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Elizabeth Anscombe's grammatical approach in moral philosophy

المقاربة النحوية في فلسفة الاخلاق لدى اليزابيث انسكومب

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Abstract:

This paper analyses Anscombe's theoretical and methodological critics of Moral Philosophy. Anscombe emphasizes the relation between Moral Philosophy and language. It begins by presenting her critics of modern ethical theories. Next, it sheds light on this philosophy through its analytical and grammatical approach, to clarify its philosophical background. Finally, Anscombe calls for a return to the Aristotelian origin of this concept and that of virtue.

Keywords: Anscombe, grammatical Analysis, moral philosophy, Aristotle, virtue.

المخلص:

تتناول هذه الورقة بالتحليل نقد أنسكومب النظري والمنهجي للفلسفة الأخلاقية. تؤكد أنسكومب على العلاقة بين الفلسفة الأخلاقية واللغة، وذلك من خلال تبنيها لمنهج التحليل المنطقي للغة الفلسفة لدى لودفيج فيتجنشتين. يبدأ البحث بعرض نقدها للنظريات الأخلاقية الحديثة. ثم يسلط الضوء على هذه الفلسفة من خلال منهجها التحليلي والنحوي. لتوضيح طبيعة وأصل مجموعة من الأدوات المفاهيمية كالقصد، الإرادة، وإظهار خلفيتها الفلسفية. وأخيراً، تدعو أنسكومب بالعودة إلى الأصل الأرسطي لمفهوم الأخلاق والفضيلة، كبديل تأصيلي يتوجب العودة إليه من أجل فلسفة أخلاقية سليمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أنسكومب، فلسفة الأخلاق، أرسطو، فيتجنشتين، الفضيلة،

1. INTRODUCTION

Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (1919-2001) was a renowned British philosopher known for her contributions to the philosophy of mind, action, and ethics. She studied under Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom she met at Newnham College, Cambridge, and later served as the executor of his will alongside George Henrik von Wright.

Anscombe was deeply influenced by Wittgenstein, embracing much of his philosophical originality. This originality is characterized not by a quest for the origin of truth but rather by a new approach to philosophical questions that is both radical and renovative. She viewed philosophy as a struggle against the bewitchments of language, emphasizing the importance of clarifying thought and critically examining the language philosophers use.

Her engagement with Wittgenstein's philosophical project included a translation of his Philosophical Investigations and a

work on the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, in which she traced the line of Logicism from Gottlob Frege to Bertrand Russell (Anscombe, G.E.M., (1959) An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus, 2015).

She was an avid reader of the classics, including Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Descartes. Her personal ideas significantly influenced philosophical circles, and her analytical rigor and depth left a lasting impact on philosophical discourse. In her seminal paper Modern Moral Philosophy (1958), she challenged prevailing ethical frameworks and advocated for a revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics.

She managed to reconcile her Christian Catholic faith with her critical and argumentative philosophical thinking. While she remained committed to Catholicism and demonstrated fidelity to Judeo-Christian ethics—taking a public stand against England's entry into the war in 1939, which reflected her moral conviction—she also opposed contraception and homosexuality. At

the same time, she never hesitated to criticize religious teachings that she considered untrue to reason and ethics.

The focus of this paper centers on a complex question that is both recent and ancient. Its ancient roots can be traced back to Greek philosophy and Aristotle's work on ethics, continuing through medieval philosophy with the contributions of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Its relevance is contemporary, as it repeatedly resurfaces within the field of moral and political philosophy. Importantly, this question has been significantly shaped by a woman philosopher who made a profound impact on the history of philosophy, known for her radical inquiries and unwavering political stance in support of just causes.

This work aims to address the following question: According to Elizabeth Anscombe, what are the flaws and aporias in modern moral philosophy, and how does she propose to refound moral philosophy, through her grammatical analysis of the philosophical concepts?

In order to answer these questions, examine her ideas through the lens of her two key texts: *Modern Moral Philosophy* and *Intention*.

2. Anscombe's critique of Modern Moral Philosophy

Anscombe's critical examination of modern moral philosophy began in 1956 when Oxford University planned to award an honorary doctorate to former American President Harry Truman. She publicly opposed this proposal during a donation assembly, justifying her stance by citing Truman's responsibility for the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Her position was rooted in a radical and unwavering moral principle: no reason can justify the extermination of a civilian population, regardless of the pretext, even if it is intended to end a war. She considered such an act politically irresponsible and ethically unforgivable.

