

G. E. M. Anscombe

From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally.

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Pathiaraj Rayappan

Intention in Action: The Philosophy of G. E. M. Anscombe.

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273 pages

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Elizabeth Anscombe is known for being one of the precursors of analytic philosophy of action and virtue ethics. However, the juxtaposition of these two books, *Intention in action* and *From Plato to Wittgenstein*, also shows how diverse and deep her thought is, not only in the field of action but also in the history of philosophy. Through the work of antique, modern, and recent philosophers Anscombe in the second book (a collection of mostly unpublished or not yet collected essays) discusses issues in the philosophy of language as well as questions concerning truth, causation, and free will. The first book, by contrast, presents itself as an exegesis of Anscombe's *Intention*; it accounts for some of her influences (Aristotle and Aquinas), discusses her main positions in moral philosophy, and exposes further contemporary discussions of these positions by later commentators. This book, which is based on a PhD dissertation, has a more descriptive aim.

Anscombe certainly is, as she herself says of her master Wittgenstein in one of the papers reprinted in the below reviewed volume *From Plato to Wittgenstein*, “a philosopher for philosophers”: not just in her style of thinking or writing, but also in her interest for topics that are mostly of interest to philosophers. However, we must acknowledge that a great deal of her philosophy is aimed at having an impact on our ways of thinking about human action and moral action. In this particular respect, she is closer to Aristotle than to Wittgenstein because, as she argues, “by contrast, Aristotle is not often so much concerned with what are apt to strike non philosophers as weird or boring problems” (206).

In this respect, *Intention in Action* by Pathiaraj Rayappan provides a reading of Anscombe in abstraction from her Wittgensteinian background. However, it shows the limits of such an enterprise. Chapter 1 comments on the sections in Aristotle and Aquinas that are relevant to the understanding of *Intention*, and chapter 2 provides a clear cursive exegesis of Anscombe's book itself. However, it paraphrases the texts without providing any critical comments or analysis. Rayappan discusses neither the points at stake nor the contemporary Wittgensteinian use Anscombe makes of these ideas. It is a purely a-contextual reading; there is even no attempt to actualise Anscombe's thinking in the context of contemporary philosophy of mind and action. Chapter 3 is a condensed summary of some of Anscombe's positions in ethics, both applied (including “just war” and “contraception”) and theoretic (including “consequentialism” and “the doctrine of double-effect”). In Chapter 4, Rayappan tries to provide an overview of topics that

have been raised after the publication of *Intention*: what it means to claim that the same action is intentional under a description and not under another; the various objections to the idea that one and the same action can receive several descriptions; the reasons versus causes dispute and the discussions sparked off by Anscombe's notion of knowledge without observation. Rayappan's "intention was primarily to demonstrate that the ideas that Anscombe has introduced and emphasised have been further discussed and that they are still philosophically current" (200); well, mission accomplished! But the mission would have been much more interesting and ambitious, had it been to actually discuss or defend Anscombe's thesis against the recent objections at stake. However, we may acknowledge that the book is a good way of getting acquainted with the Anscombian legacy in philosophy. Chapter 5 turns again to the moral. It begins with a summary of Anscombe's debate with Von Wright over the status of practical reasoning, where she claims that there is no "logical compulsion" to perform the action recommended by practical reasoning. She insists instead that the practical character (leading to action) of practical reasoning lies in how this latter is "put in service". The chapter continues with a rather incomplete discussion of Anscombe's criticism of the is-ought distinction, where her argument (i.e., that moral judgements are made in continuity with other kinds of "ought" and "ought not" judgements – like rules, rights and promises) is not fully understood. The rest of the chapter is basically dedicated to the "correction" of Anscombe's positions through Aquinas, when it would have been more interesting to pinpoint what Anscombe owes to Aquinas, what parts of his views she left aside and why.

All this makes the book a useful tool for working on Anscombe's difficult texts, especially as regards the Aristotelian and Thomist dimension of her authorship. The book also provides an interesting (though only partial) overview of the recent debates surrounding Anscombe's theses. However, we can deplore the striking absence (even in the bibliography) of any reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, her teacher and close friend, who was at least as much an influence to Anscombe's thinking as (and perhaps even more so than) her reading of Aristotle or Aquinas. Indeed Anscombe curated the translation of Wittgenstein's works into English and their editing, and she succeeded him at his chair in Cambridge. This enormous gap in the proposed exegesis makes it somewhat incomplete and sometimes biases the reading or renders it erroneous.

