

AN EVALUATION OF ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE THOUGHTS ON CONSEQUENTIALISM

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ABSTRACT

All human actions revolve around being right or wrong, good or bad. Humans are therefore saddled with the responsibility of carrying out right actions. Value statements as well as value in terms of good or bad are given to human actions, and it is the responsibility of ethics to give value judgement. The giving of this judgement is formed against various paradigms for judgment. The consequences of action become important for those who consider themselves as consequentialists. For them, the moral rightness of an action is determined by the level of good that emerges from a given action. Could this be generally acceptable? Should the consequences of actions be the background on which value judgements are to be made or human actions? The emergence of Anscombe's critique on utilitarianism is formed against this backdrop. For her virtue ethics should take the driver's seat hence actions ought not to be evaluated using the "morally ought" because it gives room for any possible action provided the consequences is good. In up-holding this, she postulates moral psychology as a way forward which she also considers to be problematic because the content needs to be properly understood and explained. In modern moral ethics, Anscombe gives one the opportunity of x-raying consequentialism noting its short-comings and thus prepares the fertile ground for the propagation of virtue-ethics.

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of ethics is the question of the rightness or wrongness of moral agents. Basically, humans are regarded as moral agents but not all human actions can be considered as acts of human, no moral judgment can be preferred. With this in hand, this work is aimed at exposing the ethical paradigm that is advocated by Elizabeth Anscombe. The problem her ethical postulations seek to address is that which is generated by the consequentialist. Various strands of consequentialists views exist, but at the crux of every consequentialist position is that fact that the good moral value of any moral actions lies within the ambit of their consequence.

Should this claim be the case? Anscombe strongly feels that this ought not to be the case because it will allow for possibility of any action when it is the case that some actions are intrinsically bad. In her work titled Modern Moral Philosophy, she coined the word CONSEQUENTIALISM and further gave a critique of what modern ethicist particularly the known Utilitarians in the likes of Bentham, Mills and Sedgwick advocate. On the final analysis she advocates a return to virtue ethics or ethical psychology that seeks to understand humans and human actions.

At every point in time in human history, living and acting rightly has never been taken for granted. This is also not different with philosophy, philosophers have posited various postulation in respect to right living. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Empedocles to mention but a few are not left out of this enterprise. We should however note that at the heart of their postulation was virtue that sums up in happiness. The medieval era also witnessed similar drive. The question of what constitutes the good life and good action. With the rise of modern philosophy, a relative shift in ethical perspective also occurred. The pendulum shifted from the good life to evaluate with what constitutes the overall consequences of an action paying specific attention to the action that produces good consequences of an action paying specific attention to the action that produces good consequences. Notable for this dawn are Jeremy Bentham, Henry Sedgwick, Peter Singer and John Staurt Mill.

Will everyone appeal to this new paradigm? Obviously no. Hence Anscombe sees the need to re-evaluate what the consequentialists as she calls them have postulated. In her own view as noted in her work Modern Moral Philosophy, she opined that the consequentialists approach to ethics is problematic because they are without foundation; they use concepts such as morally ought, morally obligated, morally right, and so forth that are legalistic and require a legislator as the source of moral authority. She

stated clearly that in the past and as obvious in medieval era, God occupied that legislator's seat, but these new system dispense of God and has adequately proffer an alternative. It is against this that she stipulated a moral psychological as a way forward in her article Modern Moral Philosophy. Furthermore, ethical theories have evolved through the ages beginning from the ancient epoch of philosophy. These theories did not just crystallize from the blues, rather they are borne from the interplay of events and how humans react to them. This being said, it means that every ethical theory that has emerged has its proponent.

Worthy of mention is that, in the Modern era of philosophy, the ethical theory that took the center stage was the utilitarian ethical theory as championed by Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill and Sedgwick. The Kantian paradigm also showed up. In this atmosphere of utility and consequence, Anscombe raises the question of the integrity of these theories. At the central point of this is the question of the integrity of consequentialism as raised by Elizabeth Anscombe.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

CONSEQUENTIALISM

This is the view that an agent is responsible for the intended and unintended but foreseen consequences of an act. (Thomas Mautner). There is a second view that defined consequentialism from the perspective that an action is right if and only if its total outcome is the best possible. It should be noted that there are various variants of consequentialism such as act consequentialism, rule consequentialism to mention but a few, but for the purpose of this work we will stick to the definitions given above.

