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Preface

Three volumes of *Collected Papers* by Elizabeth Anscombe were published in 1981.¹ Those volumes brought together a selection of papers previously published between 1947 and 1979, together with a small number of previously unpublished papers. The present volume is the first of what, it is hoped, will be a number of volumes bringing together a selection of hitherto uncollected published papers along with some unpublished ones.² *Human Life, Action and Ethics* collects eighteen previously published papers, together with five that have not hitherto appeared in English; two of those have appeared in Spanish.

The work of collecting and preparing the papers for the present volume has been based on information gathered in the course of cataloguing Professor Anscombe's papers filed in her study at her home in Cambridge. It should be emphasised that the task of cataloguing, for which my principal duties have left few opportunities, is far from complete. Moreover, since Professor Anscombe was not a very systematic collector of her own papers, it is possible there may be some deposited elsewhere of which she did not keep copies. So there may be other papers of hers in existence which would have qualified for inclusion in this volume.

[1] *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*. Volume 1: *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*; Volume 2: *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*; Volume 3: *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

[2] The contents of a prospective volume on *Religion, Belief and Practice* have already been identified though not yet prepared for publication.

The main focus of *Human Life, Action and Ethics* is on Professor Anscombe's writings in moral philosophy. The first part of the volume contains a number of papers with some relevance to her understanding of the proper valuation of human life, a topic of fundamental importance to her work in moral philosophy. The second part contains two papers on the causation of human action, and papers on practical inference and practical truth. The third part collects twelve papers, ranging from more general topics in moral philosophy to particular substantive ethical issues. We have included in this section the famous and influential 1958 paper on 'Modern Moral Philosophy' which has already appeared in a previous volume of the *Collected Papers*³ and which has been anthologised in a number of volumes. It is included here for the benefit of readers new to Professor Anscombe's work in moral philosophy; a reading of it will serve to throw light on a number of other items in the volume.

One point should be noted about the presentation of the papers in this volume. Numbered footnotes are Professor Anscombe's own, though in some cases what are merely bibliographical data have been amplified by me. Footnotes indicated by an asterisk (*) are by me. For the most part they provide information about the original occasion of a text where I have been able to establish this; details about the original publication of previously published texts; and acknowledgements to copyright owners in the case of papers over which Professor Anscombe did not retain the copyright. Very occasionally I have provided a footnote indicating alterations to previously published versions of the text where these seem to me to be authorised by alterations and corrections made in Professor Anscombe's hand to offprints or typescripts on file. In a very few places I have inserted an obviously missing word; these insertions are indicated by square brackets.

[3] In Volume 3: *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, pp. 26-42.

It remains to acknowledge debts incurred in the editing of these papers. I am very grateful to the two institutions to which I belong – The Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics, in London, and Ave Maria School of Law, in Ann Arbor, Michigan – for allowing me to find time to work on this project. Without their moral and material support it would have been impossible. Gratitude is owing to Professor John Haldane for suggesting inclusion of this volume in the series he is editing and thereby ensuring its appearance at a much earlier date than had previously seemed likely. I am grateful to him for also providing generous support in the initial stages of compiling the volume. I would like to thank Jose Maria Torralba of the University of Navarre at Pamplona, who is doing research on Professor Anscombe's work, for providing me with copies of the texts of lectures she gave at his university in the 1970s and 1980s.

The greatest debt of gratitude is owing to Professor Peter Geach not only for providing ready access to Elizabeth Anscombe's papers but also for providing generous and convivial hospitality on the occasions on which I was working on them. In the latter connection I owe thanks also to More Geach.

Finally, it has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with my wife in editing this collection of her mother's papers. We are at one in dedicating this volume to her father as a token of filial affection in his ninetieth year.

Luke Gormally

Introduction

'Philosophy', said my mother, 'is thinking about the most difficult and ultimate questions'. She defined her subject in this way for the university prospectus when she was a professor at Cambridge, in the chair which had been occupied by her teacher, Wittgenstein. Some people might want to qualify the word 'thinking' as it occurs in this definition, but Anscombe did not go in for a special, different kind of thinking: as her daughter, coming home from school, I learned from the way she met my own philosophical problems (problems arising not from philosophy lessons mostly, but from conversation and from the school curriculum) that philosophy was, as I put it to myself, 'just thinking' – merely thinking about certain topics.

