Rethinking Metaethics With G. E. M. Anscombe: A Reinstatement of the Ethical Intention Behind Philosophy of Action

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Abstract: Being a Catholic who undertook extracurricular studies on Scholasticism at Blackfriars Priory while reading the Greats at Oxford, and later pursued graduate studies at Cambridge under Ludwig Wittgenstein, of whom she was named one of three literary executors, Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe is second to none in bridging contemporary perspectives and classic controversies. Together with her husband, Peter Geach, as the father, she is the mother of Analytical Thomism, which synthesizes Aquinas with Gottlob Frege and Wittgenstein. Her seminal essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy," spearheaded the aretaic turn she aimed at the dissolution of grammatical confusions that resulted in the modern dominance of consequentialism and deontology. The first thesis thereof argues that we cannot do moral philosophy without a proper philosophy of action. Congruently, Anscombe, in writing *Intention*, is also credited for reviving the philosophy of action. In this paper, I aim to amplify Anscombe's prowess by proposing a different approach to metaethics—a classic field of the analytic school with which she is rarely associated—drawing on her contemporary revival of the philosophy of action. Regrettably, the field has detoured more towards the philosophy of mind after it was seemingly superseded by Donald Davidson's "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." I clarify that Anscombe revived action theory during the "Age of Analysis," after it had ceased to be taken seriously following the mainstream decline of Aristotelianism from the "Age of Metaphysics," with the original intention of reestablishing practical philosophy. Particularly, Anscombe's problem of relevant descriptions exposes that a single action can have various descriptions. Depending on the description, an action can have varying consequences or duties, leading to antinomies, i.e., an action is good under one description but evil in another. G.E. Moore, Charles Stevenson, and R.M. Hare inquire about the "good," but Anscombe finds the traditional metaethical inquiry ineffable without analyzing actions.

Keywords: Anscombe, Action, Intention, Modern Moral Philosophy, Problem of Relevant Descriptions

We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, § 107[1]

§1. A Woman in Parenthesis

In recent years, there has been a resurging interest in four philosophers: Philippa Foot (née Bosanquet), Dame Jean Iris Murdoch, Mary Beatrice Midgley (née Scrutton), and Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret (or G.E.M. or Elizabeth) Anscombe. Born right after WWI and having pursued their undergraduate studies at the University of Oxford during WWII, these women—close friends and intellectual peers—are now usually called the Oxford Quartet or the Wartime Quartet. One of the signs and even a major cause of the resurgence of interest in the Quartet is the establishment of Women in Parenthesis in 2015.[2] During a promotional event for their book *Metaphysical Animals*,[3] a biographical work on the Quartet, Clare Mac Cumhail and Rachael Wiseman—founders of Women in Parenthesis—explained that they named the research center as such in regretful allusion to the *parenthetical* treatment of the four women philosophers.[4] The Quartet—given their formative Oxford years when most of their male peers and teachers were conscripted, suspending for a moment the particular analytic temper of the time—have revolutionary ideas[5] that are either mostly ignored in mainstream analytic philosophy discussions or, worse, attributed to male philosophers they influenced.

Anscombe, while admittedly a staunch Wittgensteinian, not only translated Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* but was also a philosopher in her own right. She synthesized the later Wittgenstein and Aristotle, leading to the aretaic turn (i.e., the contemporary revival of virtue ethics) and, complementing the first, the revival of philosophy of action, among others. To put it in terms of Emmanuel Fernando's three ages of philosophy,[6] Anscombe, in effect, revived the explorations of virtues and *human actions* from the *age of metaphysics* with the linguistic rigor palatable in the present *age of analysis*. Hence, although Analytic

[1] Ludwig Wittgestein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Blackwell Publishing, 2009), § 107.

[2] See Women in Parenthesis, accessed April 24, 2025, https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/.

[3] See Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (Anchor Books, 2022).

[4] Elly Vintiadis, host, "'Metaphysical Animals': Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman with Elly Vintiadis," posted March 9, 2022, by The Philosopher, YouTube, 13:00–17:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CTlPAT4GjhU.

[5] See Mac Cumhail and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*; and Benjamin J. B. Lipscomb, *The Women are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

[6] Emmanuel Fernando, "The Relevance of Philosophy to Law," *Philippine Law Journal* 73, no. 1 (1998): 8–13.

Aristotelianism is associated with Michael Thompson and Analytic Thomism with John Haldane, these syncretic schools would be nothing without her.[7] Better yet, she must be considered, if you will, the mother of these movements. Likewise, while it can be argued that the reception to Foot and, especially, Anscombe's initial steps that led to the aretaic turn seemed to reposed after the 1950s, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue,* which is credited for stimulating another interest in virtue ethics in the 1980s[8] with a wider audience, is still indebted to them (and even to Murdoch, as mentioned in a later section). But most importantly, there is something in Anscombe's revival philosophy of action that we must exhume.

Donald Davidson himself lauds Anscombe's book, *Intention*, as "[...] the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."[9] Unfortunately, the development of the philosophy of action post-*Intention* was detoured from one of its original, if not the most important, objectives—largely due to the publication of Davidson's essay, "Action, Reasons, and Causes,"[10] six years after the publication of *Intention*. For one, Davidson's philosophy of action swayed the field mainly to the philosophy of mind, as we usually understand it today. Although, of course, *Intention* is also concerned with philosophy of mind, Anscombe's understanding of philosophy of mind (or philosophy of psychology as she calls it) is distinct. Hers is (i) closely related to the later Wittgenstein's non-introspective inquiry on mental states in *Philosophical Investigations*[11] and (ii) the Aristotelian inquiry into how the *soul* (or *psyche* in Latin, the root word in "psychology") animates the body,[12] including in doing *human actions*. The latter is especially important, since *human action* plays a foundational role in (teleological) virtue ethics in ways non-existent in modern moral philosophy (e.g., deontology and consequentialism). In other words, for Anscombe, philosophy of psychology inquires into (in Aristotelian terms) the *soul* that animates humans to perform *human actions* (a matter of philosophy of action), which are of moral concern (a matter of moral philosophy)—and these are all understood through the later Wittgenstein's distinct analytical method, called grammatical investigation. I know that this paragraph may seem like a word vomit for readers unfamiliar with Anscombe. However, it shall slowly be clarified as this paper progresses. In this paper, I aim to uncover the ethical objective for Anscombe's revival of philosophy of action, particularly how Anscombe critiques moral philosophy through philosophy of action (i.e., using philosophy of action as metaethics).

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[7] Rachael Wiseman, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Anscombe's Intention* (Routledge, 2016), 23.

[8] David Solomon, "Twentieth Century Ethics by David Solomon, Ph.D. 9. After Virtue," virtual lecture, 2004, posted April 6, 2022, by Catholic Thinkers, Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NN4MOmBMfM&list=PL6cPgDv4oMrvIkz-8ZmbhA651L4CrQziz&index=10.

[9] Written as a blurb in the front cover of the second edition of Anscombe's *Intention* published by Harvard University Press.

[10] Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," *The Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 23 (1963): 685–700, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2023177.

[11] See Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Philosophy of Psychology: A Fragment," in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed (Blackwell Publishing, 2009).

[12] See Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans.Hugh Lawson-Tancred (Penguin Books, 1986).

One of the most striking quotes from the preface of *Philosophical Investigations* is "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own."[13] This manifests in the seemingly enigmatic nature of *Philosophical Investigations*. But the book is not so enigmatic as to be nonsensical; rather, the reader must tie things together and actively engage in the investigation as if one is in *therapy*.[14] As it were, the reader is not a mere receptacle of *information* from what he reads, for he already, may it be unwittingly or confusingly, *know* the *information* through our language. However, language bewitches us.[15] Thus, what he reads, rather than merely relaying, must guide him or be a practice for him to untangle himself from the confusions that may have also led him to think in the beginning that he reads to receive *information* that he already *knows* (but confusingly before untangling).[16] Remarkably, Anscombe's *Intention* inherits the same attitude in her likewise Wittgensteinian sections (some may say that this is a major reason why many found *Intention* mentally arduous, leading to many favoring Davidson's much shorter and easier essay; and, notably, some may even say that *Intention* is harder to read than *Philosophical Investigations* given the former's longer sections). While I attempt to be more explanatory, I must disclose that the majority of this paper is excerpted from the first chapter (and, to a lesser extent, from the second chapter) of my undergraduate thesis. I divided my thesis in such a way that the first chapter exposes the problem or puzzle, the second uncovers Anscombe's implicit methodology, and the third dissolves the puzzle through the methodology. Accordingly, this paper does not have, if you will, *conclusive conclusions* or even the full details on the *tool* for dissolution. But, in inheriting the same attitude, it should suffice that I stimulate readers' thoughts with a proposal: What if we begin our inquiry on moral philosophy through philosophy of action?

To be more precise, I aim to show the philosophical imperative, which arises from a crisis in moral philosophy, to have a proper philosophy of action to stipulate moral philosophy. Anscombe posits this imperative in the first thesis of her seminal essay, "Modern Moral Philosophy," one of the world's most cited and regarded philosophical publications of the last century:[17]

> [...] 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 conspicuously lacking.[18]

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[13] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4.

[14] See ibid., § 133d.

[15] Ibid., § 109.

[16] For those already familiar with the later Wittgenstein, this is more easily expressed as: our language bewitches us, but these confusions are therapeutically *dissolved* by investigating our *form of life* that gives meaning to our language. Notably, "dissolved" implies that confusion is not inherent, but clarity is for we already *live* what we think is puzzling in our language.

[17] Lipscomb, *The Women are Up to Something*, 125.

[18] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3749051.

