

# **ANSCOMBE AT 100: ON ACTION AND LIVING WELL**

## **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE**

**Co-sponsored by ACPA-American Catholic Philosophical Association**

**CYA-College Year in Athens**

**Dates: June 15-16, 2019**

**Venue: CYA-College Year in Athens**

### **Organizers**

Jennifer A. Frey, University of South Carolina

Evgenia Mylonaki, College Year in Athens

### **Description**

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Elizabeth Anscombe, one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century. A student of Wittgenstein, she edited and translated into English his *Philosophical Investigations* and wrote an *Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, a book arguably more difficult than the *Tractatus* itself. Donald Davidson described her monograph *Intention* as the most important treatment of action since Aristotle and her article *Modern Moral Philosophy* singlehandedly changed the course of moral philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This conference will focus on issues at the intersection of these two major strands of her work and in particular it will attempt to explore how Anscombe understands the differences and connections between theorizing about human action and theorizing about ethics, or living well.

## **Program**

### **Saturday 15 June**

**08:45-09:00** Evgenia Mylonaki, College Year in Athens  
Opening remarks

**09:00-10:30** John Hacker-Wright, University of Guelph  
“Practical Truth and the Constitution of Agency”

**10:30-11:00** Coffee break

**11:00-12:30** Talbot Brewer, University of Virginia  
“Anscombe on Practical Knowledge”

**12:30-13:00** Lunch break

**13:00-14:30** Candace Vogler, University of Chicago  
“Anscombe and Aristotelian Necessity”

**14:30-15:00** Coffee break

**15:00-16:30** Cyrille Michon, Universite de Nantes  
“Anscombe on Double Effect and Intended Consequences”

Conference dinner

## **Sunday 16 June**

**09:00-11:00** Anselm Müller, University of Chicago & Stavroula Tsinoema, University of Crete

“Anscombe on ‘ought’”

**11:00-11:30** Coffee break

**11:30-13:00** Matthias Haase, University of Chicago

“Maker’s Knowledge”

**13:00-13:30** Lunch break

**13:30-15:00** Constantine Sandis, University of Hertfordshire

“Modern Moral Philosophy Before and After Anscombe”

## **Respondents**

Christos Douskos (Hellenic Open University)

Jennifer A. Frey, University of South Carolina

Kim Frost, Syracuse University

Triantafyllos Gouvas (Athens)

Evgenia Mylonaki, College Year in Athens

Stelios Virvidakis, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

## Abstracts

### **Practical Truth and the Constitution of Agency** **John Hacker Wright**

This paper will interpret Anscombe's moral philosophy as a providing the material for a distinctively defensible Aristotelian constitutivism. A constitutivist holds that the standards of human conduct are constitutive norms: they make us human agents. A constitutivist also holds some version of the view that we make ourselves into agents through conforming to those standards. For Anscombe, it is necessary to our agency that we engage our wills in thinking, specifically in deliberation, and the cultivation of moral virtues through choice. Good human action exhibits no vice and some virtue. Good human action is a function of the sort of thing we are: as human beings we are a distinctive sort of cause in nature that brings together reason and appetite, and this is something that requires our active engagement to bring off, and to bring off in a way such that there is no defect of reason or appetite. A vicious agent is defective qua human agent, even, as I will argue here drawing on Anscombe, in the absence of a sense of 'being at odds' with himself; failing to grasp a fundamental moral truth is itself an impairment of agency. An important component of our goodness as agents is that our actions are based on practical truth, which Aristotle describes as 'truth in agreement with right desire.' We must have a correct conception of the proper ends and desire to bring those ends about. This may seem like something that we don't effect, violating the self-constitution requirement. I do not, after all, make it the case that doing some just act is something that befits a human being. But Anscombe denies this, stating, "practical truth is the truth *brought about* in sound deliberation leading to decision and action, and this includes the truth of the description, 'doing well.'" Although the truth that a given action would be just can be grasped theoretically, it is the apprehension of the truth in deliberation that makes it a *practical* truth, and hence it is something that I must enact as a deliberating agent. There is a further worry that we may not be responsible for failing to grasp the practical truth about my situation, say, through having been inculcated in vice. Yet Anscombe holds, plausibly, that certain basic moral truths are within reach of anyone who has been brought up in a 'human environment,' even if those truths are not accessible at a particular moment of action (in which case there is invincible ignorance). Anscombe's view provides the material for defending a strictly Aristotelian version of constitutivism against arguments advanced by Christine Korsgaard that only a Kantian can provide an adequate version of constitutivism.

## **Anscombe on Practical Knowledge Talbot Brewer**

Throughout much of *Intention*, Anscombe seems to picture practical knowledge as a species of propositional knowledge, differing from speculative knowledge of our own doings not in its object but in its non-observational ground. Yet towards the end of the volume she holds that practical knowledge is a form of “knowing one’s way about” and adds that “A man has practical knowledge who knows how to do things.” I offer an interpretation of Anscombe’s view of the place of know-how in practical knowledge. I then argue for some emendations to Anscombe’s view. In particular, I argue that speculative knowledge of our doings would itself have to reflect an acquired knowhow in order to have the same object as practical knowledge of those same doings, and that we do not always have ready insight — whether practical or speculative — into what exactly we are trying to do.

## **Anscombe and Aristotelian Necessity Candace Vogler**

Elizabeth Anscombe developed her thoughts about things that were necessary in the sense that without them some good could not be or come about, or some evil be expelled or avoided, in her writings on moral authority, on the authority of the state, and more generally on rules and rights. Philippa Foot named this kind of necessity “Aristotelian necessity,” and thought about Aristotelian necessity has helped to shape some recent neo-Aristotelian work in practical philosophy. Anscombe did not think that the whole of ethics could find its foundation in thought about Aristotelian necessity. In this talk, I will explore Anscombe's views on the topic.

