'. Yet we have in the end to allow that we mean by it originating, causing, or bringing about the existence of something viz. some new state of an existing thing or substance, or, more shortly, causing a change of state of some existing things [...] by 'moving our hand' we mean causing a change of place in

⁴³ One may of course also act in right or wrong ways that are independent of morality (there are two senses in which one might being a good thief).

our hand; by ‘posting a letter’ we mean bringing about that a letter is in a pillar-box. (Prichard, 1932: 84-85)

The view outlined above anticipates those of G. H. von Wright (1963) and, more recently, Maria Alvarez and John Hyman (1998). By the end of World War II, however, Prichard had come to embrace a volitionist account of action as a form of mental activity (1945: 272-274).⁴⁴ Contra Macmurray and Ross, he now claimed that the term ‘action’ was not ambiguous at all: it referred to our mental ‘doings’ and not to their effected changes, which constitute our ‘deeds’ (Ibid.: 275; cf. von Wright 1963: 37 ff.).

Anscombe would have undoubtedly rejected Prichard’s invalid inference from the thought that we might conceivably fail to achieve anything we set out to do, to the conclusion that all we ever have a duty to do is to set ourselves (viz. will) to bring something about. Indeed, no *adequate* philosophy of psychology could ever allow for such an inference. But if, in uttering ‘I do what happens’, Anscombe had been running a million miles from Prichard’s volitionism, then she ended up too far in the other direction.

Epilogue

Sixty years after MMP, contemporary moral philosophy is replete with consequentialist thinking obsessed with trolley-cases, a re-branded ‘philosophy of psychology’ that replaces conceptual explorations with unrefined findings from cognitive science, an experimental form of ‘moral psychology’ that culminates in the situationist skepticism about character traits, and the espousal of virtue ethics as a theory of ‘morally right action’ that may even be compatible with utilitarianism. By Anscombe’s lights, moral philosophy would seem to have been in far better shape between Moore and MMP than it is now. Within the work of Ross and Prichard alone, we find a properly philosophical psychology (one that includes conceptual explorations of the relation of action to motive, intention, and the will) to be central to moral thought.

Whatever one’s assessment of the views of action that Anscombe sought to combat and the account that she put forward in their place, MMP seems to have inadvertently created a wedge between ethics and action theory. This has largely been the result of two consequences that Anscombe could not have easily foreseen, and most certainly didn’t intend. The first is the

⁴⁴ The general shape of Prichard’s account is retained in the early work of Jennifer Hornsby, who replaces willing with trying (1980: 46-48, 60-63; retracted in Hornsby, 2010).

establishment of ‘virtue ethics’ as one more position within normative ethics, theorizing that an action is right if (and only if) it is what the virtuous agent would (advise us to) do. The second is the development of ‘moral psychology’ as an independent and increasingly empirical ‘branch’ of ethics whose interest in questions of motivation, agency, and responsibility have been largely sawed off investigations into the good and the right.

To end with a ray of hope: the 21st century has seen a resurgence of neo-Anscombian producing impressive work in moral philosophy (e.g. Coope, 2006; Solomon, 2003, 2008; Thompson, 2008; Vogler, 2009; Frey, 2019 and Hain, 2019). This welcome revival of interest in her work is an opportunity for moral philosophers to work well and finally put things right.⁴⁵

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⁴⁵ Versions of this paper were presented at the *Centre for Ethics as Study of Human Value*, University of Pardubice (21 Feb, 2018), the University of Zurich’s Theory of Action summer school in Abbaye de Reigny, Vermenton (17-22 June, 2018), and the *Anscombe at 100: On Action and Living Well* conference, College Year Athens (15-16 June, 2019). Many thanks to all of the organisers and participants, including my Athens respondent Stelios Virvidakis. Special thanks to Louise Chapman, Sophie-Grace Chappell, Jennifer Frey, David Hunter, Andreas Lind, and Roger Teichmann, as well as two anonymous referees, for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts. These have helped to improve the paper, though not as much as any of them would have liked.

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