This I take to be a metaethical critique. Although Anscombe is usually not seen as a main figure in metaethics, I suggest that she be recognized as such. But in invoking metaethics, one must not misunderstand me to be invoking the likes of G.E. Moore, H.A. Prichard, A.J. Ayer, C.L. Stevenson, R.M. Hare, and other figures of early analytic ethics. By metaethics, I simply mean to analyze ethics at a second-order distance. Nonetheless, the divergence between the orthodox way of doing metaethics, that of Moore and thereafter, and that of Anscombe, which this paper shall introduce, is remarkable. The former asks the important but hackneyed question on "What is good?" In contrast, the latter asks a neglected but important question that underlies even normativity. How can we even employ normative terms if we do not have an account of the *action* we seek to judge? That is, to begin with, what is the *action* that we judge with our normative theories; hence, my proposal to the readers. Therefore, Anscombe's revival of philosophy of action is not a mere accident or a meander. So to speak, there is an *intention* implicit in *Intention*, the book by which Anscombe revives philosophy of action, to likewise revive moral philosophy as diagnosed in "Modern Moral Philosophy." But again, this paper would be as long as my undergraduate thesis if I fully included and concluded with how exactly philosophy of action *revives* moral philosophy. It suffices for this paper to show how philosophy *deteriorates* in lacking a philosophy of action, which is the very problem that Anscombe's first thesis diagnoses.

Lastly, before proceeding, I should preliminarily address why Anscombe uses *philosophy of psychology* instead of *philosophy of action* in the first thesis. This has already been briefly mentioned. But to reiterate: philosophy of psychology tells us about the *soul* (or something mental or intellectual) that animates humans into *action*, which is a concern of philosophy of action. These two special disciplines in philosophy are not synonymous, but we shall see how they are inextricably linked in the likewise inextricable connection between *intention* and *action*.

§2. Mr. Truman's Action

"The women are up to something in the Convocation," the dons[19] of St. John's College of the University of Oxford announced, "we have to go and vote them down."[20] An urgent rumor brought about the commotion. A certain don from Somerville College, one of the few women's colleges at Oxford at that time, who turned out to be Elizabeth Anscombe planned to lead an objection to University Vice-Chancellor Alic Halford Smith's nomination proposed to the Hebdomadal Council[21] of an honorary doctorate in civil law to be conferred to Harry S. Truman,

[19] "Don" is a term used in the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge, among others, that refers to a tutor or a fellow of a college.

[20] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Basil Blackwell, 1981), 62–71. See also Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals,* 2.

[21] The Hebdomal Council, at that time, was the chief executive body of the University of Oxford.

the President of the United States of America from 1945 to 1953.[22] The Convocation held on 1 May 1956 was supposed to honor the man who is said to have ended World War II by bending Japan, the last of the Axis powers, to its knees. Yet Anscombe wanted to make a scene. The consciences of the dons of Worcester, All Souls, and New College were convinced: "*It would be wrong to try to PUNISH Mr. Truman!*"[23] But what *action* did Truman do that would merit a protest?

§2.1. A Vicious Action

Anscombe elaborated on it in her speech delivered in Convocation House, which was later turned into a pamphlet entitled "Mr. Truman's Degree." She recounted:

> In 1945, at the Potsdam conference in July, Stalin informed the American and British statesmen that he had received two requests from the Japanese to act as a mediator with a view to ending the war. He had refused. The Allies agreed on a 'general principle' (marvellous phrase!) of using the new type of weapon that the Americans now possessed. The Japanese were given a chance in the form of the Potsdam Declaration, calling for unconditional surrender in face of overwhelming force soon to be arrayed against them. The historian of the Survey of International Affairs considers that this phrase was rendered meaningless by the statement of a series of terms; but of these the ones incorporating the Allies' demands were mostly of so vague and sweeping a nature as to be rather a declaration of what unconditional surrender would be like than to constitute conditions. It seems to be generally agreed that the Japanese were desperate enough to have accepted the Declaration but for their loyalty to their Emperor: the 'terms' would certainly have permitted the Allies to get rid of him if they chose. The Japanese refused the Declaration. In consequence, the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, The decision to use them on people was Mr. Truman's.[24]

And so, despite the earlier plea in 1939 for assurance that no belligerent would attack any civil population—an appeal made by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the US President before Truman (from 1933 to 1945)—Anscombe reminded the crowd:

> In 1945, when the Japanese enemy was known by him [Truman] to have made two attempts toward a negotiated peace, the President of the United States gave the order for dropping an atom on a Japanese city; and three days later a second

[22] Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 2–6. See also Nikhil Krishnan, *A Terribly Serious Adventure: Philosophy at Oxford 1900–60* (Profile Books, 2023), 165–169.

[23] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 65. See also Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 2.

[24] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 63–64.

> bomb, of a different type[25] was dropped on another city. No ultimatum was delivered before the second bomb was dropped.[26]

Hiroshima at that time was home to between 280,000 and 290,000 noncombatants and around 43,000 combatants. The dropping of "Little Boy," the uranium gun-type atomic bomb, on 6 August 1945 immediately killed or seriously injured around 80,000 people. However, approximately 90,000 to 166,000 died from the bomb in the four months after August 6. Furthermore, the city of Hiroshima estimated that 237,000 people, almost all of the city inhabitants, were either killed directly or indirectly (by the bomb's effects, e.g., burns, radiation sickness, and cancer) five years after the explosion.[27]

Meanwhile, Nagasaki at that time was home to around 240,000 noncombatants and around 9,000 combatants. Although some residents might have already evacuated or were already killed prior because Nagasaki was already a target of US small-scale bombings before the atomic bomb, the dropping of "Fat Man," the implosion-type atomic bomb, on 9 August 1945 still immediately killed between 40,000 to 75,000 people, and another 60,000 suffered severe injuries. By the end of 1945, the total casualties may have reached 80,000 deaths.[28]

Thus, it was clear to Anscombe that Truman was a mass murderer, and no honorable university shall honor such a dishonorable man. "For men to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder, and murder is one of the worst of human actions," she reiterated.[29] The atomic bombings as military *means* were unjust *intentional* killings of the noncombatant populations. Thus, these *actions* count as mass murder:

> In the bombing of these cities it was certainly decided to kill the innocent as a means to an end. And a very large number of them, all at once, without warning,

[25] The bombs that were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were both atomic bombs. What Asncombe meant by "different type" is the two types of atomic bombs produced by the Manhattan Project. The first was named "Little Boy," which had a simpler design (a uranium gun), and was dropped in Hiroshima. The second was named "Fat Man," which had a more complex design (an implosion bomb), and was dropped in Nagasaki. See Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (Simon and Schuster, 1986), 541, 577–579. See also "Designs of Two Bombs," Atomic Archive, accessed October 11, 2024, https://www.atomicarchive.com/history/atomic-bombing/hiroshima/page-2.html.

[26] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 62.

[27] "Hiroshima and Nagasaki Bombing Timeline," Atomic Heritage Foundation, accessed October 11, 2024, https://ahf.nuclearmuseum.org/ahf/history/hiroshima-and-nagasaki-bombing-timeline/.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 64.

> without interstices of escape or the chance to take shelter,[30] which existed even in the 'area bombing' of the German cities.[31]

§2.2. An Unintelligible Speech

However, the audience spoke differently from hers. First, people questioned Anscombe's ethical evaluation of the bombings, revealing their consequentialist leaning:

> I have been accused of being 'high-minded.' I must be saying 'You may not do evil that good may come,' which is a disagreeably high-minded doctrine. The action was necessary, or at any rate it was thought by competent, expert military opinion to be necessary; it probably saved more lives than it sacrificed; it had a good result, it ended the war. Come now: if you had to choose between boiling one baby and letting some frightful disaster befall a thousand people — or a million people, if a thousand is not enough — what would you do? Are you going to strike an attitude and say 'You may not do evil that good may come'?[32]

If the ethical dilemma, if we put Truman's position to be so, is to let the train run over hundreds of people or one person, as innocent that person may be, then will not we, as Truman did, choose to save the former even if it resulted in the demise of the latter? Were not the atomic bombings a *necessary evil*? How can we say that they were unjust? One may imagine that some Oxford philosophers—coherent with their British tendencies since the heydays of the so-called common-sense philosophers of the empirical tradition or even since William of Ockham—around her thinking, "Is this not morally *intuitive*?"

Second, people questioned if Truman could be truly held accountable to the degree that Anscombe held him to be (as a mass murderer). Alan Bullock, the Censor of St. Catherine's Society and a don from St. Catherine's College, defended Truman. Anscombe summarized the opposition:

> We do not approve the action; no, we think it was a *mistake*. (That is how communists now talk about Stalin's more murderous proceedings.) Further, Mr. Truman did not make the bombs by himself, and decide to drop them without consulting anybody; no, he was only responsible for the decision. Hang it all, you can't make a man responsible just because 'his is the signature at the foot of the order.' Or was he not even responsible for the decision? It was not quite clear

[30] Others may find this debatable. Some argue that the US dropped LeMay leaflets in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, warning the civilians and combantants of their impending doom. This is certainly the position taken by the US government until today. See "Leaflets Warning Japanese of Atomic Bomb," PBS, accessed October 11, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/truman-leaflets/. However, other sources support Anscombe. Alex Wellerstein, for instance, reveals: "[...] leaflets specifically warning about atomic bombs were created… but they weren't dropped on either Hiroshima or Nagasaki before they were atomic bombed. The first Truman Library document was the first draft, that was never dropped. The second one was the second draft, and was dropped, but only after the bombs were used." See Alex Wellerstein, "A Day Too Late," *Restricted Data: A Nuclear History Blog*, April 26, 2013, https://blog.nuclearsecrecy.com/2013/04/26/a-day-too-late/.

[31] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 64.

[32] Ibid., 64–65.

> whether Mr. Bullock was saying that or not; but I never heard anyone else seem to give the lie to Mr. Truman's boasts. Finally, an action of this sort is, after all, only one episode: an incident as it were, in a career. Mr. Truman has done some good.[33]

All that Truman did was put his little signature at the foot of the order. What about the minds (perhaps including Marie Curie, who discovered radioactivity that made future developments on nuclear arms possible) and muscles (perhaps including the housekeepers of the scientists' homes) of the Manhattan Project? Why put such a grave responsibility on Truman? He did not *actually* kill about 300,000 people. He had done more good than that little signature. Would not those other good acts give him a net-positive honor? Would not the felicific calculus,[34] even when considering the quality and not just the quantity of the good, favor Truman over the Japanese corpses, innocent many of them might have been? And when we consider the great atrocities that Japan (or the Axis powers at large) committed and might have committed further, will not more weight of the good sway over to Truman's scale? Would not *ends* justify the *means*? And if such consequences weigh heavily on our ethical judgment, why inquire about Truman's or anybody's, may they be Marie Curie's or the housekeepers', *intention*?

