

ACPQ Special Issue: Elizabeth Anscombe

Editor's Introduction

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I

Elizabeth Anscombe was a remarkable and formidable woman, and a very considerable philosopher. Orders of intellectual greatness are hard to assign particularly when the subject in question belongs to one's own time, but there is no question that Anscombe was one of the most gifted and accomplished philosophers of the twentieth century. Her work will continue to be read long into the future and a place for her in the history of philosophy is assured.

Her contemporary peers include the Americans: Roderick Chisholm, Donald Davidson, Van Quine, and Wilfred Sellars; the British: John Austin, A.J. Ayer, Gilbert Ryle, and Peter Strawson; and the Europeans: Hannah Arendt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Simone Weil. Of these I would conjecture that Sellars, Strawson, and Ricoeur will be judged to be of enduring interest, and in overall comparison with those (or any others mentioned) Anscombe takes the lead. She was not a genius of the order of her teacher and friend Wittgenstein, but he may be the only twentieth century figure securely in that category, and does not qualify as a contemporary peer having been born in the nineteenth century and only barely survived into the second half of the twentieth.

Among those who studied with her for various periods as undergraduates or graduates are several who themselves became eminent philosophers including Michael Dummett, Thomas Nagel, Onora O'Neill, and Charles Taylor, and three others - Sarah Broadie, Cora Diamond, and

Anthony Kenny - who appear in this special issue of the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* on the philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe.

Considering her place in the category of women philosophers she is the clear leader, marked out by her creativity, imagination, industry, insight, range and rigour. There is also a kind of singularity about her work: she proceeds directly to the topic of her investigation, makes few references to contemporaries or to current trends, writes in a concentrated and often indirect manner, eschews academic jargon, generally avoids footnotes, and sometimes ends with an expression of perplexity. Again unlike most philosophers of her standing she engaged in philosophical analysis and argumentation before non-academic audiences. In this connection while she proportioned the depth of her thinking to their likely knowledge and comprehension she never resorted to glibness or misleading oversimplification.

Wherein lies her greatness? Among the elements composing this were her intellectual commitment, stamina, and toughness. Of themselves these do not make for brilliance, but without them there tends only to be, at best, unsustained cleverness. In addition she had tremendous powers of analysis and argument. She also had a 'nose' for fakes and mistakes, not the superficial yet pervasive sort that characterise the work of most philosophers in any period; but the deeper kind that give rise to ways of thinking that seem inescapable until the error and the escape routes are pointed out. Into this category fall Descartes' and Locke's accounts of mind as co-extensive with consciousness, and of thought as only causally related to the world; Hume's arguments regarding fact, value and practical normativity, and causality; and Kant's disconnection of reason from nature. Moving down a league there are Bentham's obliteration of the intended/foreseen consequence distinction, Quine's double-standard as regards

extensional/scientific and intensional/everyday discourses, and Hare's description/prescription gap. All of these were the subject of insightful and destructive Anscombean critiques.

In his *Philosophical Lexicon*, Daniel Dennett in one of his less clever and less witty entries gives two definitions of the verb 'Anscombe':

"v. (1) To gather for safe-keeping. "She anscombed with all the notes and letters."

(2) To go over carefully, with a fine-tooth comb, in an oblique direction."

The first refers to her work as editor and translator of Wittgenstein; the second to her philosophical style. More apt, and deserving of the noun form: 'Anscombes', would have been what Dennett writes in definition of Bernard Williams: "The dream-sensation of running for one's life while wearing diving boots. "His comments on my paper gave me the [Anscombes]". Such were her analytical powers that the idea of being a focus of Anscombe's critical attention might occasion nightmares. She was invariably frank, often brusque and sometimes harsh. I am not sure to what extent she intended to be rude, though something perceived as such might be in evidence where she regarded what had been said as stupid or vacuous, or suspected vainglorious pretension. In any event the simple fact of her applying her intelligence to claims and arguments would be enough to occasion anxiety, though she was also a supportive tutor and supervisor.

