

ANSCOMBE ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY  
AS PROPAEDEUTIC TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

*Modern moral philosophy and moral Daltonism.*

In an earlier paper I have discussed Elizabeth Anscombe's three well-known theses from "Modern Moral Philosophy"<sup>1</sup>. In this paper I want to expand my reconstruction and criticism of one of them, namely the claim that a "philosophy of psychology" is a preliminary task to the construction of any possible ethical theory, or that moral philosophy «should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking»<sup>2</sup>.

I will argue that Anscombe's idea of a "philosophy of psychology" cannot be simply identified with that of "moral psychology" with which we are familiar now; that her main claim, namely that actions are analogous to language is quite promising; that among the implications there is not only a criticism to consequentialism but also acknowledgement of a central role for judgement, and accordingly not just a blunt refusal, but instead an unaware rediscovery of Kantian ethics; that her rediscovery of the idea of virtue is promising enough, albeit misunderstood by Anscombe herself when she presents it in terms of coming back to

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<sup>1</sup> S. Cremaschi, "Elizabeth Anscombe e la svolta normativa del 1958", in J.A. Mercado (ed.), *Elisabeth Anscombe e la psicologia morale*, Rome: Armando, 2010, pp. 43-80.

<sup>2</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern moral philosophy", (1958), in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. by M. Geach and L. Gormally, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005, pp. 169-194, p. 169.

Aristotelian and Thomist ethics as contrasted with modern moral philosophy.

In my previous paper I tried to highlight the context within which the three theses had been formulated, discussing the combination of a Wittgensteinian and a Thomist legacy at the root of the three theses and pointing at a few points where modern moral philosophy is misrepresented. In more detail, I argued that a few of the doctrines endorsed by Anscombe herself and used in backing her own three theses, e.g. the doctrine of absolutely prohibited acts and that of divine law, depend on careless reconstruction of Thomist doctrines and that the most promising positive claim, namely the role of relevant descriptions of actions, has not been fully exploited for what it could yield, in so far as some of its possible implications have been overlooked because of Anscombe's own obsession with an odd couple consisting in consequentialism and Kantian ethics as being the source of all troubles in ethical theory<sup>3</sup>.

In 1956, that is, one year before *Intention* and two before "Modern Moral Philosophy", Anscombe had published the pamphlet *Mr. Truman's Degree*, where she gave reasons for her own opposition to a honorary degree to former United States President Harry Truman<sup>4</sup>. These were dependent on the circumstance that Truman had done something clearly immoral according to the *jus in bello* Scholastic doctrine, namely he had directly and knowingly taken civilians as the target of a military attack in Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing. In the final page she had asked the question whether the kind of ethics taught at Oxford was either a cause or symptom of lack of moral sensitivity displayed by Faculty members on this occasion. The answer was that David Ross's philosophy, the «pretence of moral seriousness» carried by its moral realism or the claim that "rightness" is an objective property of actions notwithstanding, contends that it «might be right to kill the innocent for the good of the

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<sup>3</sup> See S. Cremaschi, "Elizabeth Anscombe e la svolta normativa del 1958", pp. 64-6.

<sup>4</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's degree" (1956), in *The Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe III: Ethics, Religion and Politics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, pp. 62-71; cf. R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 4-5.

people», since the “*prima facie* duty” to secure some advantage could override the «*prima facie* duty not to kill the innocent»<sup>5</sup>. The other philosophy that had come into fashion later on is one whose “cardinal principle” is that “good” is not a «descriptive term, but one expressing a favourable attitude on the part of the speaker»<sup>6</sup>. Both «contain a rejection of the idea that any class of actions, such as murder, may be absolutely excluded»<sup>7</sup>.

*Intention*, published in 1957, presented in some detail the action theory lying behind her reconstruction of what Truman had actually done by signing a sheet of paper. This action theory started with a few of Wittgenstein’s ideas and developed them in the direction of a destruction of the traditional Cartesian account of the mind-body relationship and a construction of a model of human action as something quite different from a chain of events in the physical world being in a causal relationship with inner events of the mental world.

“Modern Moral Philosophy”, published two years after, in turn developed the last two pages of the Truman pamphlet illustrating the roots of Oxford academics’ moral colour-blindness starting with the history of modern Ethics that was deeply influenced by this impoverished model of human action. This further development, however, is based in many ways on what was argued in detail in *Intention*. The paper is a critique of modern moral philosophy as a whole, that is, a criticism of a tradition of thought allegedly starting with Bentham and Kant and reaching, through Mill and Sidgwick, neo-intuitionism as well as emotivism. The main idea behind this criticism is that there is one way of approaching moral questions that is the mark of this tradition, or that what the mentioned philosophers share is more than those things on which they differ, and that this is not the only possible way to address moral issues but there is instead one alternative approach, exemplified by Aristotle. Anscombe «wanted to reveal the state of moral philosophy to be thoroughly unsatisfactory, dependent on incoherent

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<sup>5</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s degree”, p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

concepts and unrecognized assumptions; and she argued that, in the form in which it was then practised, it should be given up»<sup>8</sup>. The unspoken assumptions that Anscombe believed she had discovered behind two centuries moral philosophy were forgetfulness of dispositions and virtues, unjustified primacy of rules and obligation, denial of the existence of classes of actions unconditionally excluded. In order to better understand the meaning of the paper, it may be useful to view it against the background of other contemporary publications by two fellow-travellers, namely Philippa Foot, her colleague at Somerville College, who in "Moral Beliefs" had argued, against the naturalistic fallacy argument, that there are instances of evaluative adjectives that are subject to empirical constraints and thus behave differently from the adjective "good", chosen by Moore as the only instance of evaluative adjective worth examining<sup>9</sup>. Anscombe's husband Peter Geach in "Good and Evil" had carried out a parallel kind of criticism against the naturalistic fallacy argument denouncing its hidden vice consisting in the claim that the adjective "good" should be indefinable as if this was a special case, whereas its meaning, not unlike several other cases, is dependent on implicitly assumed parameters, much like the meaning of the adjective "small" in the phrase "a small elephant ", a wording that is not meant to rule out the possibility that a small elephant is larger than a "big turtle"<sup>10</sup>.

### *The priority of the "philosophy of psychology"*

The first thesis is, as mentioned, that moral philosophy «should be laid aside at any rate until

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<sup>8</sup> C. Diamond, "Anscombe", in L.C. Becker (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Ethics. Second Edition*, 3 vols., New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 74-77, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Ph. Foot, "Moral beliefs" (1958), in *Virtues and Vices*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1978, pp. 110-31.

<sup>10</sup> P. Geach, "Good and evil" (1956), in Ph. Foot (ed.), *Theories of Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 64-73.

we have an adequate philosophy of psychology»<sup>11</sup>. What is far from clear at first sight in the formulation is, first, what is meant specifically for philosophy of psychology and, second, what precisely is meant by the expression «at any rate until». As for the notion of "philosophy of psychology", it is an expression that Wittgenstein used in a handwritten notebook as the title of a series of notes that were among those that provided a basis for the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. These notes were collected in a volume entitled *Remarks on the philosophy of psychology*, edited by Anscombe herself and George von Wright and published in 1980. What the phrase "philosophy of psychology" could evoke in the reader's mind in 1958 is not so clear yet, and Anscombe does not seem to give herself much trouble in trying to explain its meaning. What she does explain, at least, is that it amounts to clarifying such concepts as action, intention, pleasure, will. The second term Anscombe makes use of in order to indicate the subject or discipline is however "philosophical psychology"<sup>12</sup>, an expression which sounds more neo-Scholastic than Wittgensteinian.

Anscombe wants to illustrate the way in which it is impossible to work in moral philosophy or employ notions such as "duty" and "ought", by arguing that if we looked for a basis for "rules" in characteristics of human nature, we could think that, as man has a given number of teeth which is not an average number, but instead a number of teeth for the human kind, so the human kind has a given set of virtues, and the man fully endowed with this set of virtues is the "norm". The drawback in this solution is that «in *this* sense "norm" has ceased to be roughly equivalent to "law"»<sup>13</sup>. But an evaluative study of human action, the study of

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<sup>11</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern moral philosophy", p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (1957), Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 78; for comments see O'Neill, "Modern moral philosophy and the problem of relevant descriptions", in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Modern Moral Philosophy*, pp. 301-16, pp. 304-5.

<sup>13</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern moral philosophy", p. 188.

«different concepts that need to be investigated simply as part of the philosophy of psychology», might lead us to consider the concept of "virtue" and this concept could make normative ethics possible. We might start with the concepts of "action", "intention", "pleasure", "will", and more concepts «will probably turn up if we start with these. Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept "virtue"; with which [...] we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics»<sup>14</sup>.

