

ETHICS AND ECONOMICS

Human Life, Action and Ethics:
Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe
Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Editors)
Exeter, United Kingdom: Imprint Academic, 2005 (298 pages)

The English philosopher, Elizabeth Anscombe, who died in 2001, is one of those scholars whose work deserves far wider attention than it presently receives. Although three volumes of her *Collected Papers* were published in 1981, they constituted only a selection of her papers previously published between 1947 and 1979, with the addition of some unpublished papers. Now, however, many articles, papers, and reviews written by Anscombe are again being brought to public attention, thanks to the efforts of the editors of *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*. This book is described as the first of a series of volumes bringing together a selection of hitherto uncollected published papers along with some unpublished ones.

Anscombe will perhaps be best remembered for her intellectual association with the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of the pioneers of analytical philosophy. While many will contest the merits of Wittgenstein's thought as well as analytical philosophy, no one would dispute either the influence of Wittgenstein or analytical philosophy, even upon schools of thought that many would regard as inimical to such thinking. Anscombe was not only appointed to the same chair of philosophy that Wittgenstein held at Cambridge, she was also one of his literary executors and translators.

In other circles, Anscombe is remembered as one of those twentieth-century scholars, educated and based at Oxford, who converted to Roman Catholicism and who were not afraid to use their intellectual skills to explicate and defend the teachings of the

Catholic Church to curious non-Catholics and skeptics (i.e., perhaps a slight majority of contemporary Western philosophers), as well as a number of doubting Catholics. The editors of this volume of Anscombe's writings suggest that she even invented the word *consequentialism* as a way of describing a form of act-utilitarianism, "but without the view that the good is to be equated with pleasure and evil" (xvii). Anscombe's critique of consequentialism on the basis of her study of act and intention could be viewed as prefiguring much of the refutation of consequentialism that we find in John Paul's encyclical on Catholic moral teaching, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993).

The focus of this volume of Anscombe's writings is on moral philosophy, with the essays being divided into three sections: respectively, (1) human life, (2) action and practical reason, and (3) ethics. The first section covers questions ranging from metaphysics, to the application of philosophical categories to what science reveals about the beginnings of human life, to the very idea of human dignity. In the case of the last of these, Anscombe's "The Dignity of the Human Being" is marvelously instructive in terms of giving nontheological substance to the phrase *human dignity*—a term much used but often in loose and sometimes unhelpful ways by some Catholics and other Christians when they speak about matters of a medical, political, and economic nature.

The same article also presents an interesting case for how one can legitimately make moral distinctions between, for example, capital punishment (which Anscombe argues does not necessarily offend human dignity) and abortion, in which a human being is killed as a matter of "convenience" rather than as a result of rightful punishment. Another essay of interest in this section, especially to those studying genetics and medical ethics, is Anscombe's engagement with claims made by the great geneticist and inaugural president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, Jérôme Lejeune, concerning the issue of whether conception results in the "immediate animation" of human beings.

The second section of these collected essays is very much for professional philosophers engaged in the study of human action. These particular essays are not for the faint-hearted, as they deal with matters usually discussed in what might be called "high" philosophical circles, such as practical inference and the causation of action. They do, however, underline Anscombe's command of the discipline of logic, not to mention her profound knowledge of, and her ability to engage with, a large number of intellectual schools beyond Aristotelian, Thomistic, and analytical philosophy.

In the third section of essays, we find Anscombe addressing a more disparate range of subjects. Included here is Anscombe's famous "Modern Moral Philosophy." This essay ought to be compulsory reading in seminaries, not to mention philosophy classes, throughout the world. It is difficult to imagine that one essay could, virtually single-handedly and simultaneously, (1) illustrate that the emperor (in this case, modern moral philosophy) had no clothes, (2) facilitate a revival of virtue ethics in philosophical circles, and (3) begin establishing a formidable counterweight to the utilitarianism then rampant in much of the academy and starting to seep into the teaching of moral theology in Catholic and Protestant seminaries throughout the West by the late 1950s. Yet, this is precisely what many believe this one essay by Anscombe managed to achieve.

Another interesting paper in this collection is a previously unpublished and undated manuscript of lecture notes in which Anscombe examines the issue of whether one ought to obey a false conscience. It is a formidable corrective to those, Christian or non-Christian, who imagine that a false conscience somehow automatically excuses a person from culpability for his evil actions.

Throughout much of this volume, Anscombe demonstrates a refreshing willingness to go to the heart of the philosophical issues underlying some of the most hotly disputed moral questions of our time. To this extent, readers will find that the volume provides a valuable introduction to, if not quick immersion in, deeper philosophical matters rarely discussed in the public square and yet that predetermine the stance of many (sometimes without their knowing it) toward subjects that presently fracture much of Western society. That alone is a good reason to read this book and to await with much anticipation the promised future volumes of Elizabeth Anscombe's writings.

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Morals and Politics

Vittorio Hösle

Steven Rendall (Translator)

Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press,
2004 (931 pages)

Vittorio Hösle is a man of many parts and considerable intellectual ambitions. His multiple positions at the University of Notre Dame indicate as much. He is Paul Kimball Professor of Arts and Letters in the Department of German and Russian Languages and Literature, with concurrent appointments in philosophy and in political science. He has published or edited twenty-eight books and four times as many articles. His systematic treatment of ethics and politics and their union in “political ethics” and “the just state,” takes no fewer than 931 pages.

Hösle self-consciously represents the better intellectual traditions of his native Germany. While a very systematic thinker, he admires and profits from the dramatists and novelists of modern times, as well as the ancient tragedians and historians. He rightly insists that they provide timeless portraits of human character, as well as essential insights into human nature and the ethical conundra of living in political community. However, his greatest intellectual debts are to his philosophically minded countrymen: Kant, Hegel, and Jonas occupy the first rank, with Weber, Scheler, Gehlen, and others in a second tier.

Kant is “the most important moral philosopher of the modern age.” His thought, however, needs to be supplemented with a “material ethics” that recognizes objective goods and values, as well as the real-world need for “higher and lower principles” to help us navigate the difference between normal situations and extreme ones. His thought