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ORIGINS OF CONTEMPORARY VIRTUE ETHICS

But not every action nor every passion admits of a mean; for some have names that already imply badness, e.g. spite, shamelessness, envy, and in the case of actions adultery, theft, murder; for all of these and suchlike things imply by their names that they are themselves bad, and not the excesses or deficiencies of them. It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong.

Aristotle, *NE* II 6, 1107^a9–17



We need to understand more clearly what contemporary virtue ethics is, and this entails a more detailed focus on its relatively short history. Even a movement with a short history, however, cannot incorporate every detail of its development, and so one's historical focus must be selective. Of what are the following two chapters a selective history?

Julia Annas points out that virtue ethics has long been the default

position of ethical theorists, with the notable exception of the modern moral theorists.¹ Because of the dominance of modern moral philosophy, those approaches inspired by Hume, Kant, and Mill, and the significant differences in focus and methodology between modern and classical approaches to ethics, the point of entry for virtue ethicists has been polemical: they seek to point out the failures of the modern moral project in order to reintroduce the classical and default position. Annas's observation on the default ethical position brilliantly reverses the tables so that it is the other camp, that of the modern moral theorists, that bears the burden of proof to establish their approach as representative of moral philosophy. A history of contemporary virtue ethics might be thought, then, to begin with Aristotle, or earlier with Plato; and, in some ways, it does. However, characterizing contemporary virtue ethics as a return to classical moral philosophy in the way that Annas does in *The Morality of Happiness* and other works tends to overlook those features in the contemporary virtue ethics which are unlike classical moral philosophy.² Contemporary virtue ethics is not simply a revival of Ancient Greek and Hellenistic virtue-centered moral philosophy, but a movement shaped by the very questions and methods of the domi-

1. Julia Annas, "Virtue Ethics," chapter 18 of *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*, ed. David Copp (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 515.

2. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). I do not mean to suggest that Annas thinks all modern virtue ethics successfully revives the classical approach. She notes, for instance, the distinctively modern, and she thinks wrongheaded, attempt of some modern virtue ethicists to take a reductionistic approach to virtue ethics: "Ancient virtue theories, at any rate, do not aspire to be hierarchical and complete. In them, the notions of the agent's final end, of happiness and of the virtues are what can be called *primary* as opposed to basic. These are the notions we start from; they set up the framework of the theory, and we introduce and understand the other notions in terms of them. They are thus primary for understanding; they establish what the theory is a theory of, and define the place to be given to other ethical notions, such as right action. However, they are not basic in the modern sense: other concepts are not derived from them, still less reduced to them" (9). Nevertheless, she argues that ancient theories of virtue line up with modern concerns with morality, rather than claiming that the modern concerns with morality are on the wrong track (120).

nant moral theorizing that it seeks to displace. This is the case even in its most unconventional varieties when it is precisely the dominant approach to moral theorizing that is being rejected. This is due to the fact that criticism of the prevailing focus and methodology of modern moral philosophy dictates the form that contemporary virtue ethical literature has taken.

The early stage of the virtue ethics movement in the late 1950s is, then, in important ways, something new: an Anglo-American response to the dominant features of Anglo-American moral philosophy. The ways in which this movement recovers features of classical virtue theory are partial at best,³ and its critical engagements with emotivism, prescriptivism, consequentialism, contractualism, and deontology continue to give shape to what it focuses on not just in its polemical mode, but in its attempts at constructing a positive approach to moral theorizing. It is the well-intentioned attempt to be relevant, to engage the mainly analytic adherents of modern moral philosophizing in debate in order to disabuse them of their fundamental moral philosophical commitments and to persuade them to adopt a neoclassical set of commitments that leads contemporary virtue ethics to bear the marks of the modern moral project. It is the intended audience addressed by the literature of contemporary virtue ethicists, and the anticipated objections they will make to the virtue ethical project, that have given the virtue ethical literature the particular shape it has.

It is not the case, however, that only philosophers working in the analytic tradition have produced significant recent scholarship on the virtues. On the one hand, there has been an explosion of research

3. Julia Driver's distinction between "virtue ethics" and "virtue theory," mentioned in the introduction, is helpful in this context, for it provides a way to distinguish between revivals of interest in the virtues within the broader context of modern moral philosophy and attempts to found moral philosophy on notions of the virtues. "Virtue ethics" she takes to mean "basing ethics on virtue evaluation." Virtue theory is concerned with providing a theory of the virtues. Every virtue ethics employs virtue theory, though not every virtue theory is tied to a virtue ethics (as in Driver's case).

on Aristotle's ethics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by historians of philosophy.⁴ The questions these historians of philosophy ask and seek to answer are of the sort "What did Aristotle mean by X?" "Does Aristotle have a consistent theory of Y?" and so forth; these are very different sorts of questions than asking whether an Aristotelian notion provides a better answer to a contemporary concern in moral philosophy. It is, however, the case that a number of virtue ethicists, indeed the majority of them, have sought to bring Aristotle's ethical notions to bear on the problems of contemporary moral theory. The degree to which these efforts have been successful in reintroducing Aristotle is addressed in chapter 5.

On the other hand, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen a growing number of Thomistic scholars who combine the resources of historians of philosophy with a concern to make the case that the Thomistic account of the virtues and other elements of his moral philosophy provides a better alternative to its rivals. Students of Jacques Maritain are especially to be noted here, such as Yves Simon, but also Ralph McInerny, John Finnis, and Alasdair MacIntyre; each has contributed in very different ways to the tradition of Thomistic thinking.⁵ Though there are various points of intersection between these thinkers and contemporary virtue ethicists, and some of the more notable contemporary virtue ethicists (such as Philippa Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse) have claimed inspiration from Aquinas,⁶

4. See the extensive bibliography compiled by Thornton C. Lockwood, "A Topical Bibliography of Scholarship on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: 1880–2004," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 30 (2005): 1–116.

