elizabeth anscombe modern moral philosophy

Elizabeth Anscombe and Modern Moral Philosophy: Revisiting Ethics with Fresh Eyes

elizabeth anscombe modern moral philosophy represents a pivotal moment in the landscape of ethical thought. When Anscombe published her influential essay "Modern Moral Philosophy" in 1958, she challenged the prevailing trends in ethical theory and sparked a renewed interest in virtue ethics, a tradition largely overshadowed by utilitarianism and deontological ethics during much of the 20th century. Her work not only critiques the assumptions underlying contemporary moral philosophy but also encourages a return to classical notions of character and human flourishing.

If you're curious about the roots of moral philosophy today or want to understand why Anscombe remains a towering figure in ethical discussions, this article will guide you through her groundbreaking ideas, their historical context, and their relevance in modern discourse.

The Context of Elizabeth Anscombe's Critique

To appreciate Anscombe's contribution, it's important to understand the state of moral philosophy before her intervention. Post-World War II ethical theory was dominated largely by two schools: utilitarianism, which focuses on consequences and the greatest happiness principle, and Kantian deontology, which emphasizes duties and rules regardless of outcomes. While these frameworks provided structure, Anscombe argued that they often missed the essence of morality itself.

In her essay, Anscombe criticized "modern moral philosophy" for being overly abstract and disconnected from the practical realities of human life. She pointed out that moral philosophers of her time largely ignored the concept of virtue and the role of human character. Instead, they fixated on legalistic rules or calculations of pleasure and pain. This, she believed, led to a fragmented and unsatisfactory understanding of ethics.

Why Anscombe Thought Modern Moral Philosophy Needed a Rethink

Anscombe's dissatisfaction stemmed from several key observations:

- The abandonment of the concept of "moral obligation" without a suitable replacement. She argued that terms like "duty" had been used without their proper philosophical grounding.

- The lack of a robust theory of virtue. Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, was largely dismissed or forgotten in favor of rule-based ethics.

- The problematic use of consequentialist and deontological frameworks to address complex moral issues, often resulting in counterintuitive or morally troubling conclusions.

By highlighting these issues, Anscombe called for a reevaluation of ethical theory, one that would reconsider the role of virtue, human psychology, and moral character.

Elizabeth Anscombe's Revival of Virtue Ethics

One of the most enduring impacts of Anscombe's essay was her revival of virtue ethics as a serious alternative to dominant moral theories. Virtue ethics centers on the development of good character traits (virtues) and the pursuit of human flourishing (eudaimonia), rather than focusing solely on rules or outcomes.

What is Virtue Ethics?

Virtue ethics is a normative ethical theory emphasizing virtues, or moral character. Instead of asking "What should I do?" it asks "What kind of person should I be?" This approach encourages individuals to cultivate qualities such as courage, honesty, temperance, and justice.

Anscombe argued that modern moral philosophy would benefit from rediscovering these ancient ideas. She suggested that without a proper understanding of virtue and human nature, moral philosophy becomes disconnected from how people actually live and make decisions.

How Anscombe Positioned Virtue Ethics Against Other Theories

Unlike utilitarianism, which calculates the best consequences, or Kantian ethics, which relies on universal moral laws, virtue ethics focuses on the agent's character and intentions. Anscombe believed that such a focus aligns better with how humans experience moral life — not as abstract rule-followers or calculators of utility, but as embodied beings with emotions, habits, and social contexts.

Her critique also extended to the concept of rights and obligations as they were understood in contemporary philosophy. Anscombe argued that these ideas, detached from a broader ethical framework grounded in virtue, lacked meaning and coherence.

Key Themes in Anscombe's Moral Philosophy

Exploring Elizabeth Anscombe's moral philosophy reveals several recurring themes that continue to influence ethical thought today.

The Role of Intention

Anscombe made significant contributions to understanding intention in moral action. She emphasized that intention is central to moral evaluation — what a person intends matters morally, not just the outcomes of their actions. This insight has had lasting effects on fields like philosophy of action and ethics.