Anscombe goes on to say that the proof that an unjust man is an evil man would require a positive account of justice as a virtue, and we would need to know «what *type of characteristic* a virtue is [...] and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced»<sup>15</sup>, a matter which Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear as he did not succeed in giving us «an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as 'doing such-and-such' is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it»<sup>16</sup>. The reader might wonder why do we need such a proof and the answer he may find is just that in «present-day philosophy an explanation is required»<sup>17</sup>. What does Anscombe mean? I would say that what she apparently has in mind is that the course of history went from a religious view of morality in terms of law to a secularized view of morality as law; that the former was the view of Christianity, in turn deriving from the Biblical idea of *Torā*, which was later secularized and thus left without a justification; that Hume deserved praise for bringing to the fore the fact that in modern philosophy moral duty was an unjustified relic. Note that 23 years later Alasdair MacIntyre developed precisely the genealogical reconstruction sketched out here in two pages into a 400 pages treatment in *After Virtue*<sup>18</sup>. The main idea is that modern

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981), Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.

civilization is a kind of secularized Christianity. Anscombe asks whether there is any way of preserving a conception of ethics centred on the notion of law without a divine lawgiver, and carries out a cursory review of attempts that had been made in this direction. She discusses five of them: the ones based on the ideas of divine law, self-legislation, nature, contract, and virtue. She declares that the merit of Hume and of the twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon philosophers who followed him should be acknowledged to have noted that a certain notion, that of moral duty, was no longer tenable once they had abandoned the premises that made it conceivable: «I should judge that Hume and our present-day ethicists had done a considerable service by showing that no content could be found in the notion "morally ought"»<sup>19</sup>. This notion in fact does not make any sense outside a view of ethics as "law", but «you can do ethics without it, as is shown by the example of Aristotle»<sup>20</sup>. Let us assume «that a "man" with the complete set of virtues is the "norm," as "man" with, e.g., a complete set of teeth is a norm»<sup>21</sup>. The only problem the Aristotelian approach carries – Anscombe does admit – is that, «in *this* sense "norm" has ceased to be roughly equivalent to "law"»<sup>22</sup>. There is nothing wrong with that, but the problem is that this idea normally cannot be used in order to express the idea of law without recourse to God, and this would imply that on these bases "the moral ought" and "duty"<sup>23</sup> would disappear. But we could do without the notion of duty and indeed it would be

a great improvement if, instead of "morally wrong," one always named a genus such as "untruthful," "unchaste," "unjust." We should no longer ask whether doing something was "wrong," passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would

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<sup>19</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern moral philosophy", p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

sometimes be clear at once<sup>24</sup>.

What Anscombe has in mind here is explained in the abovementioned paper by Philippa Foot. The idea is that you could use descriptive words such as "mendacious", "immodest", and "unjust" instead of "morally wrong", and these would provide examples of situations where use of a term would be both evaluative and subject to empirical constraints, and this would make us able to skip the difficulties carried by the words *ought* and *wrong*. Such evaluative expressions related to virtues and vices have distinct criteria for application, and there are factual circumstances that, by virtue of the meaning of these terms, imply such conclusions as «so he behaved in a rude or in a courageous way». These clearly are evaluative conclusions, and therefore we may conclude that there are indeed circumstances when the shift from description to evaluation or from *is* to *ought* is fully legitimate<sup>25</sup>.

This is certainly a part of the answer Anscombe was looking for. The overall solution, if not entirely clear in "Modern moral philosophy", became more detailed in later contributions, but the fact that such clarifications were scattered in several minor papers did not help in understanding the overall design of such answer. Concerning one important example, promises, Anscombe takes a position sufficiently clear by ascribing to duty and obligation the character of hypothetical imperatives and declaring that they should not to be understood in a legalistic sense, and yet are no less unconditionally binding because the existence of the promising game as such provides some human good, and

such a procedure as that language-game is an instrument whose use is part and parcel of an enormous amount of human activity and hence of human good; of the supplying of human needs and human wants so far as the satisfaction of these is compossible and hence an enormous quantity of human good. It is scarcely possible to

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Ph. Foot, "Moral arguments" (1958), in *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 96-109.



live in a society without encountering it and even actually being involved in it<sup>26</sup>.

And it is starting with the example of promises that we should try to clarify what is, in Anscombe's view, the legitimate sense of the very notion of duty, as opposed to the legalistic sense somehow preserved in modern moral philosophy. She argues that, in

thinking of the word for 'should', 'ought' etc. (δεῖ) as it occurs in Aristotle, we should think of it as it occurs in ordinary language (e.g. as it has just occurred in this sentence) and not as it occurs in the examples of 'moral discourse' given by moral philosophers. The athletes should keep in training, pregnant women watch their weight, film stars their publicity [...] any fair selection of examples, if we care to summon them up, should convince us that 'should' is a rather light word with unlimited contexts of application<sup>27</sup>.

Let us reconsider, yet, also a few of the claims mentioned in the 1958 essay. As for the expression «at any rate until», it is far from univocal. Does it actually mean "never" or instead "at some given point"? One might suspect that Anscombe had not a totally clear answer in her mind. Perhaps in her thesis, as she formulated it, there are two main strands interwoven. The first draws on Wittgenstein's idea that ethics, no less than any other philosophical discipline, was definitely over once the Wittgensteinian philosophy had said the last word on the way to *solve* definitively philosophical problems by *dissolving* them and, in this case what Anscombe might have had in mind is that "at any rate until" simply means "never". The second strand perhaps draws on the Thomist diagnosis according to which modern philosophy is a corruption of the true philosophy in so far as it means abandoning objectivism and adopting subjectivism, and in this case, the moral philosophy that it is possible to practice will be some kind of propaedeutic to normative ethics or a philosophical

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<sup>26</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "On promising and its justice" (1969), in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, pp. 10-21, pp. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> G.E. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 64.

anthropology, and if any normative ethics will ever become possible, it will depend on our ability in considering some concept of virtue by which we should be beginning «some sort of a study of ethics».

Also, what kind of relationship should subsist between the "philosophy of psychology" and the divine law is something that Anscombe never tried to explain in detail, or even something that never became totally clear even to her. It does not seem entirely clear whether this preliminary study can act as a premise only to a conception of morality as law or should create also a normative ethics understood as «natural [i.e. non-revealed] morality», and this would not be a moral doctrine framed in terms of laws but instead one framed in terms of virtues. Roger Crisp argued that Anscombe's position «is an artful one, given the philosophical milieu of the late nineteen-fifties. Essentially, she is accepting, in broad terms, much of what the emotivists and the prescriptivists said about the force of "ought" but suggesting that once we see that this force is all that the concept gives us then it cannot serve in serious moral philosophy»<sup>28</sup>, and that it is a survival of a number of secularized concepts that only would make sense within a theological framework, and that moral philosophers should address rather issues of moral psychology, but this only applies to those who deny the existence of a divine law, not to Christians who know what to do and for whom faith in God is enough to dispel any doubts about apparent conflict between morality and our own good<sup>29</sup>. Simon Blackburn, along similar lines, argued that Anscombe's thesis is «a version of the Dostoievskian claim that if God is dead everything is permitted: where one does not think there is a judge or a law, the notion of a verdict may retain its psychological effect, but not its meaning»<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> R. Crisp, "Does modern moral philosophy rest on a mistake?", in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Supplement to *Philosophy* n. 54 (2004), pp. 75-94, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91

<sup>30</sup> S. Blackburn, "Simply Wrong", *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept 20 2005.

An answer to these objections has been given by Anscombe's daughter Mary Geach, who argues that this «is a misunderstanding of her thesis. Anscombe maintains that the class of actions which are illicit (i.e., contrary to divine law) is the same class as the class of actions which are contrary to the virtues which one has to have in order to be a good human being. She did not think one needed a divine law conception of ethics to know what a good human being was, or what virtues he had»<sup>31</sup>.

In support of Geach's claim a short note of 1962 (four years after "Modern Moral Philosophy") may be quoted, responding to the same objection by declaring that a moral belief may also be acquired by either accident or revelation, but nevertheless, «what there does not seem to be room for is moral truths which are *per se* revealed»<sup>32</sup>. In a similar way, Roger Teichmann insisted on the idea that Anscombe herself clearly adheres to a law view of ethics but does not think that to share such a view is essential in order to understand ethics. The reason is simple:

God requires what is good because it is good – a thing is not good because God requires it. So one can grasp what is good without believing that God requires it, and indeed without believing in God at all. But one cannot, she argues, believe in being *obliged* not to steal, murder, lie, etc. without belief in a lawgiver<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> M. Geach, "Letter to the Editor", *Times Literary Supplement*, Oct 7 2005.

<sup>32</sup> G.E.M Anscombe, "Authority in morals" (1962), in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. by M. Geach and L. Gormally, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008, pp. 92-100, p. 100. It is worth adding that the report of the discussion refers that "It was objected that the 'new law' of Christ was indeed a revelation in the domain of morality. The speaker admitted this in the sense that the motives, spirit, meaning and purpose of the moral life of Christians depended on revelation, while insisting both that the law of love had already been taught in the Old Testament and that the content of the moral law, i.e. the actions which are good and just, is not essentially a matter of revelation" (G.E.M. Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, p. 50). The above has been omitted in the collection edited by Geach and Gormally.

<sup>33</sup> R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, pp. 107-8.

According to this interpretation, moral truths would remain within the reach of human knowledge even when the latter has not reached the knowledge of God, in so far as they are based on the rational recognition of human goods that rational investigation of nature and the world in which we live may be enough to come at. According to Teichmann's interpretation, duties are never *unconditional* duties, since they always are *rules* that we must follow as participants in a language game which involves a public or social use of language while aiming at provision of certain common goods. For the same reason, "unconditional" duties, yet, are not *prima facie* duties, because they do not result, as consequentialists believe, from individual calculation of consequences carried by actions but are rooted instead in participation in a language game, or in a social activity aimed at provision of some good, and then such issues as that of limits to the duty of truthfulness, once it is understood that this duty is one of the rules in the communication game, does not require an absolutist answer, just because it is simply an ill-framed question. The very simple answer to the only legitimate question, why should I keep my promises, is based on "Aristotelian necessity" and it is: «Because it's good for you *qua* human being»<sup>34</sup>. If Teichmann is right then, Anscombe's main idea is the one argued a few years later by Philippa Foot in "Morality as system of hypothetical imperatives"<sup>35</sup>. According to Philippa Foot, Kant was a psychological hedonist with regard to all actions except those done for the sake of moral law, and therefore could not conceive of the possibility of moral behaviour without something like a categorical imperative, but this is due to a faulty action theory. However, if one is freed from this theory, the picture changes and it becomes obvious that the moral man follows hypothetical imperatives because he wants the good of others, and «quite apart from thoughts of duty a

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-102.

