

# A Philosopher of singular style and multiple modes

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## Abstract

Elizabeth Anscombe was one of the most gifted and productive philosophers of the decades following the Second World War. Her writings present challenges to readers: some of them are very difficult to comprehend while others seem philosophically-minded yet situated outside of philosophy as such. There are also the issues of whether she had a philosophical method and of the influence of Wittgenstein on the manner of her approach. A summary and estimate of Anscombe's enduring contributions is presented before exploring the style and aims of her philosophical work. Then two of her writings on religion are examined and their implications for her attitude to philosophy considered.

## 1. Introduction

Elizabeth Anscombe was without question one of the most gifted, creative, wide-ranging and productive Anglophone philosophers of the post-war period. Her approach was quite distinctive as was her style. It is common to say that her work is difficult to read and comprehend, and certainly that is true of much of it. But other writings of hers are relatively clear. What accounts for this difference is in part a matter of intended audience or readership, but also the circumstances that had occasioned a piece, the nature of the task in which she was engaged, and the tractability or otherwise of the material with which she was dealing. One of her gifts was to expose the complexity of matters that had hitherto been taken to be simple so she often presented readers, who might otherwise have expected a straight and smooth path, with a twisting, turning and unpaved route. Certainly, she never wrote anything trite or facile, however humble the context, such as an address on the topic of morality to an unphilosophical lay audience<sup>1</sup> but nor did she indulge herself in gratuitous displays of philosophical sophistication. Indeed, I would suggest as a rule of thumb the principle if Anscombe makes *it* (the issue) seem difficult that is because *it* is difficult.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Morality' the text of a talk given in 1982 published in C. Marneau ed. *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* (London, 1982) and reprinted in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by GEM Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2008).

Like most philosophy students or academics, the writings of Anscombe that I first encountered were her most famous essay 'Modern Moral Philosophy'<sup>2</sup>, her monograph *Intention*,<sup>3</sup> her Cambridge Inaugural lecture 'Causality and Determination',<sup>4</sup> and her Wolfson College lecture 'The First Person'.<sup>5</sup> Unlike most, however, I also read, at more or less the same time, 'Contraception and Chastity'<sup>6</sup> and 'Transubstantiation'<sup>7</sup>, both originally published as pamphlets intended for a non-philosophical readership. It was evident in each of these six writings that the writer was quite distinctive, authorially 'present' in the texts, and of strong mind and opinion. Most commentary about Anscombe has focused on 'Modern Moral Philosophy' and *Intention*, and the last two items ('Contraception' and 'Transubstantiation') are among those writings which, if philosophers are aware of them at all, are treated as eccentric, both in the sense of lying away from the centre of her philosophical work and in being idiosyncratic. I think this is obviously wrong so far as the first is concerned for it is of a piece with her professional philosophical writing about action and ethics. 'Transubstantiation', however, is different but one may learn things from it about her philosophical attitude. I will return to this point later discussing it and another largely ignored essay 'Faith'.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Anscombe's anticipations

As a philosopher Anscombe was perceptive, insightful, imaginative, bold, rigorous in argument, independently-minded often given to attacking prevailing orthodoxies as in the four overtly philosophical pieces cited above. She was also creative, turning insights into ideas

<sup>2</sup> 'Modern Moral Philosophy' *Philosophy*, 33 (124) 1958, reprinted in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957)

<sup>4</sup> *Causality and Determination. An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971) reprinted in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind: Collected Philosophical Papers of GEM Anscombe* Vol. II (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> 'The First Person' in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> *Contraception and Chastity* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1975) reprinted in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds *Human Life, Action and Ethics* op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> *Transubstantiation* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1974) reprinted in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds *Faith in a Hard Ground* op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> 'Faith' in *Faith in a Hard Ground* op. cit.

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that have become part of common philosophical thinking as in the following examples:

1. That facts are more or less brute.<sup>9</sup>
2. That causes need not necessitate their effects.<sup>10</sup>
3. That actions are intentional under a description.<sup>11</sup>
4. That agents knowledge of their own intentional actions is non-observational.<sup>12</sup>
5. That moral theory requires moral psychology.<sup>13</sup>
6. That moral theories that do not distinguish morally between the intended and the foreseen, and between action and omission, are alike in being consequentialist.<sup>14</sup>
7. That many descriptive concepts, most relevantly those relating to natural functions, include or imply normative aspects.<sup>15</sup>

Her short 1986 statement of ‘Twenty Opinions Common among Modern Anglo-American Philosophers’<sup>16</sup> which, as in an ecclesiastical anathema declaration, she states views which she thinks are to be *denied*, allows one to infer a number of other theses which she regarded as important, and which were at odds with modern philosophical orthodoxies. These concern philosophical anthropology and philosophy of mind, ethics and action, metaphysics and natural theology. I group them as follows blending Anscombe’s own words with my gloss and occasional expansion upon them.

First, human beings are a species of animal belonging to a natural kind whose essence is human nature. There is no ‘self’ distinct from a living human individual and nor is human personhood a status involving characteristics that some human beings may fail to acquire or may come to lose. A human corpse is not a human being.

Second, ethical considerations may vary according to the biological nature of the rational beings involved; in particular human ethics, i.e. ethics relating to human conduct, is not independent of facts of human life, including physiological ones. In view of this, imaginary examples

<sup>9</sup> ‘On Brute Facts’ *Analysis*, 18 (3) 1958, pp. 69–72.

<sup>10</sup> *Causality and Determination*.

<sup>11</sup> *Intention* and ‘Under a Description’ *Noûs*, 13 (2) 1979), pp. 219–233.

<sup>12</sup> *Intention*.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Twenty Opinions Common Among Modern Anglo-American Philosophers’, in *Persona, verità e morale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Teologia Morale* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1987) pp. 49–50, reprinted in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds. *Faith in a Hard Ground* op. cit.

involving physical impossibilities for human beings are not relevant to considering moral obligation. With regard to the latter there are absolute and exceptionless prohibitions. At the same time, not all sound practical moral reasoning implies as a conclusion the necessity of taking some course of action; and nor is it always necessary to act for the best; it may be enough that some good was chosen (including the good of avoiding a prohibited kind of action). The difference between action and omission is sometimes morally significant. Properly speaking statements of moral requirement relate to persons not states of affairs, thus we should say 'X ought to A' rather than 'it ought to be the case that X is doing A'. Again, on the personal subject of action, ethics includes virtue and vice which are objectively good and bad kinds of characteristics for a human being to have.

Third, freedom of the will is not compatible with causal determinism, but in any case causation does not entail determinism. Additionally, past and present are asymmetric in so far as the latter is wholly causally closed but the former is not (at least in part, since some effects may be necessitated in their causes, so that if there is no interference in the operation of these causes the future will include these). Laws of nature do not completely explain all that happens. God is not given to emotions, or otherwise subject to change, nor are God's actions based on opinions formed on evidence. Finally, God need not create the best of all possible worlds.