The reader will also note a bunch of regrettable imprecisions, e.g. on Anscombe's criterion for intentional action. Rayappan claims that an intentional action is, according to Anscombe, an action for which the *agent* can provide reasons to act. This would explain why young children and animals cannot act intentionally (35). However, Anscombe never denied that children and animals do act intentionally, as Rayappan also (somehow contradictorily) acknowledges at other points (101: but see, e.g., R. Moran & M. Stone, "Anscombe on Expression of Intention", in A. Ford, J. Hornsby & F. Stoutland, eds., *Essays on Anscombe's Intention*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011, 33–75). But instead of trying to make sense of this, he simply admits that he does not understand how this could fit in Anscombe's account and rejects the position (238). Anscombe's criterion is that the possibility of providing reasons for an *action* described does not always depend on the agent's capacity to do so: some third person can explain why a young child (who cannot yet do so) or an animal does what he does and that makes them intentional agents. Aristotle would probably have agreed with this.

The author also sometimes seems to forget that Anscombe is interested in the uses of the notion of ‘intention’, not as it appears as such in sentences (64) but in cases where we would rightly apply the concept. Thus, it is clearly specified that “intention” is not a mental state accompanied by some bodily movement, but it is not always clear in the book whether we are dealing with the notion of intention as it relates to action or with some kind of internal state.

Moreover, the discussion of “consequentialism” and of Anscombe’s very influential paper, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958), is disappointing. Notably because it states that Anscombe holds a “law conception of ethics” (129) when she actually spends quite some time in the paper trying to refute just such a conception of ethics linked to the image of a legislator (be it God or the Kantian practical reason) and to defend a more context-relative view of morals closer to Aristotle’s virtue ethics. With the other book in view, *From Plato to Wittgenstein*, Rayappan here seems to follow a path Mary Geach denounces in her introduction: “Hasty reading of [Anscombe’s] essay *Modern Moral Philosophy* has caused some people to think that she made a cruel identification of morality with divine law, and that she held that morality vanishes if one does not believe in God. She did not: it was only the modern concept of the moral that she thought senseless without the concept of a divine law.” (xx).

The somewhat ideological dimension of the book can also make the reader rather uncomfortable. For instance, the author claims to have chosen the study of Anscombe because “she is a good Catholic” (13); it is hard to see how this could constitute a good philosophical reason for the academic study of the work of a philosopher (and Anscombe probably would not have thought so). On the one hand, when dealing with the somewhat equivocal issue of contraception, the author manages to give voice to all parties, including the idea that Anscombe’s positions when it comes to applied ethics are often question-begging. But, on the other hand, the conclusion of the book on that topic is ideological, embracing the Catholic Church’s most radical views on contraception. It does so in the name of some dubious concept of “human nature” and what the goal of sexual intercourse should be, yet in complete ignorance of actual sociological, philosophical and anthropological observations—for instance, the fact that human sexual intercourse is as much “cultural” as it is “natural”. The book’s rootedness in the traditional moral teaching of the Catholic Church pushes the discussion beyond detached philosophical scholarship.

Rayappan’s reading of Anscombe (especially Chapter 5) is thus an attempt to draw her on the side of her presumed non-philosophical convictions, although Anscombe herself endeavoured to separate them from philosophical reflexion in her most important texts. That is not to say that Anscombe’s fervent Catholicism did not strongly affect her thinking (especially her philosophical interests) and, as such, an analysis of how it did is interesting to Anscombe scholars. Nevertheless, to ignore the major influence that Wittgenstein had on her work is very unfaithful to the spirit in which she did philosophy and wrote her major texts, including *Intention* and “Modern Moral Philosophy”. In particular, Rayappan makes a final appraisal of Aquinas’ conceptual clarity in relation to his metaphysical method. Which he opposes to Anscombe’s non-clarity in relation to her conceptual analysis approach. Such a remark shows a great ignorance of mid-20th century conceptual analysis and is a mere stipulation, which does not even constitute an attempt to undermine this method.

By contrast, *From Plato to Wittgenstein* is the third book of a very welcome series of recently edited books featuring mostly unpublished or uncollected papers by Elizabeth Anscombe. The essays contained in it are investigations into the history of philosophy, with ancient (Plato), medieval (Anselm, Aquinas) and modern (Hume, Spinoza) philosophers represented as well as recent analytic philosophers (Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein). Indeed, interestingly enough, this volume of Anscombe's papers shows, more perhaps than any other, the fundamental influence Wittgenstein had on her work, even on her reading of ancient and modern philosophers. Her daughter, Mary Geach, testifies to this in the introduction of the book when she writes: "[Anscombe] recorded that before she knew [Wittgenstein], the great philosophers of the past had appeared to her like beautiful statues: knowing him had brought them alive for her" (xiii); again, "There is (...) a somehow characteristically Wittgensteinian way of countering the philosopher's tendency to explain a philosophically puzzling thing by inventing an entity or event which causes it".