<sup>35</sup> Ph. Foot, "Morality as system of hypotheticals l imperatives" (1972), in *Virtues and Vices*, pp. 157-173.

man may care about the suffering of others, having a sense of identification with them, and wanting to help if he can»<sup>36</sup>. It can be shown that this applies not only to the virtue of charity but also to other virtues, such as honesty. Is there any reason why «should the truly honest man not follow honesty for the sake of the good that honest dealing brings to men?»<sup>37</sup>. In the following I shall come back to Teichmann's interpretation and will try to elaborate on it.

*The notions of action and intention.*

As mentioned above, *Intention*, published one year after "Mr. Truman's Degree", works out in detail what was just mentioned in the pamphlet, *i.e.*, the reasons why what Truman did can be described according to an increasingly thicker series of descriptions, ranging from «depositing a few drops of ink on a sheet» to «affixing one's signature to a document», «ratifying a recommendation by technicians», and finally «killing two hundred thousand innocent victims», but only some out of these descriptions are relevant, and the others are sophisticated ones, made possible by an implicit or explicit seriously impoverished action theory. Such was the implicit action theory behind arguments such as: «We do not approve the action; nor we think it was a mistake [...] Further, Mr Truman did not make the bombs by himself, and decide to drop them without consulting anybody; no, he was only responsible for the decision. Hang it all, you can't make a man responsible just because "his is the signature at the foot of the order" [...] Finally, an action of this sort is, after all, only one episode: an incidental, as it were, in a career»<sup>38</sup>. Such action theory is more or less the one taught by the modern philosophical tradition starting with Descartes and Locke by implication from its own view of the mind-body relationship, a view that assumes a division on principle between the two terms of the relationship and then frames the issue of their possible interaction, viewing

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>38</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's degree", p. 66.

an intention as «an interior act of the mind which could be produced at will»<sup>39</sup>, or as one more of those mental events that are the contents of a container, the mind, and need afterwards to find a way of controlling bodily behaviour, so to say, at a distance. This is a marvellous way of «making any action lawful. You only had to “direct your intention” in a suitable way»<sup>40</sup>.

Wittgenstein’s manuscript notes for the never accomplished great book collected in the *Philosophical Enquiries* and then in the *Observations on the Philosophy of Psychology* include his own criticism of the Cartesian view of the mind-body or thought-world relationship, something that Wittgenstein himself in his own manuscripts named “philosophy of psychology”, an umbrella-term denoting a family of reflections on such topics and what we mean by “having an intention”, “seeing something as something”, etc. The first item from Wittgenstein’s considerations developed in Anscombe’s *Intention* is the thesis, deriving directly from Wittgenstein’s criticism of the Cartesian conception of the mind-body relationship, that intention is not a mental content and that such a view is indeed one of the most fundamental errors in modern philosophy. Descriptions of actions provide an example of *practical knowledge*, the kind of knowledge that Anscombe contrasts with observational knowledge. There is something as practical knowledge, which is different from theoretical knowledge, whose knowledge of your own intentions or of what you are doing is a good example. The difference between both lies in the fact that practical knowledge is the cause of its own object. Anscombe states that in some cases

the facts are, so to speak, impugned for not being in accordance with the words, rather than *vice versa*. This is sometimes so when I change my mind; but another case of it occurs when e.g. I write something other than I think I am writing: as Theophrastus says (*Magna Moralia* 1189b 22), the mistake here is one of performance, not

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<sup>39</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “War and murder” (1961), in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, pp. 51-61, p. 59.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

of judgment<sup>41</sup>.

Anscombe illustrates the idea by the example of a man going shopping with a shopping list in his hand. The relation of this list to the things he buys in case it had been written by himself or his wife it was the expression of an intention or of an order. The relation between the list and what he buys is different in case the list is compiled by a detective following him in order to discover what he is buying. In case of a discrepancy between the shopping list and what the man buys, things are different with the list written by himself or his wife and the detective's list; if «the list and the things that the man actually buys do not agree, and if this and this alone constitutes a *mistake*, then the mistake is not in the list but in the man's performance [...] whereas if the detective's record and what the man actually buys do not agree, then the mistake is in the record»<sup>42</sup>. Teichmann proposed to call this distinction, the distinction that allows for making sense of the existence of a non-observational kind of knowledge "Theophrastus's principle"<sup>43</sup>. Anscombe admits of the existence of doubtful cases when, in order to know what I am really doing, I also need to have recourse to observation, for example when I write something different from what I thought of writing, and in this case, in order to answer the question, I both need and need not to resort to observational knowledge. The solution for the conundrum arising from the existence of two ways of knowing, so that, in order to find out whether you are writing you do not need observation and yet you need it, in Teichmann's proposal, lies in Theophrastus's principle according to which «the error is in execution»:

Knowing what you're doing is not any species of contemplative knowledge. Your knowledge of what you are

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, p. 26.

shopping for can be expressed in a shopping list; and the same list, if complied by the detective, would also express (his) knowledge of what you had shopped for. Theophrastus' principle in effect distinguishes the different functions of the corresponding knowledge claims; and we might speak also of the different functions of the corresponding knowledge claims<sup>44</sup>.

Morality, unlike what modern philosophy is inclined to think, does not consist in arguments because the choice of means in view of the end is not the central element of morality. Practical syllogism as such is not an ethical issue, it is of interest for the moral philosopher only if we assume that «a good man is by definition just one who aims wisely at good ends»<sup>45</sup> and that there are indeed general moral premises, but these would play the role of premises for practical reasoning – like Ross argued – only for the person who has, as a further premise, a desire to do his own duty. This idea, according to Anscombe, is unconvincing because «human goodness suggests virtues among other things, and one does not think of choosing means to ends as obviously the whole of courage, temperance, honesty, and so on»<sup>46</sup>.

Practical syllogism may fall within the field of ethical studies only if – as Anscombe contends against Ross and Hare – philosophical psychology is placed at the very beginning of the study of moral philosophy, for «a correct philosophical psychology is requisite for a philosophical system of ethics: a view which I believe I should maintain if I thought of trying to construct such a system; but which I believe is not generally current»<sup>47</sup>. Good moral thinking is not thinking in accordance with the canons of practical rationality, firstly, because not all right thoughts arise from reasoning and many actions are instead spontaneous manifestations of virtue and, secondly, because practical syllogism, unlike Aristotle, does not end in an action,

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.

<sup>45</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



it always ends instead in a statement, because the goodness of an end and of an action that aims at this end is like the truth of a proposition, and

if it is right, then the goodness of the end and of the action is as much of an extra, as external to the validity of the reasoning, as truth of the premises and of the conclusions is an extra, is external to the validity of theoretical reasoning, *as external*, but not *more external*<sup>48</sup>.

*Volition is not a mental event*

I mentioned the fact that Anscombe is critical of the Cartesian model of the mind-body relationship based on the dichotomy between inner mental states and external physical events, to which execution of actions belong. This model yields pseudo-problems about notions such as volition, good, and pleasure, that is, about notions that would be perfectly comprehensible in themselves. The source of obscurity is that, according to the Cartesian model, there is an act of volition, which is an internal event, and then a causal power the former exercises on our behaviour, which belongs to the sphere of external events. It is only on the assumption of existence of both entities that the problem unavoidably arises of how a relationship between them is possible and a whole series of paradoxes well known to those familiar with the history of philosophy from Descartes to Kant is created, the best known among them being the absence of any room for free will once action is understood as behaviour, or in terms of physical events in the world external to the mind within a chain of causal links connecting physical events with each other. It is well known to those familiar with the history of modern philosophy that the most sensible solution to the paradox is the Kantian thesis – in turn rather paradoxical – according to which any action is entirely determined and at the same time completely free, depending on whether it is viewed as a part of the realm of nature or instead of the realm of freedom. Anscombe, in the best Wittgensteinian spirit, remarks that the

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<sup>48</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Practical inference” (1989), in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 109-148, p. 146.

only sense I can give to ‘willing’ is that in which I might stare at something and will it to move. People sometimes say that one can get one’s arm and move by an act of will but not a matchbox; but if they mean ‘Will a matchbox to move and it won’t’, the answer is ‘If I will my arm to move in that way, it won’t’, and if they mean ‘I can move my arm but not the matchbox’ the answer is that I can move the matchbox – nothing easier<sup>49</sup>.