The Concept of Moral Obligation

One of Anscombe's most famous claims was that after the "death of God," the modern concept of moral obligation loses its foundation. She questioned whether it is coherent to speak of "moral obligation" without a metaphysical or theological grounding. This challenge invites philosophers to reconsider the basis of ethical duties.

Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)

Drawing from Aristotle, Anscombe highlighted the importance of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is the ability to make sound moral judgments in concrete situations, balancing competing values and circumstances. This concept stresses that moral reasoning isn't merely about applying rules but involves discernment and experience.

Elizabeth Anscombe's Influence on Contemporary Ethics

The ripple effects of Anscombe's work can be seen across various branches of philosophy and ethics today.

The Revival of Virtue Ethics in Academia

Since the publication of "Modern Moral Philosophy," virtue ethics has experienced a renaissance. Philosophers like Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum expanded on Anscombe's insights, developing rich accounts of virtue that engage with modern dilemmas in medicine, law, and

politics.

Applications in Bioethics and Moral Psychology

Anscombe's emphasis on intention and character has informed debates in bioethics, particularly concerning moral responsibility and medical decision-making. Her work also intersects with moral psychology, shedding light on how character and habits influence ethical behavior.

Reconsidering Moral Language and Concepts

Her critique of moral obligation and rights continues to inspire philosophers to revisit the language used in ethics. Many have sought to clarify or redefine these foundational concepts, often integrating Anscombe's insights into broader discussions about secular morality and pluralism.

Why Elizabeth Anscombe's Modern Moral Philosophy Still Matters

In a world where ethical challenges are increasingly complex, from artificial intelligence to global justice, Anscombe's call to ground moral philosophy in human nature and virtue remains strikingly relevant. Her insistence on the importance of intention, character, and practical wisdom offers a refreshing alternative to purely rule-based or consequentialist approaches.

For students, scholars, or anyone interested in how we make moral choices, engaging with Elizabeth Anscombe's modern moral philosophy provides valuable tools to think deeply about what it means to live a good life. It reminds us that morality is not just a set of rules but a way of being—a cultivation of virtues that shape our identity and relationships.

Whether you're exploring ethical theory for the first time or revisiting it after years, Anscombe's work challenges you to consider the foundations of your moral beliefs and the kind of person you aspire to become.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Elizabeth Anscombe and what is her significance in modern moral philosophy?

Elizabeth Anscombe was a 20th-century British philosopher known for her influential work in ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of action. She is significant in modern moral philosophy for her critique of modern consequentialism and deontology, and for reviving virtue ethics through her 1958 paper "Modern Moral Philosophy."

What is the main argument of Elizabeth Anscombe's essay "Modern Moral Philosophy"?

In "Modern Moral Philosophy," Anscombe argues that contemporary moral philosophy is flawed because it lacks a proper foundation in a theory of human nature and virtue. She criticizes the use of concepts like 'moral obligation' without a theological framework and calls for a return to Aristotelian virtue ethics.

How did Elizabeth Anscombe influence the revival of virtue ethics?

Anscombe's critique of modern ethical theories and her emphasis on virtues and character traits helped spark renewed interest in Aristotelian virtue ethics. Her work encouraged philosophers to reconsider the importance of moral character, intentions, and practical wisdom in ethical theory.

What is Elizabeth Anscombe's stance on consequentialism and deontological ethics?

Anscombe was critical of both consequentialism and deontological ethics. She argued that consequentialism fails to respect the moral agent's intentions and that deontological ethics, especially Kantian formulations, rely on outdated concepts of obligation that need a religious or metaphysical foundation.

How does Elizabeth Anscombe's work connect to the concept of intentionality in philosophy?