What scandalized Anscombe even more was the perspective of her colleagues, who viewed the President's action as merely a

signature or an order to carry out the bombings to bring about the end of the war. They did not perceive it as an intention to commit murder against civilians.

This situation presented a landscape of polemics and moral ambiguity that she found morally corrupt. It called for a deeper examination that went beyond a simple analysis of actions and responsibilities, to include the intentions behind those actions and the moral duties that arise from them.

Before defending her moral project and thoughts, she critiques ancient moral theories and questions the terms "morality" and "moral duty," along with the ambiguities that have surrounded these concepts from modernity to the present day. She has chosen to clarify these terms, although Kant, unfortunately, does not take them seriously.

These terms, rooted in a religious and divine legalistic framework, later received a philosophical structure from idealist philosophers. However, once these terms are disconnected from their religious origin, they lose their coercive power and foundational basis. (Anscombe . G.E.M., (1958) , *Modern Moral Philosophy*, 33, no. 124, p. 30).

To address the shortcomings in contemporary moral philosophy, Anscombe expands her analysis beyond a purely conceptual understanding of morality and related terms. She traces these ideas back to their Aristotelian origins, offering a comprehensive critique of Western moral philosophical thought through the framework of Aristotle's ethical principles.

In her book *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Anscombe presents three theses that are both radical and thought-provoking. The first two theses are negative in nature, with the first being particularly radical. It argues that discussions of moral philosophy and related issues should be put on hold until a philosophy is developed that is grounded in sufficient psychological understanding. The only aspect of psychological analysis we can incorporate pertains to mental phenomena such as intention and will, serving as an epistemological foundation for understanding these concepts.

This is the reason, In her interpretation of the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, she refers to the aphorism (4.1121), where Wittgenstein connects psychology to the theory of knowledge (Anscombe . G.E.M., (1963) , *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London: Hutchinson, [1959], p. 152).

The second point she makes is that the concepts of morality, duty, and obligation are now outdated because their ethical foundations no longer exist. They are offshoots of an older ethical framework that has since faded away.

Her third thesis argues that British authors in moral philosophy, from Sidgwick to the present day, are of little importance (Anscombe, G.E.M., (1958) , *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Ibid, p.1). In her critique of modern moral philosophy—specifically Kantian deontology and Sidgwick's consequentialism—she highlights a common flaw among these perspectives: they all rely on concepts derived from Christianity while failing to retain their theological foundations and metaphysical justifications. As a result, these philosophies exhibit incoherence and significant internal contradictions. They utilize a conceptual framework that belongs to religion, while simultaneously rejecting its foundational principles, including the regulating and commanding authority of God.

Anscombe argued that the problem with modern morality lies not only in its abandonment of the fundamental principles of Christian ethics but also in its inability to maintain a coherent conceptual framework. Without a divine legislator, concepts such as obligation and moral duty lose their original meaning. Only God can serve as the guarantor of these moral principles and their application.

She criticizes Immanuel Kant for replacing God with reason, as the source of moral obligation in his deontological ethics. This shift results in Kantian norms and categorical imperatives lacking their binding authority since they are disconnected from the concept of divine command.

Furthermore, there is a necessity for a philosophy of psychology grounded in Aristotle's concept of virtue and human action. This approach is essential for developing a moral philosophy—not to establish a new branch of epistemology, but to replace the existing modern moral philosophies, specifically the consequentialism of Henry Sidgwick (a term she coined to describe the tendency of Sidgwick and other utilitarians to judge moral actions by the value of their consequences, in order to justify crimes against populations on the pretext of defending human values, under the pretext of ending war, as in the case of the use of nuclear weapons by American President Harry Truman against Japan). These philosophies often share a common background that misuses the concept of morality.

According to Anscombe, Sidgwick's error lies in his erroneous definition of intention. A definition which is at the origin of consequentialism and its ridiculous ethic. "The right action" is the action which produces the best possible consequences" and "a man does well, subjectively speaking, if he acts for the best in the particular circumstances according to this judgment of the total consequences of this particular action" (Anscombe . G. E. M , (1958) , *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Ibid , P.9)

This requires integrating the analysis into the philosophy of action, in order to identify and explain the connection between our actions and our thoughts. Through a descriptive language approach and a grammatical analysis that quest to clarify and evaluate actions and intentions, in order to differentiate intentional actions from other accompanying actions and to identify the conditions under which an action can be deemed intentional. As Anscombe states, "an action can be intentional under several descriptions." (Anscombe.G.E.M. (1957) *Intention*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000; pp. 81-86.)