5. McInerny was a prolific Thomist, MacIntyre is one, and the contributions of the new natural law theorist John Finnis are many and well known, but Yves Simon—student of Jacques Maritain who taught both at Notre Dame and at the Committee for Social Thought at the University of Chicago—is less well known; see his *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

6. Of course G. E. M. Anscombe and Peter Geach would be the two most prominent examples of a convergence of analytic philosophy, Aristotelianism, and Thomism in the virtue ethics movement, if they were virtue ethicists. It is my contention that though Anscombe inspires the movement, she does not belong to it, and that neither does Geach.

the aims of Thomism and the aspirations of contemporary virtue ethicists are quite different, as are their respective histories.⁷

One does find many scholars of Aristotle's ethics and analytic Thomists who see their work as advancing the goals of clarity and precision, pursuing the hallmarks of analytic philosophy as well as making progress in our understanding of Aristotle or Aquinas.⁸ There are, moreover, many points of intersection in topic and focus between the three movements. It is because of these intersecting points of interest—with defining virtue, cataloguing the virtues, and situating the virtues within the overall structure of moral theory—that the three movements are sometimes regarded as one. However, it would obscure the task of describing the contemporary virtue ethics movement if it were not disentangled from its older siblings whose projects have been inspired by a very different set of concerns and who judge their success by different standards. Scholars of Aristotle's texts share the peripatetic aim of interpreting his texts. Thomists seek to defend a comprehensive natural law-based ethics against its detractors. Contemporary virtue ethicists of the unconventional variety seek to show that an approach grounded in the virtues ought to replace the dominant modern moral philosophies, while those of the conventional variety argue that virtue ethics ought to share the main stage with the other dominant moral theories.⁹

7. Moreover, one does not find the same interruption of the default position in moral philosophy in the Thomist camps that one finds in modern moral philosophy—Thomists have, more or less continuously since the time of Aquinas, but certainly in a much more focused manner since the publication of Pope Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* in 1879, striven to think according to the mind of St. Thomas. They have been affected, to be sure, by the vicissitudes of modern moral philosophy, but theirs is a different history from that of the contemporary virtue ethicists.

8. See John Haldane, ed., *Mind, Metaphysics, and Value in the Thomistic and Analytic Traditions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002).

9. A third significant area of focus on the virtues has been developed within the growing field of Eastern philosophy. See, for instance, Philip J. Ivanhoe's "Virtue Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition," 49–50. Particularly notable are those works that have woven together Confucian and Aristotelian ethical approaches; see especially May Sim's *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge

There are additional reasons why Aquinas and his Thomist successors are marginal figures not just to virtue ethics but to contemporary moral philosophy in general. Aquinas is a theologian, and a Catholic theologian at that. He argues at length that the activities enabled by the virtues identified by Aristotle are brought to their full perfection only through the working of the divinely infused (rather than habitually acquired) theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. So Aquinas's approach is not merely a modified Aristotelian ethics, it is an ethic that deliberately seeks to surpass in a way that completes rather than negates that proposed by Aristotle. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that the acquired virtues are able to be identified and articulated and that each of them is a perfection of our nature; however, he thinks that our final perfection is something more than natural and that we can achieve it only should we accept the redeeming infusion of God's grace.

These are claims that one does not find in any major corners of the contemporary virtue ethics movement. They are found, however, in some varieties of what might be called a contemporary Christian virtue ethics, which has been championed by Stanley Hauerwas,¹⁰ Gilbert Meilander,¹¹ and Jean Porter,¹² among others. The connections between these Christian theologians and those in the secular virtue ethics movement has, however, been mostly a one-way street—Christian virtue ethicists have been eager to engage and

University Press, 2007), and Jiyuan Yu's *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge & K. Paul, 2007). The fact that the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions are not developmentally connected but come to be compared only later makes the history of Aristotelian-Confucian virtue ethics unique.

10. Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 1975); and, with Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

11. Gilbert Meilander, *Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

12. Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue: The Relevance of Aquinas for Christian Ethics* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

draw from the arguments of contemporary virtue ethicists, but not vice versa. Most contemporary virtue ethicists have completely ignored their work, and others have denounced Christian intrusions onto what they consider exclusively secular territory.¹³

These points distinguishing contemporary virtue ethics from Aristotelian and Thomistic ethics are stressed because of the frequency with which they are compounded. As true as it is that the majority of contemporary virtue ethicists have identified their approach with some variety of Aristotelianism, contemporary virtue ethicists look as well to other traditions for inspiration, such as the Stoic and more recently, the Humean, Kantian, and Nietzschean traditions. The fact that different contemporary virtue ethicists can harvest from these different traditions, each of which is in conflict with another on some central claims, and still count themselves as contemporary virtue ethicists, is a significant clue to discovering what contemporary virtue ethics is.

Despite the verity of Annas's claim that some sort of ethic of virtue has always been the default position of moral philosophy, contemporary virtue ethics is best understood as a very recent movement in moral philosophy.¹⁴ As we will see in the next chapter, it has

13. Annette Baier argues that the distinctively Christian notions of original sin, divine law, grace, and supernatural happiness are fundamentally opposed to a legitimate virtue ethics in *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985). See also Richard Taylor's *Virtue Ethics: An Introduction* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2002). Given the historical continuity between the classical and contemporary world provided by Christian moral theorizing, calls to jettison Christian-influenced moral philosophy are, among other things, paradoxical.

14. Though *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics* includes chapters detailing a long history of virtue ethics, the manner in which this history is compiled points to the newness of the contemporary movement. Dorethea Frede's chapter, "The Historic Decline of Virtue Ethics" (in *CCVE*, 124–48), supplies an account of a rupture in the philosophical tradition of virtue-focused moral philosophizing, and Timothy Chappell's "Virtue Ethics in the Twentieth Century" (in *CCVE*, 149–71) provides an analysis of its reemergence. The narrative of rupture and rebirth is given a very new synthesis in the last chapter of the volume, when Christine Swanton, in "The Definition of Virtue Ethics," (in *CCVE*, 315–38) argues for a notional definition of the virtues that is intended to unite all virtue ethical theories and that is uniquely identified with no single approach in the tradition.

developed in a variety of ways, and has been variously described by its different adherents. Its origins are easier to discern than its later permutations, since we can trace its initial inspiration to a single and truly remarkable essay, Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy."¹⁵ Yet even in its first generation, one finds a curious division between two leading figures, both analytic philosophers associated with virtue ethics in the 1970s, Philippa Foot and Peter Geach.¹⁶

Philippa Foot's *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, is a collection of essays, all of which but two were previously published, the earliest of them in 1957.¹⁷ This collection represents, as she tells us in her introduction, her preoccupation with two themes, "opposition to emotivism and prescriptivism, and the thought that a sound moral philosophy should start from a theory of the virtues and vices."¹⁸ The polemical character of her efforts is prominent throughout, and she herself remarks on the ways her early work was given shape by its attempts to distance itself from the Kantian project—as when reflecting on what she considers now her justly critiqued "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," for proposing interest and desire to do the work that Kant's categorical imperative does and that Foot now thinks that a naturalized practical rationality does.¹⁹

Peter Geach's *The Virtues* is not primarily concerned to make the case that emotivism and prescriptivism are failed ethical theories, although Geach certainly agrees with Foot on that score. His main

15. The page numbers in what follows are from the most easily accessible printing, chapter 1 of *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote, *Oxford Readings in Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

16. It should also be noted that G. H. von Wright devoted a chapter to the virtues in his 1963 book, *The Varieties of Goodness*.

17. Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

18. *Ibid.*, xi.

19. *Ibid.*, 157–73. She remarks on this work in *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 60–61. The retrospective character of much of *Natural Goodness* provides a fascinating example of philosophical maturation over the course of a lifetime.

concern is to make the case that human beings need the virtues—and by “need” he tells us he has in mind something like what “need” meant for Aristotle, as a condition for flourishing. Geach thus employs an Aristotelian notion of teleology, and insists that it can be used in a way that is safe from the failures embedded in Aristotle’s natural theories, which are poorly informed by flawed empirical evidence.²⁰ He also provides a fairly traditional Aristotelian and Thomistic account of the virtues, responding to real and hypothetical critics of such an account along the way. Geach’s work is, then, a hybrid of sorts, combining elements from the three movements of scholarly Aristotelianism, Thomism, and the burgeoning virtue ethics movement.

Foot’s metaethical and ethical efforts are secular in their metaphysical cast, even though they are acknowledged by her to have found inspiration in the works of St. Thomas Aquinas.²¹ Her commitment to atheism motivates her attempts to provide an exclusively naturalized account of practical rationality. Geach’s work on the virtues, also inspired by the works of Aquinas, embraces the Catholic tradition to which Aquinas is seen as a major contributor, and *The Virtues* is remarkable for its unapologetic theological commitments. Significantly, it is Foot’s rather than Geach’s investigation that provides the template for many of the virtue ethical investigations to follow. Yet both of them, and the many others to follow, can be seen to have drawn impetus for their very different projects from G. E. M. Anscombe—friend and colleague to Foot, friend and wife to Geach.

20. Significantly, Foot takes up this theme, and in an extensive manner, in *Natural Goodness*.

21. Philippa Foot remarks, “it is best when considering the virtues and vices to go back to Aristotle and Aquinas. . . . It is my opinion that the *Summa Theologica* is one of the best sources we have for moral philosophy, and moreover that St Thomas’s ethical writings are as useful to the atheist as to the Catholic or other Christian believer” (*Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, 1–2). Though Foot begins her essay with these remarks, her contention that it is possible to use virtue wrongly could not be further from the Aristotelian and Thomistic claim that a virtue is such as never to be used wrongly.

Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy"

"What is now called 'virtue ethics' is everywhere said to owe its origin, or at least its revival, to Elizabeth Anscombe's article 'Modern Moral Philosophy,'" remarks Christopher Coope in his perceptive and acerbic reflection on the vicissitudes of contemporary virtue ethics.²² It is worth noting, however, that not every interpretation of Anscombe's essay arrives at the conclusion that she means to be founding a movement in virtue ethics. Julia Driver, for instance, notes there to be an alternative *modus tollens* interpretation of Anscombe's essay in her *Stanford Encyclopedia* entry, which, instead of pressing the standard *modus ponens* argument and arriving at the conclusion that virtue ethics should be pursued in the absence of religious-based ethics, proceeds as follows: "(1) If religiously based ethics is false, then virtue ethics is the way moral philosophy ought to be developed. (2) It is not the case that virtue ethics is the way to develop moral philosophy. (3) Therefore, it is not the case that religiously based ethics is false." Driver continues, "Thus, according to the alternative reading, one can conclude that Anscombe is arguing that the only suitable and really viable alternative is the religiously based moral theory that keeps the legalistic framework and the associated concepts of 'obligation.'"²³ Driver finds support for the *modus tollens* interpretation in Anscombe's doubts about whether we can at present find a nontheistic account of human flourishing. Driver does, however, note that Anscombe's own daughter, herself a philosopher, Mary Geach, endorses the standard *modus ponens* interpretation:

22. Coope, "Modern Virtue Ethics," 20–52, 21.

23. Julia Driver, "Gertrude Elizabeth Anscombe," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, winter 2011 ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/winter2011/entries/anscombe>.

Note that this reading of the article is at odds with that of Mary Geach, who maintained in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, in response to Simon Blackburn's 30 September 2005 review of *Human Life*, that her mother was "... proposing, in an atheistic culture, a study of the psychology of the virtues with a view to finding a clear and non-theistic method by which one could come to see the objective truths of morality." This view, though, doesn't seem well supported by Anscombe's clearly expressed doubts about developing a normative account of human flourishing that was naturalistic, and that would stand up to scrutiny.²⁴

My reading of Anscombe favors Mary Geach's interpretation, but such an interpretation of Anscombe's intentions in this watershed essay does not imply that virtue ethics took shape in the manner Anscombe would have wished.

To wit, as Coope explains, Anscombe never referred to what she was doing as "virtue ethics." Her main focus was on practical rationality, seeking to revive a robust account of *phronesis*. Her work, and that of other early thinkers in this movement, is better described as contributing to what Coope contends is more aptly called "good sense ethics." The irony of mainstream contemporary virtue ethicists looking to Anscombe's essay as their inspiration is striking when one contrasts the radical nature of her views about modern moral philosophy against virtue ethical efforts to accommodate the virtues to modern moral philosophy. Coope remarks:

At first—way back in the late 1950s—a virtue ethicist would have been someone who found more of interest in "Modern Moral Philosophy" than in modern moral philosophy. That article was disconcerting, and hence one expected to learn something from it. Turning to modern virtue ethics, what a contrast we find. It can be called concerting. Modern virtue ethics has become something soothing, edifying and familiar. It has grown up in the polluted atmosphere of contemporary expectations (assumptions, presuppositions, confusions, distractions) and naturally enough has quickly become tarnished by them.²⁵

24. Ibid., note 2.

25. Coope, "Modern Virtue Ethics," 31.

In order to appreciate Coope's perspective on contemporary virtue ethics, we should first try to see Anscombe's remarkable essay with fresh eyes.

