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G E M Anscombe (1919-2001)

Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (commonly known as Elizabeth Anscombe) was born on the 18th of March 1919, the third child of an atheist father and nominally Anglican mother, who were schoolteachers. She became convinced of the truth of the Catholic Faith on the basis of reading she did between the ages of 12 and 15. G K Chesterton was influential at that stage in her life. Her philosophical interests were already aroused. Reading a book on natural theology by a nineteenth century Jesuit she came across a 'proof' of a 'principle of causality' which she saw proceeded 'from a barely concealed assumption of its own conclusion'. Over a period of three years, before embarking on the study of philosophy at university, she made five attempts to produce an improved version, in each case coming to judge that it was vitiated by the same fault, though more cleverly disguised, as the one that had provoked her efforts.

Anscombe went to Sydenham High School for Girls, then, in 1937 to St Hugh's College, Oxford. Her parents had been hostile to her efforts to become a Catholic, so it was only when she went to university that she was in a position to receive instruction in the Faith. This she had from Fr Richard Kehoe OP at Blackfriars, Oxford, being received into the Church on 27 April 1938 at the age of 19. Unbeknown to her, another undergraduate, Peter Geach, had been receiving instruction in his final year from the same Dominican priest and was received into the Church the following month. They were to meet shortly afterwards and became engaged later that year. Geach had obtained a first in Greats that year; Anscombe was to obtain a first in 1941. They were married on 26 December that year. Their marriage was to bear fruit in the lives of seven children as well as in intensely productive

philosophical exchanges, for Peter Geach (1916-) was also to have a distinguished career as a philosopher and logician.

While still an undergraduate Anscombe wrote the first part, 'The War and the Moral Law', of a pamphlet which she co-authored with a fellow undergraduate, Norman Daniel, on *The Justice of the Present War Considered*. (1939). She judged the war unjust both because of the unlimited aims with which it was undertaken, and more particularly because she identified a conditional intention on the part of government to kill civilians. So at the age of 20 she had firmly in place the basis for her subsequent opposition to nuclear deterrence policy and her opposition to the conferral of an honorary doctorate by Oxford University on ex-President Truman.

After a year (1941-42) on a postgraduate scholarship in Oxford, Anscombe in 1942 took up the Sarah Smithson research studentship at Newnham College, Cambridge, and while there became a student and friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) who then held the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge. She always engaged critically with his thought, and had little time for his reflections on religion, but his influence on her was powerful, perhaps most of all through the example he gave of unrelenting intensity in addressing philosophical problems and his aversion to shallowness and pretension. His substantial work in undermining the Cartesian assumptions behind the tradition of modern philosophy was also of great importance to her. A fair amount of her subsequent work can be seen as a re-appropriation of much in Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas through dismantling the Cartesian obstacles to a just estimation of their writings. Wittgenstein appointed her one of his three literary executors and she played a major role in editing and translating his unpublished works, besides lecturing on his work.

In 1946 she was appointed to a Research Fellowship at Somerville College, Oxford, in 1951 to a college lectureship and to a university lectureship in 1958, and to an Official Fellowship of the College in 1964. This was a period of intense work – of tutoring, lecturing, writing, translating and editing – combined with bringing up a young family. Anscombe's own contributions to philosophy cover most areas of the subject, contributions distinguished by the acute manner in which she uncovered and challenged unquestioned assumptions. Most, though not all, of her teaching and

writing was addressed to students of philosophy in whom she could not assume her own Catholic beliefs. Here we shall briefly review work which is directly relevant to Catholic social thought.