Pleasure, the key notion of utilitarianism, the school of thought that reduces good to pleasure just by definition, is one more concept that has been misunderstood because of its interpretation starting with the volition-behaviour dichotomy. The fallacy that made it possible to shape the seemingly plausible paradox according to which what is desired is pleasure, and pleasure in turn is what is desired, was in turn made possible by the modern theory of knowledge. This theory has led to the consequence that, while the ancient seemed puzzled by the concept of pleasure, this «has hardly seemed a problematic one at all to modern philosophers»<sup>50</sup>. Eventually, the theory of knowledge adopted by modern philosophers could not see the obvious parallel between will and judgment, or the fact that the conceptual connection between the will and the good can be compared to the conceptual connection between judgment and truth. However, it is true that the good is the object of the will, but with a difference with respect to the truth and the judgment: «an account of wanting introduces good as its object, and goodness of one sort or another is ascribed primarily to the objects, not to the wanting [...] Goodness is ascribed to wanting in virtue of the goodness (not the actualization) of what is wanted; whereas truth is ascribed immediately to judgements, and in virtue of what actually *is* the case»<sup>51</sup>. The cause of blindness before similarities and differences between both cases lies in Locke’s and Hume’s theory of knowledge on whose

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<sup>49</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

basis any «sort of wanting would be an internal impression»<sup>52</sup>. It is a proof of surprising shallowness both to accept uncritically the notion of pleasure received from the British empiricists that pleasure is a particular internal impression and at the same time

to treat pleasure as quite generally the point of doing anything. We might adapt a remark of Wittgenstein's about meaning and say 'Pleasure cannot be an impression; for no impression could have the consequences of pleasure'. They were saying that something which they thought of as like a particular tickle or itch was quite obviously the point of doing anything whatever<sup>53</sup>.

*Consequentialism is based on an impoverished conception of action.*

The notion of intention and its relation to the definition of human action is the point in "philosophy of psychology" that best contributes in setting the stage for the critique of modern moral philosophy. As described above, Anscombe rejects a definition of intention as a kind of mental state or event and defends a conception of intentional action that defines it starting with the reasons that the agent has to perform the action. The main weakness that Anscombe detects in consequentialism (and indeed in all modern moral philosophy is the problem of relevant descriptions, namely inability to describe an action in a persuasive way, so that it may be made to fall under one particular norm. The price paid for this inability is inability to justify any particular action or disapprove of it.

Curiously enough, Anscombe believes Sidgwick to instantiate the turning point in modern moral philosophy as he allegedly dared to draw those consequences that Mill had resisted to, namely that even «calculating the particular consequences of an action such as murder or theft»<sup>54</sup> is not out of question once forever. The turning point allegedly depends on the way in

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern moral philosophy", p. 180

which intention is understood. Sidgwick «defines intention in such a way that one must be said to intend any foreseen consequences of one's voluntary action»<sup>55</sup> or, in other words, he denies any distinction «between foreseen and intended consequences», and lack of such distinction is the reason why it is «a necessary feature of consequentialism that it is a shallow philosophy»<sup>56</sup>.

It may be noted that it is unclear why this should be Sidgwick's, not Bentham's, fault. We may safely assume that Anscombe had never read a line by Bentham and then, having read something by Mill as well as by Sidgwick, she did not realize that in fact what she had read in Sidgwick was already there in Bentham, and how Mill's strategy had been trying to correct and soften those among Bentham's claims that had caused more drastic rejection, and how Sidgwick's strategy had been trying to revise Mill's attempt while dropping the most infelicitous among his "improvements" on Bentham's doctrine<sup>57</sup>.

Sidgwick's fault is, in more detail, dropping the distinction that Aquinas had made – at least as Anscombe reads him – between a desired goal and side effects belonging to a casual chain that leads to our own goal and which we have contributed in bringing into existence<sup>58</sup>. At Bentham's time this distinction had long fallen in disrepute due to widespread contempt for Casuistry. This was the reason why all these considerations appeared to Bentham to be strange subtleties and he admitted just of direct consideration of particular and rather direct

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>57</sup> See S. Cremaschi, "The Mill-Whewell controversy on ethics and its bequest to analytic philosophy", in E. Baccarini and S. Prijić Samaržja (eds.), *Rationality in Belief and Action*, Rijeka: University of Rijeka: Faculty of Arts and Sciences - Croatian Society for Analytic Philosophy, 2006, pp. 45-62; Id., "Nothing to invite or to reward a separate examination. Sidgwick and Whewell", *Ethics & Politica/Ethics & Politics*, 10/2 (2008), pp. 137-181, available at [http://www2.units.it/~etica/2008\\_2/CREMASCHI.pdf](http://www2.units.it/~etica/2008_2/CREMASCHI.pdf)

<sup>58</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 20 a. 5; cf. G.E. Anscombe, "Action, intention and 'double effect'" (1981), in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 207-226, pp. 225-6.

consequences. Mill, finding himself under attack by William Whewell, expanded the scope of consequences worth considering to those of classes of actions as such as bearers of distinct kinds of consequences. Anscombe traces the rejection of the principle of double effect to developments in the history of philosophy between the seventeenth to the twentieth century, an epoch during which

Cartesian psychology has dominated the thought of philosophers and theologians. According to this psychology, an intention was an interior act of the mind which could be produced at will. Now if intention is all important – as it is – in determining the goodness or badness of an action, then, on this theory of what an intention is, a marvellous way offered itself of making any action lawful. You only had to ‘direct your intention’ in a suitable way<sup>59</sup>.

The whole truth is that Aquinas had written something more nuanced on intentions and consequences than what Anscombe ascribes to him. He had formulated the so-called principle of "double effect", albeit not naming it in this way, in the context of discussion of the right to defence as a means of identifying cases when an action that produces an in itself [*ex genere*] bad effect is permissible avoiding the implication that the human act under discussion becomes an evil act. Aquinas argues that

nihil prohibet unius actus esse duos effectus, quorum alter solum sit in intentione, alius vero sit praeter intentionem. Morales autem actus recipiunt speciem secundum id quod intenditur, non autem ab eo quod est praeter intentionem, cum sit per accidens<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “War and murder”, pp. 58-9.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae q 64 a 7; Engl. Transl.: “Nothing hinders one act from having two effects, only one of which is intended, while the other is beside the intention. Now moral acts take their species according to what is intended, and not according to what is beside the intention, since this is accidental”.

In order to understand more precisely what he had in mind, we should look at his theory of human acts<sup>61</sup>, which does not make room for that distinction between foreseen and intended events which shows up in the passage quoted, and indeed makes the admission that consequences occurring "most of the time" [*ut in pluribus*] have a bearing on the act's goodness. According to this theory, goodness and badness in acts depend on a cluster of factors: the object, that is, what determines whether the act is *prima facie* good or bad, the agent's end<sup>62</sup>, the relevant circumstances, and also further ends that the agent may be pursuing in addition to the act's direct end<sup>63</sup>. The distinction drawn by Aquinas between the *natural end* of acts and their end *in the moral order* is an important one and goes in the direction desired by Anscombe, but its drawback is establishing a dichotomy between the *natural* and the *moral* order of events, which is as tricky as most dichotomies tend to be. As Anscombe herself had shown, the same action may be described as: (a) depositing a few drops of ink on paper, (b) putting a signature, (c) giving political ratification to guidelines worked out by technicians, (d) saving the lives of thousands of soldiers by bringing a war to an end, and (e) killing 200,000 civilians. While shifting from one of these descriptions to another one shifts, at some non-obvious point, from a neutral external act to an internal evil act. The double-effect principle, later on codified by Scholasticism and connected with a list of four conditions on whose basis it is possible to establish allegedly clear-cut distinctions between different categories of acts, such as the one between *indirect* and *direct* abortion, was not in fact Aquinas's own general doctrine. The more particular distinction between *intended* and *foreseen* effects was introduced by him in the context of a discussion of defence from aggression, and it is a rather *ad hoc* distinction, drastically simplifying the doctrine presented in *Ia IIae*. Such a simplification may have been adopted as a means of defending, albeit in a

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Ia IIae, q 10-20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae q 12, a 4.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae q i-ii q 1, a 3 ad 3.

more articulate and plausible way, those conclusions that were customarily accepted about self-defence. But, had he taken seriously enough what he had written about human acts in *Ia IIae*, instead of providing outright justification for self-defence, he would have talked of lesser degree of blameworthiness for damage caused in this case than for damage caused by aggression. He could have repeated what Augustine (in one of his lucid intervals) had written, namely that self-defence is never justified because it is unacceptable that «one may kill people in order not to be killed by them»<sup>64</sup>, or at least he could have argued that one is all the time responsible for damage caused albeit for justified reasons and self-defence may be at most a compelled but tragic choice in case of defence of third parties and admissible but in some degree guilty in case of defence of oneself. Had he done so, yet, he should have revised everything he had written on such topics as war, capital punishment, and prosecution of heretics.

Anscombe is well aware that the double effect doctrine has been “frozen” in Catholic moral theology and states that «denial of this has been the corruption of non-Catholic thought, its abuse and the corruption of Catholic thought»<sup>65</sup>. The problem is that the principle holds if the distinction holds between *foreseen* and *intended* effects, a distinction that – I would add – is rather obvious in some cases but rather elusive in others. Such distinction is, according to Anscombe, essential for Christian ethics, since it forbids a number of actions as evil in themselves, but «if I am answerable for the foreseen consequences of an action or refusal, as much as for the action itself, then these prohibitions will break down»<sup>66</sup>. Abuse of this doctrine, based on the Cartesian psychology according to which intention is a mental event that can be produced on demand, has produced, among other things, such justifications of *coitus reservatus* as the following:

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<sup>64</sup> Augustine, Epistola 47.5; cf. *De libero arbitrio* 1.5.12.

<sup>65</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “War and murder”, p. 54

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

A man makes a practice of withdrawing, telling himself that he intends not to ejaculate; of course (if that is his practice) he usually does so, but then the event is accidental and *praeter intentionem*; it is, in short, a case of ‘double effect’<sup>67</sup>.