The seeming inability of her audience to adequately connect Truman's signature and the dropping of the atomic bombs bears similarity to what Anscombe calls the *doctrine of collective responsibility*:

> For some time before war broke out, and more intensely afterwards, there was propaganda in this country on the subject of the 'indivisibility' of modern war. The civilian population, we were told, is really as much combatant as the fighting forces. The military strength of a nation includes its whole economic and social strength. Therefore the distinction between the people engaged in prosecuting the war and the population at large is unreal. There is no such thing as a non-participator; you cannot buy a postage stamp or any taxed article, or grow a potato or cook a meal, without contributing to the 'war effort.' War indeed is a 'ghastly evil,' but once it has broken out no one can 'contract out' of it. 'Wrong' indeed must be being done if war is waged, but you cannot help being involved in it. There was a doctrine of 'collective responsibility' with a lugubriously elevated moral tone about it. The upshot was that it was senseless to draw any line between legitimate and illegitimate objects of attack. Thus the court chaplains of democracy. I am not sure how children and the aged fitted into this story: probably they cheered the soldiers and munitions workers up.[35]

In Truman's case, people seem not to connect A to B, C, until D. All that they can say, correct or incorrect it may be, is that A (Truman's signature) ultimately resulted in net-positive[36]

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[33] Ibid., 66.

[34] See Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Clarendon Press, 1907), ch. 4.

[35] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 63.

[36] See John Stuart Mill, "Utilitarianism," in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, eds. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen (Oxford University Press, 2015).

consequence X. In the case of the noncombatant population of an enemy nation, they cannot distinguish a non-combatant's *actions* from a belligerent's war efforts. They think the former, correct or incorrect the calculation may be, ultimately increases the net-positive consequences for the enemy, increasing the net-negative consequences for the Allied forces. In both cases, the *doctrine of double effect* is unspeakable. But how and why?

§2.3. Lessons from the Past

Earlier in 1939 during her undergraduate years reading the Greats at St. Hugh's College, Anscombe co-produced a pamphlet with her friend, Norman Daniel, entitled "The Justice of the Present War Examined," condemning Britain for joining WWII against Nazi Germany.[37] But she was neither a Nazi-sympathizing fascist nor a pacifist. Rather, invoking St. Thomas Aquinas' just war theory,[38] it was clear to her that it was unjust for her country to enter the war at that time.

Anscombe lists seven conditions for a just war.[39] The first was cleared ("[...] there must be violation of, or attack upon, strict rights") because Germany infringed on Poland's sovereignty; the second too ("the war must be made by a lawful authority"); the fifth too ("war must be the only possible means of righting the wrong done") because "although we may suspect that war could have been averted by a more intelligent policy [...] before the war broke out, [...] when war was declared it is possible that the wrong done could not have been righted by peaceful means"[40]; and so too the sixth ("there must be a reasonable hope of victory"). However, the qualification for the third ("the warring state must have an upright intention in making war"), fourth ("only right means must be used in the conduct of the war"), and seventh ("the probable good must outweigh the probable evil effects of the war") conditions were contentious. I only further discuss the third and fourth conditions given their relevance in this section.

Concerning the third, Anscombe questions Britain's *intention* in combating Germany.[41] There was a suspicion whether Britain truly cared for Poland or she only signed the 1939 Anglo-Polish Agreement—which created an alliance with Poland, France, and the Soviet Union, thus surrounding and locking Germany—as a pretext for opposing the Nazis regardless of what would happen to Poland. If the latter was the case, then Britain's *intention* would be from fear and pride, which would make a move towards war unjustified under the third condition, rather than from a desire for justice for Poland, which would make a move towards war justified under the third condition. Moreover, if that was the case, then Britain might have used Poland only as a *means* to her own *end* and not for Poland's interests as an *end* in itself as well. On the other hand,

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[37] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Norman Daniel, "The Justice of the Present War Examined," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Basil Blackwell, 1981), 72–81. See also Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 65–69.

[38] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947), pt. II-II, Q 40.

[39] See Anscombe, "The Justice of the Present War Examined," 73.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 74–75.

Britain's *intention* was vague at best. But if this were the case, the *intention* for war was also limitless, for we would not know if the *end* (because this is contained under the *intention*) of war (and war is the supposedly just *means* for that *end*) was reached. If so, "[...] there is no point at which [the British] or the Germans could say to our government: 'Stop fighting: for your conditions are satisfied.'"[42]

The younger Anscombe, as it were, anticipated the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For what *end* did Truman aim when he ordered the atomic bombings as a *means*? "For *peace*," the apologists would insist. However, the Japanese were already willing to surrender at that time if the conditions for capitulation were less harsh. The stubborn and indeterminate demands triggered the Japanese' unwavering loyalty to the Emperor, leading to what transpired. Peace, the same supposed *end*, could have been achieved even if less demanding conditions had been offered. One may infer that the Allied forces were consistent in their inability to think properly about their *means*. Hence, how could they draw the line?

Concerning the fourth condition, we may focus on the *doctrine of double effect*. The doctrine, briefly speaking, states that if an *action* (and the nature of it in itself must be good or morally neutral) has two kinds of effects, one good and one evil, then the *action* is permissible only if the evil effect is an *unintended* effect coinciding with the *intended* good effect.[43] The right *means* in warfare must follow this doctrine. *Intentionally* targeting noncombatants, then, must be impermissible because it *intends* an evil effect (killing the innocent). On the contrary, if a belligerent operates a targeted bombing (presuming that it qualifies under the other conditions for just war, and thus the nature of targeting bombing must at least be morally neutral) against its enemy combatants (presuming that the belligerent is justified in believing that the area is reserved for warfare and the noncombatants already left the area if they used to be in the area) but it happens that some civilians were injured or killed *unintentionally* (presuming that they enter the area or did not leave the area although it was reserved for warfare between combatants), then the targeted bombing is still permissible. Accordingly, Anscombe concludes that Britain's measure to blockade goods entering Germany, *intending* to starve the national life including noncombatants, was impermissible even if it was a *means* for weakening the Nazi combatants because the harm against the civilians was also *intended*. This disqualified the measure and Britain's *intention* at war at large under the fourth condition.[44]

Once again, the younger Anscombe was already aware of the *doctrine of collective responsibility*, which makes the *doctrine of double effect* unintelligible for the majority of the Oxford dons. And if the *doctrine of double effect* is unintelligible, how can one distinguish civilian *actions* that have *unintended* consequences of helping the combatants, as in the case of

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[42] Ibid., 75.

[43] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt. II-II, Q 64, art. 7. See also Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "War and Murder," in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe*, vol. 3, *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Basil Blackwell, 1981), 51–61.

[44] Anscombe, "The Justice of the Present War Examined," 78–79.

Marie Curie and the scientists' housekeepers? Therefore, if combatants can be targeted for their morally reprehensible *actions*, then so too the noncombatants whose *actions* are seemingly indistinguishable from combatant *actions*.

But how can one differentiate between *intended* good effects and *unintended* evil effects if one does not know what *intention* and *action* are? What is the nature of Mr. Truman's *action*? Is it not true that Truman's *action* was only signing paperwork? What is *massacre* or *murder* anyway? What is the nature of noncombatant *actions,* and are they separable from military *actions*? Could realizing one's *intentions* have prevented the nuclear disaster in Japan?

Needless to say, at that moment in Convocation House, it was obvious that Anscombe's speech would have been better appreciated in a convent. John Cecil Masterman, who would soon replace Alic Halford Smith as the next University Vice-Chancellor,[45] put the motion to the house: "*Placet ne vobis, Domini Doctores? Placet ne vobis, Magistri?*"[46] "*Non placet*"[47] was unheard—the meeting adjourned in *silence*, although some swore they made a sound.[48] The press deemed Anscombe's protest to be a *one-woman campaign*.[49] On 20 June 1956, Truman's conferment of an honorary degree carried on as proposed in the Convocation.[50]

Nevertheless, the concern of St. John's dons remained true—the women were still up to something. The Wartime Quartet would soon redefine analytic philosophy. Anscombe, in particular, would spearhead the aretaic turn in the analytic school and Western philosophy at large, reviving the modern corpse of moral philosophy.

§3. The Soulless Corpse of Modern Moral Philosophy

In 1957, about a year after the Convocation incident, Anscombe gave a sarcastic but insightful radio talk on the BBC Third Programme.[51] "Does Oxford moral philosophy corrupt the youth?" was the question. Its implicature—that Oxford morally corrupts the youth—is an unfair accusation, Anscombed judged, for such a corruption already "[...] echoed outside the university; for example, it was right to massacre the Japanese because it was (or at least was thought to be) productive of a better total state of affairs than not doing so would have been."[52] The commonsensical dons just honored such common moral depravity. Even R.M. Hare understood

[45] Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 3.
[46] The Latin phrase translates to "Does it not please you, lord Doctors? Do you like it, teachers?"
[47] The Latin phrase translates to "I do not like it."
[48] Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 5.
[49] Ibid., 6.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, eds. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Imprint Academic, 2005), 169–175. See also Krishnan, *A Terribly Serious Adventure*, 181–184.
[52] Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" 172.

that Anscombe passed her sarcasm. After the transcript of her radio talk was also published in *The Listener*, Hare (and another philosopher, Patrick Howard Nowell-Smith) wrote a letter to the editor disputing Anscombe, which was also published in the tabloid.[53] Anscombe composed a script for a rejoinder but was rejected for a radio talk.[54]

Two themes reemerged, similar to her two main points in her condemnation of Truman. First, modern moral philosophy is unfamiliar with *action*—i.e., modern moral philosophy lacks a proper philosophy of action, a discipline seemingly forgotten to be taken seriously after the prime of the Schoolmen until Anscombe. Secondly and accordingly, ethical theories, due to the hollowness where *action* used to be and for other reasons, became legalistic or consequentialist.