In fact, one of the reasons of her treatise on intention is to highlight the difference between the practical and

theoretical orders. Practical knowledge operates under a non-demonstrative logic, meaning that an agent does not need to be fully aware of everything happening around him in order to act or make a decision ; this is part of the teleological nature of action. In contrast, theoretical or intellectual reasoning requires a different approach. This is where naturalism plays a crucial role as a supreme principle that cannot be overlooked when discussing virtue.

3. The Grammatical Analysis

Although Wittgenstein's grammatical analysis is often associated with his second philosophy, as presented in his *Philosophical Investigations*, this interpretation is somewhat superficial. In reality, it is within this analysis that he employs the logical atomism from his first philosophy, as outlined in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. This serves as another argument against the thesis of a radical rupture between the two phases of Wittgenstein's thought. The passage from the *Investigations* illustrates the application of his theory of logical atomism, thereby supporting the view that Wittgenstein's grammatical analysis within his theory of language games represents an extension and development of the logical atomistic analysis he inherited from Bertrand Russell, and developed in his own way. Wittgenstein clearly addresses this in his book *philosophical investigations*: "But what are the simple constituent parts of which reality is composed? What are the simple constituent parts of a chair? Are they the pieces of wood from which it is made? Or are they molecules or atoms? By 'simple,' I mean uncompounded. Here's what's important: « composed » in what sense? Speaking without further precision about the 'simple constituent parts of the chair' makes no sense at all." (Wittgenstein, L (1958) *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, , pr47, p. 21). This illustration connects back to the first aphorism of the *Tractatus*, which does not concern itself with the particular or simple components of the world or compound facts,

but rather with the way they are structured: "The world is everything that is the case." (Wittgenstein L (first published 1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell, F.R.S. Routledge and Kegan Paul, Broadway House, Brigham Young University, printed in Great Britain by Lund Humphries, London, Bradford).

The grammatical analysis inherited by Anscombe extends beyond the simple description of the correct uses of language proposed by John L. Austin and the Oxford philosophers of ordinary language, to encompass the theory of language games. It also explores how these games are acquired and the practical conditions that allow for their existence, particularly focusing on the meaning and limits of language use. By applying this method of grammatical analysis, Anscombe seeks to view every human action as a state of affairs that is open to multiple values and possibilities. A multiplicity of possibilities that is not confined to the typical use of language in reality for a word to have meaning. Instead, meaning is shaped by the context in which it is presented, indicating that it is not inherent in the object itself but is determined by how it is revealed within a specific language game. In this context, Anscombe draws on Wittgenstein's distinction between explanations based on physical causes and those based on reasons. In human actions, we are not dealing with physical objects linked mechanically and explained through a causal logic of cause and effect. Rather, we are dealing with agents who have reasons for their actions. (Anscombe, G.E.M., (2001) *L'Intention*, pp. 143-144). Grammatical analysis examines the logical and conceptual aspects of an action, allowing us to question its motives and whether it is intentional.

Wittgenstein's grammatical analysis, further developed by Anscombe, is characterized by the distinction among various grammatical categories such as psychological verbs, proper nouns, color names, and numbers. However, its aim was not to construct a purely formal theory of language. Instead, it

sought to understand the true connection between action and intentionality. This involved clarifying the relationship between reality and other mental phenomena by showing that language problems are often disguised as philosophical and metaphysical issues. (Anscombe, G.E.M (2011) A Theory of Language, in M. Gaech and M. Gormally (Eds.), From Plato to Wittgenstein, Imprint Academic, Exeter, p. 201.)

4. Aristotelian virtue as an alternative

Anscombe's appeal for a return to Aristotle and Aristotelian ethics is essential. With the diminishing influence of ethics based on law and Christian principles, it is argued that we should revisit the foundational concept of "moral" as proposed by Aristotle, emphasizing the importance of virtue . It is important to respect the distinction between moral virtue, which operates alongside intellectual virtue.