The kind of corruption Anscombe has in mind is thus reduction of intention to a mental event that can be produced on demand, not reduction of consideration of subsequent events to a dichotomised consideration of either natural ends or further side effects. And this is what she does again in a later contribution, where she replaces the name “double effect principle” with that of “principle of side effects”, defined as a minimal principle, according to which there are some things that, if pursued as either ends or means, necessarily make the action under consideration an evil action, but when caused as side effects do not necessarily turn the action into an evil one. She writes that a

side effect is one not intended by the agent. The principle is of course not that, so long as death is what you intend, you can cause it with a clear conscience [...] The principle of the side-effect merely states a possibility: where you may not aim at someone’s death, causing it does not necessarily incur guilt<sup>68</sup>.

This principle is part of the wider principle of double effect, which in turn should be understood as including several other things besides this minimal principle<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>68</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Murder and the morality of euthanasia”, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 260-77, p. 274.

<sup>69</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Action, intention and ‘double effect’”, pp. 224-5; for comments see R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, pp. 112-9; P. Rayappan, *Intention in Action. The Philosophy of G.E.M. Anscombe*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 135-41.



A possible criticism is that Anscombe could have found in Aquinas's *Ia IIae* a contribution to a kind of action theory as the one she was working out and that was going precisely in the direction of a discovery of a multiplicity of ends of action interwoven with each other, with the implication of a need to keep such complexity in mind while judging the goodness of actions, and instead she quotes a *quaestio* from *Ia IIae* where we meet, so to say, the “pre-Thomist” Aquinas I have mentioned, one who repeats traditional solutions that had been worked out by his predecessors before his own exploration of the complexity of human acts was available<sup>70</sup>.

What are the reasons for such a surprising self-defeat? I would suggest: haste and prejudice. In fact, as much as Anscombe never was a Kant scholar and limited herself to repeating current formulas about Kantian ethics, so, despite having read the *Summa Theologiae* as a student and having repeatedly compulsed it in the course of her later career, she missed at least the opportunity of benefiting from the secondary literature produced in the last two decades of the twentieth-century after an Aquinas-renaissance began, and had a tendency to repeat the formulas into which Thomist ethics had crystallized. The fact of having recourse to such an example as *coitus interruptus*, instead of the bombing of Hiroshima, an example she had clear in mind, may be a symptom of slipping back into traditional topics more popular in her own alignment than bombing of civil targets.

The problem is that in the light of *her own* action theory, even condoning the choice of such exotic examples instead of more obvious ones, also the erotic behaviour of a married couple should have been considered as a texture of acts, volitions, sentiments and feelings, a set consisting of a plurality of levels none of which instantiates an absolutely “brute fact”, but all of which are interrelated with each other and “refer” to each other as parts of discourse do. If this holds for the example made by Anscombe herself of «pumping water into the cistern

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<sup>70</sup> See S. Cremaschi, *Breve storia dell'etica*, Rome: Carocci, 2012, pp. 76-90.

which supplies the drinking water of a house»<sup>71</sup>, this should *a fortiori* hold for the individual performance of the action of – in Anscombe’s own language – “retreating”. The latter, in Aquinas’s language would be no more than an “act of man”, which does not yet instantiate a “human act” and a full-fledged human act would be instead living during one’s lifetime a married life, consisting among other things of an erotic relationship that is an affair lasting in time and covering dimensions of affection, tenderness, pleasure, procreation, none of which as a whole, and even less one of them at any particular moment, amounts to a “human act” as such, and accordingly does not instantiate a legitimate subject for moral evaluation. In the light of such – typically Anscombian – kind of consideration, the moral relevance of the distinction on which she insists (claiming to do so for exclusively philosophical, not theological, reasons) between a married life where the fully legitimate purpose of generating responsibly is attained by periodic abstinence and one where it is attained by contraception seems to be unjustified<sup>72</sup>.

## 6. No action without a description

I have mentioned that the complex relationship between action and intention represents the strong point in Anscombe’s theory. Her main conclusion may be aptly summarized in O’Neill’s words:

Although individual acts – act tokens – are events in the world, we both think about action and act under certain descriptions<sup>73</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> See J. Teichman, “Intention and sex”, in C. Diamond and R. Teichmann (eds.), *Intention and Intentionality. Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Anscombe*, Brighton: Harvester, 1979, pp. 147-161; P. Rayappan, *Intention in Action*, pp. 18-21.

<sup>73</sup> O. O’Neill, “Modern moral philosophy and the problem of relevant descriptions”, p. 305.

In short, the starting-point in Anscombe's action theory is that a description of what someone is doing captures a few out of several true descriptions of her or his observable behaviour; that, as far as we succeed in reporting what someone is doing under a particular description we also describe his or her intention; that the agent would be able to tell immediately what he or she is doing; that what she or he would say in normal cases would be the same as what we would say. For example,

I am sitting in a chair writing, and anyone grown to the age of reason in the same world would know this as soon as he saw me, and in general it would be his first account of what I was doing; if this were something he arrived at with difficulty, and what he knew straight off were precisely how I was affecting the acoustic properties of the room (to me a very recondite piece of information), then communication between us would be rather severely impaired<sup>74</sup>.

Action is analogous to language, since it is too composed of different levels intertwined with each other, and each of them represents a "brute fact" in relation to another. In another paper, Anscombe argues that there is a difference between the meaning of "intention" when the word means the intentional nature of what you're doing – that you are doing *this* on purpose – and its meaning when it means an additional or collateral intention *with which* you are doing it. For example, I make a table: this is intentional because I am doing exactly *this* on purpose; I have the further intention, say, to earn a living or to do my job by making the table. The example can help us in seeing that the intentional act matters per se, as much as further or collateral intentions do. You may also think of an example such as to move one's arm in order to pump water in order to fill a tank in order to poison the inhabitants of a house in order to

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<sup>74</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 8.

make a coup possible that would overthrow a cruel dictatorship<sup>75</sup>. The conclusion is that, in such a case, an action may exist that falls under four different descriptions. Such a "thick" reading of human action is what provides the basis for a way of considering it that ascribes to it more thickness than consequentialism would allow for, in that it views actions as physical behaviour, whose relevant description is limited to the one of the relationship it has with its own "consequences".

I have already mentioned the thesis that for every action there are an indefinite number of descriptions, all of them "true" in a trivial sense of the term, but up to a point irrelevant, since they miss the core of what one is trying to describe, and thus it is true on one hand that «every action has many descriptions»<sup>76</sup>, but also, on the other, that only when you reach some cut-off point you may say that an act «was a wicked act, a great violation of justice»<sup>77</sup>. A corollary that Anscombe perhaps does not spell out in full is that, unlike Aquinas, there is no morally neutral act, but just descriptions of acts at different levels. In fact, what Truman had done may be described as «‘depositing ink on a paper with a pen’, ‘signing a document’»<sup>78</sup>, and going on, as “subscribing an order”, and then in a number of ways, each representing a “brute fact”<sup>79</sup> in relationship to the following description is the relevant one, until we reach the cut-off point with the description “killing innocents”; once we reach this point, we know that the action under scrutiny is just and exclusively wicked.

The role of relevant descriptions is central in Anscombe’s overall argument because inability to identify the relevant description of an action would be what condemns modern moral

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.

<sup>76</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “The controversy over a new morality”, in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 227-237, p. 235.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>79</sup> See G.E.M. Anscombe, “On brute facts” (1958), in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, pp. 22-5.

philosophy, or better consequentialism, to be a shallow philosophy. O'Neill argued that the consequences Anscombe believes she could derive from this point go too far, because one can doubt that the Jewish-Christian ethics has managed to avoid the problem, and then it is not clear

why did Anscombe think that the problem of relevant descriptions was a weakness – a fatal weakness indeed – in Kantian ethics and more generally in “modern moral philosophy” but not fatal to for Aristotelian ethics? The problem [...] will surely affect all approaches to ethics except those forms of radical particularise that (purportedly) do not view acts in terms of descriptions under which they fall<sup>80</sup>.

Anscombe believes that this is what makes theories that aim to build models of rules or moral principles untenable, and this is the reason why utilitarian and Kantian theories have allegedly gone bankrupt, and all modern moral philosophy tends to fall into some form of consequentialism – note that Kantian ethics always seems to be a rather marginal case – because, according to modern moral philosophers, we cannot establish under which description we should judge an action and thus we have to resort to judging it on such extrinsic characteristics as their expected consequences. But the difficulty is the same for any theory that considers actions in terms of kinds of actions, and

the difficulty of identifying relevant act descriptions does not tell *for* an ethics of virtue or against the positions that Anscombe groups under the heading ‘modern moral philosophy’. The problem of relevant descriptions arises in describing or judging a given particular, but not in shaping future action. Describing the world [...] is a demanding task [...] But it is only the background for ethical and other practical reasoning. Those who conflate the appraisal of particular situations with practical judgment take a spectator view of the moral life<sup>81</sup>.