In considering these claims and the seven I listed initially, there are several differences, apart from the previously mentioned fact that the latter have become part of common philosophical thinking. First, the initial 'insights', as that term suggests, involve a penetrative vision discerning features or relationships that had gone unnoticed among her peers and preceding generations. By contrast her counters to views prevailing among her analytic contemporaries belong to the self-same category, namely that of theses, positions, and theories, and are recognizable as pre-existing alternative views – be they minority ones. Second, the insights are broad and have extensive implications, some within fields, notably ethical theory, others across philosophy as a whole. For example, the brute relativity of facts, and the non-necessitating character of efficient causality, may be invoked in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind and action, and logic. Whereas, the opinions tend to be subject-specific.

Let me illustrate this briefly with regard to the case of the notion of *brute facts* and more generally of *levels of description*. This pair of ideas was introduced in two publications in 1958: 'On Brute Facts' and 'Modern Moral Philosophy' though the former is largely an extract from the latter. Anscombe puts it to use in showing that, contrary

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to Hume, one may infer statements of requirement from statements of fact. Her example is that of it being true that 1) *she owes her grocer money* (requirement) because 2) *she asked for potatoes and he delivered them and sent her a bill* (facts). Her claim is that her owing the grocer money is itself a fact consisting of her request, his delivery and his submission of a bill, all in a given context, that of certain institutions (of exchange). The request, delivery and submission are brute facts relative to the fact that she owes him payment, and his carting 'a quarter' (28 lbs) of potatoes to her house is itself brute relative to the fact described by saying 'he supplied her with potatoes'.

Subsequently this idea got taken up by John Searle who coined the term 'institutional facts' in his 1964 paper 'How to derive "ought" from "is"'.<sup>17</sup> The extent of his indebtedness to Anscombe is apparent in the main argument of his essay but not in his brief passing reference to her in a footnote to the following sentence: 'We might characterize such facts as institutional facts, and contrast them with non-institutional, or brute, facts: that a man has a bit of paper with green ink on it is a brute fact, that he has five dollars is an institutional fact'. Because of the Searle paper, and because of Anscombe's prior use of the distinction in connection with a partial refutation of Hume's contention that 'ought' cannot be derived from 'is' (partial because she thought he was right in respect of what she termed the strongly deontological 'moral ought'), the idea of brute facts and brute relativity tends to be thought of simply in connection with the logic of requirement. I believe, however, that it has broader application, and like the qualifier 'under a description' is related to Aristotelian ideas. The first (relative bruteness) to that of hylomorphic constitution, the second (under a description) to the 'inasmuch as' or 'qua' construction or to what is predicated with qualification '*secundum quid*' which are variant forms of reduplicative propositions. Consider, then, what Anscombe says about brute facts. She writes:

In relation to many descriptions of events or states of affairs which are asserted to hold, we can ask what the 'brute facts' were; and this will mean the facts which held, and in virtue of which, in a proper context, such and such a description is true or false, and which are more 'brute' than the alleged fact answering to that description.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> John Searle, 'How to derive "ought" from "is"' *Philosophical Review* 73 (1) 1964, pp. 43–58. The reference runs as follows: 'For a discussion of this distinction see G. E. M. Anscombe, "Brute Facts", *Analysis* (1958).'

<sup>18</sup> 'On Brute Facts' op. cit., 71.

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Now compare this with what Aristotle says in the *Physics* about matter and form as causes:

Since nature is twofold, form and also matter, we should get a theoretical grasp on it ... so that we should get a theoretical grasp on natural things neither without their matter nor with regard to their matter [alone] ... matter is relative to something, since there is one sort of matter for one form, and another for another ... Something is said to be a cause if it is: [1] The component from which a thing comes to be – for example, the bronze of a statue or the silver of a bowl, and also the kinds of these. [2] The form or paradigm, that is, the account of the essence, and kinds.<sup>19</sup>

Anscombe makes no reference to Aristotle in speaking of ‘brute relativity’, though she does in relation to what may be termed ‘description relativity’, as represented by the phrase ‘under a description’.<sup>20</sup> Yet I think her familiarity with the idea of material and formal causes and of hylomorphic constitution influenced the former. For one way of putting the point about brute facts and brute relativity is to say that the content of a fact-description D1 is brute relative to another D2, if D1 serves as the ‘matter’ for D2 re-formed by a structural context. So, for example being a quantity of bronze of such and such a shape is, in the context of representational conventions, being a statue, or put linguistically ‘A is a piece of bronze of such and such a shape’ is brute relative to ‘A is a statue’. So here, as in the case of actions and debts, we get insight into a kind of internal relationship between levels which for Hume could only be contingent and forged not by anything on the side of reality but by psychological associations.

The third difference between the particular insights (1–7 above) and the general views (‘twenty opinions’) is that the first are hard won discoveries arising in the course of sustained periods of intense thinking about particular problems and perplexities, while the opinions are more assemblages of the fruits of general reflection.

### 3. Anscombe’s methods

This raises a question of whether there is also a contrast in the *methods* by which Anscombe arrived at the insights on the one hand and the contrary theses on the other. I think that in broad terms there is a difference in the *ways* that led her to the two, but that in itself does not

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle, *Physics* II, 2 & 3 translated C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018) 23–4.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Under a Description’, op. cit. note 11, 219.

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speak to the matter of *methods* in the sense of procedures or techniques. The difference would be this: the theses were arrived at through processes of reading and listening to philosophers, great ones from the past and significant ones from her own period, and discussing and debating, and synthesizing arguments and conclusions so as to come to more or less settled views. The insights, by contrast, came to her in the course of investigations prompted by questions of the form: 'how is it possible that such and such?'

This last phrase will immediately suggest a Kantian approach, seeking sufficient and/or necessary conditions of some phenomenon or type of thought or experience; but I have something broader and more varied in mind. One kind of example of the questions that gave rise to her investigations would be 'how is it possible that people could think that it is permissible intentionally to kill the innocent?', a second is 'how is it possible that saying 'I promise' creates an obligation', a third, 'how is it possible that one can resign from a club and so be free of its rules and authority but not resign from being governed by the state?', fourth, 'how is it possible that someone could think that one can only know what is necessary?', fifth, 'how is it possible that we know we see objects rather than just surfaces, or just appearances of objects or surfaces?', a sixth, 'how is it possible to know what to do or not to do without having some kind of ethical theory be it an implicit one?', a seventh 'how is it possible that some philosophers have been convinced that they are immaterial beings while doubting that there is a world of material objects?', an eighth 'how is it possible that some philosophers have been convinced that thought is a brain process while also thinking about non-material realities' and an ninth 'how is it possible that some philosophers can say there is no such thing as language or think that there are no such things as thoughts?'

In the *Theaetetus* Plato has Socrates say 'the feeling of wonder shows that you are a philosopher, since wonder is the only beginning of philosophy'.<sup>21</sup> The wonder in question is related to astonishment but also to puzzlement or else no enquiry would ensue. Characteristically Aristotle is clearer if more prosaic when he writes in the *Metaphysics*, no doubt with the *Theaetetus* passage in mind, that 'It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> 155d.