Anscombe posits three theses:

The first is 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, in which we are consciously lacking. The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My third thesis is that the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.²⁶

We see immediately the point of Coope's claim that the essay is disconcerting: if Anscombe is right, we need to cease and desist from engaging in moral philosophy in its current mode because we lack a coherent anthropology to support it; there is something profoundly amiss with our contemporary and prevalent use of "moral"; and the great variety we find in contemporary Anglo-American ethics is of no consequence—and that because of its near obsession with consequences. Anscombe intends her article to serve as an obituary for modern moral philosophy, and it is an obituary that lacks an enco-mium.

The Semantics of Obligation

Of the three, it is the second thesis that seems to have had the most effect on the literature to follow, and it helps to explain why so much early virtue ethical literature begins from the viewpoint of a

26. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 26.

27. For two such examples, see Kathleen Wilkes, "The Good Man and the Good for

critique of deontology.²⁷ It is sometimes overlooked, however, that Anscombe does not seek to do away with every notion of “ought” or “obligation.” This could not be clearer than in her use of a non-deontological “ought” in the very formulation of her thesis that claims that the use of “the *moral* sense of ‘ought,’ ought to be jettisoned.” What she means is that the special sense of “ought” that seems so interwoven within the very fabric of contemporary ethics, that which goes by the name of the “moral ought,” needs to be rejected. Remove this thread, and the garment has lost its shape.

Nevertheless, “should,” “ought,” “needs,” and related terms are needed to refer to ordinary senses of good and bad. For instance, for a lawnmower to be good—to cut well—you ought to sharpen its blades. Anscombe remarks that such terms as these are indispensable, and do not evoke any sort of “moral” connotations. The application of these terms in such a way as to harness connotations that indicate being bound by law is, she says, the result of history. It was Christianity’s Torah-derived conception of divine law that gave “should” and its equivalents their obligatory bite. The modern world is no longer dominated by a Judeo-Christian worldview, and yet it is precisely a belief in God as lawgiver that is required to make intelligible a law conception of ethics. Nevertheless, the terminology of our predecessor culture remains intact. Anscombe remarks:

It is as if the notion “criminal” were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten. A Hume discovering this situation might conclude that there was a special sentiment, expressed by “criminal,” which alone gave the word its sense. So Hume discovered the situation in which the notion “obligation” survived, and the word “ought” was invested with that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a “moral” sense, but in which the belief in divine law

Man in Aristotle’s Ethics,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 355; Bernard Williams’s chapter, “Morality, the Peculiar Institution,” in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 174–96; which is also anthologized as chapter 2 in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 45–65.

had long since been abandoned: for it was substantially given up among Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.²⁸

Where worldviews crumble, language remains—retaining the semblance of intelligibility but bereft of meaning. Hume, on Anscombe's reading, exposes what Kant seeks to clothe—namely, the vapidness of our language of obligation once stripped of its metaphysical underpinnings.

Anscombe argues that one can indeed accept the “bruteness” of facts, as Hume sees them, and nevertheless find transitions from “is” to “owes”—you owe your grocer an agreed-upon sum of money for the potatoes he delivered to your house;²⁹ and from “is” to “needs”—a machine needs oil to run well.³⁰ Yet she posits that Hume is right to point out that, absent a divine lawgiver, no implication can be made from “is” to the “ought” of the alleged moral type.³¹ She concludes her thoughts on Hume's naturalistic fallacy in the following way: “I should judge that Hume and our present-day ethicists did a considerable service by showing that no content could be found in the notion ‘morally ought,’ if it were not that the latter philosophers try to find an alternative (very fishy) content and to retain the psychological force of the term.”³² It is precisely the attempt to wiggle their way out from the implications of Hume's observation, the attempt to continue to employ an unintelligible concept that nevertheless retains its “mesmeric force,” an attempt to clothe what in essence remains a naked imposter, that leads modern moral philosophy to run amok.

This is just the place, Anscombe protests, where the lesson of Aristotle ought to have been remembered—that one can do ethics without

28. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 31. It is precisely this “interesting situation” that MacIntyre elaborates on in the opening chapter of *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

29. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 28–29.

30. *Ibid.*, 30.

31. *Ibid.*, 33.

32. *Ibid.*

the notion “morally wrong” through the employment of aretaic terminology, such as “untruthful,” “intemperate,” and “unjust.” With varying degrees of successful avoidance of the notion “morally wrong,” contemporary virtue ethicists have striven to follow Anscombe’s suggestion and to utilize elements of Aristotle’s aretaic investigations.

Ceasing Moral Philosophy

Anscombe’s first thesis, that regarding the need to desist from moral philosophizing in its current mode, has not been widely heeded. Anscombe argues that following Aristotle’s path of describing actions using the language of virtue and vice requires far more than a well-heeled aretaic vocabulary—it requires an adequate and comprehensive account of human action: “In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology.”³³ We cannot explain what injustice is without providing an account of what sort of characteristic a virtue is, and how it is related to the actions in which we find it. Anscombe contends that such an account is a matter not for ethics, but rather for a conceptual analysis that must be done before an ethics that highlights the virtues can be deployed. Before virtue, one needs a philosophical anthropology. Her insistence on this point explains the motivation for Anscombe’s own work in intention and action theory.³⁴

Some marginal virtue ethicists, most notably Alasdair MacIntyre, have evidently taken Anscombe’s second thesis to heart. Most, however, have undertaken the task of reviving the language of virtue without supplying the philosophical psychology she calls for. Instead of painstaking conceptual analysis trained on action theory, we have seen in the mainstream virtue ethics movement the explosion

33. *Ibid.*, 30.