ARISTOTLE'S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

Aristotle has a fundamental belief that people as everything else in nature have distinctive 'end' to achieve or a function to fulfil. With this the tone of his ethical theory could be said to be teleological in outlook. For him, morality has to do with developing habits, the habits of right thinking, right choice and right behaviour.

He goes further to posit that the good person is the one who is fulfilling his or her duty or function as a human person. Aristotle holds that functioning as a human person is the rational control of the soul and guidance of the irrational. In his postulation of virtue as mean, that there are some acts that are intrinsically bad and have no mean. These include envy, theft, adultery, murder etc. They are always wrong. This forms a foundation of Anscombe absolutist position about morality.

IMMANUEL KANT: GROUNDWORK FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS

According to Kant, goodness is an objective quality inherent in rationality. Man's goodness is a derivation in nature and can only be defined in relation to its reflecting the objective goodness of rationality. He avers that of all good qualities found in man, only the act of commitment to rationality is absolutely good. This commitment which is not a mere wish but the summoning of all means in our power is called a 'good will' (John Maurant and Hans Freud, 83).

In Kant's own view, the representation of an objective principle insofar as it is necessitating for a will is called a 'command' of reason and the formula for the command is called imperative. Supreme interest is however given to what he calls Categorical Imperative which represents an action as objectively necessary for itself without any reference to another end. (Ak. 4; 413-414). The major critique that has bedevilled this postulation of Kant is that it enthrones man as the paradigm for moral judgment.

JEREMY BENTHAM: THE PRINCIPLES FOR MORALS AND LEGISLATION

From the very outset, it should be stated clearly that Jeremy Bentham takes a utilitarian posture in relation to his views on morals. The opening words of his discuss sets the template clearly. For him, nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign master "Pain and Pleasure". It is for

them to point out what we ought to do as well as to determine what we shall do. By principle of utility, Bentham means that principle which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish happiness. (Bentham. Ch 1:2). He also avers that the greatest good of the greatest number is achieved when the aggregate of pleasure is more than the aggregate good of pain. This forms the crux of his utility calculus and the scientific outlook to his postulations. Viewing this scientifically it seems laudable because of the precision tendency inherent in the calculus.

For Bentham, we ought to pursue pleasure. Trying 'ought' to pleasure is the only way the words right and wrong and others of this stamp derive their meaning. This is one of the points that is strongly criticized by Elizabeth Anscombe who is of the opinion that the 'ought' allows for any possible action including wrong actions.

HENRY SIDGWICK: METHODS OF ETHICS

In a unique way, he tried to model his philosophical thoughts around that notion of happiness. In his view, the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the fundamental goal of ethics. For him, the criterion for the goodness of any action is that which has as its consequences the greatest possible amount of pleasure. We should note that the pleasure he alludes to here is that which affects the common good and not just that which affects only the carrier of the action. He calls this universalistic hedonism. Paying attention to the fact that one may at some time promote individual happiness beyond the common, Sedgwick in his work failed to draw the fitting line for this circumstance. Suffice it to mention that Anscombe was one of his critics as we will find in chapter three.

ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE'S CONSEQUENTIALISM

BIOGRAPHY OF GERTRUDE ELIZABETH MARGRET ANSCOMBE

She was born on the 18th of March 1919 in Limerick into the family of Allen Wells Anscombe and Gertrude Elizabeth Anscombe. Her schooling career began in Sydenham schools from where she graduated in 1937 and later proceeded to St. Huges' College Oxford. In 1941, she received a first in Literae Humaniores. Her academic tour found her in Newham College Cambridge (1942), Somerville College Oxford (1946), where she was offered a teaching fellowship in 1964. Anscombe returned to Cambridge in 1970 where she was awarded the chair of philosophy and formally occupied the chair of Ludwig Wittgenstein who had great influence on her philosophical dispositions. She retired in 1986 and died on 5th of January 2001. Worthy of mention is the fact that she was known not to be afraid of standing apart from the crowd. This was evident in her opposition of the idea of the Oxford University' to grant honorary degree to Harry Truman who played a great role in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

ANSCOMBE' MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY: A DISCUSS ON CONSEQUENTIALISM

From the outset, it should be borne in mind the coinage of the term consequentialism is credited to Elizabeth Anscombe. From her popular work "Modern Moral Philosophy" 1958, she made use of the term in close reference to utilitarianism. (Thomas Mautner). Anscombe rejected a large class of theories about ethics. One of her main contributions to ethics is the introduction of the word consequentialism a label for these theories, along with an account of their alleged shortcomings. Consequentialism is the denial that there is any significant moral difference between results of action that are brought about intentionally and those that are foreseen but not intended (Duncan Ritcher).