So to read Anscombe you need no key, except when she is discussing some text in detail: then it helps to have the book itself. However, you do have to pay close attention. Her style was dense and unrepentive, and it is hard to know sometimes whether it would be more clarificatory to go on to the next sentence, or to return to the previous one. She does not carry the reader along, as some authors do (Newman is an example). Yet some people prefer her sort of writing, like the confection *panforte*, all fruit and nuts and no dough, very chewy and tough.

Not all the essays here are equally difficult, however. She did vary her style according to audience. One work here was a radio talk. She was given the title 'Does Oxford Moral Philosophy

Corrupt Youth?’ (Someone had implied it did.) She replied no; this philosophy made no difference to the young; it only taught them to go along with the ways of society and to accept its standards. But she made it plain that she was radically opposed to those standards, to its rules, both as expressed and as carried out.

It was for this radical opposition, no doubt, that the BBC had chosen her to address the question about corrupting youth. Anscombe had recently got into the international press for opposing the degree which Oxford University gave to ex-President Harry Truman. He was notorious for having ordered the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She had risen in the ancient house of Congregation, asked permission to speak in English, and given a speech in which she compared Oxford’s proposed action to that of honouring Hitler or Nero or Ghengiz Khan. However, Congregation granted the degree; men came to vote, urged on to do so by the news that ‘the women’ were going to make trouble in Congregation. Only four people said ‘*non placet*’.

This episode made her give the course of lectures which became the book *Intention*. If people were capable of excusing Truman by saying he had only signed his name on a piece of paper, it was clear that there were some things which she understood and they did not. A more sophisticated version of this was produced later by Nowell-Smith in *The Listener* – he pointed out that Truman’s action had many descriptions, and wanted to know for which of those it should be judged. No one now would ask this question except rhetorically; *Intention* changed the consciousness of Anglo-Saxon philosophy, making everyone aware that actions are *intended* under descriptions, and that they are at least to be judged under those. Here, in this collection, the Anscombe of *Intention* is to be found in the essay on Chisholm, a work of philosophical psychology with no ethics in it.

I think it was while she was giving the course on ‘Intention’ that she heard my father say about some medicine ‘I’m a big man,

and I need a big dose, so I'll take ... You know', he added, 'my father really used to reason like that'. Anscombe was at the time wondering about practical syllogisms, and was arrested by the word 'reason'. So *that* was what practical reasoning was! It was a chain of reasoning ending 'So I'll'.

Her interest in practical reasoning is continued in the essay on von Wright on 'Practical Inference' here reproduced, in which she brings it out that 'I believe p ' is not usually the conclusion of an argument: belief in the conclusion of an argument is as much an additional step, not logically implied by the premisses, as is action in the light of an argument. Anscombe does not beat any drums or sound any trumpets in pointing out this vital fact; Moore had long ago pointed out that ' p but I do not believe that p ' is a self-contradiction of non-logical kind, but it is an example of Anscombe's genius for making unexpected connections that she compares belief to action in this way, directing our attention to a fact which should be noted by anyone who regards as unanswerably correct the opinion of Hume that rationality only belongs to beliefs, and not to actions or the passions that impel them. (Of course, since an assertion is an action, Moore's paradox already shows that an action can be self-contradictory, even when it does not consist in the assertion of logically contradictory propositions.)

Hume's reflections on ethics have greatly influenced our culture. I have seen a sentence in French beginning 'Vous avez bien fait de ...' translated into an English one beginning 'I'm glad you were able to ...'. I doubt if the translator had a philosophical axe to grind: he was simply trying to make a piece of dialogue sound natural, and it seemed more natural to him in an English speaker that he should express his pleasure at a good action than that he should tell the agent that he had done well.

'Doing well' is the topic of the essay on 'Practical Truth'. She had been thinking about this subject when she was visiting a friend, a farmer's wife who was a near neighbour on the Welsh

border. Both women had a daughter with them, and one, my sister, was describing her activities outside abortion clinics, trying to prevent mothers from having their children killed. 'That was well done,' said the farmer's daughter. Doing well! Again my mother found an Aristotelian example in everyday life.