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<sup>80</sup> O. O'Neill, “Modern Moral Philosophy and the problem of relevant descriptions”, p. 307.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Does the multiplicity of true descriptions of one act create an insurmountable difficulty for every approach in ethics? The answer may be positive if what we mean is ethics carried out in a “spectatorial” attitude, in the sense described by Stuart Hampshire<sup>82</sup>, while – as O'Neill contends – it is not a real problem for first-person ethics. That is, the practical judgment (as opposed to judgment concerning past actions) does not consist in judging individual actions, but aims instead at «shaping the world», it «does not encounter the problem of relevant descriptions because it is not directed at individual act-tokens»<sup>83</sup>. As in life we do not act for *one* end and do not apply *one* rule, first-person ethics consists in «finding some way – at least *one* way – of acting that satisfies *a large number of distinct aims, standards, rules, principles and laws*»<sup>84</sup>. As I already mentioned, the above difficulty does not provide an argument in favour of virtue ethics, but just one against consequentialism, since only the latter does restrict the subject-matter of evaluation in actions to their consequences, thus possibly making them elusive, to the point of potentially justifying any kind of action, even the worst action, but such a difficulty is a problem for any theory apart from existentialism or particularism. But perhaps it is only a difficulty for moral philosophers who lack the required amount of modesty to admit that we need not have an ethical theory first, and then *apply* it to real life.

The comment is in order perhaps that Anscombe in one step discovered *the* solution to modern moral philosophy's conundrums – those that, I would dare to add, did not start with Sidgwick but rather with Francisco Suarez, the first modern philosopher who contended that judgment on the good is not the task of practical, but of theoretical reason – and, in the following step, lost of sight the already discovered solution, leaving the task of discovering it again to others, for example Stuart Hampshire, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hannah Arendt,

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<sup>82</sup> S. Hampshire, “Fallacies in moral philosophy” (1949), in *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 42-62.

<sup>83</sup> O. O'Neill, “Modern moral philosophy and the problem of relevant descriptions”, p. 313.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

Albrecht Wellmer, and Onora O'Neill. The required solution involves reconsidering the distinction between practical and theoretical judgment, a distinction that baroque Scholasticism and early modern moral philosophy, including Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Spinoza, had lost sight of, and indeed it is surprising that Anscombe seems to have no suspicion of the fact that Kant had proved to have it clear in mind that in practical life what allows for bringing action under *one* and *only one* description, so as not to leave any more room for moral dilemmas, is reflecting judgment<sup>85</sup>.

*The notion of virtue is the transition point from the philosophy of psychology to Ethics.* One of the three main theses in "Modern moral philosophy", the proposal of a return to the Aristotelian view of ethics as discussion of virtues as opposed to a view of ethics as law-based, had already appeared in *Intention*. Here Anscombe has written that

duty and obligation and moral sense of ought are survivals from a law conception of ethics [...] None of these notions occur in Aristotle. The idea that actions which are necessary if one is to conform to justice and the other virtues are requirements of divine law was found among the Stoics, and became generally current through Christianity, whose ethical notions come from the Torah<sup>86</sup>.

On the basis of this remark a diagnosis is carried out of the way in which modern moral philosophy developed a kind of incomplete secularization of a particular theological doctrine, the doctrine of divine command. This diagnosis is spelled out in "Modern moral philosophy" in two pages, and was extended, later on, by MacIntyre and Bernard Williams. In more detail,

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<sup>85</sup> See I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), transl. By M.J. Gregor, Cambridge University Press, 1991, Introduction to the metaphysics of morals, § 4; cf. S. Cremaschi, *L'etica moderna. Dalla Riforma a Nietzsche*, Rome: Carocci, 2007, pp. 169-172.

<sup>86</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 78 fn 1.

as I have illustrated, in 1958 Anscombe seems to adopt this controversial theological view, with all its paradoxes and without realizing its incompatibility with Aquinas's ethics, and four years later, in 1962, she seems to contradict her own 1958 view.

In *Intention* she also adds another remark that will provide the basis for her subsequent work in ethics, which is the "naturalist" claim that the end of moral action is not in turn a moral end, or that morality is a tool for producing some "human goods". She writes that

when a man aims at health or pleasure, then the enquiry 'What's the good of it?' is not a sensible one. As for reasons against a man making one of them his principal aim; and whether there are orders of human goods, e.g. whether some are greater than others, and whether if this is so a man need ever prefer the greater to the less, and on pain of what; this question would belong to Ethics, if there is such a science<sup>87</sup>.

In other words, ethics is characterized by terms such as "ought" used with a special meaning, but it «is to be characterized by its subject matter: roughly, human flourishing, or various aspects of human flourishing»<sup>88</sup>.

Anscombe's rescue of the notion of virtue was meant to provide the missing link between Metaethics and normative ethics, grounding normativity precisely on the idea of "norm", as distinct from the idea of a statistical average, conceived as what is appropriate for mankind. More specifically, there are only two sources of normativity in a stricter sense: the legislator's authority and social custom. To say that something is unlawful or that it is a right is possible in these contexts, and no further question is appropriate about deeper justification. Yet, for both laws enacted by a legislator and social customs, a further question is justified, namely the question about "Aristotelian necessity", that is, their necessity in order to produce some human good.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>88</sup> R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, p. 103.



Thus, while playing chess, making the same kind of move with the tower as with the horse is not allowed, and the reason is that the rules of chess do not allow for that, and no further justification is required; while making promises, making them with the intention not to keep them is not allowed, and the reason is that the promising game does not allow for that. In a sense, no further justification is required just because making a promise means joining a game with constitutive rules. In another sense a further question is legitimate of the duty to keep promises that is not required, or better, is more easily answered, for chess, and the answer to this question depends on the circumstance that the institution of promises is essential for the production of important human goods such as mutual trust and the possibility of co-operation<sup>89</sup>.

The kind of normative ethics whose construction was undertaken by Anscombe and Foot on the basis of the idea of "Aristotelian necessity" turns out to be rather different from virtue ethics as commonly understood in the following decades, and indeed more similar to various versions of Kantian ethics that have been proposed in the last decades.

#### 8. Anscombe's mixed contribution to the revival of moral psychology

In this section I will try an assessment of three main issues discussed in the present essay.

The first is the relationship between Anscombe's theory and virtue ethics. A few topics developed in *Intention* as well as in "Modern moral philosophy" were taken over by others in the Seventies thus contributing to a remarkable recovery of the discussion of the notion of virtue in the Anglo-Saxon world. First with a contribution by a rather odd book by Peter Geach, namely *The Virtues*<sup>90</sup> – more a collection of meditations than a philosophical text – and then with the decisive contribution of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, a virtue ethics was born,

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110-2.

<sup>90</sup> P. Geach, *The Virtues*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979<sup>2</sup>.

understood as description of adequate dispositions for different roles that we happen to play in the context of one historically given social order, and whose strength is its alleged ability to escape both the moral dilemmas implied by a normative ethics made of rules and prescriptions and the kind of impersonality to which a normative ethics of consequences is confined. The work that first gave visibility to the current was MacIntyre's, and then Bernard Williams, Stuart Hampshire, Martha Nussbaum and others offered rather different contributions, interesting though not always right when they criticize either the Kantian or the utilitarian tradition and when point at classical and still promising ways of justifying normative ethics<sup>91</sup>, but rather disappointing when attempting to treat virtue ethics as if it were a third kind of normative ethics in competition with Kantian ethics or utilitarianism. The worst of what this trend has yielded is to be found in attempts at applying it to bioethics, business ethics, public ethics, which has resulted in one more kind of catalogues, instead of rules to be followed or decisions to be taken, of virtues to be practiced in various areas, the virtue of the good doctor, those of the good businessman and of the virtuous citizen, in other words, in exhortation.

The remark is in order, yet, that virtue ethics has not just been disappointing when turned into one approach in applied ethics, but also yielded rather heterogeneous developments<sup>92</sup>. Williams and Hampshire have done something very different from what MacIntyre did, as they have insisted on the non-methodical and non-objectifying character of moral discourse, which is not simply spectatorial but in a first-person perspective. Anscombe and Foot, in turn,

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<sup>91</sup> See M. Nussbaum, "Virtue ethics, a misleading category?", *The Journal of Ethics*, 3 (1999), pp. 163-301; S. Cremaschi, "La rinascita dell'etica della virtù", in F. Botturi, F. Totaro, C. Vigna (eds.), *La persona e i nomi dell'essere. Scritti in onore di Virgilio Melchiorre*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2002, pp. 565-584.

<sup>92</sup> As aptly remarked by G. De Grandis, 'The rise (and fall?) of normative ethics. A critical notice of Sergio Cremaschi's 'L'etica del Novecento'', *Ethics & Politica / Ethics & Politics*, 7\1 (2006), pp. 1-11, available at [http://www.units.it/ethics/~2006\\_1/degrandis.htm](http://www.units.it/ethics/~2006_1/degrandis.htm).

even if they may be said to have given birth to virtue ethics, have both unavowedly evolved in a direction closer to attempts at rescuing Kantian ethics such as those by Alan Donagan, Thomas Nagel, Onora O'Neill than to what goes under the label "virtue ethics". This is a point that may be easily missed, since Anscombe's and Foot's own representation of their work may be misleading. Kantian ethics is presented by both as a typical instance of a law ethics without a law-giver; besides, the idea of self-legislation is said by Anscombe to be a typical sample of nonsense, as far as any law requires a legislator who would promulgate it; and the idea of a categorical imperative is said to be a contradiction in terms, while ethics as a system of imperatives makes perfectly sense once one keeps it in mind that the latter as just as any other imperative, merely hypothetical imperatives. Note that, in the case of promises as well as of lies no less than of «judicial execution of the innocent» no mysterious entity may be assumed to exist that the philosopher should investigate behind the word "duty" understood in a "non-emphatic" sense. The fact is simply that rules are constitutive of a language game and they cannot be followed without entering the game itself, which is, in most cases, far from optional, since the texture of human existence qua social existence is made of language games. The normative ethics first outlined by Anscombe and then further developed by Foot is therefore a kind of "virtue ethics" only in one particular aspect, having more to do with metaethics than with normative ethics. The latter is for them rather an ethic of deliberation guided by right reason.