Wittgenstein certainly influenced Anscombe's way of reading other philosophers. Hence the first paper of the book, on Plato, attempts to diagnose the sort of philosophical misguided route which may have led the latter to think of the forms as immaterial, universal and unchangeable *objects*. On another occasion, she reintroduces the moral discussion about piety at the centre of the reading of Plato's dilemma in the *Euthyphro*. In a so far unpublished paper, she also discusses the issue of "the unity of apperception" through an analysis of Plato's discussion of the instrumentality of sense organs in the perception (by the soul) of simultaneous perceptions. She also gives insight into her own philosophy of sense-perception, which we find in her work on the intentionality and the subjectivity of sensation (G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind. Collected Philosophical Papers II*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981): Anscombe is interested in that which links our vegetative and sensitive form of life to our intellectual life. The papers on medieval philosophy include an extended discussion of Anselm's proof for the existence of God disputing (against a Russellian interpretation) that it is an ontological argument. Anscombe's discussion of Anselm also extends to a discussion about the existence of truth, its relation to meaning and its unity, and to a confrontation between Anselm and Aquinas and even Anselm and Wittgenstein on these issues.

In her essay on Spinoza regarding free will, Anscombe returns to the complicated Aristotelian notion of practical truth in order to account for the sense in which humans can, by acting, make things true. They exert, in this sense, a kind of free will similar to Spinoza's God's. The long paper on Hume offers an overview of the ideas contained in Anscombe's later papers on Hume and the idea of causality. (See G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Hume and Julius Caesar' and "Whatever has a Beginning of Existence must have a Cause": Hume's Argument Exposed', in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein. Collected Philosophical Papers I*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981.) Anscombe famously argues that Hume's conception of causality, according to which it is not grounded on the perception of causal relations but on relations or chains of continuity established by the mind, is erroneous: "To think you have explained remembering by saying that there is a causal connection between memory and thing remembered is like thinking you have explained addition by saying there is an arithmetical connection between the addition sum and its answer." (M. Geach's Introduction, xvi)

Most of the essays in the “recent and contemporary” section are about Wittgenstein, and this is the first genuine collection of Anscombe’s texts on Wittgenstein that shows how much influence both philosophically and in her mode of thinking the latter had on her. Apart from the biographical text on Wittgenstein, already published in *Philosophy* (1995), one of the key topics of the papers (see more specifically “A theory of language?” and “Frege, Wittgenstein and Platonism”) is the issue of grammar: its status and its power in revealing philosophical dead-ends. Anscombe insists that “grammar” in the sense of Wittgenstein is no different from “grammar” in the ordinary school-grammar sense. The grammar studied by Wittgenstein is just more complex and refined than the simpler school-grammar. For instance, superficial grammar led Frege to a kind of platonic position about the existence of numbers, when “a really serious and comprehensive book of grammar would treat *numerals* in a separate chapter” from other nouns (133).

The section also contains reflexions concerning the continuities and discontinuities in Wittgenstein’s thinking as well as the great influence both his now called “first” and “second” philosophies had on philosophy and its method. The issue of truth is discussed again, together with the question of whether Wittgenstein became a conventionalist after believing in the *Tractatus* that truth was only a matter of science. The book also reproduces Anscombe’s review of Saul Kripke’s *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, in which she points at the mistaken interpretation Kripke gives of Wittgenstein on rule-following and where she turns the so-called sceptical argument into an interesting challenge against Wittgenstein’s claims on learning and following a rule. The later papers also show the extensive knowledge Anscombe had of Wittgenstein’s work, including the *Tractatus*, on which she wrote a book. In her paper on Russell’s definite descriptions, Anscombe acknowledges the importance of Russell’s account for the specific kind of proposition containing these definite descriptions and also disputes a number of Russell’s theses by insisting notably that the context (and not merely, e.g., a difference of time) affects meaning (145), so that “propositions can change their truth-value” and that “a real proper name does not have to have a logically guaranteed bearer”; again another Wittgensteinian argument.

From Plato to Wittgenstein adds considerably to the rich and diverse scope of papers published in the earlier collection of Anscombe’s papers, *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein*. It is no wonder that contemporary philosophers pay more and more attention to Anscombe’s thought, for there is much that remains to be explored. And while Anscombe is not, as Roger Teichmann argues (*The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), what we might call a systematic thinker, a full understanding of her thought means that one must inquire into the various and varied, though not unrelated, topics on which she wrote. The editors Mary Geach and Luke Gormally are to thank for providing access to the writings of this major philosopher of the twentieth century.

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