§3.1. A History of Degradation

Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy" posits three distinct but interrelated theses:

> [...] 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 conspicuously lacking.
>
> [...] the concepts of obligation, and duty—moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say—and of what is morally right and wrong, and 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.
>
> [...] the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.[55]

The third criticizes consequentialism, a term she coined originally to mean the opposite of moral absolutism. The second deals with the traditional problem of normativity. And the first criticizes modern moral philosophy (which includes consequentialism and deontology) as lacking philosophy of action. Remarkably, the theses are deliberately ordered as such. To criticize consequentialism, Anscombe must show what has gone wrong with the modern conception of normativity. And to show what has gone wrong with the modern conception of normativity, Anscombe must illustrate how the lack of philosophy of action led modern moral philosophy into its degradation. While I shall focus on the first thesis, this subsection shall dig deeper into the implications of the first thesis for the other two, thus also showing the implications of my paper to the other aspects of moral philosophy. Moreover, while the previous section concentrates on Anscombe's epiphany and historical background of the time, this subsection shall show how her concerns are connected to moral philosophy and its history at large.

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[53] Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something*, 124.
[54] Ibid., 125.
[55] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 1.

Anscombe points to the elephant in the room: "Anyone who has read Aristotle's *Ethics* and has also read modern moral philosophy must have been struck by the great contrasts between them."[56] Modern moral philosophy—that is, Immanuel Kant's deontology and classical utilitarianism, but also Henry Sidgwick's consequentialism (a term that Anscombe coined originially to mean the opposite of m oral absolutism),[57] and the wider sense of consequentialism we use today (that includes classical utilitarianism and Sidgwick's consequentialism)—must be delineated from Aristotle's virtue ethics. The latter considers the character of the moral agent and the teleological nature of the moral agent's *actions,* while the former does not in the latter's fashion, considering *mostly* the duties for *actions* (deontology) or the consequences of *actions* (consequentialism).

I write "mostly" because modern ethical theories may still consider some watered-down versions of *virtue* subordinated under duties or consequences. Kant's account of a *virtuous* man—that is, a man whose *action* has moral worth—is the one who acts under a *categorical imperative*, particularly under circumstances when it seems that there are inclinations to act otherwise.[58] For instance, a treasurer who has a sickly child in need of money for medication still does not steal the money he guards not even for fear of punishment (doing so leads to the legalistic interpretation of duty or *acting in conformity with duty*, which boils down to following a merely hypothetical imperative) but plainly because he *acts from the duty* "thou shalt not steal" (the moral interpretation of duty, which is to act according to what a *categorical imperative* demands).[59] It is unclear, then, for Kant whether a man who follows duty but without such pressures to act otherwise is truly *virtuous*.

Likewise, some consequentialists hold some notions of *virtues* insofar as they incline the moral agent to act with the deemed best consequences, e.g., being altruistic for Peter Singer[60] and other effective altruists, and the so-called *virtue* of selfishness for Ayn Rand[61] and other ethical egoists. Thus, Singer's *virtuous* man is an affluent one who gives every inch of extra resources to relieve world hunger and does not treat this as a mere supererogation.[62] On the other hand, Rand's *virtuous* man is exemplified by the characters in her novels, for instance, John Galt and his followers in *Atlas Shrugged,* who champion a libertarian notion of self-interest against a big government.[63]

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[56] Ibid.

[57] See Ibid., 12

[58] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 5:72. See also Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 4:398.

[59] For the differentiation between *acting in conformity with duty* and *acting from duty*, see Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:82.

[60] See Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

[61] See Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (Signet, 1964).

[62] Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972): 229–243, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2265052.

[63] Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (Signet, 1996).

On the contrary, *virtues,* according to Aristotle and his followers, like St. Thomas Aquinas, are of two kinds: moral virtues and intellectual virtues. The former regulates one's desires to act according to the correct *end*; the latter regulates one's intellect to choose the proper *means* to the correct *end*.[64] These *virtues* guide humans to live according to their *proper end*. Accordingly, instead of duties or consequences, teleology guides Aristotelian *virtues*. This shows, which shall be further elaborated as my paper unfolds, how Aristotelian ethics has a richer philosophy of action (compared with modern ethical theories) that Anscombe would further restore vis-à-vis contemporary intellectual changes in the analytic school.

Notwithstanding, Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," albeit only 19 pages, is philosophically dense. One may write different research papers on its various contentions. One of its notable points is her solutions to David Hume's is-ought distinction or the problem of normativity.[65] While I shall not substantially restate it here, her answers also show her revitalized teleological approach to *actions*, which is more appropriately restated in the third chapter. These groundbreaking solutions, as it were, prophesied the developments in metaethics after her article. The solution of "is" to "owes"[66] predates John Searle's "How to Derive 'Ought' From 'Is'." And her solution of "is" to "needs"[67] predates Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness.*

Likewise, Anscombe recommends two ways of reviving normative ethics (after years of metaethical theorizing in the analytic school since G.E. Moore). First, she recommends that obligations may be contractual,[68] which contemporary moral constructivists, beginning with John Rawls, have developed. Second, and the one that Anscombe favors, we may banish the notion of "ought" as modern moral philosophy defines it and opt for Aristotle's virtues,[69] which Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre have further developed. Accordingly, Anscombe is hailed as the spearhead of the aretaic turn, a movement that has restored Aristotelian ethics as a viable alternative to deontology and consequentialism in contemporary philosophy.

The imperative behind these recommendations comes from another point of criticism—that modern ethics has dislodged from the divine law theory of the Jews, medieval Catholics, and ancient Stoics.[70] "Ought" only retains the mesmeric force (i.e., compelling or commanding rhetorical force) of the Judeo-Christian moral commands. However, it is uncertain where exactly it sources its actual (not merely rhetorical) normativity, unlike how medieval

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[64] Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford University Press, 2011), 1227b35–40.

[65] See David Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature," in *Hume: The Essential Philosophical Works*, ed. Tom Griffith (Wordsworth, 2011), bk. 3, pt. 1, § 1.

[66] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 3–4. Cf. John Searle, "How to Derive 'Is' From 'Ought'," The *Philosophical Review* 73, no. 1 (1964): 43–58, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2183201.

[67] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 5. Cf. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Clarendon Press, 2001).

[68] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14. Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Belknap Press, 1971).

[69] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 14–15. Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Clarendon Press, 2002), 1–18.

[70] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 6.

Catholics were convinced that God is the law-giver.[71] Notably, this affirms something similar to the emotivist (i.e., that ethics, which is non-truth functional, is merely an expression of emotions and its normative force is only a force on our emotions)[72] and prescriptivist (i.e., that moral language, which is non-truth functional, has a purpose of prescribing *actions* and its normative force is that commanding force of language)[73] analyses of normativity but only insofar as referring to modern moral philosophy. If so, using "ought" under modern moral philosophy is akin to using the word "criminal" (which turns out to be still useful for ostracizing people due to its lingering negative connotation) after criminal courts had been dissolved.[74]

Therefore, one must not blindly blame Hume's is-ought distinction for the degradation of moral philosophy. Hume only identified what must be obvious after the period when it used to be justified for medieval Catholics that they *ought* to do what *is* stated in the divine law.[75] But what happens after, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, the so-called *death of God* whom we, due to modern changes, have murdered?[76] One must not wonder, then, why analytic ethics began with G.E. Moore's intuitionism[77] (which resembles Sidgwick's intuitionism, which he thought to be a method in ethics that can be harmonized with utilitarianism, another method in ethics),[78] followed by A.J. Ayer's emotivism[79] (which resembles Hume's sentimentalism),[80] then by R.M. Hare's prescriptivism[81] (which resembles Kant's principle of universalizability).[82] They were all searching for any new source of the good and normativity in lieu of God, as did Hume, their pre-contemporary hero. Although Anscombe does not dwell on these early metaethical theories in "Modern Moral Philosophy," the implication of her criticism of Hume on these theories is clear. MacIntyre, whom Anscombe deeply influenced, pursued this in *After Virtue*, which also criticizes a similar degradation in continental ethics shown in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre.[83]

Apart from Anscombe, Iris Murdoch preceded MacIntyre, particularly in his comparative critique of analytic and existentialist ethics. Among the quartet, Murdoch, while also Oxford-educated and knowledgeable of analytic philosophy, was also keen on French existentialism so much so that she was reputed as one of the leading experts on the alien

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[71] Ibid., 8.

[72] Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Penguin Books, 2001), ch. 6.

[73] Richard Mervyn Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 1952).

[74] Ibid., 6.

[75] Ibid. See also Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*. (Oxford University Press, 2010), 449–467, 685–704.

[76] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge University Press, 2008), aphorism no. 125.

[77] See George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 2nd e. (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[78] See Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (Macmillan and Co., 1907), bk. 3, ch. 1; bk. 4, ch. 4.

[79] See Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 6.

[80] See Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature," bk. 3, pt. 1, § 2.

[81] See Hare, *The Language of Morals*.

[82] See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:31–32.

[83] See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

continental thought in Britain during her time.[84] While it was her youthful existential *angst* that figuratively and literally led her across the English Channel, she soon realized that Ayer and Sartre are just two faces of the same coin.[85] While Sartre can be more poetic, which Murdoch admired, he expressed what Ayer wrote dryly.