Anscombe made significant contributions to the philosophy of action, particularly regarding intentionality. She explored how actions are understood through the intentions behind them, which is crucial in moral evaluation. This focus on intentionality complements her ethical theories by emphasizing the role of the agent’s mental states.

Why is Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" still relevant in contemporary ethical discussions?

Anscombe's essay remains relevant because it challenges the assumptions of contemporary moral theories and highlights the importance of virtues, character, and moral psychology. Her critique encourages ongoing

reflection on the foundations of ethics and inspires alternative approaches beyond utilitarian and Kantian frameworks.

Additional Resources

Elizabeth Anscombe and Modern Moral Philosophy: A Critical Exploration

elizabeth anscombe modern moral philosophy represents a pivotal moment in 20th-century ethical thought, marking a profound critique of prevailing moral theories and a call to reconsider the foundations of ethics. Anscombe, a British analytic philosopher, is widely recognized for her 1958 essay "Modern Moral Philosophy," which challenged the assumptions of contemporary ethical frameworks and reignited interest in virtue ethics. Her work continues to influence debates on moral theory, intention, and the language of ethics, making her contributions essential for scholars and students seeking a deeper understanding of modern moral philosophy.

The Context of Elizabeth Anscombe's Intervention

In the mid-20th century, moral philosophy was dominated by two main traditions: utilitarianism, which emphasized the consequences of actions, and deontological ethics, represented by Kantian moral theory focusing on duties and universal laws. Anscombe's essay emerged as a response to what she perceived as a crisis in moral philosophy, characterized by the loss of meaningful moral vocabulary and the decline of substantive ethical concepts such as virtue and moral character.

Anscombe argued that contemporary moral philosophers had inherited a framework based on legalistic and obligation-centered language that no longer made sense without a corresponding metaphysical or theological foundation. She famously stated that the concepts of moral obligation and duty were remnants of a bygone era, and without the context of divine law, these ideas lacked coherence. This critique urged philosophers to reconsider the basis of moral judgments and the role of human flourishing in ethical theory.

Anscombe's Critique of Moral Philosophy

Central to Anscombe's critique was the notion that modern moral philosophy had become overly abstracted from human life and practical reasoning. She emphasized the importance of intention and the agent's character in moral evaluation, a stance that contrasted sharply with consequentialist and rule-based ethics.

The Role of Intention

One of Anscombe's key contributions was her analysis of intention, elaborated in her later work but rooted in the concerns raised in "Modern Moral Philosophy." She argued that understanding an agent's intention is crucial for assessing the moral value of actions. Unlike utilitarianism, which often overlooks the agent's mental state, Anscombe highlighted that intentions distinguish between acts that might be outwardly similar but morally different.

Return to Virtue Ethics

Anscombe called for a revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which focuses on the development of moral character and the cultivation of virtues necessary for human flourishing. She believed that virtues provide a more coherent and practical basis for ethics than the fragmented rules and principles dominating her contemporaries. This emphasis on virtues reintroduced concepts like practical wisdom (phronesis) and the significance of moral education.

Impact on Contemporary Moral Philosophy

The influence of Elizabeth Anscombe on modern moral philosophy extends beyond her original essay. Her work has inspired a reexamination of traditional ethical theories and fostered the growth of virtue ethics as a major normative framework alongside consequentialism and deontology.

Virtue Ethics in the 21st Century

Following Anscombe's critique, philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Philippa Foot, and Rosalind Hursthouse have developed virtue ethics into a robust alternative to mainstream ethical theories. These thinkers have expanded on Anscombe's insights to address contemporary moral issues, emphasizing the role of community, narrative, and the social context in moral development.

Philosophical and Practical Relevance

Anscombe's work not only reshaped academic discourse but also has implications for practical ethics. By focusing on intention and virtue, her philosophy offers a framework for evaluating complex moral dilemmas where rules may conflict or fail to provide clear guidance. This approach resonates with fields like medical ethics, environmental ethics, and political philosophy, where nuanced judgment is essential.