Elizabeth Anscombe died on 5 January 2001 within days of the passing of Quine with whom, through her husband Peter Geach, she had formed a personal friendship. While they were united in their attachment to rigour, to a belief in the importance of logic, and to a conviction that philosophy had been transformed by the work of Gottlob Frege, their own philosophical outlooks, and conclusions, could not have been more different: he being one of the foremost proponents of scientific materialism; she a teenage convert to Roman Catholicism and a lifelong

advocate of theological orthodoxy. Additionally, while Quine thought of philosophy as closely aligned with science and due to develop as the latter progressed, Anscombe, while respectful of science per se, was anti-scientistic and sceptical of attempts to solve philosophical questions by appealing to empirical theories. She also had no inclination to suppose that contemporary philosophy was in general an improvement on the thought of the past. In general, perhaps because there were more great figures there, and because Wittgenstein had dismantled the philosophy of Descartes which separated modern thought from its predecessors, she tended to look to earlier times than to the present or recent past. She had a particular feeling for philosophers from the pre-modern period, particularly Plato, Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas, but also, though she studied them less, Spinoza and Kierkegaard. Of her contemporaries and juniors she appreciated the work of her friends Georg Von Wright and Philippa Foot, and that of Saul Kripke.

II

Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe was born on 18 March 1919 the youngest of three children and only daughter of Alan Wells Anscombe, a science master at Dulwich College in South London, and of his wife Gertrude Elizabeth, a classics teacher, after whom she was named. Her father was an atheist and her mother a nominal Anglican. Before she entered her teenage years and up to the middle of them Elizabeth discovered Roman Catholicism by reading a book on the lives and work of Elizabethan English recusant priests, and read her way into the Catholic faith; but her parents were strongly opposed to her wish to become a Catholic and it was only on leaving Sydenham High School for Girls and getting to St Hugh's College Oxford that she felt free to receive instruction preparatory to admission to the Church.

At Oxford she studied 'Greats' (Classics and Philosophy) and in her first year became a Roman Catholic. Shortly thereafter she met Peter Geach, another philosopher convert, while both were in a Corpus Christi procession at the Servite Priory of St Philip a few miles north of Oxford. Like her he had been receiving instruction from the Dominican Fr Richard Kehoe of Blackfriars, Oxford.. They became engaged shortly thereafter and married at the Brompton Oratory in London on St Stephen's Day (December 26) 1941. Earlier in the same year Anscombe had graduated with First Class Honours, secured by the brilliance of her philosophy scripts and in the face of her apparently comprehensive ignorance of ancient history.

'Miss Anscombe', as she continued to be called, even by Geach (and through the course of having seven children) crossed in 1942 to Cambridge to take up the Sarah Simpson post-graduate research studentship at Newnham College. It was in Cambridge that she met Wittgenstein who then held the Chair of Philosophy and whose lectures she attended, becoming increasingly enthusiastic about his revolutionary ideas. By 1946 she had returned to Oxford as a research fellow at Somerville College where she remained in one or another capacity (as college lecturer 1951, university lecturer 1958, and official college fellow from 1964) until her appointment to the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge in 1970.

Between first meeting him and returning to Oxford, Anscombe maintained contact with Wittgenstein, travelling to Cambridge once a week to meet with him. In the course of that year 1946-7 they became close friends. Obsessive about the originality of his own thought and somewhat misogynistic, she was one of the few academics Wittgenstein ever trusted, and he would address her affectionately as 'old man'. Although he is quoted by Norman Malcolm as saying of Anscombe and of another philosopher convert, Yorick Smithies, that he "could not possibly believe all the things they believe", in his final year, when he knew he was dying,

Wittgenstein asked Anscombe to put him in touch with a "non-philosophical priest". That she did calling upon Fr Conrad Pepler OP. of Blackfriars, Cambridge. Notwithstanding that she effected the introduction, however, Anscombe never presumed that Wittgenstein had resumed the faith of his childhood, and speculations to that effect are wishful thinking. Early versions of these may have been encouraged by the following facts. 1) Fr Pepler did administer the last rites while Wittgenstein was still alive (though he had fallen into unconsciousness by then), 2) he was given a Catholic burial, and 3) members of his family subsequently arranged for the printing and distribution of an *in memoriam* card which in Catholic circles would normally be taken to indicate that the person remembered, and for whom prayers were sought, had died a practising Catholic. Anscombe regretted any encouragement that may have been given by these facts to the belief that Wittgenstein had returned to the Catholic faith.