<sup>22</sup> 982b12.

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Anscombe may well have been struck in reading these passages while studying Greats (Classics and Philosophy) at Oxford for she recalls that while still at school she struggled to justify some ‘principle of causality’ and ‘went around asking people *why*, if something happened, they would be sure it had a cause’, and of the period of her early university studies she recounts ‘For years I would spend time, in cafes, for example, staring at objects saying to myself: ‘I see a packet [of cigarettes]. But what do I really see? How can I say that I see here anything more than a yellow expanse?’<sup>23</sup> This capacity to be struck by questions and to persist in trying to understand what gave rise to them and how they might be answered, thinking hard and in an undistracted way about these things remained with her and is evident in all her writing.

It also explains her seriousness and with that her preference to engage with great philosophers of the past who were similarly struck by simply stated but profound questions, rather than to engage, as most philosophers now do, with research agendas set by their contemporary peers and pursued in increasing numbers of monographs and articles. At the time when Anscombe began publishing in 1950s it was more common to have few if any footnotes, but by the time she stopped publishing in the 1990s the situation had been completely transformed yet she continued to refer mainly to ancient, medieval and modern writers (generally in her own translations were these were required) making few references to her contemporaries and then for the most part only to leading ones such as Davidson, Kripke, and Quine.

### 4. Philosophical demeanour

Mary Geach, who is herself a philosopher and Anscombe’s literary executor, recalls her mother defining philosophy for the purpose of a Cambridge undergraduate prospectus as ‘thinking about the most difficult and ultimate questions’. She then goes on to say ‘Some people might want to qualify the word “thinking” as it occurs in this definition, but Anscombe did not go in for a special, different kind of thinking’.<sup>24</sup> This suggests that Anscombe did not believe in or at any rate did not herself make use of a philosophical

<sup>23</sup> Introduction to G.E.M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind* p. vii.

<sup>24</sup> Introduction to M. Geach & L. Gormally eds. *Human Life, Action and Ethics* p. xiii.



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methodology, but while that may be true in a narrow sense of methodology there is no doubt that her philosophical writings differ from those intended for a general audience in ways that encourage the question are the differences just ones of subject matter or degree of rigour, or is there also something different in *method*?

As it happens there has been some recent discussion of Anscombe's philosophical style, not in the sense of literary manner, though she certainly has one, but of what the authors of these discussions themselves term her 'method': first, by a distinguished former student Cora Diamond in 'Reading the *Tractatus* with GEM Anscombe', part 3 of which is titled 'Anscombe and Philosophical Method'<sup>25</sup>, and second, by Ulf Hlobil and Katharina Nieswandt in 'On Anscombe's Philosophical Method'.<sup>26</sup> According to Diamond, in Anscombe's examination of the *Tractatus*

She lays out, makes open to view, a way of using words, ... she is attempting to put before the reader with the 'extreme intelligibility' with which the account can (she thinks) be presented, what it is to say that something is so [in the case of the *Tractatus*] on analogy with using a picture to say that *this* is so, a picture capable of being used also to say that *this* isn't so. ... She herself is presenting a use of language, the picture-proposition use, which will not make it look like a queer sort of fact that every proposition is either true or false.<sup>27</sup>

According to Hlobil and Nieswandt, meanwhile, a commonly found method when writing on her own account follows a four-stage path:

First, asking what is x? or 'what does 'X' mean? and with that setting out some answer or answers which purports to be non-circular.

Second, showing that there can be no straightforward answer in the form of a translation or analysis or definition answering the question what x is or what does 'x' mean? but offering something nonetheless explanatory, or explicatory.

Third, identifying practices, typically linguistic' ones in which x features critically,.

<sup>25</sup> Cora Diamond 'Reading the *Tractatus* with GEM Anscombe' in Diamond, *Reading Wittgenstein with Anscombe, Going On to Ethics* (Cambridge, MA.: 2019) Ch. 3.

<sup>26</sup> In J. Haldane ed. *The Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit p. 116.

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Fourth, showing how the foregoing description makes sense of x by showing its role in relation to it.

There is something recognizable in both of these accounts though that may be because of their familiarity as philosophical methods more generally. One might think, especially with regard to what Hlobil and Nieswandt write, that the first and second stages are basically Socratic, and the first certainly so in the sense in which analytic philosophy in its heyday saw itself as engaged ‘Socratic’ definition, and the second then contra-analytic in the manner of Quine in ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’. Meanwhile, the third and fourth are recognizably late Wittgensteinian. Given Anscombe’s education and later formation as a student of Wittgenstein’s this is hardly surprising. But I want to introduce two further features the first of which may serve to explain what is surely obvious about much of her writing, namely its great difficulty and which is related to another feature, which I think is important, which I will call her philosophical *demeanour*.

Rush Rhees, who together with Anscombe and Von Wright served as Wittgenstein’s first literary executors, gave a report of the master’s advice: ‘Wittgenstein used to say to me, “Go the bloody *hard* way”’. adding ‘I remember this more often, perhaps, than any other single remark of his.’<sup>28</sup> Of course going the bloody hard way oneself is compatible with clearing and preparing the way so that it is signposted and made even, thereby becoming an easier route for those who follow. But Wittgenstein and Anscombe do not do that. Sometimes it is only when we have been led to a dead end and a new start is begun that we realise we were being led along the wrong track. This is not true of ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ but that is indicative of its atypicality in her *oeuvre* (a fact rarely referred to) because in it she was setting out for a mixed faculty and student audience, views borne of recent concentrated reading of modern moral philosophy (from Kant to Sidgwick) for the purposes of tutoring undergraduates in it at her college (Somerville). Those views represented her assessment of where the subject had gone wrong and of what cultural shift might lie behind that. The latter aspect incidentally touches on a significant interest on her part in cultural mindsets – *weltanschauungen* (to which she also refers in ‘Causality and Determination’).<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Rush Rhees, ‘The Study of Philosophy’ in *Without Answers* (London: Routledge, 1969) 169.

<sup>29</sup> She writes ‘The truth of this conception [that causation is some kind of necessary connection] is hardly debated. It is, indeed, a bit of *Weltanschauung*: it helps to form a cast of mind which is characteristic of our whole culture’. Op. cit. note 4, 2.

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Certainly, misdirection is also a Socratic or Platonic method and she not only read dialogues of Plato, Anselm, Berkeley and Hume with appreciation, she also wrote some of her own. *Intention* itself is hard to read in part because it is neither linear nor paved nor punctuated with clear views back or forward, We remain in rough and often obscure terrain. One explanation might be the desire to show the workings, another is that this is just a reflection of her own mode of thought. Both could be true but I think there is also something else in that, like Wittgenstein, she wants the reader to know the way is hard or at the least not to conceal the fact; and for them, which is to say for *us*, to go that way too. This is why, as in the later Wittgenstein, there is an element of many voicedness in the text. *Intention* is markedly Wittgensteinian in method and to a degree in its format and mannerisms which explains why its mode may have seemed familiar to her, unfamiliar to most of her contemporaries, and simply perplexing to later readers. Commentators have observed the similarity in style of some of Anscombe's writings to those of Wittgenstein as represented by the *Philosophical Investigations* or *On Certainty*, but those who say this are invariably referring to the English editions, perhaps forgetting that Anscombe produced those translations. I am not suggesting that she substituted her voice for that of Wittgenstein but only that as translators are generally aware the expressive rendering of works tends to involve author and translator as co-producers of the resulting text.