34. *Intention* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957; 2nd ed., 1963).

of descriptions of the virtues, the effect of which, Coope complains, has been concerting. Instead of shedding light on key concepts in order to fill the explanatory gap described by Anscombe,³⁵ we find, Coope claims, obscurantism on key notions such as happiness, and the elevation of a reshaped and vague virtue. Coope again:

The key notion of good fortune or *eudaimonia* was given a moral slant: “Eudaimonia in virtue ethics is indeed a moralized concept” writes Hursthouse (2003: 7). Goody virtues were soon being invoked (or invented or emphasized) by the dozen. . . . The new generation of virtue ethicists however all went for charity or benevolence. . . . Yet charity had inexplicably been left out by Aristotle. . . . Why this curious omission? How could Aristotle (to say nothing of Plato and the rest) have failed to notice what now seems to so many to be the most vivid and obvious of all the virtues? What have we learned since his day, and how did we learn it? There seems to be an enormous change—not to be characterized as a difference of emphasis! About all this there has arisen a not-to-worry complacency.³⁶

Coope goes on to note that although Anscombe’s fellow traveler, Peter Geach, emphasizes charity in his work on the virtues, the word for him names a supernaturally infused theological virtue, not the general benevolence celebrated by the standard-bearers of mainstream contemporary virtue ethics, such as Rosalind Hursthouse and Michael Slote.³⁷ For this and other reasons Geach simply does

35. “It can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing.’ And it is the last concept that appears the most doubtful. For it is a bit much to swallow that a man in pain and hunger and poor and friendless is flourishing, as Aristotle himself admitted” (“Modern Moral Philosophy,” 44).

36. Coope, “Modern Virtue Ethics,” 33.

37. Rosalind Hursthouse elevates charity to a master virtue when she writes, “From the perspective of virtue ethics, one can say that it is ‘absolutely required’ that one does not ‘pass by on the other side’ when one sees a wounded stranger lying by the roadside, but the requirement comes from charity rather than justice” (*On Virtue Ethics*, 6); and claims that every virtue ethicist recognizes this central role of charity: “Charity or benevolence, for example, is not an Aristotelian virtue, but all virtue ethicists assume it is on the list now” (ibid., 8). These claims leave undetermined such questions as: Which justice? Which charity? Which benevolence? There seems to be a Kantian notion of

not fit into the mainstream virtue ethical category and, if anything, remains marginal to the movement.

The point about competing definitions of charity is significant. Christian charity is a gift from God, the basis of our friendship with God and neighbor, and the organizing and motivational point of unity for all the other virtues.³⁸ It leads one to love others—and such love has both a unifying and a beneficent dimension; that is, it seeks to do good to others and it seeks union with them because they are seen as fellow brothers and sisters in a spiritual family of which God is the Father. Like Anscombe's observations about the philosophical cum theological account that renders obligation intelligible, charity is an intelligible concept only if its theological core holds true.

What becomes of charity when this theological underpinning is rejected, or at least considered irrelevant? Secular charity demands that we do good to others, but the important question of "Why should we?" has received very few attempted answers, and they are not especially inspiring. Consider Michael Slote's reflections on secular charity, or as he terms it, a "generalized concern for other people":

The moral philosophies that today dominate the philosophical scene, (utilitarian) consequentialism and Kantianism, are both ready with answers as to why we must be concerned, at least to some extent, with all other human beings. And it has become difficult to accept any overall moral philosophy, like Aristotle's, that offers no defense of generalized concern for (other) people. Such a moral philosophy now strikes most philosophers as retrograde, and, more particularly, it seems to be unhelpful in regard to one of the great and central moral issues of contemporary (or modern) life, namely: how *much* concern or help do we owe to those, half a world away, whose troubles or sufferings we hear about and can do something to relieve.³⁹

justice competing with a secularized version of Christian charity in the first quotation. Michael Slote writes: "I hope to persuade you thereby that basing morality ultimately in a motive like caring or (universal) benevolence or even love makes a good deal of sense" (*Morals from Motives*, x).

38. Aquinas, *ST II-II*, qq.23–46.

39. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, vii–viii.

To Slote the matter appears settled: charity, benevolence, or its particularized “warm” agent-based “care” variety, as Slote will have it in this work, is fundamental.⁴⁰ Everyone, Slote suggests, knows this, or if they do not they are retrograde. Aristotle is retrograde and unhelpful with respect to the primary tasks of our age, and in fact no moral philosophy that fails to make secular charity or benevolence central is acceptable.

But Slote’s explanation does not sufficiently explain why we should exercise charity. Slote tells us we should because consequentialism and Kantianism are ready with answers for why we should. He also tells us that it is retrograde not to express this concern for others. Slote’s insinuation seems tantamount to a claim that charity is popular, other moral theories are endorsing it, and so should those who adhere to an ethics of virtue. If Anscombe is to be heeded and so an adequate philosophical psychology provided, then it would seem a much richer account of the justification and motivation for charitable action should be provided by Slote or others endorsing the secular version of charity. But that justification simply seems unneeded to Slote, and the pressing question for him is not why we should be charitable. Rather, he is concerned with such questions as whether we should care for distant and personally unknown persons, how we are to determine how much to donate, and how to balance universal benevolence with the particular care we should have for those we know and are responsible for. What Slote seeks in this work of his is not an account that charity is required, but of how we are to be charitable, and he looks to our sentiments for an answer.

What would a Hume, or more pointedly a Nietzsche, make of Slote’s efforts? They would point out that the reasons that charity or benevolence seem so central have to do with the force the word retains from its formerly Christian context. Absent that context, we find a notion that retains motivational force without the content to

40. *Ibid.*, 114–37.

justify that motivation. Here is Coope again: "Clearly, a reasonable virtue ethic needs either be Geachean or Nietzschean. In the early days of its revival it was more or less so. But what a falling away there has been. Nietzsche would have talked of decadence: meaning here the replacement of good sense by goodyness."⁴¹ The concerting, consoling effect of the sort of virtue ethics championed by Hursthouse and Slote uses to its advantage a notion of "charity" whose continued force is merely accidental to the religious and historical context that invest it with meaning. Like the "present-day ethicists" described by Anscombe, they make use of a notion that has a noble heritage and retains motivational force but that is no longer motivationally justifiable. If Anscombe and Coope, and Hume and Nietzsche too, are correct regarding the way in which key terms can live on beyond the theological context that gives them their meaning, then attempts to employ those terms, like obligation and charity, outside of those contexts are suspect, and, to the extent that their moral theories rest upon those key terms, they are susceptible to devastating criticism.

Contemporary Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism

Anscombe's third thesis, that the differences between the many Anglo-American moral philosophies that can be observed today are negligible, is not the sort of claim to endear Anscombe to those with a stake in articulating those differences. What justifies this thesis? Has it had an impact on the contemporary virtue ethics movement inspired by Anscombe's article? To answer this question, we need first to look at her characterization of modern moral philosophy.