She stood up as a strong critic of Utilitarianism, Kantian ethics and Social Contract theories. She opined that these are secular approach to moral theory and have no foundation. She posited that they make use of such words as "Morally Ought", "morally obligated", "morally right", morally wrong", and so forth which are in themselves legalistic and demands a legislator as the source of moral authority. (Anscombe, 7). Her argument is that modern moral philosophers made effort in erecting a moral structure of what is morally right or wrong that has no content outside of the legislative circle provided by the divine. In

advocating that ethics can be done without these aforesaid concepts as shown by Aristotle and the likes of Plato who made use of such terms such as 'unjust', 'untruthful', and 'unchaste'. Thus Anscombe advocates a virtue ethical approach.

Summarily, the basic claims of Anscombe according to Sergio Cremaschi are: moral philosophy should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology (Anscombe, 1) understood in terms of 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. (Sergio Cremaschi, 9).

The force of moral obligation arises out of forgetfulness of its origin, and thus the concepts of obligation, and duty [...] and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of "ought" [...] are survivals [...] from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. (Anscombe, 1) modern moral philosophy focuses on norms and obligatory action but, in order to justify such notions, it would need the theological premise that it has eliminated. The consequence is that, it is a highly unstable building. (Sergio Cremaschi, 9). English ethicists since Sedgwick have been constructing systems according to which the man who says "We need such-and-such, and will only get it this" may be a virtuous character: that is to say, it is left open to debate whether such a procedure as the judicial punishment of the innocent may not in some circumstances be the "right" one to adopt, and such a doctrine is quite incompatible with the Hebrew-Christian ethic. For it has been characteristic of that ethic to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever consequences threaten, such as choosing to kill the innocent, adultery, theft for any reason (Anscombe, 1).

EVALUATION OF ANSCOMBE'S VIEWS ON CONSEQUENTIALISM

Anscombe made certain claims such as the claim that consequentialism is a shadow philosophy for there are always boarder line cases in ethics and if the consequentialists must consider boarder line case, they must make reference to standard already in society or their circle. This view seems meaningful because if standards are not referenced, then every man becomes a lord unto himself.

Consequentialism is the denial that there is any significant moral difference between results of action that are brought about intentionally and those that are foreseen but not intended. It might be thought of as the theory that intention is unimportant in ethics. Anscombe seems to have opposed this kind of theory because, if all that matters is results, then there is no limit to what we might do in order to achieve the best results possible. What this stands to imply is that the end justifies this means. One is also forced to ask if it should be the case that all possible intentions both foreseen and intended and foreseen and unintended not be put into consideration before an act is executed?

Suffice it to mention that Anscombe claims that the views of utilitarians like Mill are ambiguous thus open to any possible interpretation. This is laudable because if proper clarification and precision of thoughts are not stipulated, any idea can be twisted to suit any purpose. This is conventionally unacceptable.

Anscombe advocates for virtue ethics and postulates that ethic be kept on hold until a proper philosophy of psychology is developed. One may ask what she means by this ? She means that a proper understanding of why humans act the way they do should be studied. In a bid to further this view of hers, she did a work on intention. For her without paying attention to intention we seemingly cannot make sense of human behaviour. In responding to Anscombe, Crip and Stole note that the idea of virtue ethics is not also clear and what needs to be done is some basic moral psychology to get clarity on notion like intention, desire and action.

For some other philosophers, Anscombe is a moral absolutist because she strongly believes that certain things that are wrong must never be done for any reasons whatsoever. In her view killing and stealing are always bad and can never be justified by any consequence.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, we have been able to establish that Elizabeth Anscombe was born in the twentieth century, she was strongly influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein and she made a laudable contribution in various areas of philosophy particularly in ethics. Her major work titled *Modern Moral Philosophy* owes her views and critique against what she coined as consequentialism. In her opinion, modern philosophers like Bentham, Mills, Butler and Sedgwick can be classified as utilitarians who tried to build morals principles on what she considers to be a very weak foundation. She opined that they built on a hopeless simplistic notion of pleasure or happiness.

She therefore advocates for virtue ethics that has solid foundations on certain principles. For her flourishing of a man consist in his being good i.e. virtue which is not just tied to a particular act of goodness. She finally projects the idea of a well-ground moral psychology which seeks to understand why man acts the way he does as the requisites for doing ethics.

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