1000-Word PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTORY ANTHOLOGY

G. E. M. Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy"

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When discussing morality, we often talk about what we ought to do: e.g., "you ought not to cheat on that test" or "you shouldn't steal candy from a baby."

The philosopher Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (1919-2001) argues in her article "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) that unless God gives us moral commands, moral claims, including claims about what we morally "ought" to do, make no sense because "ought" implies that there is some power telling us what to do.

Anscombe therefore concludes that contemporary non-religious moral theories make no sense. We must either accept God as the basis of morality, or develop a new kind of ethics that gives up talk about what we ought to do.

This article explains Anscombe's arguments and shows how she used them to attack the theory of ethics known as "consequentialism" and how it inspired other philosophers to develop theories of virtue ethics.

1. Morality, Oughts, and God

Anscombe says there is a sense of the word "ought" that has nothing to do with morality. We might say that "plants ought to get sun."[1] This doesn't mean it's morally wrong to block a plant from getting sun. It means that for a plant to be an exemplary plant, it must get sun.

Anscombe thinks that we used to be able to say the same thing about humans. We could say "a person ought not to cheat others," and this meant that exemplary humans do not cheat others.[2] This is how the ancient Greeks conceived of humans, for instance.

Anscombe thinks a shift happened when philosophy adopted Christianity's view of ethics.[3] According to

Christianity, which was influenced by the Jewish Torah, morality is a matter of doing what God said to do.[4] God gave us moral laws, and we are supposed to follow them.

With God's law comes the idea of "ought" that we now use for morality. "A person ought not to cheat others," when adapted into the Judeo-Christian system, turned into "there is a moral rule against cheating others," rather than "exemplary humans do not cheat others."[5]

Thus Anscombe says we took ancient Greek descriptions of exemplary humans, which were not rules we were supposed to follow, and turned them into rules.

2. Contemporary Consequentialist Moral Philosophy

This is all well and good for Christians and others who accept God as the source of moral law. But, as Anscombe notes, modern moral philosophy claims not to require belief in Christianity. It claims to be justified no matter what religion you believe in.[6]

Anscombe's chief target is consequentialism.[7] Consequentialism is an ethical theory that says we ought to do whatever causes the best consequences.

Anscombe thinks that this is a ridiculous view if we give up the idea that God commands us to do things. What does it mean to say we "ought" to cause the best consequences? If God doesn't give us moral laws, there's no law that says we ought to do this.

According to Anscombe, without God, there is nobody to rightfully tell us what we ought to do. We cannot use the laws of society to tell us what to do, because a society might have awful laws. We cannot make laws for ourselves, because it is absurd to think that guiding oneself is anything like making laws.[8]

We could follow custom or the "law of nature," but some customs are terrible, and the law of nature might include things like "the strong should eat the weak," which is clearly bad.[9] We could say that morality is a contract we enter into, but it is ridiculous to think we are bound by a contract we don't know about and haven't actually signed.[10]

3. The Virtue Solution

Anscombe says there is one solution if we do not want to accept God as the basis of morality and do what God commands. We can return to the earlier way of thinking about good and bad. Using

philosophy and psychology, we can figure out what things are good for humans as a species, just like we can figure out what things are good for other living creatures, like plants. Good plants get sun (for instance), and good humans behave honestly (for instance).[11]

This method of investigation will have no place for the lawlike sense of "ought." Instead of "ought," we would use more detailed descriptive terms, like "just" and "unjust."[12] Justice is one of the virtues of a human: a good human is (among other things) just.[13]

These virtue terms are more detailed than talking about what is "moral" or what we "ought" to do because we can give specific, obvious examples of (for instance) just and unjust actions. It is unjust to punish innocent people, no matter what.

Consequentialism, meanwhile, says that anything *could* in principle be moral if it leads to good consequences. Consequentialism says that we ought to punish one innocent person to prevent a riot that will kill many innocent people.[14]

Anscombe thinks that the consequentialist approach causes us to debate about whether it's morally right to (for instance) punish an innocent person. The virtue ethical approach skips this debate about moral rightness. There is no debate about whether it's unjust to punish an innocent person. It is clearly unjust.[15]

The virtue ethicist focuses on what is just and unjust, courageous and cowardly, wise and unwise, and so on.[16] By developing a theory of human virtue, which requires psychological and philosophical investigation into what a good human life consists of, Anscombe thinks we can return moral philosophy to a place where we can come up with concrete answers. Consequentialism, meanwhile, gives us no concrete answers: everything depends on the consequences.

4. Anscombe's Legacy

Although many philosophers were not convinced by Anscombe's insistence that judgments about what we ought to do presuppose God's existence or her arguments against some of the ethical theories that she critiques, her discussion of the possibility of a modern virtue ethics was very influential. Many philosophers were excited by Anscombe's proposed virtue ethics and they followed her suggestion by developing virtue ethical theories.[17]

Notes

[1] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 7.

[2] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 7.

[3] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 5.

[4] See Because God Says So: On Divine Command Moral Theories by Spencer Case.

[5] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 5-6.

[6] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 6.

[7] See Consequentialism and Utilitarianism by Shane Gronholz. Anscombe also claims that her argument applies to other moral theories, like those of Kant and Butler. (See Deontology: Kantian Ethics by Andrew Chapman). Kant tells us we must constrain ourselves to follow the moral law, which Anscombe thinks is incoherent because if you do something yourself that is not the same as being bound by a law, and Butler thinks we can derive ethics from our conscience, but conscience often tells us to do horrific things. See Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 2-4.

[8] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 13.

[9] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14. For an introduction to an ethical theory that appeals to following customs, see Cultural Relativism: Do Cultural Norms Make Actions Right and Wrong? by Nathan Nobis.

[10] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14. For an introduction to ethical theories that present ethics as a contract, see Social Contract Theory by David Antonini.

[11] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14-5.

[12] These more detailed ideas are known as "thick" concepts.

[13] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 16.

[14] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 16.

[15] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 16.

[16] See Virtue Ethics by David Merry.

[17] Some philosophical works influenced by Anscombe include Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* and Alastair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.

References

Anscombe, G. E. M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33.124 (1958): 1-19.

Foot, Philippa. *Natural Goodness* (2001, Oxford University Press, 2001).

MacIntyre, Alastair. *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

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