

Elizabeth Anscombe and Consequentialism



Elizabeth Anscombe was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Even as an undergraduate in wartime Oxford, she knew that she wanted to change the way that philosophical ethics was done. She later worked closely with Wittgenstein, and put his insights into practice in the moral sphere. She is often credited with kicking off the revival of virtue ethics, and was a forthright critic of consequentialism.

Anscombe's writing still comes across as fresh and fascinating today, and often addresses pressing practical problems that afflict the lives of real people, and for this reason alone she has much to contribute to classroom teaching. However, her writing is also dense and frequently quite technical, often referring to debates in philosophy with which she assumes that her reader has a significant amount of prior knowledge. To understand Anscombe's writing, the beginner needs a reasonable amount of commentary to provide context and fill in the gaps.

About these resources

The narrated slideshows in this series outline the thought of Anscombe and her Oxford contemporaries Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch. They provide clear, brief summaries of their ideas on some key topics often taught in the classroom. They can be integrated into teaching, or used as a basis for part of your own lesson planning.

Anscombe on consequentialism

The most obvious reason to talk about Anscombe when teaching students about consequentialism is that she invented the term! Although the word 'utilitarianism' had been in use since Jeremy Bentham coined it in the eighteenth century, the term 'consequentialism', used to describe theories where consequences alone are what matters, was born with Anscombe's famous article 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in 1958. The article is wide-ranging, criticising many of the features of contemporary moral philosophy and arguing for a completely fresh start. However, the critique of consequentialism is one of its major centrepieces.

'Modern Moral Philosophy' does a number of things, but its main aim is to show that "it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology" and that "concepts of obligation and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of 'ought', ought to be jettisoned" on the grounds that they are survivors of an older religious philosophical tradition that can no longer survive now that they have lost their theological moorings.

To understand this second point, we need to look at what went on in ancient ethics. Aristotle, for example, did not really talk about obligations and duties, instead focusing on character and virtues. It was only once these virtues were hooked up with the idea of a Judeo-Christian lawgiver that we got the modern, and rather legalistic, sense of moral duties and prohibitions.

This, Anscombe thought, runs into trouble after the enlightenment, when moral philosophers are looking to human nature or reason as a source of morality, instead of a divine lawgiver. Kant attempts to do this by showing that we are our own judges and legislators, while the utilitarians sought to discover the source of moral laws in the capacity for pleasure and pain. Her main

objections to Bentham and Mill were that their conceptions of pleasure were too flimsy and superficial to carry the weight of theory that they needed to.

While today most people regard utilitarians like Bentham and Mill as consequentialists, Anscombe did not. For Anscombe, consequentialism was a theory where nothing other than consequences mattered, and all other considerations had to be disregarded. Her major critique of consequentialism is that it can lead to situations in which people can do unthinkably terrible things, provided that the utilitarian calculation favours that course of action. On a number of occasions, Anscombe vociferously criticised consequentialist defences of certain acts of war, for example dropping bombs on innocent civilians in order to bring a swifter end to the conflict.

It is not entirely clear why she thought that this definition of consequentialism did not apply to Bentham and Mill, and there is still some disagreement on what her thinking was here. It is a slightly easier case to make for Mill, since he is sometimes read as a rule-utilitarian. Rule-utilitarians favour the rules which, when applied, lead to the greatest utility. It would not be difficult to argue for a rule against the slaughter of innocents, even if there are some rare scenarios where this may bring about the maximum happiness. With Bentham, who was a direct utilitarian, it is harder to see why she would not have seen him as a consequentialist. It has been suggested that Anscombe thought that the implications of consequentialism were so terrible that it would be uncharitable to read Bentham as accepting them.

Anscombe's critique of consequentialism is part of her broader rejection of modern moral philosophy. Her powerful background motivation is to show how humans can do (and attempt to justify) terrible things when they seek out simplistic monolithic sources for all moral claims, and give these claims the status of a divine law. Although her work did much to revive virtue ethics in the twentieth century, Anscombe's own relationship with this tradition was somewhat ambiguous. For one thing, she was devoutly religious herself, and it is not straightforwardly obvious that she accepts the rejection of a religious underpinning for morality that she discusses in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Furthermore, she sees the project of developing a plausible virtue theory as depending on a rich and detailed understanding of human motivation which was more advanced than anything that had been proposed at the time that she was writing.

Further Reading

You can read Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' here:

<https://www.pitt.edu/~mthompso/readings/mmp.pdf>

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on Anscombe has a useful section on consequentialism here: <https://iep.utm.edu/anscombe/#H5>

Podcast 4.1 on our website goes into more depth on Anscombe's view that some actions are wrong no matter what their consequences are. Further podcasts in section four provide more details and context about Anscombe's thought: <https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/curated-resources/podcasts/>