Preparation for the task of translating Wittgenstein's work (written in German) had begun while he was still alive, but now she and the other two literary executors and editors (G. von Wright and Rush Rhees) set about the project of bringing material to publication. Anscombe took the lead in this, and the appearance in 1953 of her translation of Wittgenstein's masterpiece *Philosophical Investigations* was, without any question, one of the major turning points in twentieth century philosophy.

This was followed by her translations of other works: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1956), *Notebooks 1914-16* (1961), *Zettel* (1967) and (with Denis Paul) *On Certainty* (1969). She also concerned herself with Wittgenstein's earlier philosophy, publishing *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (1959), and together with Geach translated *Descartes' Philosophical Writings* (1954).

Anscombe's appreciation of philosophers with whom she disagreed profoundly (principally Descartes and Hume) was marked, as was her range. She could write authoritatively, using her own translations, of Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Frege and Wittgenstein. But first and foremost she was neither an historian, a translator, nor an editor, but an original philosopher. Her short book *Intention*, first published in 1957 and republished by Harvard University Press in 2000, is universally regarded as a classic account of the nature of intentional behaviour, and as the founding text of the theory of action. In it she argued that intentional actions are ones to which a particular sense of the question 'why?' applies: one which seeks a reason that is provided either by identifying a backward-looking factor, such as that the agent is rectifying a failing or wrong, or a forward-looking one such as an immediate aim or further objective. Additionally, the performance of such actions is known to the agent non-observationally.

Anscombe's motive in investigating intention was her perplexity and frustration at attempts to excuse or minimise culpability by saying that an agent only intended immediate acts and that their foreseen and desired consequences were something distinct for which he might not be morally responsible. Thus she forged a link between philosophical and moral psychology which was further adverted to in her 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy", which introduced the term "consequentialism" into the English language. The writing of this had resulted in part from the desire to see what moral philosophers had to say about the determinants of the value of actions, and in part from the practical need to read ethical texts in preparation for tutoring the subject in Oxford which she had agreed to do in order to allow her Somerville College colleague Philippa Foot to take a period of study leave. Yet it is rightly credited as being the principal cause of the revival of an ethics focussed on virtue rather than on rule or outcome. Though

Anscombe never supposed that the whole of ethics could be done in terms of the concept of virtue and on that account she cannot correctly be termed a 'virtue ethicist'.

Similarly, 'Causality and Determination', her inaugural lecture as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge subverted, and some believe refuted, a centuries' old orthodoxy about the nature of causation, viz. that it is essentially necessitarian and/or lawlike. Instead she treated the notion of 'causality' as an abstraction formed on the basis of particular verbal descriptions such "cutting", "pushing", "tearing" and so on which are deployed in everyday observation and explanation. To the extent that there is a unifying core to these and hence to the notion of causality more generally it is, she suggested, that of derivativeness, of one thing 'coming from' or 'being due to' another. This approach connects with other themes in her work on epistemology and metaphysics where she subverts empiricist accounts and in the process blocks one route to scepticism. For Anscombe, here developing ideas from Wittgenstein, concepts which are specific instances of ones of substance, causation, and value, are not got by abstraction from experience but brought to it through the grammar of language. It is not a discovery that gold is a substance for 'gold' is a substantival term.

