

elizabeth anscombe modern moral philosophy

Elizabeth Anscombe is a towering figure in modern moral philosophy, known for her critical examination of the ethical landscape of the 20th century. Born in 1910, she was a prominent British philosopher who made significant contributions to various fields, including ethics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of action. Anscombe is especially noted for her work "Modern Moral Philosophy," published in 1958, which has sparked extensive discussion and debate in philosophical circles. This article aims to explore the key ideas in Anscombe's work, her critiques of contemporary moral philosophy, and her revival of virtue ethics, ultimately shedding light on her enduring influence.

Background and Context

Elizabeth Anscombe's philosophical journey began at a time when moral philosophy was dominated by utilitarianism and deontological theories. The aftermath of World War II saw an increasing skepticism toward meta-ethical theories that divorced morality from human flourishing or character. Anscombe, with her keen intellect and profound insights, sought to address these concerns and articulate a more robust moral philosophy.

Education and Influences

Anscombe studied at the University of Oxford,

where she became a student of the renowned philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. His influence is evident in her thinking, particularly in her emphasis on ordinary language and the context of moral statements. Anscombe's intellectual environment was rich with debates on ethics, and her engagement with figures such as G.E. Moore and A.J. Ayer shaped her critical approach to moral philosophy.

Modern Moral Philosophy: A Critical Examination

In her essay "Modern Moral Philosophy," Anscombe criticizes the prevailing moral theories of her time, particularly the utilitarian and Kantian frameworks. She argues that these theories are inadequate for addressing the complexities of moral reasoning.

1. Critique of Consequentialism

Consequentialism, particularly as articulated by utilitarianism, posits that the morality of an action is determined solely by its outcomes. Anscombe identifies several issues with this view:

- **Reductionism:** She argues that reducing morality to mere outcomes neglects the intentions behind actions, which are crucial in moral evaluation.
- **Moral Distinctions:** Anscombe posits that consequentialism fails to acknowledge the moral significance of certain distinctions, such as between killing and letting die.
- **Practicality:** The focus on outcomes makes moral reasoning overly abstract and impractical, as it requires individuals to predict the consequences of their actions in complex situations.

2. Critique of Deontological Ethics

Anscombe also critiques deontological ethics, particularly the Kantian approach that emphasizes duty and rules. Her critiques include:

- **Lack of Connection to Virtue:** She argues that deontological theories detach morality from the character of the moral agent, focusing instead on adherence to rules.
- **Moral Absolutism:** Deontological ethics often leads to rigid moral absolutes that can result in moral dilemmas where individuals are forced

to choose between conflicting duties.

The Revival of Virtue Ethics

In response to the limitations of both consequentialism and deontology, Anscombe advocates for a revival of virtue ethics, which emphasizes character and the moral agent's intentions. She argues that moral philosophy should return to the Aristotelian tradition, which considers the role of virtues in achieving the good life.

1. The Role of Virtue

Anscombe's emphasis on virtue ethics includes several key points:

- **Character Formation:** Moral actions stem from the character of the individual, highlighting the importance of cultivating virtues such as courage, honesty, and compassion.
- **Moral Intentions:** The intentions behind actions are crucial for moral evaluation, suggesting that a good act must arise from a good character.

- **Community and Tradition:** Virtue ethics acknowledges the role of community and tradition in shaping moral understanding, emphasizing that moral values are not merely individualistic but embedded in social contexts.

2. The Importance of Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)

A significant aspect of Anscombe's virtue ethics is the concept of practical wisdom, or phronesis. This involves:

- **Judgment in Action:** Practical wisdom enables individuals to make sound moral judgments in specific situations, considering the complexities and nuances of human life.
- **Balancing Virtues:** It requires balancing different virtues in a way that is contextually appropriate, avoiding rigid rules that fail to account for human experience.

Implications for Modern Moral Philosophy

Anscombe's critiques and proposals have profound implications for modern moral

philosophy. Her work encourages a reevaluation of ethical theories and highlights the need for a more integrated approach to morality that values character, intentions, and community.

1. Influence on Contemporary Philosophy

- **Revitalization of Virtue Ethics:** Anscombe's work has inspired a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics, influencing contemporary philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Philippa Foot.
- **Critique of Moral Relativism:** Her emphasis on objective moral truths challenges the trend toward moral relativism, advocating for a return to universal moral principles grounded in human nature.

2. The Role of Emotions in Moral Philosophy

Anscombe's focus on character and virtue also opens up discussions about the role of emotions in moral decision-making. It emphasizes that emotions can play a significant role in moral judgments, suggesting that moral philosophy should not ignore the affective dimensions of

human life.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Anscombe's contributions to modern moral philosophy are both profound and enduring. Her critical examination of consequentialism and deontological ethics, paired with her advocacy for virtue ethics, has reshaped the landscape of moral philosophy. By emphasizing the importance of character, intentions, and practical wisdom, Anscombe invites us to reconsider how we understand morality in a complex and often challenging world.

Her work remains relevant today, as it challenges philosophers and ethicists to engage with the deeper questions of what it means to live a moral life. As we navigate the moral complexities of contemporary society, Anscombe's insights provide a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between ethics, character, and community, reminding us that moral philosophy must always be rooted in the lived experiences of human beings.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Elizabeth Anscombe and what is her contribution to modern moral philosophy?

Elizabeth Anscombe was a British philosopher known for her work in moral philosophy and for her influential essay 'Modern Moral Philosophy' published in 1958, where she critiqued contemporary ethical theories and emphasized the importance of virtue ethics.

What is the central thesis of Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy'?

Anscombe argues that modern moral philosophy lacks a proper foundation, particularly in its reliance on legalistic notions of morality, and she calls for a return to virtue ethics rooted in Aristotelian thought.

How does Anscombe critique consequentialism in her work?

Anscombe critiques consequentialism by arguing that it reduces moral evaluation to the outcomes of actions, disregarding the intentions behind them, which she believes is

essential for understanding moral responsibility.

What role does virtue ethics play in Anscombe's philosophy?

Virtue ethics is central to Anscombe's philosophy as she advocates for a focus on character and moral virtues rather than solely on rules or consequences, aligning her views more closely with Aristotelian ethics.

How did Anscombe's views on moral philosophy influence later thinkers?

Anscombe's critique of modern moral philosophy has influenced a resurgence in virtue ethics, inspiring contemporary philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Philippa Foot, who have further explored the importance of character and virtues.

What is the significance of Anscombe's views on intentions in moral actions?

Anscombe emphasizes that intentions are crucial to understanding moral actions, arguing that the morality of an act cannot be fully

understood without considering the agent's motivations and goals.

How does Anscombe address the concept of moral obligation?

In her work, Anscombe challenges the notion of moral obligation as it is commonly understood in modern philosophy, suggesting that without a divine lawgiver, the concept loses its grounding and becomes problematic.

What impact did Anscombe's work have on the feminist movement in philosophy?

Anscombe's emphasis on the complexities of moral reasoning and critique of traditional ethical frameworks paved the way for feminist philosophers to explore the intersections of ethics, gender, and social justice.

Why is 'Modern Moral Philosophy' considered a pivotal text in ethical theory?

'Modern Moral Philosophy' is considered pivotal because it challenges the prevailing ethical theories of its time, reintroduces virtue ethics into the discourse, and encourages

philosophers to reconsider the foundations of moral thought.

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