My mother regarded all abortion as evil, as she did all killing of the innocent (see the paper on 'Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia'), and was not as ready as some Catholic moralists to accept the idea that it is permissible to remove a pregnant tube. This emerges in the review of Glanville Williams which was turned down by the law journal that commissioned it. Williams was one of the grey eminences of the English Establishment, that part concerned to 'up-date' the law, so that it might express the rulers' disrespect for human life, for the family, and for decent standards of justice. Bodies like the Law Commission work out in detail the laws which government puts to Parliament, and the principles on which these bodies work are the principles of men like Williams. Sometimes Parliament runs ahead of the Law Commission: the flavour of their beliefs can be tasted in the comment of one former Law Commissioner on a private member's Bill, which became the Forfeiture Act, giving the courts discretion to allow those guilty of unlawful killing to inherit the goods of their victims. Stephen Cretney speaks of the sponsors having to make an exception of murder 'notwithstanding the fact that there may well be murder cases – some instances of so-called mercy killing, for example – in which the forfeiture rule might operate harshly and unjustly'.¹ Sometimes public outcry prevents 'updating' of laws; the Criminal Law Revision Committee,²

[1] Stephen Cretney, *Law, Law Reform and the Family* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 83.

[2] The work of the Criminal Law Revision Committee (established 1959, inactive since 1986, though not formally disbanded) has in effect been inherited by the Law Commission (established 1965); see, for example, the statement of indebtedness of the latter to the work of the former in *The Law Commission, Offences Against the Person and General Principles* (Law Com No 218; 1993), #1.5

of which Williams was a member, proposed at one time that the laws about evidence be changed. Anscombe, with an American lawyer called Joe Feldman, wrote a heavily satirical piece (not included here) suggesting a few more radical changes.³

I remember at that time she told me about a thing Wittgenstein had said: that when people enunciated some instance of the law of non-contradiction, they were generally ‘pulling a fast one’ – performing some piece of dialectical sleight-of-hand. The Lord Chancellor came on the radio shortly after, discussing the proposed changes in the law of evidence. ‘Either you trust the jury’, he said, ‘or you don’t’. We laughed heartily.

Anscombe came to write ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ when Philippa Foot, who ordinarily taught ethics in Somerville,⁴ asked her to do it while she (Foot) was away in America. My mother settled down to read the standard modern ethicists and was appalled. The thing these people had in common, which had made Truman drop the bomb and the dons defend him, was a belief which Anscombe labelled ‘consequentialism’. I believe she invented the term; it has come to mean much the same as ‘act-utilitarianism’, but without the view that the good is to be equated with pleasure and evil with pain. As Anscombe first explained it, however, consequentialism is the view that there is no kind of act so bad but it might on occasion be justified by its consequences, or by the likely consequences of not performing it. One might hold this without thinking that right action is always that which produces the best consequences. A virtue ethicist might be a consequentialist. It needs to be discussed: Could a virtuous man be a consequentialist in the sense explained by

(referring to the Fourteenth Report of The Criminal Law Revision Committee, *Offences against the Person*, 1980).

[3] G.E.M. Anscombe and J. Feldman, ‘On the Nature of Justice in a Trial’. *Analysis* 35/2 (1972): 33–36.

[4] Anscombe and Foot where at the time jointly responsible for teaching the philosophy syllabus at Somerville.

Anscombe? Or: are there kinds of act which are always inconsistent with virtue?

Anscombe's study of action and intention was an important part of her opposition to consequentialism. To hold that some actions are out of the question, we need to distinguish between the intended and the known or foreseen. The Williams review and the essay on 'double effect' apply her action theory to ethical topics. Both essays show her disagreeing with the usual opinion of Catholic moralists. She expresses an opinion about the case of ectopic pregnancy which instantiates her view that the corruption of Catholic teaching was in the abuse of the double effect doctrine. She had not, I think, looked at the actual arguments and her view was influenced by an account of an ectopic pregnancy coming successfully to term, which surely could not have been in the fallopian tube. Her view was later modified by a description of the crisis that occurs in ectopic pregnancy if it is not diagnosed before the tube starts to rupture.