On Anscombe's view, what ties together the various dominant ethical theories in such a way as to justify calling them as a whole "modern moral philosophy" is their united anti-absolutist stand,

41. Coope, "Modern Virtue Ethics," 36.

which is put to the service of ends that justify means. "Consequentialism" is the term Anscombe coins for this. She observes that in moral philosophy since Sidgwick, it is considered legitimate to conclude that there are circumstances wherein it can be "morally right" to do something that is simply and absolutely unjust, like punishing an innocent man when one knows he is innocent. Anscombe reflects on these attempts to legitimize what both the Bible and the Greeks consider nefariousness in these terms:

It is clear that a good man is a just man; and a just man is a man who habitually refuses to commit or participate in any unjust actions for fear of any consequences, or to obtain any advantage, for himself or anyone else. Perhaps no one will disagree. But, it will be said, what *is* unjust is sometimes determined by expected consequences; and certainly that is true. But there are cases where it is not: now if someone says, "I agree, but all this wants a lot of explaining," then he is right, and what is more, the situation at present is that we can't do the explaining; we lack the philosophic equipment. But if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration—I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind.⁴²

Anscombe is no Pollyanna. She acknowledges the significant role that the consideration of consequences should play in moral deliberation. She also readily admits we have yet to do the work, and even to develop the tools necessary to do the work, to explain why it is the case that the good man is the just man. She also does not have explanations for why a just man is one who would never perform an unjust action or why every violation of a moral absolute is an unjust action. Indeed, the metaphysical bases for Anscombe's own reliance on the inviolability of certain moral principles are never communicated, much less defended. Nevertheless, like Aristotle remarking that philosophical ethics can really be pursued only by those who have been properly educated about the basic facts of the ethical

42. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 41–42, footnote excluded.

life,⁴³ there is no philosophizing with those who do not recognize that there are certain actions that can never be considered just or good or right.

Why does Anscombe not provide reasons for why she thinks that violations of moral absolutes are never just? She of course tells us that we currently lack the philosophical tools to provide an explanation for why her position on moral absolutes is true. But philosophical explanations are one thing, and reliance on presuppositions is another. What are the reasons for Anscombe's presupposition regarding moral absolutes? We can only speculate, but it is likely that some of those reasons are nourished by her faith. It is not the case, however, that one needs to embrace Judeo-Christianity to think there are moral absolutes; Plato remains the counterexample to that supposition. It is also likely then that Anscombe is relying on insights about the very structure of the universe. In any event, the presupposition of moral absolutes is widely shared throughout the history of moral philosophy, and has long held a firm position in the legal structures of all variety of political communities. Anscombe may simply have thought it unnecessary to defend what she takes as an obvious point.

One implication of Anscombe's claim regarding corrupt minds is that on her view those who are willing to consider the suspension of moral absolutes for the obtainment of so-called good results are not in fact engaging in moral philosophy. Instead, they are engaging in a variety of sophistry that might more properly be called rationalizing. Such an insinuation is of course highly inflammatory for those who embrace the Platonic distinction between philosophy and sophistry but nevertheless are willing to set aside absolute prohibitions on actions traditionally described as unjust, but it is not one of Anscombe's goals to avoid giving offense.⁴⁴ No opponents were more odious to Plato or Aristotle, and none fought against more fiercely,

43. *NE* I 4, 1095^a31–1095^b12.

44. The charge of "a corrupt mind" indicates one is past the point of being persuaded. Aristotle reflects on such as these in the following: "Now if arguments were in

than those “wise ones” willing to give rhetorical cover to the corrupt. Anscombe is cut from this same cloth, and her essay is a contemporary assault on the sophistry of her day.

A good case can be made that identifying modern moral philosophy as consequentialism and exposing it as sophistic provides the primary motivation of Anscombe’s entire essay. Her exhortation to cease and desist from moral philosophy as it is currently practiced and to rebuild foundations for ethical philosophy through developing a “philosophical psychology” needs to be understood as the response to the crisis she has discovered and named. Those other two theses are weapons meant to battle against the sophistical arms wielded by those she has grouped together and identified as her adversaries.

Consider further the manner in which Anscombe peels back the armor of some terms of central importance to moral philosophy in order to reveal what she considers the true nature of her enemy:

It is left to modern moral philosophy—the moral philosophy of all the well-known English ethicists since Sidgwick—to construct systems according to which the man who says—“We need such-and-such, and will only get it this way” *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 though the present Oxford moral philosophers would accord a man *permission* to “make it his principle” not to do such a thing, they teach a

themselves enough to make men good, they would justly, as Theognis says, have won very great rewards, and such rewards should have been provided; but as things are, while they seem to have power to encourage and stimulate the generous-minded among the young, and to make a character which is gently born, and true lover of what is noble, ready to be possessed by excellence, they are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness. For these do not by nature obey the sense of shame, but only fear, and do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment; ... What argument would remould such people?” (NE X 9, 1179^b4–16). In this and other quotes from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, W. D. Ross’s translation in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984). It is for such as these that political institutions need to use force, not just the art of persuasion practiced on the few who are truly persuadable. Few things were more worrying to Plato or Aristotle than legislators who lack the requisite excellent character needed to govern well.

philosophy according to which the particular consequences of such an action *could* “morally” be taken into account by a man who was debating what to do; and if they were such as to accord with his ends, it might be a step in his moral education to frame a moral principle under which he “managed” (to use Nowell-Smith’s phrase) to bring the action; or it might be a new “decision of principle,” making which was an advance in the formation of his moral thinking (to adopt Mr. Hare’s conception), to decide: in such-and-such circumstances one ought to procure the judicial condemnation of the innocent. And that is my complaint.⁴⁵

It is passages such as this that justify seeing Anscombe as a champion of absolutism against a new barbarism of consequentialism. Moreover, one cannot appreciate the reasons for her call to recover elements of an Aristotelian approach to ethics without taking stock of her position on the inviolability of certain moral precepts. That is, she turns to Aristotle precisely because modern moral philosophy has proven itself unwilling to do justice to a moral theory’s requisite reliance upon moral absolutes.

There is a notable disconnection between the departure of those Anscombe deems “consequentialists” from the foundation of moral philosophy and the reputations they enjoy. Consequentialists are to be found in nearly department of philosophy. They enjoy good reputations, are entrusted with the education of the youth of society’s leaders, and one finds those they have educated running universities, hospitals, cabinets, congresses, and countries. If Anscombe is right, then the situation of consequentialism she unmasks is a problem that extends far beyond the pages of academic journals. Consequentialism is, moreover, symptomatic of a deep problem in the modern moral philosophy not just of Anscombe’s day, but of much of the mainstream contemporary virtue ethics movement that takes its inspiration from Anscombe.