According to Ayer, ethics is meaningless, and its controversies are philosophical pseudo-problems. Borrowing from the Vienna Circle of logical positivists, most notably from Rudolf Carnap's "dogma" of analytic-synthetic distinction[86] that traces back to Hume's fork,[87] something must be either *analytic* (i.e., *logical* or tautological) or *synthetic* (i.e., *factual* or empirical) for something to be meaningful. Ethical claims are neither, Ayer argued.[88] Moral claims are only emotional expressions, which may still emotionally "guide" (in the sense that they emotionally impel us) our *actions* and judgments, but are ultimately truth-barren and subjected to individual discretion. Ayer writes:

> But in any case there is nothing to be done about it, except look at the facts, look at them harder, look at more of them, and then come to a moral decision. Then, asking whether the attitude that one has adopted is the right attitude comes down to asking whether one is prepared to stand by it. There can be no guarantee of its correctness, because nothing counts as a guarantee.[89]

Quoting the same passage, Murdoch is stricken by its similarity to Sartre's existentialist hero, who escaped *bad faith* by realizing one's radical freedom (i.e., feeling existential *angst*) and living thereafter according to one's choices that make meaning and value for oneself out of an inherently meaningless and valueless world.[90] Yet how can these explain Philippa Foot's shock when she saw the first newspaper pictures[91] and newsreel footage[92] from the Nazi concentration camps in Buchenwald and Belsen, Germany?[93] Was the shock all nothing but a feeling? Can there be only indignation and never *righteous* indignation? "We are told that we are lonely

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[84] Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something*, 97–98.

[85] Ibid., 97–100.

[86] Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World and Pseudoproblems in Philosophy*, trans. Rolf A. George (Open Court, 2003), 176. See also Rudolf Carnap, *Introduction to Symbolic Logic and its Applications*, trans. William H. Meyer and John Wilkinson (Dover Publications, 1958), 18. Cf. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 1.

[87] See ch. 2, § 1.2.

[88] Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 6.

[89] Alfred Jules Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgments," in *Philosophical Essays* (Macmillan & Co., 1954), 244.

[90] Iris Murdoch, "The Novelist as Metaphysician" in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Penguin Books, 1999), 105.

[91] See Hannah Caven, "Horror in Our Time: Images of the concentration camps in the British media, 1945," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 21, no. 3 (2001): 205–253, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439680120069399.

[92] See Mavis Tate, "German Attrocities (1945)," British Pathé, April 30, 1945, Newsreel, 4 min., 35 sec, https://cutt.ly/jeXRJFia.

[93] Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something*, 2–3. See also Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, 143–145.

individuals in a valueless and meaningless world. Yet it is also hinted that . . . certain moves are preferable to certain others," Murdoch bewilders.[94] "There is no virtue if there is no immortality," Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov boasts.[95]

Earlier than Ayer, Moore argues that because the good is undefinable (i.e., one would commit naturalistic fallacy when one attributes a natural property to the good because it leads to open questions, e.g., if the good is pleasure, is pleasure itself good, what about so-and-so?), the moral must only be intuited (thus, avoiding predication of any natural properties).[96] Yet many Nazis believed that their conscience was clear, intuiting no moral fault in their *actions*.[97] How can we prove them otherwise, but can we even? Hare, after emotivism dissatisfied him, argued that the language of morals is not justly captured by mere emotions. Rather, it prescribes universal imperatives.[98] Nonetheless, Hare still concurs with Ayer that ethics is non-cognitive. It is as if Hare borrowed only the logical form of Kant's principle of universalizability, but without any substantial content to be universalized.

Alas, Ayer's belief, similar to Sartre's hero, that "[...] the right attitude comes down to asking whether one is prepared to stand by it. There can be no guarantee of its correctness [...]"[99] remains true for Moore and Hare. These succeeding failed attempts failed similarly. Anscombe's critique of the modern moral "ought" as having only mesmeric force[100]—may it take the form of emotions, existential *angst*, intuition, or universal prescription—is indeed warranted. Could it be that what the mesmeric morality lacks is retrievable in the rich nature of *human actions*?

Realizing this, it becomes even more striking how Anscombe's three metaethical theses in "Modern Moral Philosophy," while they simultaneously recognize what had become of ethics, would lay the groundwork for the return to normative ethics similar to before all the degradations. As I show in the succeeding sections and chapters, she uses the philosophy of action, emanating from her first thesis, as a tool for metaethical critique that exposes the weaknesses of modern normative ethics.

§3.2. A Preliminary Analysis of Actions Qua Actions

Now returning to her radio talk, Anscombe mockingly suggested to moral corrupters:

> [...] concentrate on examples which are either banal: you promise to return a book, but … and so on; or fantastic: what you ought to do if you had to move

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[94] Iris Murdoch, "The Existentialist Hero," in *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Penguin Books, 1999), 110. See also Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something*, 99.

[95] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Everyman's Library, 1992), 70.

[96] See Moore, *Principia Ethica*.

[97] To consider Adolf Eichmann's case, see Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin Books, 1992), ch. 15.

[98] See Hare, *The Language of Morals*.

[99] Ayer, "On the Analysis of Moral Judgments," 244.

[100] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 7.

> forward and stepping with your right foot meant killing twenty-five fine young men while stepping with your left foot would kill fifty drooling old ones. (Obviously the right thing to do would be to jump and polish off the lot.)[101]

The trolley problem is still the scourge of ethics classes today.[102] It is as *banal* and *fantastic* as it gets. It remains a fallacious pseudo-problem insofar as it aims to illustrate (inadequately) a philosophical controversy (viz., what is the right thing to do?).

It has become banal because seemingly all moral problems are discussed through its pattern or metaphor (or euphemism). Thus, ethics has centered only on moral judgment (good or bad, right or wrong) without thoroughly considering the distinct *actions* outside the trolley problem to which the moral judgment will be applied. It waters down the relevant nuances of particular circumstances, located especially in the *action* under moral scrutiny, whose richer account is not tautological with turning a lever or otherwise, commission or omission. It is fantastic because who would actually be in that situation? We might as well bypass it and just discuss the particular moral problem, such that the nature of the issue (likewise located especially on the *action* under moral scrutiny) will not be further buried under railways and a lever switch. At best, the trolley problem and the likes must only be treated as if each of them applies to only their own distinct *actions* (e.g., turning a lever), as shallow and absurd as their examples of *action* may be. Put together—banal and fantastic—the trolley problem and similarly analogous thought experiments are inadequate compensations for the missing account of what *actions* are. But what are *actions*?

Actions, briefly speaking, are what we *do*—e.g., run, walk, eat, jump, push, etc... But to be more precise, "If I fall over, you wouldn't usually call that an *action* on my part; it's not something that I *do*, it is rather something that happens to me," Anscombe clarifies.[103] Thus, an agent's *intention* (i.e., X is an *action* if it is something that one does on one's part and not what just happens to happen to oneself, like falling over) is a qualification for *action*. However, *intention* is another can of worms. For one, one *action* can have numerous *descriptions,* and the *action* can be *intentional* or not depending on the *description*.[104] Moreover, defining *intention* itself is another problem—is it a mental cause, a feeling, a motivation, etc? But what matters at this point is that we realize that *action* is a relevant philosophical controversy.

We can start our preliminary inquiry on *action* by discussing the nature or definition of the *actions*. For instance, what is running and how is it different from walking? We can then

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[101] Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" 171.

[102] Perhaps I should recognize that the origins of the trolley problem as we know it today is attributed to Philippa Foot, Anscombe's friend, in an article originally published in 1967. See Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 19–32. Nevertheless, similar analogical thoughts experiments in ethics already existed prior as proven by Anscombe's radio talk critical of them about a decade before Foot's article.

[103] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Action, Intention and 'Double Effect'" in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, eds. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Imprint Academic, 2005), 214.

[104] Ibid., 214–215.

realize how philosophizing *action* is relevant to ethics, because all that are morally obligated, permitted, or otherwise are *actions*. "One ought not to kill other humans," many will concur. But what is it to *kill*? Does the term "kill" suitably express what we mean when we say it? One may argue that "killing" another human in self-defense does not belong to what "one ought not to kill other humans" commands. If so, what is the difference between the *action* of self-defense and the *action* that the example means to prohibit?

There are two traditional reasons why the distinct *actions* may initially appear synonymous. It can be because the term is *ambiguous* if it gains different meanings.[105] Or the term is *vague* if the meaning is loose or has unclear boundaries (as mentioned earlier, does "killing" include so-and-so?).[106] This brings us back to Truman—what is "mass murder" that we call, and was it Mr. Truman's *action* when it seems that all he did was what we call "signing a paper"? And if we cannot provide an account of Truman's *action*, then we cannot proceed to the ethical judgment of the *action* he has taken. However, this traditional account of the problem with *actions* merely applies a basic linguistic analysis also used in non-*action* terms. Anscombe has her specialized manner of problematizing *actions*, called the *problem of relevant descriptions*, elaborated in the next subsection.

It also becomes clearer why the trolley problem and other analogical thought experiments fall short in discussing what is good or bad, right or wrong. At best, by representing a distinct *action* under moral scrutiny through the *actions* possible in railways and lever switches (e.g., turning the lever or not, commission or ommission), we are implicitly directed to assume that what we just have to consider is the consequences or duties which are more "exciting" and "fruitful" to consider than thinking what is to turn a lever. Why would one inquire into the nature of *action* under moral scrutiny, although one has to as established prior, if the format of the analogy already designates it to be turning the lever or not—an account so vapid that no rich philosophy of action relevant to ethics may arise from it?

Furthermore, given that different *actions* are different from one another, one commits the fallacy of false equivalence if the moral judgment on *action* α is just applied to *action* β, such that β is not considered as β but as if it is tautological to α when that is not the case. Yet many analogies in ethics work this way. One may explain this away by defending that metaphors and what they symbolize may have something in common and not necessarily be tautological.[107] But my criticism still stands, for you will still be admitting that α (e.g., analogical *actions* under the trolley problem) only bears some similarity but is not tautological to β (non-analogical/distinct *actions*, e.g., killing, stealing, assaulting, etc). Even if you add a caveat that you will be particularizing on what is common between α and β (if there is any), I invoke Occam's razor.

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[105] Adresito Acuña, *Philosophical Analysis: Advanced Techniques for Critical Thinking*, 7th ed., (UP Department of Philosophy, 2006), 35.

[106] Ibid., 35.

[107] See Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 1 (1978): 31–47, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342976.