Anscombe was not unwitting in matters of style. She can be very creative in formulating examples or introducing imagery. Also, there is a typescript of an earlier version of material for *Intention* with accompanying comments by Philippa Foot where Anscombe's text is more linear, plain and easily followed perhaps because she had still to recognize difficulties. More likely, however, is that having smoothed things out to her own partial satisfaction she then thought it better to reintroduce or re-expose the bumps, blocks and fissures. There is also perhaps a kind of vanity or pride in being an immediate disciple of one whom she believed (rightly) to be a misunderstood genius, whose profundity of method contrasted with (as she saw it) the superficial facility of theoretical lexicographers such as J.L. Austin whom she hated with a vengeance.

In further though brief characterisation of her demeanour, and in contrast to the preceding, I want to mention a feature that I have not seen discussed though something of the sort has been noted in relation to Wittgenstein, which is a similarity of vision, both in the *way* of seeing things and in the *what* of it, to that of G.K. Chesterton. As with Aurel Kolnai another moral philosopher-convert to Catholicism, with whom she shared many substantive moral

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opinions, Anscombe's embrace of Catholicism was influenced in part by reading Chesterton. For reasons of space I will not quote a series of parallel passages, and I only pick out the idea that nothing is really hidden, that the facts lie before our eyes but that either because they are so familiar or because we are in the grip of an idea or a spirit that distorts our sight. Here then is Chesterton followed by Wittgenstein's reflections on, or expressions of that idea from *Philosophical Investigations* (129).

In order to strike, in the only sane or possible sense, the note of impartiality, it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty. That I may remark in passing is why children have very little difficulty about the dogmas of the Church. I mean that we see things fairly when we them first. ... when its fundamentals are doubted, as at present, we must try to recover the candour and wonder of the child; the unspoilt realism and objectivity of innocence. Or if we cannot do that, we must try at least to shake off the cloud of mere custom and see the thing as new, if only by seeing it as unnatural. Things that may well be familiar so long as familiarity breeds affection had much better become unfamiliar when familiarity breeds contempt. For in connection with things so great as are here considered, whatever our view of them, contempt must be a mistake.<sup>30</sup>

126. Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. One might also give the name “philosophy” to what is possible before all new discoveries and inventions.

...

129. The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at some time struck him.— And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* in *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* Vol. II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986) 147–8.

<sup>31</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* trans. GEM Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

### 5. Knowledge and faith

So much for the matter of philosophical method considered in the abstract. I want next to consider two examples of Anscombe's approach: the first relating to the treatment of a familiar philosophical issue: the nature of knowledge, the second to religious or theological ones: faith and transubstantiation. The first cites and then extends her investigation of when it is appropriate to speak of knowledge and of what in the context and background may make sense of this, not from the point of view of traditional 'epistemology' given that the latter is usually associated with a general study of the status of perceptual and doxastic items with regard to conditions of veridicality and justification. Of course, Anscombe was concerned with whether certain beliefs are true and whether they are justified, and with the more specific issue of what the objects of perception may be and the kind of knowledge it may deliver, but it is important to be clear at the outset that as an heir to, and ongoing participant in the Wittgensteinian revolution against Cartesianism in metaphysics and philosophical psychology, she was not concerned with any general task of defining or justifying knowledge, be it perceptual or conceptual.

One reason for the eschewal of definition is that what is called 'knowledge' may be quite different, not just as between knowing *how* and knowing *that* and knowing *of*, but even within uses of these expressions. Famously for example the issue of knowledge without observation discussed in *Intention* requires us to distinguish between what would normally be involved in me knowing that *I* moved my hand when that was intentional on my part, and me knowing that *you* moved my hand, to which we can add as another kind of knowledge, me knowing that you moved *your* hand or indeed my hand *intentionally*.

Here there is a difference between non-observational and observational knowledge, but also between first-person and second-person knowledge of intentional action, as distinguished say from knowledge of another's heartbeat inferred from taking their pulse. So non-inferential knowledge of intentional action isn't the same as non-observational knowledge of such action, though the latter is an instance of it. We might also note differences that seem to cut across the knowing *how*, knowing *that*, knowing *of* distinction as in knowing *where* one is and, what is something different again, knowing *when* one is. The former issue is touched on by Anscombe in an examination, published posthumously, of

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'Grounds of Belief'.<sup>32</sup> I do not know whether she discussed the latter though she does have investigations of temporal relations, and of the reality of the past, and of knowledge of it by memory and by testimony, and the last source (testimony) which is relevant to what she says about cases of knowing *where* one is, may also be applied to instances of knowing *when* one is, where the knowledge is not that expressed, if any is so expressed, exclusively by token reflexives such as 'here' and 'now' or 'not there' and 'not then'.

Consider the following exchange:

- A. 'Do you know where you are?'
- B. 'Yes',
- A. 'Where are you then?'
- B. 'Here'
- A. 'Do you know where here is?'
- B. 'No'.

There is a difference between knowing what time it is and knowing what century it is, or what era it is, or if it is an era, and again between knowing that one is standing in a building and knowing that one is standing in Bloomsbury or in London or in Europe. It is not just that there is a difference in *expectation* with regard to someone's knowledge of when and where they are, it is that there are differences in what explain these differences. Not knowing the time is common enough, not knowing the century, where this is not because one has oddly forgotten, or is mentally confused, or lives in a culture where that measure doesn't occur, should strike us as odd. Consider another exchange:

- A. 'What century is it?'
- B. 'I don't know'
- A. 'Have you forgotten?'
- B. 'No. I have never known'.

One might direct someone ignorant of when it is, to look at the clock but what would one refer them to as evidence of what century it is. There are documents and perhaps 'devices' that report this but it is

<sup>32</sup> 'Grounds of Belief' in M. Geach & L. Gormally eds. *Logic, Truth and Meaning: Writings by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2015).

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not ordinarily by reference to consulting these that one knows the present century as it is by looking at watches and clocks and mobile phones that one knows the time, the day and the date. Also, while someone might be proud of their ability to tell what time it is just by looking at the sky no-one could boast of a comparable skill for telling the day of the week, the date or the century.