Analyzing the Strengths and Limitations of Anscombe's Approach

While Elizabeth Anscombe's critique revitalized moral philosophy, it is important to consider the strengths and potential limitations of her approach.

- **Strengths:**
  - Reintroduction of moral psychology and character into ethical analysis.
  - Clarification of the role of intention in moral responsibility.
  - Encouragement of a more holistic and human-centered ethical framework.

- **Limitations:**
  - Her rejection of moral obligation may be seen as too radical or dismissive of deontological concerns.
  - Some critics argue that virtue ethics can lack clear decision procedures in moral dilemmas.
  - The reliance on Aristotelian metaphysics may not appeal to all contemporary philosophers, especially secular ethicists.

Comparisons with Other Ethical Theories

Comparing Anscombe's virtue ethics revival with utilitarianism and Kantian ethics reveals fundamental differences in approach and emphasis:

1. **Utilitarianism:** Focuses on maximizing overall happiness; criticized by Anscombe for neglecting the agent's character and intentions.
2. **Kantian Ethics:** Centers on duty and universal moral laws; Anscombe questioned the coherence of

duty without a theological foundation.

3. **Virtue Ethics (Anscombe's perspective):** Emphasizes moral character and practical wisdom; seeks to ground ethics in human nature and flourishing.

Elizabeth Anscombe's Enduring Legacy

Today, Elizabeth Anscombe remains a towering figure in modern moral philosophy. Her incisive critique and call to return to Aristotelian ethics continue to challenge scholars to rethink the foundations and language of morality. By foregrounding intention, character, and virtue, Anscombe's philosophy provides a rich resource for addressing ethical complexity in a rapidly changing world.

Her work invites ongoing reflection on how moral philosophy can remain relevant and responsive to both enduring human concerns and contemporary moral challenges. As ethical debates evolve, the insights of Elizabeth Anscombe on modern moral philosophy serve as a vital touchstone for clarity, rigor, and depth in the pursuit of moral understanding.

Elizabeth Anscombe Modern Moral Philosophy

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objections and difficulties, and aiming to give a unified overview of her philosophy. Many of Anscombe's arguments are relevant to contemporary debates, as Teichmann shows, and on a number of topics what Anscombe has to say constitutes a powerful alternative to dominant or popular views. Among the writings discussed are Intention, 'Practical Inference', 'Modern Moral Philosophy', 'Rules, Rights and Promises', 'On Brute Facts', 'The First Person', 'The Intentionality of Sensation', 'Causality and Determination', An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus, 'The Question of Linguistic Idealism', and a number of other pieces, including some that are little known or hard to obtain. A complete bibliography of Anscombe's writings is also included. Ranging from the philosophy of action, through ethics, to philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and the philosophy of logic and language, this book is a study of one of the most significant bodies of work in modern philosophy, spanning more than fifty years, and as pertinent today as ever.

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education of citizens. Violence in Northern Ireland and the crime of abortion are among the issues discussed. Peter Phillips Simpson is professor of philosophy and classics at the Graduate Center and the College of Staten Island, City University of New York. He is the author of numerous articles and books including The Politics of Aristotle, A Philosophical Commentary on the Politics of Aristotle, and Karol Wojtyla. An important and significant contribution to the field. Simpson presents classical sources with a freshness and thoroughness not often seen.--Prof. John Hittinger, U.S. Air Force Academy Simpson's application of his view to the current crisis in liberal culture is clear, consistent, and timely.--Prof. Nicholas Capaldi, University of Tulsa It is a rare pleasure to read a book that combines the elegance and rigour of the best of analytic philosophy with the imaginative breadth and radical seriousness of some of its rivals. -- Margaret Atkins, Heythrop Journal

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the historian’s perspective, their far-reaching theoretical assumptions are based on a quite small body of textual evidence. In reality, there was a rich variety of approaches to moral thinking and ethical theories during the period from 1400 to 1600.

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