Virtue is mentioned by Anscombe at a crucial, but rather obscure, point in "Modern Moral Philosophy" where she introduces the idea that, once philosophy of psychology is built, it will be possible to introduce a notion of virtue as a balanced or "normal" attitude, for

the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a 'virtue.' This part of the subject-matter of ethics, is however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is – a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis – and how it relates to the actions

in which it is instanced [...]. For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as “doing such-and-such” is affected by its motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required.<sup>93</sup>

The important point for Anscombe seems to be not so much that actions should be approved in so far as they are an instance of the practise of one virtue more than in so far as they are in accordance with right reason, but instead that what is the subject-matter for judgment is action in its eventual complexity, *i.e.*, as a combination of external behaviours with motives and intentions immanent in the action itself. After that, once such a reconstruction of action has been worked out, we need no virtue-based normative ethics, since at this point no alternative arises between rational action, laws, and virtues.

Anscombe’s normative ethics and developments added by Foot do include instead a number of Kantian elements or are a more Kantian kind of ethics than several other contemporary approaches going under the label "Kantian". In fact, the admission of exceptions to the rule that Anscombe constantly pointed at as a proof of the perverse character of consequentialism is totally unknown to Kantian ethics, even in Anscombe’s and Foot’s impoverished representation; virtue as a standard for a good human being does carries out a role in the rational identification of good human acts, but no role in the direction of conduct; moral judgment is judgment on action considered in its complexity, or in its different layers of means and ends organized around immanent intention, and it assesses its goodness on the basis of a hypothetical imperative, since the assessment is made on the basis of its conformity to rules constitutive of action itself.

Thus, judgment escapes the rule-and-exception conundrum simply because it is unconceivable, once their constitutive function has been understood, to think that rules may

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<sup>93</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern moral philosophy”, p. 188.

admit of exceptions<sup>94</sup>. In this sense, Anscombe's normative ethics is more Kantian than Kant's, and on occasions it displays symptoms of rigorism more acute than those reported in Kant's records. Besides, the circumstance that actions may be properly understood only "under a description" is a rediscovery of the very notion of judgment that was quite central for Kantian normative ethics, not to say its main element, as a reading of the *Metaphysics of Morals* and "On the common saying: 'this may be true in theory but it does not apply in practice'" may prove.

#### 9. Moral psychology, philosophical psychology, or philosophy of psychology?

A considerable part of the Anglo-Saxon philosophy after Anscombe has embraced the idea of the relevance of what is commonly known today as "moral psychology" (not "philosophy of psychology") to ethics, and such terms as action, intention, practical reason, motives and desires are now widely discussed by moral philosophers. However, it is far from obvious to whom this work on value-neutral concepts will be useful and how the shift will be possible from these to evaluative concepts. As a fact, in the comparatively large amount of literature that has been classified under the label "moral psychology", an important issue has been that of emotions, a new discovery in the Anglo-Saxon philosophy from the last decades after the theme had gone lost for a long time, perhaps from 1790, the date of the sixth edition of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Emotions and their character of mental acts with a cognitive content were rather important topics in German-speaking philosophy from the first decades of the twentieth century, for Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler, and Edith Stein. It may

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<sup>94</sup> For a rather similar argument see K. Baier, *The Moral Point of View: A Rational Basis for Ethics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958. Baier's argument is that rules come unavoidably to be established in the course of any process building any kind of human co-existence precisely in order to settle conflicts of interests and that precisely because of such constitutive function their peculiar character is being overarching vis-à-vis rules of a different kind.

be noted that the theme of emotions has been consistently ignored by Anscombe and Foot, as the "philosophy of psychology" has been understood by them as consisting just in cognitive and decisional processes. It may be added that the issue of emotions was rediscovered by a younger colleague, Iris Murdoch<sup>95</sup>, who was influenced by Foot, and then acquired increasing weight in the subsequent literature going under the label "moral psychology"<sup>96</sup>.

Developing Anscombe's contributions, a body of literature has been growing named "action theory", a now well-established trend, perhaps a new sub-discipline. It is far from clear whether it may be thought of as a discipline in itself or instead as a part of "moral psychology". Besides, during the same decades, a birth or re-birth of a genre called "philosophy of mind" has taken place, which in turn does not fail to leave several questions open about its nature and status. The philosophy of mind such as it has come into existence is what most closely resembles the idea of a philosophy of psychology as Wittgenstein and Anscombe possibly conceived of it. But one might ask, and in fact many do wonder, how it is possible to get into a (philosophical) theory of the mind, mental processes and concepts through a linguistic gateway rather than starting with hypothesis formulated by the empirical sciences on the workings of nervous system and the brain. And in fact, a couple of decades after the revival of the philosophy of mind a remarkable strand of philosophical discussion started on neuroscience, and a body of literature that studies the neurological basis of moral reactions, feelings and judgments has gone under the name "neuroethics"<sup>97</sup>.

Most of the time, applications of results from neuroscience to ethics were presented in terms

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<sup>95</sup> See I. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), London: Routledge, 1989; cf. S. Cremaschi, "La rinascita dell'etica della virtù", pp. 570-1.

<sup>96</sup> See C. Bagnoli, "Introduction", in *Morality and the Emotions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 1-36, particularly pp. 2-9.

<sup>97</sup> See M. Reichlin, *Etica e neuroscienze*, Mondadori Università, Milano 212, pp. 115-163; C. Bagnoli, "Introduction", pp. 12-19.

of reduction programs that apparently used to echo a philosophical ideology called naturalism. Perhaps, in order to avoid lapse into ideologies, a clarification is required of the legitimacy of all naturalization programs; that is, once they are formulated in terms of (psychological, sociological, biological) reduction of some field to another, they appear to be quite legitimate but also comparatively safe from any stronger philosophical implication<sup>98</sup>. In fact, the kind of naturalization implied by neuroethics does not involve more shocking philosophical problems than any other reduction program would do, except for the fact of dissolving the subject-matter of ethics as such. This is no threat to philosophical ethics, but an objection with a different nature may be formulated to such programs, namely that the life of the mind does require the physical facts occurring in the brain as its “basis”, and yet it emerges «with multiple layers with a cultural, social and individual character; and it is precisely the complexity of the physical basis that makes a bigger complexity of the mental life possible, a complexity that, through deep and continuous relationships established with other minds and with the whole of cultural meanings transmitted by the cultural environment, yields outcomes that cannot be neither forecasted nor deduced from the physical bases out of which they emerge»<sup>99</sup>. As a partial conclusion, I suggest that, while trying to do normative ethics what scientific psychology has to say about behaviour and mental processes should be kept in mind, but this is not what Wittgenstein and Anscombe called "philosophy of psychology". One more final consideration is that one may wonder whether moral psychology is possible and justified as a philosophical exercise aimed at rescuing books III and VII of *Nicomachean Ethics* or instead whether and philosophers are not the only heirs of Aristotle and this part of his legacy has been successfully incorporated into psychology as a science. As a fact, another

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<sup>98</sup> See S. Cremaschi, “Naturalizzazione senza naturalismo: una prospettiva per la metaetica”, *Etica&Politica/Ethics &Politics*, 9/2 (2007), pp. 201-217, available at [http://www2.units.it/~ethics/2007\\_2/CREMASCHI.pdf](http://www2.units.it/~ethics/2007_2/CREMASCHI.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> M. Reichlin, *Etica e neuroscienze*, p. 163.

way of understanding moral psychology does not assume that it is the name of a philosophical discipline with well-defined borders, but instead of a crossroad between ethical discourse and psychological theories, and in this sense it would dissolve the problem by reducing it to the question of the importance of psychology and the neurosciences for ethics.

The third point I wish to discuss is the role of the "social" dimension of morality in Anscombe's ethical theory. The central point in her attack to Kant is that the idea of self-legislation does not make any sense because a law is a law and a law is a command by a law-giver, and all the rest is expression of a disease in language that just calls for "treatment", not for philosophical discussion.

As a criticism of Kant's theory it is certainly not too charitable. It forgets that Kant did have in mind a role for a law-giver, albeit understood in terms of the metaphor of the moral world as a constitutional monarchy where every subject is also a citizen, and therefore a member of a community of legislators supervised by a sovereign. Had she been aware of this element in Kantian theory, the doubt could have arisen that the Schopenhauerian or Nietzschean tale about forgetfulness of origins in modern moral philosophy is less convincing than fascinating. The fact is that Kant, though a main character in the plot of "modern moral philosophy", was far from being an atheist, but was rather a theist, and had reasons of his own for justifying the moral law on the basis of "right reason", the same program as Aquinas and, oddly enough, as Anscombe herself, if we are to take the 1962 declaration I have quoted above seriously. The peculiar point in Kant's theory is not the idea of a rational moral law, but rather the idea of a parallel between the laws of the moral and those of the physical world, two separate sets of laws sometimes conflicting with each other.