No doubt hour, date, century, and era are conventional metrics but there are also significant differences between them. Era is related to time but also to the presence of a physical (in a broad sense) or cultural characteristic enduring through a temporal period, and this seems different from century which again seems different from hour. Of these, century looks to be more independent from a non-temporal feature than does era but some uses relax the temporal boundaries to encompass characteristics, as in 'the long nineteenth century' (1789–1914) or 'a century of progress'. And while in determining temporal location one might look for evidence in each case: hour, century, era, it does not look like *experience* is involved in the usual understanding of this which does apply in the case of knowing that one is in a building. I can see that in a way that even with a watch I do not see the time. On the other hand knowing that I am in Bloomsbury does not seem just to be a matter of observation, even less knowing I am in Europe or in the Western hemisphere.

Certainly, if at a given time I know I am in a particular named street then given collateral knowledge I also know I am in Bloomsbury, and thereby I currently know I am in London, but any of these could alter without me changing spatial location and without immediately observable consequences, for example, the street name could be changed without me knowing so, and what was designated 'Bloomsbury' might be renamed 'East Tottenham' and London restyled 'Central Capital Territory'. Of course, I might infer these facts *from* observation of other things but where they are not inferred nor would I say they are observed. Rather they are matters of common framework knowledge relying on testimony usually communicated implicitly. Thinking back to the earlier issue, if Anscombe is right then I know non-observationally through exercising my agency that I have a body but my knowledge that I am a human being does not, pace Michael Thompson, seem to be non-observational in that sense,<sup>33</sup> but nor does it seem to be observational either. Consider a third exchange:

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Thompson 'Apprehending Human Form' in A. O'Hear ed. *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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- A. 'How do you know you are human?'
- B. 'One day I looked and saw that I was'
- A. 'What was it that you saw?'
- B. 'Maybe it wasn't something I *saw*, I think it just a feeling I had'.

### 6. Traditional epistemology

I embarked on this short reflection having said that one reason Anscombe was not interested in traditional epistemology is that she did not subscribe to the idea that there might be an essence or definition of knowledge in general, and the examples I have given illustrate the diversity of things called knowledge which are different not just in the way of instances of the same phenomenon, but are themselves different sorts of things. Practical competence, propositional knowledge, and acquaintance (where knowing *a* is not equivalent to knowing *that a is f*) are not just defined over different classes of objects or by reference to different kinds of warrant.

Additionally, there is an issue in seeing how even propositional knowledge could be defined in terms of *true belief + warrant*, or *cause*, since belief is a term indicating a quasi-disposition while knowledge is an ability. I say 'quasi-disposition' because as Anscombe points out while 'belief' is a grammatically dispositional concept it is not a real disposition. Her understanding of the latter notion is related to her metaphysics. She writes:

What I call a real disposition ... is a property D such that to say an object has D is to say that it is such as to do such-and-such under such and such conditions. The only saving clause we have to put in here is 'saving external interference'. By this criterion neither 'knowledge' nor 'belief' signify real dispositions<sup>34</sup>

Certainly, someone who believes something or someone need not tend to a specifiable end as in the manner of a disposition. One may believe that *p* without ever saying it or anything you take to be implied by it, or even thinking it or as Anscombe puts it 'without the thought [that *p*] ever coming into one's consciousness'.<sup>35</sup> At the same time the *criteria*, by which I mean something logically different

<sup>34</sup> 'Belief and Thought' in *Logic, Truth and Meaning*, op. cit., 151.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit.



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from evidence, for ascribing belief is connected to sincerely thinking or saying. If we use the more general notion of *doing something* which will cover thinking and saying and exercising non-cognitive capacities then the same is true of ascriptions of knowledge. But that does not show that knowledge is the same kind of thing as belief for as I said, someone who has knowledge has a recognitional capacity for identification or an effective power to do or to make something. As one might say, he or she has an ability to achieve or attain something factive, active or practive. Belief may have truth as its goal but that does not show that someone who has a belief that *p* tends to the truth that *p*, or that if *p* is true and he believes it that this is an achievement or attainment.

As well as not being interested in the *definition* of knowledge, on account of holding a view akin to the Aristotelian dictum that existence is said to be in many ways, she is not interested in the question of the general *foundations* of knowledge because there aren't any, certainly not in the sense that other philosophers have tried to build knowledge out of sense-experience, or on the basis of principles of reason, or innate ideas. As she puts it in one place, 'asked what was given, a present-day English speaking philosopher would be likely to say 'the lot'. We start mediis in rebus; our philosophical activity is one of describing and clarifying this milieu to ourselves'.<sup>36</sup> With regard to the question of the nature of mental reference Anscombe is similarly pluralistic and anti-essentialist. She could not have been forgetful of the question posed by Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* when he asks 'What makes my thought of him my thought of him?' but also mindful that his other simple question 'what is left over if I subtract the fact that my arm goes up from the fact that I raise my arm?' it is both pointing to an issue and looking toward mistaken assumptions about the nature of thought and action. Philosophers, including Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke and the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* have taken these questions seriously in a way that the later Wittgenstein and Anscombe believe is misguided and troublesome. To put it briefly the former group have looked for something like a mechanism, or a causal structure or a metaphysical process that would establish isomorphism, or noetic outreach or causal dependency that could explain intentionality but it does not need and cannot have an explanation from outwith or below. Each of these candidates runs into trouble as regressive or open to counter example or illusory in the sense of a magic trick giving an appearance of something happening because for example

<sup>36</sup> 'Necessity and Truth' in in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein: Collected Philosophical Papers* Vol I (Oxford: Blackwell. 1981), 84.

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we confuse the absence of presence with the presence of absence, such as not observing an agent doing or saying things on an occasion when we might attribute a thought to him and concluding that thought is an essentially private phenomenon of a kind quite unlike saying or doing.

### 7. Religion and philosophy

Next I turn to the second and contrasting example of Anscombe's approach. As well as being a broadly analytic academic philosopher in the mold of Wittgenstein, Anscombe was also an intellectually committed Roman Catholic, knowledgeable about Hebrew and New Testament Scripture and the major writings of Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas. She wrote on matters of faith, doctrines and morals from a markedly traditional and orthodox perspective and in opposition to what she regarded as the modernist, revisionist, and accommodationist tendencies of twentieth century figures about which, and whom, she could be scornful.

Given the depth and extent of her religious commitments, her great gifts for philosophy which allowed her to make significant and lasting contributions in metaphysics, moral philosophy, philosophy of mind and action, and the history of philosophy, and the pervasive atheism and agnosticism among her Oxford and Cambridge colleagues, it may seem surprising that she did not publicly advance or defend the cause of theism with any of them.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, there is no mention in any of her writings of William Alston, John Hick, Basil Mitchell, Dewi Phillips, Alvin Plantinga, William Rowe, Richard Swinburne or any other philosopher of religion writing during the period of her professional career. This is not to say, however, that philosophical discussion of religion is entirely absent from the writings published during her lifetime, but significantly nor is there much of it, and what there is hardly conforms to the sort of thing usually referred to as 'philosophy of religion'. I will say why I think this is so but first consider what she actually gathered under that heading.