In 1956 Anscombe unsuccessfully opposed a proposal that Oxford University confer an honorary doctorate on ex-President Harry S Truman. She opposed it because ‘choosing to kill the innocent as a means to your ends is always murder’, and Truman had ordered murder on a massive scale by signing the order to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some of the overwhelming majority of senior members of the University who endorsed conferral of Truman’s degree rationalised their position by saying one shouldn’t make him responsible for the mass murder just because he signed his name at the foot of the order – that was *all* he did! Anscombe explained her opposition in a pamphlet, *Mr Truman’s Degree* (1956). She went on, however, to confront the roots of the specious exoneration of Truman in a series of lectures on intention, which were published the following year: *Intention* (1957). Intentional actions are ones which an agent knows he is performing (without having to rely on observation) and to which he would have to allow the question ‘Why are you doing X?’ to apply, and where the answer to the ‘Why’ question is a *reason* which either is backward-looking (e.g. revenge) or identifies the immediate and further objectives one is seeking to achieve. A range of actions are therefore identifiable under descriptions which specify the means chosen and ends aimed at. (So, for example, it is clear enough what Truman was aiming at in signing the order – the destruction of Japanese civilian populations – even if that was not his ultimate aim. So the action-description ‘ordering mass murder’ applies to what he did.) The work is dense, short (94pages) and has been seminal – a book which restored philosophical interest in action theory. When the second edition (1963) was reprinted in 2000, the then doyen of American philosophers, Donald Davidson, described it as ‘the most important treatment of action since Aristotle’.

Anscombe’s work made it clear that though an agent’s own statements of his intentions have a certain authority there are constraints on the intelligibility of those statements. They cannot, for example, suppress mention of his evidently chosen means to his chosen ends. Nor can an agent ‘redescribe’ his ends when the facts of the case and the context make clear what he is aiming at. Intellectual manoeuvres of this

kind have not been uncommon in the history of Catholic moral theology, particularly in the application of the principle of double effect, with attempts to redescribe as side-effects what are manifestly chosen effects.

‘The denial of [the principle of double effect] has been the corruption of non-Catholic thought, and its abuse the corruption of Catholic thought’ Anscombe observed. In Oxford in the 1950s she confronted what she saw and named as the prevailing consequentialism of conventional morality and its academic defence. Consequentialism, as she defined it, consisted in the denial of a morally significant distinction between the intended and foreseen effects of one’s choices; one was held to be equally responsible for both. On such a view there cannot be absolute moral norms against, for example, killing the innocent, adultery, idolatry, or vicarious punishment. If my refusal to kill one innocent person in order to save the lives of 19 others makes me just as much responsible for their deaths as I would have been had I intentionally killed them then the absolute prohibition on intentionally killing the innocent must seem to collapse. Since unintended evils will result from many of our chosen actions and omissions, the belief that one is just as responsible for them as if one had aimed to bring them about, will lead one to ground choices in attempted calculations about which outcome of different options will be the lesser evil. Such a conception of rational moral choice has entered Catholic moral theology under the name ‘proportionalism’, subverting the Church’s teaching on absolute moral norms.

The diagnosis of consequentialism as a prevalent feature of modern moral philosophy appeared in a famous paper Anscombe published in 1958: *Modern Moral Philosophy*. That paper also identified the moderns’ distinctive use of the notions of ‘moral duty’, ‘moral obligation’, the ‘moral ought’, which Anscombe diagnosed as deracinated derivatives of a divine law conception of morality. In the absence of belief in a divine lawgiver she recommended that secular moralists cease ungrounded invocations of ‘moral obligation’ and return to an Aristotelian understanding of the virtues as what are required for human well-being. The article has been widely credited with initiating the revival of philosophical interest in the virtues.

Answerability for intentional actions does not exhaust what human beings are answerable for. One is answerable for foreseeable harmful side-effects of one’s

choices, though one does not incur guilt if one's chosen course of action was required for sufficiently grave reasons. One is also answerable for omissions when one *could* and *should* have acted. And one may be guilty of failure to act even when one is not aware that one *should* act, when ignorance of obligation is itself culpable ignorance, as in one who does not take the trouble to find out what he should take the trouble to find out.

