

G.E.M. ANSCOMBE (1919-2001)

The death of Elizabeth Anscombe (on 5 January) within days of that of W. V. Quine saw the passing of two giants of twentieth century English-language philosophy. United in their attachment to rigour, to a belief in the importance of logic, and to a conviction that philosophy had been transformed by the work of Gottlob Frege, the philosophies of Quine and Anscombe could not have been more different: he, one of the foremost proponents of scientific materialism; she, a convert to Roman Catholicism and a keen advocate of theological orthodoxy.

G.E.M. Anscombe was born on 18 March 1919 the youngest of three children and only daughter of Alan Wells Anscombe, a science master at Dulwich College in South London, and of his wife Gertrude Elizabeth, after whom she was named. She went up to Oxford in 1937 as a Scholar of St Hugh's College where she read Greats (Classics and Philosophy) and in her first year converted to Catholicism. Shortly thereafter she met another philosopher convert, Peter Geach, whom she married on Boxing Day 1941 (and with whom she was to have three sons and four daughters). Earlier in the same year she had graduated with First Class Honours, secured by the brilliance of her philosophy scripts and in the face of her apparent ignorance of ancient history.

In 1942, "Miss Anscombe", as she continued to be called - even by Geach, crossed to Cambridge to become a postgraduate at Newnham College. It was in Cambridge that she met Wittgenstein whose lectures she attended, becoming increasingly enthusiastic about his revolutionary ideas. By 1946 she had returned to Oxford as a research fellow at Somerville College (where she remained in one or another capacity until her appointment to the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge in 1970). She maintained contact with Wittgenstein, however, travelling to Cambridge once a week. In the course of that year (1946-7) they became close friends. Obsessive about the originality of his own thought and somewhat misogynistic, she was one of the few academics Wittgenstein ever trusted, and he would address her affectionately as 'old man'. Although he is quoted by Norman Malcolm as saying of Anscombe and of another philosopher convert, Yorick Smithies, that he "could not possibly believe all the things they believe", in his final year, when he knew he was dying, Wittgenstein asked Anscombe to put him in touch with a "non-philosophical priest". Notwithstanding that she effected the introduction, she never presumed that Wittgenstein had returned to the faith of his childhood.

Preparation for the task of translating Wittgenstein's work (written in German) had begun while he was still alive, but now she and the other two literary executors and editors (G. von Wright and Rush Rhees) set about the project of bringing material to publication. Anscombe took the lead in this, and the appearance in 1953 of her translation of Wittgenstein's masterpiece *Philosophical Investigations* was, without any question, one of the major turning points in twentieth century philosophy. This was followed by her translations of other works: *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (1956), *Notebooks 1914-16* (1961), *Zettel* (1967) and (with Denis Paul) *On Certainty* (1969). She also concerned herself with Wittgenstein's earlier philosophy, publishing *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (1959), and with Geach translated work of Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* (1954), the figure whose ideas were among the main targets of Wittgenstein's criticisms.

Anscombe's appreciation of philosophers with whom she disagreed profoundly (principally Hume) was marked, as was her range. She could write authoritatively, using her own translations, of Plato, Aristotle, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Frege and Wittgenstein. But first and foremost she was neither an historian, a translator, nor an editor, but an original philosopher. Her short book *Intention*, first published by Blackwell in 1957 and republished by Harvard in 2000, is universally regarded as a classic

account of the nature of intentional behaviour, and as the founding text of the theory of action. Donald Davidson has written of it that "Anscombe's Intention is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle".

Her 1958 article "Modern Moral Philosophy", which introduced the term "consequentialism" into the English language, resulted from reading done in preparation for tutoring the subject in Oxford and was originally given as a general talk. Yet it is rightly credited as being the principal cause of the revival of an ethics based on virtue rather than on rule or outcome. Likewise, "Causality and Determination", her inaugural lecture as Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, (the position once held by Wittgenstein) subverted, and some believe refuted, a centuries' old orthodoxy about the nature of causation, viz. that it is essentially necessitarian and/or lawlike.

For the most part Anscombe's work was highly academic, usually difficult to comprehend, and often combative in expression. It sometimes took readers years to see the point of what she was arguing, but this was because she always took on the hardest problems and had no time for slick presentation. Rush Rhees quoted Wittgenstein as often saying "go the bloody hard way"; this is a direction Anscombe appears to have taken to heart. She is reported to have said to A.J. Ayer "if you didn't talk so quickly, people wouldn't think you were so clever" - though, in fairness his reply should also be quoted: "if you didn't talk so slowly, people wouldn't think you were so profound."

From her student days she had discussed and written about issues of moral, political and religious interests. In 1939 she co-authored a highly controversial pamphlet predicting that Britain's conduct in the second World War would be unjust, and in 1956/7 she protested the award by the University of Oxford of an honorary degree to President Truman, charging that he had commanded the murderous use of nuclear weapons against innocent Japanese civilians. Perplexed by defenders of Truman she came to the conclusion that they failed to understand the nature of his actions, and it was this that led her to write Intention, in which she pointed out that in doing one thing (moving one's hand) one may intentionally be doing another (directing the death of human beings).

In 1948, in debate with C.S. Lewis at the Socratic Club in Oxford she demolished his favoured argument against "the self-refuting character of naturalism". Where lesser minds viewed this as giving comfort to the enemy (atheism), Anscombe characteristically saw herself as simply exposing bad argumentation. Her own verdict on the event "that it was an occasion of sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms, which Lewis's rethinking and rewriting showed he thought were accurate" seems the correct one. In any event, no-one could seriously doubt her belief in the value of Christian apologetics if they read the likes of her pamphlets on Transubstantiation (1974), and on Contraception (1977), where she argued passionately in favour of traditional Catholic teachings.

In 1967 Anscombe was elected Fellow of the British Academy. She subsequently received a number of other distinctions including foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1999 (along with Peter Geach) a Papal medal pro Ecclesia et Pontifice. Three volumes of Anscombe's Collected Papers were published in 1981: From Parmenides to Wittgenstein; Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind; and Ethics, Religion and Politics. Two collections of papers were dedicated to her: Intention and Intentionality (1979) and Logic, Cause and Action (2000), and together with Geach she was the recipient of a volume of essays Moral Truth and Moral Tradition (1994) published to honour their fifty years of marriage.

One of Anscombe's last pieces of philosophical writing was "Russell or Anselm?". Philosophical

Quarterly, 1993, in which she defended the thesis that Anselm's argument of Proslogion 2 could be saved "from the stupidity of an Ontological Argument" by deletion of a comma. This rests on the claim that in "Si enim in solo intellectu est, potest cogitari esse et in re, quod maius est" the second (editorial) comma ought to be omitted; in which interpretation (as "if that than which nothing greater can be thought of exists only in the mind, something which is greater can be conceived to exist also in reality"), the argument does not treat existence as a property of objects and so does not fall foul of Kant's famous objection. Writing of her defence Anscombe remarked "[I have] thought harder about Anselm's argument than I did before. But I still think that I haven't thought hard enough. I don't know whether Anselm's argument is valid or invalid - only that it is a great deal more interesting than its common interpretation makes it." The scholarship, imagination, boldness and honesty were characteristic of her work as a philosopher.

In her anthology *Women Philosophers* (1996), gathering work from the seventeenth century to the present, Mary Warnock describes Anscombe as "the undoubted giant among women philosophers". She certainly has a good claim to be the greatest woman philosopher of whom we know, and to have been one of the finest philosophers of the twentieth century. Her work will long continue to be studied and profited from.

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