<sup>37</sup> She did engage with the question of the rationality of religious belief and the case for theism privately with Anthony Kenny and Philippa Foot but failed to persuade either of the truth of theism or a fortiori of that of Catholic Christianity. Anthony Kenny recalls that 'From time to time Elizabeth would lament to me that she felt quite unable to offer Philippa a proof of the existence of God'; see Kenny, 'Anscombe in Oxford' in Haldane ed. *The Life and Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe* (Imprint), 2019.

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The third volume of her *Collected Philosophical Papers*, selected by Anscombe and published in 1981 while she still held the Chair of Philosophy at Cambridge, is *Ethics, Religion and Politics*. It is divided into three parts headed *Ethics*, *Philosophy of Religion* and *Political Philosophy*, the part first containing ten papers and the second and third two each. In the Introduction to the book Anscombe writes as follows:

Some of the papers in this volume ... were written for the general public, for ordinary philosophical meetings or for philosophical journals. Others ... were composed to express an explicitly Catholic view; indeed they were mostly written for meetings of Catholics or were addressed to a Catholic readership.

[then later she explains]

In general my interest in moral philosophy has been more in particular moral questions than in what is now called 'meta ethics' (The analogous thing is *unrestrictedly* true about philosophy of religion, as may be seen from papers 11 and 12 in this collection) [*my emphasis*].<sup>38</sup>

The two papers in question are 'On Transubstantiation' and 'Faith'. The first was written as a London *Catholic Truth Society* pamphlet intended for a general, non-academic readership and appears barely philosophical at all, certainly not a philosophical paper. It begins 'It is easiest to tell what transubstantiation is by saying this: little children should be taught about it as early as possible. Not of course using the word 'transubstantiation', because it is not a little child's word'. Note that specifying the 'what' is set within the context of acting; it is a partly ostensive and partly pragmatic definition. She then continues by talking about the Mass and the consecration of the bread and wine, and proceeds in an advisory tone as if to parents or perhaps infant school teachers suggesting how they might explain the idea of religious sacrifice. Much of what follows is expository but now addressed to adults directly, expounding religious understandings of the nature and purpose of Christ's sacrifice.

The only part of the essay that tilts in the direction of familiar academic philosophy is a short discussion of whether the very idea that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ is unintelligible or incoherent. This begins:

<sup>38</sup> *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers* Vol III (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) 'Introduction' vii-viii.

But the thing is impossible, contradictory: it cannot be believed! It has to only a figure of speech!” Well, indeed it cannot really be understood how it is possible. But if it is claimed it is impossible, then a definite contradiction must be pointed to, and if you believe in it, you will believe that each claim to disprove it is as contradictory can be answered.<sup>39</sup>

She then considers a putative line of refutation: how can a man be wholly in the small space defined by a host? Agreeing he cannot be present *dimensionally* she suggests there are other ways for a body to be in a place writing of this very and perhaps uniquely special case ‘when we consider *That* which the bread has become, the place where we are looking has become (though not dimensionally) the place where *it* is: a place in heaven’. A little later she writes

... we can reflect that [the Eucharist] is his [the Lord’s] way of being present with us in his physical reality until the end of this age; until he comes again to be dimensionally and visibly present [and in a footnote she adds]

Theologians have not been accustomed to say that our Lord is ‘physically’ present in the Eucharist. I think this is because to them ‘physically’ means ‘naturally’ as the word comes to be from the Greek for nature [*physis*] and of course our Lord is not present in a natural manner! But to a modern man to deny that he is physically present is to deny the doctrine of the Catholic Church.<sup>40</sup>

I suppose that by ‘physically’ she means in a real and substantial way, in contrast on the one hand to being ‘symbolically present’ and on the other to being ‘immaterially present’, whatever either of these might mean. In other contexts one would expect Anscombe to bite hard into these terms and distinctions to test which might be real and which illusory or otherwise confused. That she does not do so here and barely clarifies things is a further indication that this is not a philosophical essay or at least not as would generally be recognized. The brevity, conversational style and instructional intent of her discussion contrasts markedly with writings on the same topic by Michael Dummett, another Roman Catholic and Oxford philosopher also influenced by reading Wittgenstein and by studying with and becoming a professional colleague of Anscombe herself.

<sup>39</sup> *Collected Papers III* 108; *Faith in a Hard Ground* 86.

<sup>40</sup> *Collected Papers III* 109; *Faith in a Hard Ground* 87.

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Dummett's writings on religion, like Anscombe's, are generally on particular religious questions and addressed to a religious readership rather than philosophical ones prompted by religious concepts and claims. In the case of transubstantiation, however, he wrote two long and in large part philosophical essays. The first is titled 'Transubstantiation' and remains unpublished<sup>41</sup>; the second 'The intelligibility of Eucharistic Doctrine' appeared in 1987 in a festschrift for Basil Mitchell who had retired from the Oxford *Nolluth Chair in the Philosophy of the Christian Religion* three years previously to be succeeded by Richard Swinburne.<sup>42</sup> In neither paper does Dummett refer to Anscombe's essay. This may seem surprising given that he must have known of it but I suspect he regarded it as catechetical rather than investigative and having nothing to offer in resolving the theoretical problems that he was concerned with. Indeed any philosopher learning that Anscombe had written on the subject and that she had gathered that writing in a volume of *Collected Philosophical Papers* in a section head 'Philosophy of Religion' is likely to be disappointed qua philosopher.

Second, although her essay is not a philosophical one it does show the influence of two figures who deeply influenced her approach to philosophy and to religious subjects: Aquinas and again Wittgenstein. Note to begin with the resemblance of her response to the claim that the doctrine of the real presence is impossible and contradictory, viz. that while the doctrine cannot be understood it can be defended by showing there is no contradiction, and what Aquinas writes in Question 1, article 8 of the *Summa Theologiae* 'Whether Sacred Doctrine is a matter of Argument':

...If our opponent believes nothing of divine revelation, there is no longer any means of proving the articles of faith by reasoning, but only of answering his objections – if he has any – against faith. Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments

<sup>41</sup> I am completing the editing of a volume of essays by Dummett (many previously unpublished) titled *Society, Ethics and Religion*, 'Transubstantiation' will be included in that.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Dummett, 'The Intelligibility of Eucharistic Doctrine', in William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holzer eds *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

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brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered.<sup>43</sup>

Next, note the resemblance between what she has to say in seeking to defuse the charge of contradiction and what Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologiae* discussing ‘Whether the body of Christ be in this sacrament in very truth, or merely as in a figure or sign?’

First, Anscombe: [How can a body be wholly in this small space] Well, indeed not by the coincidence of his dimensions with the hole in space defined by the dimensions of the remaining appearance of bread: let us call this the ‘dimensive’ way of being in a place. ... [We believe that something is true of *That* which is there, which contradicts it being there dimensionally. And certainly the division and separation from one another of all these places where *That* is, does not mean a separation of *it* from itself].<sup>44</sup>

Second, Aquinas: Christ’s body is not in this sacrament in the same way as a body is in a place, which by its dimensions is commensurate with the place; but in a special manner which is proper to this sacrament. Hence we say that Christ’s body is upon many altars, not as in different places, but ‘sacramentally’.<sup>45</sup>

As regards the Wittgensteinian influence, this appears at the very outset. In the passage from the opening part of the *Philosophical Investigations* which I pair here with the opening of Anscombe’s essay, Wittgenstein is describing a more primitive stage of inducting a child into a language game but the logic is the same as that which Anscombe employs. Remember also that the translation of Wittgenstein is Anscombe’s.