How can that be, especially when we find rule-based approaches to ethics, including those of the utilitarian variety, regularly criticized

45. “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 44, footnote excluded.

in much of the contemporary virtue ethical literature? One reason is that there are a number of ways to critique a rule-based approach to ethics other than on the basis of its willingness to consider the occasional suspension of moral absolutes. The core of Anscombe's critique of consequentialism is not, however, that it is rule-based, but that it is willing to suspend moral absolutes.⁴⁶ And indeed, the evidence shows that it is possible to have a virtue-based approach to moral philosophy that endorses a version of consequentialism. For example, Michael Slote takes the side of Anscombe's opponents when he writes, "If killing an innocent person is necessary in order to avoid a large-scale human catastrophe, then one may and even should perform the killing. In such a case, we think a certain sort of moral shift occurs because large-scale humanitarian concerns enter the picture."⁴⁷ What is this "certain sort of moral shift"? It is the shift from considering the care of one's own character to considering the general welfare of a larger community. Echoing Machiavelli, Slote urges that on occasion we need to lay aside our own moral well-being for the well-being of the whole by committing an intentional killing of an innocent man or group of persons who are tragically at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Providing further evidence of mainstream virtue ethical complicity with consequentialism, Slote goes on to argue that affecting such a "moral shift" is incumbent on those who have taken on a role of public service: "For when a person has to decide whether to kill an innocent person in order to prevent a great human catastrophe, it is natural to think of her as having been effectively but unofficially *thrust into* a public or political role. . . . Political roles should override considerations of personal or family advantage in those who have a

46. "It is noticeable that none of these philosophers displays any consciousness that there is such an ethic, which he is contradicting: it is pretty well taken for obvious among them all that a prohibition such as that on murder does not operate in face of some consequences. But of course the strictness of the prohibition has as its point *that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences*" (ibid., 35).

47. Slote, *Morals from Motives*, 96.

deep and genuine love of their own country.”⁴⁸ It is unclear how else to read this passage than that Slote is arguing that caring for large numbers of people obligates you to lay aside your care and concern for your own good—even the good of maintaining a just character, as well as your care and concern for your family and friends—such as not sacrificing them on the consequentialist altar of the public good. The underlying presupposition is that care for one’s country requires one to sacrifice care for what is in fact just. The good and the just have been put at opposite poles in this passage, and yet strangely Slote hardly seems to notice. Slote’s admonition is reminiscent of Adeimantus’s interpretation of the wisdom literature of his day in the second book of the *Republic*, and a contemporary Adeimantus would be justified in interpreting Slote as having provided political leaders carte blanche for otherwise heinous actions that have been determined as necessary for securing the common good.

Rosalind Hursthouse, justly regarded as one of the most significant contemporary virtue ethicists, is more conflicted on the topic of whether one can suspend a moral absolute than is Slote. Consider Coope’s interpretation of the underlying meaning of Hursthouse’s discussion of absolutism in the context of “Irresolvable and Tragic Dilemmas” in *On Virtue Ethics*:

Rosalind Hursthouse thinks that one would be “seriously lacking in virtue” if one has come to consider the world to be such that one is forced quite often—“not infrequently”—to lie or to kill ([*On Virtue Ethics*] 1999: 86). Again she maintains that “a too great readiness to think that ‘I can’t do anything but this terrible thing, nothing else is open to me’ is a mark of vice, of a flawed character” ([*ibid.*] 1999: 87, footnote, italics omitted). All this suggests a consequentialist attitude; for after one has checked, and double checked, to be quite sure one has not been “too ready,” one is presumably to go ahead. One is not to lie or to kill the innocent *too often*.⁴⁹

Is Coope’s interpretation unfair?

48. *Ibid.*, 98.

49. Coope, “Modern Virtue Ethics,” 51.

Hursthouse is very sensitive to claims that virtue ethicists are all too ready to throw moral principles to the wind, and she explicitly argues that virtue ethics is wrongly accused of doing away with absolutism in ethics, at least doing away with it easily or too quickly.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, her own account does not seem successfully to respond to the charge she intends it to. The whole point of an absolute prohibition on certain actions, at least as the term is generally applied, and as Ancombe takes it, is that it is always binding. A lack of appreciation for that common sense implication concerning the reach of a moral absolute becomes evident when considering an example offered by Hursthouse that is intended by her to make clear her endorsement of moral absolutes. This example comes at the end of a dialogue she pursues over several pages, in which she concludes with modest support for the absolutist position on ethical foundations: "I am quite willing to stick my neck out and say that we find the world to be such that no genuinely virtuous person would ever sexually abuse children for pleasure."⁵¹ But is this, in fact, an absolute? The "for pleasure" qualification is rather unsettling. It is clear enough that she thinks that sexually abusing children for pleasure is always wrong (or at least it is not what the virtuous agent *would* do). However, is this meant to leave open the possibility that doing so for the sake of saving lives, or educational purposes, or whatever, just *might* be the right thing to do in some circumstances? Hursthouse's standard way of dealing with dilemmas is to ask whether a particular choice is in accord with what a virtuous person would do, and it is of course hard to imagine any virtuous person ever sanctioning the torture of children for any reason whatsoever. Nevertheless, her qualification is, to say the least, troubling.⁵² In any event, there

50. "The preceding discussion of tragic dilemmas ... should serve as a corrective to another misunderstanding of virtue ethics: the idea that it denies that there are any absolute prohibitions, some particular actions that one is categorically required not to do" (Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 83).

51. *Ibid.*, 87.