Why get in trouble with metaphors (which is another but unnecessary philosophical problem in regards to the moral problem) when you can just provide an account of the *action* itself, which may be another philosophical problem, but a necessary one?

Or worse, the trolley problem does not even care to analogize distinct *actions*. The trolley problem may be only posing as if its discussion of right and wrong applies to all moral circumstances regardless of distinct *actions*. Of course, saving the most number of the highest quality humans is the right thing to do, even when mass murder, population control, eugenics, and other *actions* are involved, because *actions qua actions* do not matter. Only consequences (or whatever an ethical theory's definition of the *good*) matter.

§3.3. The Problem of Relevant Descriptions

However, others may argue that while there are distinct *actions*, how they are morally justified is the same: either by consequence (in consequentialism) or by duty (in deontology).

Suppose *action a* is wrong because of justification *A*. Suppose there is another *action b* judged as wrong on the same level as *action a*. Is it not possible that the reason why *a* and *b* are wrong on the same level is that their justification is both *A* (e.g., both *actions a* and *b* produce the same value or range of net-negative utility)? Accordingly, *actions a* and *b* are just instantiations of *B* in the more general moral judgment or what Bertrand Russell calls a propositional function:[108] "*B* is wrong because of *A*," such that particular *actions a* and *b* are members of set *B* but also of *A*. Or more precisely: "$(\forall x)$ (Bx → Ax) → Wrong(x)."

The propositional function has three predicates corresponding to sets: *B*, *A*, and *Wrong*. However, we are only concerned with sets *B* and *A* for this section (i.e., it is irrelevant for now if, for instance, having a net-negative utility or any definition of bad makes *actions* wrong). Accordingly, let us focus on this part of the propositional function: "$(\forall x)$ (Bx → Ax)." Noticeably, all members of set *B* are *necessarily* also members of set *A*. Put simply, sets *B* and *A* have the same domain. But they do not incidentally have the same domain, for these sets are tautological, i.e., the members of set *B* (e.g., *actions a* and *b*) must also be members of set *A* (e.g., it must have a particular net-negative utility value of -x.x or some range) to be members of set *B* and vice-versa. In other words, not only do they have the same *extension*, they also have the same *intension*. Hence, Rudolf Carnap advises that in such propositional functions, we must do away with the antecedent "Bx" because "Ax" is already sufficient, and predicate *A* tells us better about the membership qualification of set *B* than predicate *B* does.[109] Thus, the precise propositional function turns out to be "$(\forall x)$ (Ax) → Wrong(x)."[110]

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[108] See Betrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (Routledge, 2010), lec. 5.

[109] Carnap, *Introduction to Symbolic Logic*, 36.

[110] In this propositional function, the remark from Carnap does not apply because not all members of set *Wrong* are also members of set *A*. It is possible that there are more wrong *actions* other than *actions a* and *b*.

This explicates my claim earlier—that *actions* in modern moral philosophy are ultimately characterized by moral justifications alone (i.e., what is the good) of the particular ethical theory. *Actions a* and *b* are known only insofar as predicated by *A*—i.e., that, for instance, *a* is *a* and *b* is *b* only because they have a particular net-negative utility value of -x.x or some range. Thus, according to this account, the membership qualification of set *A* is already a *sufficient* condition for *actions a* and *b* to be *a* and *b*, implying that predicate *A* wholly *describes* these *actions*. It also further makes sense how the trolley problem, which only focuses on defining the good regardless of the account of *actions qua actions,* goes hand in hand with modern moral philosophy. Anscombe's criticism of consequentialism is now under our noses.

It seems that, insofar as ethics is concerned, it is already sufficient that we account for actions based on their adherence to some normative values. But is that really sufficient? Is normativity the precondition for accounting for actions, or is it the other way around? Anscombe's *problem of relevant descriptions* will awaken us from the dogmatic slumber of the usual way of doing moral philosophy. I divide the puzzle into three parts.

1. The same *action* can have many *descriptions*.
2. Which of those *descriptions* are *relevant*?
3. And when there are many relevant descriptions of the same action, which is often the case, how do we still make sense of the action as a unified single action?

This section shall elaborate on the first part. The second part shall be introduced as a problem (but not fully resolved) in the next subsection. However, the third part cannot be elaborated and resolved in this paper, although I did so in my undergraduate thesis.

As illustrated previously, the account of the nature of *actions* in consequentialist theories is only *actions qua* consequences. However, Anscombe remarks:

> Mill also, like Kant, fails to realize the necessity for stipulation as to relevant descriptions, if his theory is to have content. It did not occur to him that acts of murder and theft could be otherwise described. He holds that where a proposed action is of such a kind as to fall under some one principle established on grounds of utility, one must go by that; where it falls under none or several, the several suggesting contrary views of the action, the thing to do is to calculate particular consequences. But pretty well any action can be so described as to make it fall under a variety of principles of utility (as I shall say for short) if it falls under any.[111]

[111] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 3. Cf. Mill, "Utilitarianism."

The same *action* can be *described* in many ways.[112] Did I *flip the switch*? Or did I *turn on the lights*? Or did I *alert* someone outside that there is someone in this room? Did I *slap* you? Or did I *swat the mosquito* on your cheeks? Or did I *wake you up* from unconsciousness? Did I *lie*? Or did I *manipulate* you? Or did I *save myself* from retribution? Or did I *save someone* from being harmed by misleading the killer about someone's true whereabouts?

If an *action* can have many *descriptions*, then one *description* may produce consequences that differ from the calculations in other *descriptions*. Consequently, our moral judgment may differ depending on which *description* frames our judgment, leading to antinomies. Action "x" under description "a" can be optimific or have net-positive utility, but it may not be under description "b," "c," "d," etc… You can say that your action, as described as "giving alms to the poor" or "feeding the needy," promotes happiness. But your action can also be described as "encouraging dependency" and "inhibiting self-reliance," which promotes harm. But the question is: why should these *descriptions* and not the other ones frame our judgment on this *action* under moral scrutiny? But what if all these *descriptions* do *describe* the same *action*? And what if there are other *descriptions* that we are forgetting to consider? We must realize, then, the importance of the philosophy of action to moral philosophy.

As of writing, news about the Philippine Senate hearing on the former President Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" has caused the infamous rhetoric to resurface. "The war on illegal drugs is not about killing people. This is about the innocent and the defenseless," Duterte contends.[113] He implies that the relevant *description* of his *action* is *saving* the victims and possible victims of illegal drugs rather than *killing* innocent suspects or drug criminals. The *description* "saving" already frames our consequentialist judgment for Duterte's *action* (and remarkably, most justifications for the "war on drugs" are consequentialist), regardless of whether the calculation is correct or incorrect (which is another criticism against consequentialism, but I digress). And of course, *saving* lives is for the greatest happiness. One may respond: "...but not if it means *killing* people." But how can you say that if the principle of double effect is unspeakable, as in Truman's case? Is it not true that forbidding evil *means* that good may come is a "disagreeably high-minded doctrine," because the consequential *ends* ultimately justify the *means*?[114] Moreover, that retort implicitly assumes that *killing* is the relevant *description* rather than *saving* lives. But how can you argue that under consequentialism when there are various *descriptions*? Likewise, how can Duterte imply that his *action*s' relevant

[112] See also Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Under a Description," *Noûs* 13, no. 2 (1979): 219–233, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2214398; and Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe and Sidney Morgenbesser, "Two Kinds of Error in Action," *The Journal of Philosophy* 60, no. 14 (1963): 393–401, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2022824.

[113] Rowegie Abanto, "'Ako Ang Makulong': Duterte Says He Takes 'Full Responsibility' for Bloody Drug War," *ABS-CBN News*, October 28, 2024, https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/2024/10/28/duterte-says-he-takes-full-responsibility-for-bloody-drug-war-1237.

[114] Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 64–65.

description is *saving* lives? Thus, Anscombe writes, "It is a necessary feature of consequentialism that it is a shallow philosophy."[115]

The same problem applies in the same manner to deontology. Anscombe observes:

> His [Kant's] own rigoristic convictions on the subject of lying were so intense that it never occurred to him that a lie could be relevantly described as anything but just a lie (e.g. as "a lie in such-and-such circumstances"). His rule about universalizable maxims is useless without stipulations as to what shall count as a relevant description of an action with a view to constructing a maxim about it.[116]

However, Onora O'Neill, a Kantian, casts doubt on this. While she recognizes that the *problem of relevant description* may persist in judging particular *actions* already done, she states:

> But in *practical* judging we are not judging a particular act. The task in practical judgment is to shape action *that is not yet done*. There is no particular act to be judged. The aim of practical judgment is to shape the world (in small part), not to identify some way in which the world is shaped. Action yet to be done can be shaped by ensuring that it satisfies a range of standards, rules, principles or laws that are taken into account in deliberating. There will, of course, often be many ways of satisfying any set of standards, rules, laws or principle, indeed many ways of satisfying a single standard, rule, principle or law. For example, a rule such as 'always check your petrol before driving onto the motorway' could be satisfied by many different acts. I might check the petrol the night before my trip, or as I get into the car, or as I pass a pump—or, alas, as I drive onto a long stretch of motorway without service stations.[117]

This Kantian *apologia* does not impress me. For one, is O'Neill then succumbing to Anscombe's argument that we must do away with "ought" as modern moral philosophy, including deontology, defines it?

Second, you still need the philosophy of action in moral philosophy, even if the *action* is not yet been done. Practical reason, as shown by Aristotle and reiterated by Anscombe, in *actions* one will actuate includes thinking about the *action*'s *end* and the *means* to achieve it. This is the purpose of Aristotle's intellectual virtues, which dispose our faculty of deliberation to choose the correct *means* for our *actions* to be done.[118] By doing so, a moral agent must already be thinking of *actions* he will actuate. Accordingly, one must still address the *problem of relevant descriptions*. For instance, before a nation declares war, that nation must deliberate about its *intended actions* that are yet to be done. The fact that Anscombe critiqued Britain after joining WWII[119] does not mean that Britain could not have deliberated its *actions* before *acting* on them.