Anscombe: It is easiest to tell what transubstantiation is by saying this: little children should be taught about it as early as possible ... the thing can be taught and it is best taught at mass at the consecration ... Such a child can be taught then by whispering to it such things as: ‘Look! Look what the priest is doing ... He is saying the words that change the bread into Jesus’s body ... If the person who takes a young child to mass always does this

<sup>43</sup> *Summa Theologiae, Second and Revised Edition* [hereafter *ST*] translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province ((London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920) Ia, q1. a8, response.

<sup>44</sup> *Collected Papers III* 108–9; *Faith in a Hard Ground* 86.

<sup>45</sup> *ST III*, q75, a1, ad 3.

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(not otherwise troubling it) the child thereby learns a great deal'.<sup>46</sup>

Wittgenstein: An important part of the training will consist in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word ... But if this is the effect of the ostensive teaching, am I to say that it effects an understanding of the word? ... No doubt it was the ostensive teaching that helped to bring this about; but only together with a particular kind of instruction. With different instruction the same ostensive teaching of these words would have effected a quite different understanding ... I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, a 'language-game'.<sup>47</sup>

### 8. On Faith

The second of the collected papers: 'On Faith' was given as an annual lecture at St Mary's College Oscott which then as now was a seminary for the training of Catholic priests, and her audience would have been seminarians, plus the Rector, Vice Rector, Spiritual Director and other teaching staff. Again, therefore, she was addressing co-religionists but ones who could be presumed to have a greater or lesser degree of academic formation in philosophy and theology. The Second Vatican Council had ended a decade before, but already there had been a move away from the kind of neo-scholastic training that had become dominant in the wake of Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* 'On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy' which commended scholastic philosophy and especially that of Aquinas. The manual form in which this had been presented was more dogmatic and purportedly deductive than discursive and some of those present would have recognised if not appreciated the target of some of her criticisms. Having rejected certain tendencies associated with the phrase 'We used to believe' Anscombe continues

Now there was a 'We used to believe ...' which I think could have been said with some truth and where the implied rejection wasn't a disaster. There was in the preceding time a professed enthusiasm for rationality, perhaps inspired by the teachings of

<sup>46</sup> *Collected Papers III* 107; *Faith in a Hard Ground* 86.

<sup>47</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 5–7.

Vatican I against fideism, certainly carried along by the promotion of neo-thomist studies. To the educated laity and the clergy trained in those days, the word was that the Catholic Christian faith was *rational*, and a problem, to those able to feel it as a problem, was how it was *gratuitous* – a special gift of grace. Why would one essentially need the promptings of grace to follow a chain of reasoning? ... .. But there was a greater problem. What about the ‘faith of the simple’? They could not know all these things. Did they then have some inferior brand of faith? Surely not! And anyway, did those who studied really think they knew all these things? No: but the implication was that the knowledge was there somehow ... In the belief that this was so, one was being rational in having faith<sup>48</sup>

What follows is an interesting exploration of the idea of faith not as propositional belief but as *believing someone*, and of this faith in him or her as having as logical presuppositions certain assumptions or convictions. Divine faith, at least in the Judaeo-Christian conception with which she is concerned, is believing God which is made possible by the transmission of faith and of what it presupposes by way of beliefs about God. Faith is not on this account created by transmission, it is a gift not from previous generations but from God, but it may be transmitted via them (and though she does not say so that may be the normal, and ‘appointed’ means of receiving this divine gift.) This involves the recipient assuming authority on the part of some others, for believing *someone* in the relevant sense is not just to believe what he says, or even to believe it in consequence of his saying it, but to believe it because he says it, taking his saying it to be an assurance of its truth. She continues:

And now we come to the difficulty. In all the other [non-religious] cases we have been considering, it can be made clear what it is for someone to believe someone but what can it mean ‘to believe God’? Could a learned clever man inform me on the authority of his learning, that the evidence is that God has spoken? No. The only possible use of a learned man is as a *causa removens prohibens*. There are gross obstacles in the received opinion of my time and in its characteristic ways of thinking, and someone learned and clever may be able to dissolve these.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Collected Papers III* 113; *Faith in a Hard Ground* 11.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Faith’ p.



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Anscombe's conclusion is that Divine faith – believing God – is believing that something ‘– it may be a voice, it may be something he has been taught – comes as a word from God. Faith is then the belief he accords that word’.<sup>50</sup> Again a few comments are in order. First, one can see again, now in the scholastic phrase *causa removens prohibens* – removing an obstacle that impedes the cause of an action or process – the idea that the role of philosophy in relation to religious claims, and specifically those of Christian doctrine, may not be to establish their natural intelligibility let alone to prove them, but only to remove seeming intellectual blocks to the reception of those teachings. On this account philosophy's role is as hand-maiden to sacred doctrine, as again Aquinas states:

The reasons which are brought forward in support of the authority of faith, are not demonstrations which can bring intellectual vision to the human intellect, wherefore they [the objects of faith] do not cease to be unseen. But they remove obstacles to faith, by showing that what faith proposes is not impossible.<sup>51</sup>

In both ‘Transubstantiation’ and ‘Faith’ we can see very clearly the influence of Aquinas and Wittgenstein. What is taken from each is rather different in kind, however. First, Anscombe more or less quotes Thomas (and the point about not seeking to prove a point of doctrine but only to counter allegations of contradiction is also a recurrent theme in Peter Geach's writings on religion whose indebtedness to Aquinas he oft acknowledged). What she takes from Thomas in the case of transubstantiation is something she repeats as part of her own answer. Here then I think we might say that his influence is that of a teacher of substance. In the case of Wittgenstein it is different. What she derives is first a conception of the task of philosophy in general, as conceptual clarification. Elsewhere she writes:

we want to get clear about the concepts we habitually use before we trust ourselves as philosophers to use them for purposes beyond our immediate ken. So we accept common views or remain in views not arrived at by philosophy while we work at concepts ... the logical features of concepts which we want to describe are such as to make us need tools of philosophical description not always unlike those used by a medieval philosopher.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> *ST II*, IIae, q2, a10, ad 2.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Necessity and Truth’ in *From Parmenides to Wittgenstein: Collected Philosophical Papers* 84.