## **Anscombe on double effect and intended consequences**

**Cyrille Michon**

I will try to develop the problem I see in Anscombe's later account of the doctrine of double effect, and a possible evolution when compared to previous ones, as already remarked by John Finnis. It seems that according to Anscombe's later account not all intended consequences are aimed at under the description under which they are intended. And it seems then that Anscombe's later view either contradicts an important piece of her analysis in *Intention* or needs some clarification.

## **Anscombe on Ought Anselm Mueller**

Anscombe claims that “the concepts of ... moral obligation and moral duty ... and of the moral sense of ‘ought’, ought to be jettisoned ...” (her second thesis in *MMP*). My contribution argues that this is (and was at the time) bad advice, although it is true that the positions she is attacking do not supply us with any plausible rationale for treating moral norms as obligations. Anscombe considers and examines various explanations of the force of “ought” in statements about how to act: explanations that refer, alternatively, to 1) what is *naturally needed*, in the way of virtue, for human life, 2) necessities conditional on the individual's *purposes*, 3) *conventional “compulsion”* by forcing and stopping modals, and 4) the dictates of *conscience*. Discussion of these options suggests that we have to turn to, and understand, moral *experience* – an experience *as of obligation!* – in order to arrive at an adequate account of the “moral *ought*”. Anscombe herself points the way to such an account by drawing on Aquinas' ideas of *knowledge by connaturality*, *natural law*, and *synderesis*.

## Maker's Knowledge Matthias Haase

One of the most influential thoughts in Anscombe's *Intention* is her revival of the ancient and medieval idea of practical knowledge – in the words of Aquinas famous formula: a knowledge that is the “cause of what it understands.” On closer inspection, however, it is unclear how exactly her considerations stand to the tradition she claims to revive. On the face of it, there is important difference. As Anscombe has it, the object of practical knowledge is one's intentional action: say, the act of building a house. That is not how Aristotle, Maimonides and Aquinas speak. According to their views, the object of practical knowledge is the house made. The action of making or building a house is the way or manner in which one knows of its existence. If all goes well, the maker or producer knows her product through the act of production.

One might think that this is just a difference of emphasis. After all, if one knows that one has made a house, then one knows that there is (or was) a house. But it is unclear whether Anscombian practical knowledge extends all the way to the completion of the action. For, Anscombe appears to equate practical knowledge with “knowledge in intention”. Given the two guises in which intending can appear – in action and prior to action – the focus is on knowing *what one is doing* and knowing *what one is going to do*. Knowing *what one has done* and *has achieved thereby* seems to be another matter. Since one can't intend what one has done, it would seem that the done deed can't be in the scope of practical knowledge so conceived.

The contemporary literature following Anscombe is shaped by Anscombe's equation of practical knowledge with knowledge in intention. Roughly speaking, it divides into two camps. According to *Presentism* put forward by Michael Thompson, Sebastian Rödl, and Eric Marcus, practical knowledge is self-knowledge *in action* and for this reason restricted to action in progress. According to *Futurism* put forward by David Velleman and Kieran Setiya, practical knowledge is knowledge *by decision*. In consequence, achievements can be known before reaching them. Neither conception leaves space for the traditional conception of maker's knowledge according to which the making or producing is the source one's knowledge of the product.

Given Anscombe's equation, Presentism and Futurism appear to exhaust the available options. In consequence, the question arises whether is guilty of her own charge: Could it be that she misunderstood what those ancient and medieval authors meant by practical knowledge? In the paper, I first argue that Presentism and Futurism are equally untenable. They both rest on the assumption that one can have practical knowledge of *what is doing* without having any knowledge of *what one has done so far*. But this is mistake. It neglects the fact that the description of on-going action by the progressive ('I'm doing A') differs from the description of a mere tendency by the prospective imperfective ('I'm going to do A') in that the former entails that there is some A\* for which it is true that I have done A\*. If one doesn't know of phases of one's action that are already complete, then one doesn't know that one is on the way. In consequence, the talk of practical knowledge of what one is doing becomes a funny way of saying that one knows what one intends to do. If there is to be practical knowledge of the actuality of one's action in material reality, it has to include knowledge of one's achievements on the way. I will argue that this means that the intelligibility of the very idea of practical knowledge of the actuality of my action depends on making space for the traditional notion of maker's knowledge according to which one can know the product through one's act of production.

Then I consider whether there is an alternative to Presentism and Futurism available within the framework of Anscombe's *Intention*. Finally, I discuss the question what consequences this disagreement about *technical* practical knowledge and the production that manifests it has for the discussion of *ethical* practical knowledge and the praxis in which it is realized.

## **Modern Moral Philosophy Before and After Anscombe Constantine Sandis**

This paper argues for the following:

- i) There was considerably more philosophy of action in moral theory *before* 1958, when Anscombe complained of its lack under the banner 'philosophy of psychology', than afterwards. This is in part because
- ii) Anscombe influenced the formation of 'virtue theory' as yet another position *within* normative ethics, and
- iii) Anscombe's work contributed to the fashioning of 'moral psychology' as an altogether *distinct* (and now increasingly empirical) branch of moral philosophy.

None of (i-iii) were foreseen, let alone intended, by Anscombe, who would have been positively against them. The tragic irony of 'Modern Moral Philosophy', then, is that, despite its notoriety, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century moral philosophy makes more sense when read backwards. The welcome revival of interest in her work is an opportunity to finally put things right.