As indicated here, Anscombe's work was for the most part highly academic, usually difficult to comprehend, and often combative in expression. It sometimes took readers years to see the point of what she was arguing, but this was because she always took on the hardest problems and had no time for slick presentation. Rush Rhees quoted Wittgenstein as often saying "go the bloody hard way"; this is a direction Anscombe appears to have taken to heart. She is reported to have said to A.J. Ayer "if you didn't talk so quickly, people wouldn't think you were so clever" - though, in fairness his reply should also be quoted: "if you didn't talk so slowly, people wouldn't think you were so profound."

From her student days, however, she had discussed and written about issues of moral, political and religious interests. In 1939 she co-authored a then highly controversial pamphlet predicting that Britain's conduct in the Second World War would be unjust, and in 1956/7 she protested the award by the University of Oxford of an honorary degree to President Truman, charging that he had commanded the murderous use of nuclear weapons against innocent Japanese civilians. Troubled by how people found it easy to defend Truman she came to the conclusion that they failed to understand the nature of his actions, and showed in *Intention*, that in doing one thing (moving one's hand) one may intentionally be doing another (directing the death of human beings).

In 1948, in debate with C.S. Lewis at the Socratic Club in Oxford she demolished his favoured argument against "the self-refuting character of naturalism". Where some apologists viewed this as giving comfort to the enemy (atheism), Anscombe characteristically saw herself as simply exposing bad argumentation. Her own verdict on the event "that it was an occasion of sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms, which Lewis's rethinking and rewriting showed he thought were accurate" seems the correct one. In any event, no-one could seriously doubt her belief in the value of Christian apologetics if they read the likes of her pamphlets *On Transubstantiation* (1974), and on *Contraception and Chastity* (1977), where she argued passionately in favour of traditional Catholic teachings.

In 1967 Anscombe was elected Fellow of the British Academy. She subsequently received a number of other distinctions including foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1999 (along with Peter Geach) a Papal medal *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice*. Three volumes of Anscombe's *Collected Papers* were published in 1981: *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein; Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*; and *Ethics*,

Religion and Politics. Two collections of papers were dedicated to her: *Intention and Intentionality* (1979) and *Logic, Cause and Action* (2000), and together with Geach she was the recipient of a volume of essays *Moral Truth and Moral Tradition* (1994) published to honour their fifty years of marriage.

Since Anscombe's death four further volumes of her writings have been published: *Human Life, Action and Ethics* (2005), *Faith in a Hard Ground* (2009), *From Plato to Wittgenstein* (2011), and *Logic, Truth and Meaning* (2015), and several collections of essays, and studies of her work have appeared - two of the authors of which, viz. Roger Teichmann and Rachel Wiseman are among the contributors to this issue. This special issue of the *ACPQ* adds further to the growing library of work by and about Anscombe (the main items of which are specified below) which is built upon and is further contributing to the renaissance of interest in her work. That promises to have several good outcomes. First, we will understand better the work of hers that was already known of. Second, we will gain further insight into areas and developments within her philosophy through engaging with hitherto unknown or neglected material. Third, we will be able to bring this knowledge to the ongoing effort to understand and resolve, so far as that it ever possible, some of the central questions of philosophy.

One of Anscombe's last pieces of philosophical writing was characteristically quirky but likewise also suggestive of hitherto unseen lines of enquiry. In "Russelm or Anselm?" *Philosophical Quarterly*, 43 (1993), she defended the thesis that Anselm's argument of *Proslogion 2* could be saved "from the stupidity of an Ontological Argument" by deletion of a comma. This rests on the claim that in "*Si enim in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est*" the second (later editorial) comma ought to be omitted; in which interpretation ("if that than which nothing greater can be thought of exists only in the mind, something which is

greater can be conceived to exist also in reality"), the argument does not treat existence as a property of objects and so does not fall foul of Kant's objection. Writing of her defence

Anscombe remarked:

[I have] thought harder about Anselm's argument than I did before. But I still think that I haven't thought hard enough. I don't know whether Anselm's argument is valid or invalid - only that it is a great deal more interesting than its common interpretation makes it.

The scholarship, imagination, boldness and honesty evident in this essay characterised her work as a philosopher and may serve as an inspiration to her admirers.

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