Both before and after the publication of the papal Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) Anscombe defended the Church's teaching on contraception, arguing that a woman who used the anovulent pill to render intercourse sterile, while clearly not engaging in the non-generative type sexual *behaviour* which the Church had always taught to be intrinsically bad (*per se malum*), deliberately produced circumstances that rendered chosen acts of intercourse non-generative as *intentional acts*. Such a choice was to be distinguished from having intercourse in circumstances in which the woman happened to be naturally infertile: generative type behaviour was not vitiated by any intentional bringing about of sterility. Anscombe argued that defence of the Church's teaching on contraception was essential to the intelligibility of the Church's teaching on chastity. Those who initially claimed to be making a case for the use of the pill only within marriage would soon be allowing other kinds of non-marital, non-generative sexual acts.

In 1970 Anscombe moved from Oxford to the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge, the Chair once occupied by her teacher Wittgenstein. One of the subjects of her seminars in her first years there was 'on killing human beings'. Human beings are to be distinguished from the other animals in being spirit as well as flesh. The spirituality of human bodily life is exhibited in a number of ways: in the fact that a thought can be identified only by saying what is being thought and not by material happenings or any physical process; in the fact that human beings 'move in the categories of innocence and answerability and desert': in our requiring *justification* for certain courses of action. So human beings possess a great dignity. It is radically contrary to recognition of that dignity to kill a human being for reasons of convenience or because one judges that he or she lacks a worthwhile life. Duly constituted civil authority may kill in defence of the common good but, since the foundation of its right to do so is the human need of protection from *unjust* attack,

civil authority may never engage in or authorize the killing of the innocent. Our most basic right is our right not to be murdered. Anscombe had always been clear in her opposition to abortion and euthanasia, regarding each nation that has 'liberal' abortion laws as having become 'a nation of murderers'. Though her reading of the embryological evidence left her unconvinced that there was an individualised human form at the very earliest stages of development, she held that abortion at these stages was, if not the killing of an individual human being, at least the killing of 'a living individual whole whose life is – all going well – to be the life of one or lives of more than one human being' which it would be pedantic not to call murder.

Anscombe's opposition to abortion was not merely intellectual. She joined two of her children in actions outside abortion clinics; there is a press photograph of her being dragged away by police on one occasion from the front of an abortuary. The press reports, however, carefully avoided saying who the elderly protestor was.

Respect for human dignity, as Anscombe understood it, means not merely basic respect for human existence but respect for the kind of life proper to the nature of human beings. And so failure to see that human beings should be brought into existence only through natural procreation in the bond of marriage leads to a loss of recognition of human dignity. This is manifest in the status accorded to the human embryo in IVF programmes.

Anscombe used to wonder at times in the 1960s whether the Church's teaching on contraception would suffer the same neglect as her teaching on usury, usury being the demanding of interest on the mere strength of a loan. In a posthumously published paper (written in 1975) she presented the thesis that 'the automatic right of money to bear interest is something that essentially goes with a stock market; and further is something that must go against prosperity unless trade and productivity are continually expanding. For if interest is paid, then either there must be a real increase of productivity, or there must be a flow of the country's money into the hands of the people who already have money (to them that have shall be given) or there must be inflation.' Anscombe thought it highly regrettable that the Church should have fallen silent about usury since Benedict XIV's condemnation of it 'in unretractable terms' in his Encyclical letter *Vix pervenit* of 1745.

On so many moral issues Anscombe was opposed to the conventional tenets and spirit of the age.

She retired from the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge in 1986. She had been made a Fellow of the British Academy in 1967. Over the course of her career she had been a regular visiting professor in a number of universities in the United States, and on occasions in Germany, Spain and South America. Many students testified to her outstanding abilities as a teacher. Concluding an obituary notice, her sometime colleague, Professor Philippa Foot, wrote: 'She was a very important philosopher and a great teacher. Many say "I owe everything to her" and I say it too on my own account.'

Large and important areas of Anscombe's work in philosophy have been left untouched in this account, which itself has been unavoidably superficial in what it has treated. There can be no substitute for reading Anscombe's own writings.

Luke Gormally (2011)

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