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[115] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 12.

[116] Ibid., 2. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; and Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

[117] Onora O'Neill, "Modern Moral Philosophy and the Problem of Relevant Description," in *Modern Moral Philosophy*, ed. Anthony O'Hear (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 312.

[118] Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 1228a; bk. 5.

[119] See Anscombe and Daniel, "The Justice of Present War Examined," 72–81.

That critique, more than a criticism of an *action* already there, is also a retrospective critique of Britain's deliberation. The same applies to Truman's case. O'Neill seems to think that the *problem of relevant description* only applies to a third-party moral judge or a moral agent contemplating past *actions,* when it also applies to moral deliberations before doing the *action*.

Lastly, the argument that *actions,* that are not yet there, can be molded by some rules during deliberation may boil down to a vicious circle because those rules still include *actions*. Indeed, "always check your petrol before driving onto the motorway" is a rule that can be satisfied by various *actions*, because it is a banal and easy example. That rule also contains the *action* "check your petrol." If some instantiations satisfy it, it just means they contain relevant *descriptions* of that *action*. However, the fact that there are *actions* that are true in many non-conflicting *descriptions* does not negate that there are *actions* that encounter the *problem of relevant descriptions*. Can there be an *action*-guiding rule during a moral agent's deliberation that would prevent killing another human (and thus shape the moral actor's *action* not yet there)? Should the maxim state, "Thou shalt not kill"? But what is *killing?*

To begin with, how do we even properly formulate a maxim to be tested for universalizability if the *action* in that maxim has many *descriptions*? You can say that *lying* is wrong. But in certain circumstances, the *action* described as *lying* can also be *described* as *keeping promises* (suppose you promised your friend to deny something to keep her secret for her privacy). If "one ought not to *lie*" is universalizable as Kant argues,[120] then it must apply to all situations, including the one I mentioned. But looking at the other *description*, *keeping promises*, it seems the opposite. Or, similar with the example on Duterte, consider one saying: the *action* is not even about *lying*, it is about *helping someone* (suppose the person said to someone angrily holding a knife that he does not know the true whereabouts of a stranger he passed by on the sidewalk, although he knows that the stranger turned that way). And if *helping* a stranger is the *description*, then the maxim, "one ought not do the *action*," is not even universalizable, because even Kant would argue that *helping* is beyond duty (i.e., an imperfect duty).[121] But if *lying* describes the *action*, then the maxim is universalizable. But how do we settle the problem of whether this or that description does or does not *describe* the *action*? And how do we know if the *description* is *relevant*? This now leads us to the second part of the *problem of relevant descriptions*.

§3.4. A Preliminary Analysis of Actions Qua Human Actions

Because the same *action* can have many *descriptions*, there must be stipulations for identifying the *relevant description* even before considering the *action*'s consequences or duties for them—i.e., there must be an account of *actions qua actions*. Referring to the propositional function earlier, predicate *A*, whether a consequentialist or deontological qualification, does not

[120] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:402–403.
[121] See ibid., 4:422.

capture the whole nature of *actions*. Accordingly, consequentialist and deontological moral judgments are in crisis. But how do we know the *relevant descriptions* of the *action*?

I divide this second part into two subparts. First, we must delineate the *relevant descriptions* of *actions* in principle. By "in principle," I mean we must find in the most general sense when a *description describes* an *action relevant* in moral philosophy at large, without addressing yet the particularities of particular circumstances or moral problems. I.e., does this *description* really *describe* an *action* that moral philosophy, in general, is concerned with? Second, given that we now know the *relevant descriptions* in principle, we must further delineate which of those *relevant* in principle are actually *relevant* in particular circumstances we are considering. Nonetheless, both shall show that an account of *actions* needed in ethics is inextricably human.

First, ethics is concerned with *actions* as *human actions* (*actus humanus*). We are not interested in the dog barking and the cat meowing.[122] Neither are we interested in the *actions of humans* (*actus hominis*) such as breathing, yawning, blinking, *actions* of our bodies at the cellular level, and others.[123]

To further clarify, *human actions* are distinguished from *acts of man*. *Acts of man* are those that happen to humans and not that humans do them; they are involuntary. I do not beat my heart; my heart just beats because that is how the human body works. I did not kick my knee; reflex kicks just happen to my knee because the doctor hit my knee with a reflex hammer. I did not ram myself into you; my body just jolted incidentally in your direction because I was surprised when the crocodile suddenly leaped at me. Wittgenstein did not threaten Karl Popper with a poker; he just held and moved the poker as if a pointing stick while speaking loudly because that is his mannerism—at least according to Peter Geach.[124] Noticeably, acts of man are explained only by their *causes*;[125] they are described mechanistically. On the other hand, human actions are explained with *reason*.[126] They do not just happen, humans do them. And that is why humans can explain why they do them. Why are you jumping? I am trying to reach the book on the shelf. Why are you drinking coffee this late? I have an exam tomorrow. Why did you lie? I made a promise. Why did you punch him? Because he punched me.

Accordingly, some nuances of *action qua actions* can be located in humans who produce that *action*. Therefore, the wholeness of the account of *actions qua actions* is found in the account of *actions qua human actions*. This also means that human reasoning through which one's *action* is produced is relevant to the philosophy of action. After all, *human actions*, unlike *actus hominis* and *actions* of other organisms without the extent of reason as humans have, must

[122] Anscombe, "Action, Intention and 'Double Effect'," 215.

[123] Ibid.

[124] See David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins, 2001).

[125] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 200), §§ 7, 10.

[126] Ibid., § 5.

be thought of and not just mindlessly done. That is to say, we can attain the account of *action qua human action* through the philosophy of psychology, which is necessarily intertwined with the philosophy of action insofar as we are discussing *human actions*.

For instance, Harry Frankfurt famously differentiated *bullshitting* from *lying*.[127] In *lying*, the liar cares about the truth and so *intends* to mislead people away from what he believes to be true. In *bullshitting*, the bullshitter does not care about the truth and merely says whatever he believes to be persuasive as he *intends* to persuade people for some other *ends* excluding making people believe what he knows or does not know (or does not even care to know) to be true or false. We may now realize how the *problem of relevant descriptions* can be solved by inquiring into *intention*, because the *intention* of one's *action* contains *descriptions* that are relevant to the *action* but not for other *actions* (e.g., the *description* of "misleading" occurs in lying but not in bulshitting).

A plethora of similar differentiations are also found in jurisprudence. Consider murder (wherein the moral agent has the *intention* to kill or inflict serious harm) vis-à-vis manslaughter (wherein the moral agent does not have the *intention* to kill or inflict serious harm), etc… And even if both cases resulted in the same consequence (e.g., the death of the victim) or even if they are from the same unclear (because the *problem of relevant descriptions* applies) moral duty (e.g., thou shalt not kill), these *actions* are still judged differently.

You may say that X *kills* Y, but X may retort: "I only *pushed* him," or "I only *transferred force through my hands* to his chest." Or more convincingly, X may say: "I *did not kill* Y, I only *defended myself* against him," or "Yes, I *pushed* Y but what killed him was his impact on the stone which I did not see because the terrain was grassy, and so I *did not intend to kill* him," among other *descriptions*. Realizing how some *descriptions* may be unconvincing (i.e., they do not capture the nature of the *action* or the *description* is not the *relevant* one) must convince us of the importance of the philosophy of action (i.e., how can we argue that such *descriptions* are unconvincing?) to moral philosophy.

This now leads us to the second subpart of the second part of the *problem of relevant descriptions*. Since, in principle, the *descriptions* of *actions* that are *relevant* to moral philosophy are those wherein the human agent can *reason* why, when we are dealing with particular circumstances of moral scrutiny, the relevant descriptions must come from the particular human agent. I.e., the *relevant descriptions* of a particular *action* must come from the particular human agent. Suppose someone *shot a gun* and the bullet hit a man. As observers, it is easy for us to describe the action we saw as "he *gunned down* a man." That is, in principle, a *relevant description* since it *describes* a *human action*. But because we are now dealing with a particular *action* done by a particular human agent, we must consider the particular human agent and extract the *reason* why he *acted* so from him. It is possible that he did not *act* under the

[127] Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

description "to *gun down* a man," but "to *hit* an animal" because he was hunting and he thought that the man was a deer.

Differentiating *actions* as such aids in taking account of moral culpability—i.e., to what degree one can be held responsible for one's *actions*. The notion of culpability is necessary in ethics because, again, it is the human who does the *action* under moral scrutiny. Thus, not only do we morally scrutinize the *action* alone (as if it is a free-floating *action* without an actor, which is not the case), but we also necessarily scrutinize the moral actor.

But what happens if you fail to see *actions* under moral scrutiny as *human actions*? Anscombe observes a moral depravity:

> Responsibility is causality; for to hold someone in good standing responsible for what he did is to ascribe the whole causality of it as an event to him — and that is unfair; you must not make him a scapegoat for something that obviously had all sorts of causes. Thus I must face the future with a recognition of limitless responsibility; no letting myself off this; I cannot, for example, take the easy way out by saying that certain courses of action are excluded by their badness; but towards the past I need feel only that degree of responsibility indicated by my share in bringing about whatever situation was brought about.[128]

Simply put, we fail to hold people responsible, as in Truman's case. But also, we fail to delineate where people's responsibility ends, as shown in the so-called *doctrine of collective responsibility*. But if the reader is understandably still unconvinced that such cases are instances of moral depravity, the succeeding chapters shall further elucidate.

Nevertheless, modern moral philosophy may still have some notion of *human action*, particularly *intention*. Sidgwick argues:

> [...] in the case of conscious actions, the agent is not regarded as morally culpable, except in an indirect way, for entirely unforeseen effects of his voluntary actions. No doubt when a man's action has caused some unforeseen harm, the popular moral judgment often blames him for carelessness; but it would be generally admitted by reflective persons that in such cases strictly moral blame only attaches to the agent in an indirect way, in so far as his carelessness is the result of some wilful neglect of duty. *Thus the proper immediate objects of moral approval or disapproval would seem to be always the results of a man's volitions so far as they were intended—i.e. represented in thought as certain or probable consequences of his volitions* (*emphasis added*) [...][129]

He adds:

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[128] Anscombe, "Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?" 172–173.
[129] Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, bk. 1, ch. 5, §2, para. 2.