The purpose of this proclamation to return to the Aristotelian ethics is to recover its foundation lost with the loss of an ethic based on law and the Christian religion . She argues that we should return to the origin of Aristotle's conception of "moral" as a virtue, while respecting the distinction between this type of moral virtue, which exists in parallel to intellectual virtue. A distinction that is essential for avoiding the confusion that modern philosophy has encountered when evaluating human actions.

The aim of this return to virtue in the sense of the Aristotelian ethics , is not to found a theory but to save the idea of moral obligation from the inconsistencies that have afflicted it with the moderns and utilitarians, in other words , a morality without God . It is in the search for a finality of human action that this return to Aristotle is essential, that is the whole content of the Nicomachean Ethics .

In his treatise, Aristotle begins with the « good », defined as that to which our actions tend in all circumstances (Aristotle (2004) Nicomachean Ethics). But as there are different actions, there are consequently different ends, and as there is a hierarchy of sciences tied together by a common

denominator called the architectonic of reason , which is political science, there is also a hierarchy of ends, or certain ends aim at others, and in turn the latter aim at others, until we come to an ultimate end . In conclusion, different hierarchical ends lead us to a supreme end , which is the supreme good, or the ultimate meaning of life, which according to Aristotle is justice .

Aristotle considers politics to be the science whose object of study is the supreme good. This is why he presents the Nicomachean Ethics as a treatise on politics. He mentioned : "The good is certainly desirable when it concerns an individual taken separately, but its character is more beautiful and more divine when it applies to a people and to entire states". (Aristotle, (2004) Nicomachean Ethics, Translated and edited by Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press .)

The Aristotelian approach to the virtues comes as a critique to Plato's thesis, which qualifies virtue as nothing but a type of knowledge and vice as a lack of knowledge (Stanforde encyclopedia of Philosophy , (2001) , Aristotle's ethics) . This thesis places the chapter on ethics within that on the theory of knowledge. Now, Aristotle distinguishes between ethical virtues (hexis), which are states or dispositions to experience appropriate feelings and those which are not, and these are states acquired by habit (our second nature), and not by thought or calculation, which distinguishes them from intellectual virtues.

The origin of Anscombe's moral virtues is rooted in Aristotelian ethic , which gives them a dual foundation: realistic and practical of justice , and natural , of happiness (Eudaimonia) far from idealist abstractions .

According to Aristotle, virtue is moderation and temperance, which expresses a balance between two vices, an excess and a deficiency. By virtue, we mean that which maintains a happy medium. Now, to remain standing other virtues , only justice, which is the virtue of virtues, remains so in all situations, and gives everyone their due. It is even the condition of the other virtues, for

other virtues like courage and friendship are variables, each dependent on the context of the agent. The criminal's courage, for example, is not a virtue but a vice, because it serves a bad end, or intellectual probity, which is nothing more than technicality and meticulous accuracy.

This moral realism that Anscombe claims as an alternative to the modern moral crisis, stems from Aristotle's natural doctrine of the virtues, which finds its roots in human nature.

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up Anscombe's grammatical approach in moral philosophy, we can see that the philosopher does not aim to found a new moral theory, nor a simple religious ethic, but a radical critique of modern and contemporary moral theories, which she divides into two categories: consequentialism that is justified on term of consequences and, Immanuel Kant's deontological ethics, that think in terms of duty, obligation and absolute evil, are all religious concepts, but on the basis of which reason has replaced the core divine legislator that is God.

To resolve this crisis, Anscombe proposes three possible alternatives. One is methodological, and the two others are theoretical. The methodological is the grammatical approach that she inherited from Wittgenstein. The theoretical are, firstly a moral psychology, which focuses on the analysis of intention as the principle that guides all human action, and without which the latter remains vain and meaningless. Secondly, a return to Aristotle's "ethics of the virtues".

Not forgetting among all this, to emphasize the influence of Wittgenstein's grammatical analysis, the cor premise of this study, and the themes it retained from him, notably that of causality: "My first strenuous interest in philosophy was in the topic of causality" (Anscombe. G.E.M. (1981) "Introduction", *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*, The Collected Philosophical Papers II,

Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. vii). And the nature of mind, the field in which we deal with all those phenomena and values (intention, obligation, rule) that guide and determine human action.

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