Her views on the early embryo would also be widely reprobated by people with whom she would be in sympathy about many important matters; by other faithful Catholics, that is: but this is a question which the Church leaves open. In her unpublished paper on 'The Early Embryo: Theoretical Doubts and Practical Certainties' (not reproduced here) she says that 'the proposal to procure an abortion is a proposal to kill either a growing baby, or, if it should be so early that there can be some doubt ... whether it is reasonable to call it *a* human, it is a proposal to kill a living individual whole whose life is — all going well — to be the life of one or lives of more than one human being'. She casts doubt on the 'rigid' definition of murder as the (wilful and unjust) killing of a human being and says 'even if it were certain that, for example, a week-old conceptus is not a human being, the act of killing what is in the earliest stages of human life has evidently the same sort of malice as killing it later on when it is unquestionably a human, or more than one.'

For her, the question 'Is this a human being?' asked of a human *in utero* is like the question 'Is this a cat?' asked about a cat *in utero*. But if the early embryo is not (because of its capacity to split) to count as a member of the species, there is a question what the malice consists in, when we kill a human embryo which we are sure is not yet a man. The answer, I think, may be found in her essay on 'The Dignity of the Human Being', where she argues that neither vengeful killing nor capital punishment is an offence against human dignity, because to kill someone on the ground that he deserved it is to recognise him as a rational being, answerable for his actions. Some killing, however, treats a human being's death as a convenience. Abortion is this kind of killing; it treats a baby as disposable material. Supposing its noble *telos* to confer upon it the dignity of humanity, an early embryo's killing would show a similar malice, as Anscombe says.

These doubts about the early embryo show that Anscombe's interest in human life as a topic was not only motivated by an interest in ethics. Her interest in the human soul predates the involvement in ethics which was brought on by the Truman episode and by her disgusted reading of Hume, Butler, Sidgwick, *et al.* The rather tentative papers in the first part of this book can be seen as a return on her part to an old love. When I said that my chosen research topic would be the soul, she told me that this was what she had named as her interest, I think when she put in for her research fellowship. These papers display her really radical anti-Cartesianism, shown not only in her readiness to divide up the material and immaterial along Aristotelian lines, but in her view that it needs arguing for if it *must* be the case that the seed of one species of plant has something different about it from the seed of another — apart from being of that species. The reply we might reasonably make to this very radical remark is that, after all, they have found out that inherited differences, whether of species or of individual peculiarities, are always mapped in the DNA, so whether there is a reason independent of discovery for

thinking that different kinds of seeds must be different in their internal arrangements, well, it just is so. However, I do think that an argument to show that it must be so — that even if we did not know about DNA, we would know that there must be something like that to be looked for — would be valuable, if it could be made. It could bring out something important about the relation of matter and form.

Another question about her philosophy arises from her view that the word 'moral', the concept of 'moral obligation' as used by unbelievers, should be dropped if possible. People have in fact followed her advice by trying to discuss virtues, like Aristotle. But her paper on whether a mistaken conscience binds is not expressed in terms of virtues, and it is hard to see how it could be. The question of whether a mistaken conscience binds could translate like this: If a man supposes an action to be contrary to a virtue, does he reduce that virtue in himself by performing the action, perhaps under the influence of another virtue which requires the action in question? (What is in question might be an omission rather than an action.) Huck Finn's virtue of friendship requires that he do a thing which he regards as stealing. Does 'stealing' Jim make him unjust?

Her work on practical inference represents a way of moving by means of Aristotle's philosophy towards some substitute for the concept of moral obligation which she, of course, felt free to use here as she did believe in the divine law. She sees that there is no way of criticizing actions whose ends are objectively good ones otherwise than as inimical to other good ends, so that if an action is apt for one good end, it is only criticizable as bad if there is a last end which governs all. So the people who do not believe in a divine law, but do believe in such an end, might express the question of whether a mistaken conscience binds by asking whether the act of a man who does what he mistakenly conceives as inconsistent with this ultimate good, is on this account inconsistent

with his ultimate good, even when not doing the act would in itself be inconsistent with that good.

But in pointing people along the road of virtue ethics, without getting them to ponder the question of the architectonic end, perhaps she only gave them another way of being consequentialist. I hope that this book may do something to fill the gap, if only by showing that it is there.

The difference between a philosopher, as we in the West understand that word, and a sage who is giving of his wisdom, is in this: that the way to show respect for a sage is to accept his teaching, but the way to respect the philosopher is to argue. There is plenty here to argue with. My mother loved it; she was always ready for a bout.

Mary Geach