> [...] that the Intuitionist properly speaking—in contrast with the Utilitarian—does not judge actions by an external standard at all; that true morality, in his view, *is not concerned with outward actions as such, but with the state of mind in which acts are done—in short with "intentions" and "motives"* (*emphasis added*). [...] In other words, *what we judge to be 'wrong'—in the strictest ethical sense—is not any part of the actual effects, as such, of the muscular movements immediately caused by the agent's volition, but the effects which he foresaw in willing the act; or, more strictly, his volition or choice of realising the effects as foreseen* (*emphasis added*). When I speak therefore of acts, I must be understood to mean—unless the contrary is stated—acts presumed to be intentional and judged as such [...][130]

Simply put, Sidgwick "[...] defines intention in such a way that one must be said to intend any foreseen consequences of one's voluntary action,"[131] i.e., the *intention* is the moral actor's foresight of the *action*'s expected consequences. However, this implies that:

> [...] Sidgwick's thesis leads to its being quite impossible to estimate the badness of an action except in the light of *expected* consequences. But if so, then *you* must estimate the badness in light of the consequences *you* expect; and so it will follow that you can exculpate yourself from the *actual* consequences of the most disgraceful actions, so long as you can make out a case for not having foreseen them.[132]

The acceptance of this is not just true for Sidgwick but for "[...] *consequentialism* [...] which marks him and every English academic moral philosopher since him."[133] Anscombe, in fact, coined the term "consequentialism for this reason. Because Sidgwick endorses an ethical judgment based on foresight of consequences, absolutism, which characterizes the absolute nature of natural laws before modern moral philosophy, has become impossible under him and those with similar philosophical thought. It should be noted, however, that many no longer use "consequentialism" purely in Anscombe's original coinage, which is strictly for identifying the consequentialism-absolutism demarcation. Nonetheless, Anscombe's coinage continues to help us today to also demarcate consequentialism (even in the sense beyond Anscombe's definition) from (Aristotelian teleology), because what we classify now as consequentialist theories (which we now include classical utilitarianism) used to be incorrectly categorized under teleology (distinguished only from deontology).[134]

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[130] Ibid., bk. 3, ch. 1, § 2, para. 1.
[131] Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 11.
[132] Ibid., 12
[133] Ibid.
[134] See Charlie Dunbar Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory* (Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1930), 296, 278. This insufficient teleology-deontology distinction is also taught by probably the most popular or more traditional textbook for Philo 1 (Philosophical Analysis) in the University of the Philippines. See Acuña, *Philosophical Analysis*, 259.

Furthermore, Aristotle's intellectual virtues are unspeakable under consequentialism from Sidwick and onwards, because lacking skills in deliberation and calculative thinking for your *actions* will still absolve you in the end. And it further makes sense why the *doctrine of double effect* is unintelligible to modern moral philosophy. The doctrine morally permits good or morally neutral *actions* that have foreseeable but *unintended* bad effects, but this disintegrates if what is foreseen is *intended*. Thus, Anscombe disagrees with this "vulgar" definition of *intention*. Notably, the doctrine is also one of the pillars of absolutism, for it shields moral laws against the inconstant nature of consequences in foresight.

§4. Further Hurdles to Philosophy of Psychology

In 1957, Anscombe wrote a review of Glanville Williams' book, published in the same year. Suspiciously, the law journal that commissioned it declined to publish it, akin to the BBC Third Programme incident. Yet this is just the rabbit hole to the common philosophical degradation entrenched in British thought. Indeed, as Lipscomb puts it, it was "Anscombe versus the world."[135]

Williams' *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*[136] deploys polemical propaganda (which, unfortunately, may not be that polemical in contemporary Western public opinion). This so-called "New Statesman" mentality, as Anscombe names it after Williams' like-minded *The New Statesman* magazine, includes: (1) the permissibility of mothers' "eugenic killing" of physically and mentally defective babies,[137] (2) population control through giving incentives to the parents commensurate with their social status (the poorer, the lesser),[138] (3) sterilization of people with genetically transmissible disorders and diseases,[139] (4) babies conceived through artificial insemination by donor (AID) are natural children of the wife and the (non-biological father) husband,[140] (5) abortion must be permissible for any reason doctors think fit up until the time of viability,[141] and (6) suicide is not wrong and assisted suicide (not just euthanasia for the ill patients) must be legalized.[142] It must now be obvious how Sidgwick's "vulgar" definition of *intention*, which makes the *doctrine of double effect* impossible, may have aided these positions.

But Anscombe observes another, but more primitive, source of corruption, which may have foregrounded Sidgwick's depravity:

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[135] Lipscomb, *The Women are Up to Something*, ch. 6.
[136] See Glanville Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).
[137] Ibid., 31.
[138] Ibid., 68–69, 71.
[139] Ibid., ch. 3.
[140] Ibid., 137.
[141] Ibid., 232–233.
[142] Ibid., 305.

> But ever since the seventeenth century a false and absurd conception of intention has prevailed, which derives from Cartesian psychology; according to this conception an intention is a secret mental act which is producible at will. In the event, theologians often treated the 'direction of intention' as something that could be accomplished by telling oneself at the time of action 'What I really mean to be doing is…'[143]

And so, "[...] a servant could go and hold the ladder for a burglarious master, so long as 'he directed his intention' purely to the earning of his pay."[144] And by *intending* so, the moral agent implies that "earning of his pay" is the relevant *description* of his *action*—his help to his master's burglary in *acting* so is irrelevant. Therefore, there is no distinction between earning pay in other—what an Aristotelian would argue to be good or morally neutral—ways and in the example provided. The trick is:

> He [Williams] himself knows very well that it is one thing to give a man drugs to ease his pain, knowing that their cumulative effect may kill him before the disease does, and another to poison him intentionally; he denies the moral importance of the distinction in order to push people over from accepting the one into accepting the other [...][145]

In the same manner, a physician may direct one's *intention* when "aborting" a fetus, the same way when one *intends* to "treat" an ectopic pregnancy.[146] A man may also father a child through a donor's semen because it is he who has "fathering" in mind, not the donor. The same goes for eugenics and sterilization—for it seems that you may say in your head when you are about to "euthanize" or "sterilize" someone: "I *intend* to do this just like I usually 'get rid of patients' diseases' or 'prevent' them." Needless to say, in the latter cases, the patient can be cured and get to live. Similar goes for the public who benefits from the suppression of viral diseases (vis-à-vis the possible children who may inherit their parents' disabilities, which is a comparison as fair as the earlier one). But all is well—just do not think about these, and you will not *intend* them. As Anscombe insinuates, such a notion of *intention* coheres with Williams' belief "[...] that there is no such thing as dishonest belief."[147]

Put simply, apart from Sidgwick's definition of *intention* as foresight of consequence, is *intention* a private mental act, as Williams argues? But if *intention* is private, how should we judge if this *description* of so-and-so is truly the *description* under which the human agent is *acting*? Is it sufficient that it is just what is in his head? How do we know he is lying?

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[143] Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, "Glanville Williams' The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law: A Review," in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Imprint Academic, 2005), 252–253. Cf. René Descartes, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings*, trans. Desmond M. Clarke (Penguin Books, 2003), meditation 6.

[144] Anscombe, "The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law: A Review," 253.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid. Cf. Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law*, 165n.

§ 5. What Now?

Now that the discussion is leading to how to correctly define *intention* (which, in my undergraduate thesis, led me to uncover Anscombe's implicit Wittgensteinian and Aristotelian methodology), I shall leave this paper hanging. Nonetheless, I shall also end this paper grounded in human life. I shall stay true to Anscombe's view, or even of the whole Wartime Quartet and even of the later Wittgenstein, that philosophy, even of today's *age of analysis* and by still maintining its linguistic rigor, must return to its humane roots from the *age of metaphysics*—this is the Anscombeian brand of what P.F. Strawson calls "the post-Lingusitic thaw."[148] In light of this, I shall mention some other things to further ponder.

Going back to Duterte, the issue of the war on drugs, especially as people debate it, has collapsed into a trolley-like dilemma. Duterte is accused of killing the most vulnerable. It is said that his war on drugs is, basically, a war against the poor. On the other hand, the critics who accused Duterte have also been criticized. Duterte's supporters say that the critics are basically ignoring the likewise vulnerable population, especially women and children, who were harmed by drug addicts. There is something to observe and analyze about these conversations. Not all the time, but sometimes, some people actually agree or at least can agree on what is good. At the end of the day, many people want peace. Many do not want innocent people to be harmed. But what people actually disagree on is how to even *describe* the *actions* that they will then judge according to their common definition of the good. There is something much deeper, but often overlooked, that is left unsettled. And maybe, moral dilemmas are dilemmas not only because we disagree on what is good, but also and primarily because, to begin with, we do not even agree on how to *describe* the *action* under moral scrutiny. And there is something Aristotelian here that modern moral philosophy has forgotten. There must be a difference between knowing the good and knowing how we achieve the good, akin to how Aristotle distinguished moral virtues and intellectual virtues.[149] And to further extend the point, maybe because modern ethics lack a thicker account of action, we are led to presuppose *thin ethical concepts* like good or evil, right or wrong. But if moral philosophy is stipulated with philosophy of action, as it should be, will we be compelled to favor *thick ethical concepts*,[150] like virtues and vices?

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[148] Peter Frederick Strawson, "The Post-Linguistic Thaw," in Philosophical Writings (Oxford University Press, 2011), 71–77. See also Wiseman, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Anscombe's Intention*, 16.

[149] Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, 1227b35–40.

[150] See Debbie Robers, "Thick Concepts," in *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics*, ed. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett (Routledge, 2018), 211–225.

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