On balance, one would not say that Anscombe proved to be aware of the above theoretical context while attacking Kant. At most, reading Anscombe in a charitable way, one may admit that she duly followed Wittgenstein's teachings against rationalism and diseases of language hidden behind speculative systems. She may have been right in pointing out that the "laws" of



the will can be called so only in a metaphorical sense, that what you do while performing any action is just following rules, and therefore the unconditional or overarching character of moral judgment may be asserted without any need to introduce what may be Kantian idle wheels or hidden world behind phenomena, such as the Transcendental Subject and the Fact of Reason. Moral rules are overarching because we are playing the promising game and not chess; the rules of chess are in turn overarching with regard to other rules in their own more limited domain, that of a game which is *just a game*. In this sense, perhaps, as Foot contends, also moral imperatives are hypothetical ones, since their strength stems from the fact of having joined a language game aimed at producing human goods. In another sense, perhaps, they are not, namely in the minimal sense according to which such formal requirements as logical consistency, fairness, and reciprocity do not just provide a formal structure to imperatives, but also establish important constraints on the rules or maxims we can rationally adopt, and, in this sense, being logical and being good are two virtues one cannot have independent of each other.

I come back now, as promised, to Teichmann's interpretation of Anscombe's idea of morality as language-game that, I believe, can provide a more full, more comprehensible, and less anti-Kantian reconstruction of Anscombe's view than Foot's morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives. My suggestion is that Teichmann's reading might perhaps be further developed in the following direction: what Anscombe has tried to do was not grounding normative ethics in "moral psychology", but just setting moral discourse free from prejudices deriving from a dogmatic pre-scientific psychology, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century associationist theory. This kind of psychology, besides interpreting the mind-body relation in the way that has been illustrated, that of a machine-body with a container of ideas, pictured the latter as a field of forces, impressions of pleasure and pain and passions, with a mysterious kind of causal power over the body. It was this psychology – according to Anscombe – to vitiate any attempt at building an ethical theory by misrepresenting any request to provide *reasons* for a

request to *discover* causes. Teichmann thus keeps Foot's idea, namely that morality is a system of hypothetical imperatives, but making it more plausible by stressing the role of language-games. In the light of this reconstruction, a good answer to the question «Why should I keep my promises?» is «Because the institution of promising is good for human beings».

The language-game of giving reasons for one's actions, like all language-games, is a public thing, and so it is to be expected that what counts as an acceptable reason for action will not be something restricted to the agent's own good. After all, why would we have a concept of reason according to which a person's saying 'I did that solely for my own benefit, and regardless of other people' can only be met with 'Oh I see; well, I must admit that is a good reason'? Giving reasons for one's actions is giving an *account* of oneself – and this is not the same as describing one's own psychology<sup>100</sup>.

In other words, the issue of moral motivation, a problem that had turned out intractable for Bentham and that raised serious problem for Kant, simply does not exist<sup>101</sup>. According to Teichmann-Foot-Anscombe, the moral law, or the moral imperative, or duty just overlap with reasons for acting; these do not provide a psychological motive but just a rational justification for actions; the latter *always* have an internal rational justification (albeit on occasions an inconsistent, defective, or specious one); justification does not lie in a psychological

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<sup>100</sup> R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, p. 102

<sup>101</sup> It may be added that in recent Kant scholarship the importance has been noted that Kant gives to moral sentiments the same respect, moral content, benevolence, sympathy and gratitude. See for ex. N. Sherman, "The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality", in O. Flanagan, A. Rorty (eds.), *Identity, Characters, and Morality*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, pp. 149-170; S. Cremaschi, *L'etica moderna*, pp. 159-162 and 172-176; Id., "Kant's empirical moral philosophy", in B. Bercić and N. Smokrović (eds.), *Proceedings of Rijeka Conference "Knowledge, Existence and Action"*, Rijeka: Hrvatsko društvo za analitičku filozofiju and Filozofski fakultet Rijeka, 2003, pp. 21-24.

dimension as far as it has little to do with pleasure and pain, happiness or well-being, not even with social feelings such as benevolence, but lies instead in an argumentative dimension. This is rooted in the analogy between language and actions that makes so that the latter are impossible to describe in any meaningful sense when reduced to external behaviour, but may be fully understood when viewed at through a number of levels, each of them representing some kind of doing x *in order to* do y. Intention is not a mental event, but rather one action's inner orientation or teleology.

An appropriate remark is also that understanding actions is not so much a matter of psychology as a matter of sociology, in the minimal sense in which the later Wittgenstein's philosophy, centred on the idea of language-game is, so to say, a set of prolegomena to any possible future sociology<sup>102</sup>. In Teichmann's already quoted words, the «language-game of giving reasons for one's actions, like all language-game, is a public thing»<sup>103</sup>, and it is this very starting-point that rules out some kind of reasons as inconceivable, more or less like those of Mafalda's nasty friend Susanita, who in one of Quino's strips complains of the fact that the grammar handbook does not make room for the phrase «we love myself». When read in this way, Anscombe's and Foot's normative ethics is a system of hypothetical imperatives not so much because it is a kind of non-deontological ethics or of virtue ethics, which it is not, but simply because much less than the categorical imperative is enough to make duties overarching and immune from exceptions. But in this case, against the letter of Anscombe and Foot but following their spirit, the basic language-game is the language-game of giving reasons for actions, not language-games such as promises, communication, exchange of goods, etc. It is this basic language-game to be justified by the circumstances of being

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<sup>102</sup> On Wittgenstein and sociology see J. Habermas, "Sprachspiel, Intention und Bedeutung. Zu Motiven bei Sellars and Wittgenstein", in R. Wiggershaus (ed.), *Sprachanalyse und Soziologie*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1975, pp. 319-340.

<sup>103</sup> R. Teichmann, *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, p. 102.

indispensable for providing human goods, and primarily the good of living in a truly human way, that is, deploying fully our own nature of beings able to communicate and who come to this world within a form of social life, first of all “the talk of glances” between mother and baby represented in Nicola Pisano’s sculpture.

Before summarizing my conclusive claims, I add a suggestion taken from sociologist Salvador Giner. Metaethics, in order to reclaim the discussion about the nature and justification of morality does not need so much psychology as sociology. What metaethical discussion is facing today – Giner suggests – is: (i) the legacy of centuries of purely philosophical reflection on the good life, virtue, the nature of good; (ii) the legacy of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ethical theories that, while trying to start with plausible concerns such as a distinction between authority-based tradition and rational evidence, at some point ended up with those pseudo-problems about the mind-body relationship, pleasure, volition and intention that have been diagnosed by Wittgenstein and others; iii) different reduction programmes, focused either on evolutionary theory, socio-biology, neuroscience; these programmes are plausible until their proponents do not unduly combine one of them with a philosophical ideology, naturalism, and until they do not delude themselves into believing their own reduction programme to be the only legitimate one. In fact, any reduction program in the study of morality is legitimate and other programs have no debt to pay to biological or neurological reductionism, and among them sociological reduction may prove the most obvious and fruitful; in fact sociology is a hypothetical and experimental empirical science studying the interrelationship between human beings, but in its most fruitful moments has been at once also ethical theory.

Just because relationships between human beings are not relations between different parts of a machine, not even relationships between parts of a complex self-regulating system, but always have a dimension of public interaction where subjects are asked to give reasons, to justify their actions, the distinction drawn by Ferdinand Tönnies and repeated in different

ways by Émile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, and Max Weber between two basic ways of interacting, namely *Community* and *Association*, is a fundamental distinction for the study of morality as far as it emphasizes the circumstance that «every source of morality proceeds from the communitarian dimension»<sup>104</sup>, or that there is a substantive rationality of virtue, the rationality of the moral sentiments inherent to human beings that does not necessarily require analytically complete deliberation, for human beings

know *more aristotelico* if they are doing the good or are betraying, if they are faithful, are false, comply with their word or are cruel, or compassionate and so on. And they know it without solipsism, always, invariably, in a situation where various people, or many, or a multitude is involved. Feelings of justice, perception of injustice [...] are states of consciousness instantiating such objective evaluation we are able to provide<sup>105</sup>.

### *Conclusions*

The reconstruction I have carried out, I believe, may yield the following suggestions: (1) Anscombe's proposal to ban ethics completely until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology may sound convincing for what it denies, that is, ethical non-cognitivism from the Forties and Fifties; it sounds as deep wisdom as it echoes the (real or apparent) depth of Wittgenstein's philosophy; but in fact it means just opening an already-open door, since non-cognitivism had already declared normative ethics impossible; besides, it is addressed to an ill-defined target, "modern moral philosophy", exemplified by Mill, Sidgwick, and Ross (and Kant), while taking for granted that such authors as Grotius, Pufendorf, Price, Whewell either never existed or shared Mill's, Sidgwick's, and Ross's claims; (2) Anscombe's idea of a "philosophy of psychology" is a concept different from that of "moral psychology" that has

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<sup>104</sup> S. Giner, *El origen de la moral. Ética y valores en la sociedad actual*, Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 2012, p. 108.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 396

become later popular, and is comparatively unstable in its definition and meaning; (3) Anscombe's main positive contribution to the philosophy of psychology lies once again in what she denies, that is, in her rejection of an image of the mind as a repository of mental contents whose link with the extra-mental world consists in incoming sensory stimuli and in outgoing "springs of action"; (4) What Anscombe completely misses is the world of emotions; it is a somewhat odd oblivion, since it implies forgetting one important element in Aristotle's philosophy, precisely the philosophy she wanted to rehabilitate, and also because it ignores the room made for emotions by Kant himself;

5. The central idea in Anscombe's philosophy of psychology, namely that actions are analogous to language and may be read on a variety of levels, each of them being possibly a "brute fact" vis-à-vis the following level, is a fruitful idea that carries crucial implications, such as a decisive criticism to the viability of consequentialism as well as the suggestion of a central role for judgment in the interpretation of actions; this fruitful idea, yet, far from being alternative to modern moral philosophy as such, is instead Kant's leading idea.