52. For a more recent reflection on dilemmas and moral absolutes, see Hursthouse's

are no examples of unqualified absolutes that I have discerned in Hursthouse's works, whereas endorsing absolutes with qualifications is consistent with her other works. This suggests that Hursthouse endorses a weak variety of consequentialism.⁵³ At the very least, we can conclude that Hursthouse's defense of absolutism is atypical because it avoids both theistic and deontological principles, and because the absolutes she offers are not without qualification.⁵⁴

Perplexingly, given her own position, Hursthouse's qualified prohibition against the sexual abuse of children is directly preceded with what seems a note of approval of that quote from Anscombe regarding the consequentialist to be one who shows "a corrupt mind." Hursthouse puts stress on the corruption being due to thinking *in advance* that there can be conditions under which violating an absolute can ever be just, and this would seem to entail endorsement of Anscombe's claim that the mark of a "modern moral philosopher" is

"Discussing Dilemmas," *Christian Bioethics* 14 (2008): 141–50. Her position in this article is, as far as I can tell, unchanged from her position in *On Virtue Ethics*. In remarking on an anecdote regarding a lecture by Anscombe that Hursthouse attended she writes: "One need not share her [Anscombe's] belief that lying is always a sin, nor her belief that God's Providence ensures that an agent will be confronted with a forced choice between forbidden acts only through previous wrongdoing of his own, to accept her point. I do not believe either" ("Discussing Dilemmas," 143). Lying is not always wrong, and neither is killing, as Hursthouse argues in her important work on abortion in which she recognizes that abortion is the killing of a living being, that there is something fundamentally wrong with a callous approach to abortion, but also that there are a number of circumstances that can make abortion the right action to perform ("Virtue Theory and Abortion," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 [1991]: 223–46); for a discussion of the circumstances in which abortion may be justified see 236–42).

53. This is taking consequentialism in broad terms to include varieties of moralities grounded on self-interest, to encompass Hursthouse's conclusion: "My conclusion, in this chapter, is that it offers a distinctively unfamiliar version of the view that morality is a form of enlightened self-interest, a version *so* unfamiliar that probably, as things are at the moment, that is a dangerously misleading way to describe it." (*On Virtue Ethics*, 190). What makes her position on self-interest, which she notes is similar to those of Hare, Gauthier, and Singer, different from theirs is that unlike defending enlightened self-interest from a neutral point of view she does so from the distinctive perspective of the work she sees *phronesis* performing (*ibid.*, 191).

54. The whole of chapter 3 of *On Virtue Ethics* deserves careful reading on this topic, especially 83–87.

one who considers that “in such-and-such circumstances one is to procure the judicial condemnation of the innocent,” or the killing of defective children, or the telling of lies, or the sexual abusing of children. Nevertheless, Hursthouse’s modest defense of absolutism seems to leave open the possibility that there are conditions in which a virtuous person may have to violate an absolute, and that seems to be a matter of envisioning such possibilities *in advance*.

Additional evidence for this consequentialistic cast of mind when it comes to looking at issues of applied ethics within mainstream virtue ethics is found in Justin Oakley’s entry in *The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics*.⁵⁵ Oakley posits the claims that virtue ethics has both illuminated a number of bioethical issues and that “its applications to bioethics have, in turn, arguably helped to develop virtue ethics as an approach more generally.”⁵⁶ To defend both of these claims Oakley considers significant virtue ethical approaches to several of the most sensitive life-and-death issues. On euthanasia, for example, he commends the manner in which Foot’s treatment applies charity in such a way as to show when it requires us to kill another person,⁵⁷ remarking: “Thus, in reminding us that euthanasia is death brought about *for the good of* the person who dies rather than merely at the request of the person (competent or otherwise) who dies, Foot is able to bring out the relevance of the virtue of charity to the question of when acts of euthanasia are ethically justifiable.”⁵⁸ Euthanasia is a good for a person when the condition of that person includes significant disability and suffering, depriving, on Foot’s view of flourishing, the individual of the basic goods constituent of a flourishing life. Unlike the theologically informed virtue of charity, this secular variety of charity is not anchored to an absolute prohibition against killing. Foot’s position is further expounded upon by Liezl van Zyl,⁵⁹

55. CCVE, 197–220.

56. *Ibid.*, 198.

57. Philippa Foot, “Euthanasia,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 85–112.

58. CCVE, 200.

59. Liezl van Zyl, *Death and Compassion: A Virtue-Based Approach to Euthanasia* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishers, 2000).

who utilizes additional virtues like compassion, benevolence, and respectfulness to help determine when terminating or significantly shortening a person's life is justifiable. Oakley himself endorses the view that euthanasia does not undermine a health provider's obligation to heal rather than harm because terminating a patient's life, in certain circumstances, brings a wholeness or completion to it.⁶⁰

On the question of abortion, Oakley credits Hursthouse with shifting focus away from the question of whether or not women have the right to terminate their pregnancy, or whether or not an unborn child has an inalienable right to life, to a focus on the question of whether in the particular circumstances in which a woman finds herself it would be virtuous or vicious for the woman to abort her unborn child. Hursthouse describes ways in which abortion can be wrong when it is a callous, selfish, or cowardly act. However, there are times when a woman's decision to abort can be an expression of deep humility.⁶¹ Hursthouse's virtue-centered approach to abortion is taken up by other virtue ethicists to address the question of prenatal testing and the decision to abort those unborn children discovered to have significant impediments to the possibility of flourishing in the ways in which healthy individuals typically flourish.⁶²

Although there should be no doubt that a virtue-rich approach to patient-doctor care is of great value and has improved the medical profession,⁶³ there should also be little doubt that when faced

60. Justin Oakley and Dean Cocking, *Virtue Ethics and Professional Roles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); CCVE, 200.

61. CCVE, 209.

62. Oakley focuses in particular (CCVE, 211–14) on Rosalind McDougall's recent articles, "Acting Parentally: An Argument against Sex Selection," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 31 (2005): 601–5; "Parental Virtue: A New Way of Thinking about the Morality of Reproductive Actions," *Bioethics* 21 (2007): 181–90; "Impairment, Flourishing and the Moral Nature of Parenthood," in *Disability and Disadvantage*, ed. K. Brownless and A. Curentron (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

63. Edmund D. Pellegrino's work has been particularly helpful in advancing this richer approach to medical practice. See especially his *A Philosophical Basis of Medical Practice*, with David C. Thomasma (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), and *For the Patient's Good: The Restoration of Beneficence in Health Care* (Oxford: Oxford University

with difficult life-and-death issues, the mainstream virtue ethical approach endorses a view that is willing to consider those, admittedly narrow, times when it is incumbent on the virtuous agent to set aside a moral absolute. It is this very willingness to consider when, in advance, it is deemed morally good to terminate an innocent life or to violate some other moral absolute that shows the mainstream virtue ethical approaches to applied ethical questions to be most distant from Anscombe's recommendations, and in fact a partner in the consequentialism she decries.

Press, 1988). Unlike Foot, Hursthouse, Oakley, and other mainstream virtue ethicists, Pellegrino is not willing to divert from absolute prohibitions against killing, even in hard cases.