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The example she was concerned with is distinguishing necessity *de re* and *de dicto*, but there is something of deeper and more extensive significance which she almost always refers to Wittgenstein, which is studying the ‘grammar of concepts’ and which is related to the Aristotelian classification and logic of categorical predications, and that in turn to the logic of specifications of natures and of what belong to them. The latter crops up in various places, as for example in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ when she writes

Just a man has so many teeth, which is certainly not the average number of teeth men have, but is the number of teeth for the species, so perhaps the species *man* regarded not just biologically but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life – powers, and faculties and use of things needed – ‘has’ such and such virtues and this man with the complete set of virtues is the ‘norm’ as ‘man’ with, e.g. a complete set of teeth is a norm.<sup>53</sup>

Again in her essay ‘Human Essence’ she writes:

All men not too young and not incapacitated have the blessing of language ... That a new-born baby is speechless is the same sort of fact as a new-born kitten being blind. Earthworms are not blind, it does not belong to their nature to be sighted ... Here we are encountering the concept of a nature or essence. Consideration shews [sic] that, as Wittgenstein observes in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI I 371) ‘Essence is expressed in grammar’. Consideration of what? Well, for example, the following absurd sentences: ‘Where does this pencil’s uncle live?’, ‘What is the shape of dust?’, ‘What is a rainbow made of?’, ‘How many legs has a tree?’, ‘What does a chair feel?’. ‘Do bacteria think?’.<sup>54</sup>

Although the manner of its presentation is very different from anything in Aquinas or other medieval Aristotelians, the issues that Anscombe, following Wittgenstein, is on to are those of certain logical and, though he would not say it, metaphysical distinctions, specifically those between essence, proprium, and accidental accidents. Anscombe never wrote about the parallels but it is this commonality that provides a bridge between her Aristotelianism and her Wittgensteinianism. Neither, however, is much developed in

<sup>53</sup> ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ in *Human Life, Action and Ethics* 188.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Human Essence’ in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 27. op. cit.

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the cause of what we now think of as constructive philosophy of religion or natural theology.

Regarding Wittgenstein she actually thought that the implications of his early philosophical views and later philosophical demeanour were generally troublesome for religion. Writing in the Catholic weekly *The Tablet* in 1954 she remarked:

I do not think a Catholic could accept Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* if he understood it, because of its teaching on ethics. ('The world is independent of my will' so I cannot be morally responsible for anything that happens; and similarly 'The facts all belong to the task and not to the performance'). This I think is quite closely connected with all the rest. So the whole must be wrong. Of his later work Wittgenstein said 'Its advantage is that if you believe, say, Spinoza or Kant this interferes with what you can believe in religion but if you believe me nothing of the sort' I do not know whether he was right about this.<sup>55</sup>

That latter doubt is worth pondering. Is she really uncertain? or is it dutiful disingenuity or equivocation? On the one hand consider what she wrote in her 1986 'Syllabus of Errors' (Twenty Opinions Common among modern Anglo-American Philosophers): 'Analytical philosophy is more characterized by styles of argument and investigation than by doctrinal content. It is thus possible or people of widely different beliefs to be practitioners of this sort of philosophy. It ought not to surprise anyone that a seriously believing Catholic Christian should also be an analytical philosopher'.<sup>56</sup> This would support the idea that Wittgenstein's philosophy presents no obstacle if one took her to be thinking of him as an 'analytical philosopher'. But by the same token her uncertainty, if genuine, may warrant a contraposition implying that in her opinion he was not *simply* a philosopher of analytic method but was perhaps an implicit or undercover metaphysician, or perhaps a deflationist, or even a 'Humean' of a kind at odds with religious doctrine. This brings me to 'on the other hand' which is an observation reported by Anthony Kenny who records her as saying 'On the topic of religion Wittgenstein is poison'.<sup>57</sup> Why might she have said this? Here I conjecture two considerations. First, that she had seen people poisoned by his ideas: some perhaps made skeptical about the

<sup>55</sup> Anscombe, 'Misinformation: What Wittgenstein Really Said' *The Tablet* 203, 1954, 13

<sup>56</sup> 'Twenty Opinions' op. cit., 66.

<sup>57</sup> See Kenny, 'Anscombe in Oxford' in Haldane ed. *The Life and Work of Elizabeth Anscombe*.

application of mundane concepts to the idea of a transcendent reality; others believing that he actually provided a means of taking religion seriously but only as a celebration of the human, rather than an acknowledgement of the divine. I am thinking here, as I suspect was she, of the practitioners of ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’, especially perhaps Rush Rhees and Dewi Phillips the former a fellow student and executor of Wittgenstein, the latter the best known member of the Swansea Wittgenstein school. Anscombe sometimes spoke of ‘the Swansea sigh’ and in writing about ‘The Simplicity of the Tractatus’ she reports that Wittgenstein ‘once said to his friend Rush Rhees, a sighing man, not to repine and blame himself for something in himself: “that’s God’s fault not yours”’.<sup>58</sup> The ‘Swansea sigh’ may refer just to this aspect of Rhees’s personal character but given the way in which others picked up both certain skeptical ideas and the manner of this influential figure I think the ‘sigh’ became a form of Swansea Neo-Wittgensteinian criticism or unarticulated response to what were perceived to be philosophical errors, and the main one with which members of the Swansea school were concerned was ‘metaphysics’ in a use of the term equivalent to ‘crass reification’. But Christian doctrine in an orthodox understanding of it has obvious metaphysical presuppositions, hence hostility to metaphysics would poison serious belief.

Second, there is perhaps a further point which may suggest that she was troubled by the possibility that she herself had been affected by this anti-metaphysical aspect of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, for she found it difficult to argue for the idea of an immaterial intellect or a separable immaterial soul, on the grounds that concepts of substance belong to the natural order. This is something she was evidently uncomfortable about and tried not to discuss, for it meant that she could not follow Aquinas in what he argued on philosophical grounds about the persistence of a separated active intellect,<sup>59</sup> and it raised questions about the credibility of Catholic beliefs and practices relating to the souls of the faithful departed. More radically, her failure to

<sup>58</sup> ‘The Simplicity of the Tractatus’ in M. Geach and L. Gormally eds *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2011), 177.

<sup>59</sup> On this see Anscombe, ‘The Immortality of the Soul’ in *Faith in a Hard Ground*, ‘Analytical Philosophy and the Spirituality of Man’ in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, and ‘The Existence of the Soul’ in R. Varghese ed. *Great Thinkers on Great Questions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998); and J. Haldane ‘Anscombe and Geach on Mind and Soul’ in Haldane ed. *Life and Work of Anscombe*.

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persuade Foot and Kenny, the two Oxford philosophers to whom she had been closest, of the case for theism, and the conspicuous absence in her extensive oeuvre of any direct argument for the existence of God, raises the question of whether she doubted the power of philosophy to show the reasonability of theism save in the negative respect already referred to, of defending against arguments intended to show its unreasonability insofar as it advanced or presupposed contradictory claims. There are places in her writings which might seem to suggest a positive disposition towards constructive natural theology, but on closer examination these turn out to be inconclusive speculative explorations, as in her suggestion that Anselm's famous proof is not an ontological argument.<sup>60</sup>

### 9. Conclusion

Two aspects of Anscombe's work as a philosopher emerge from the foregoing explorations. First, that she used her considerable mental powers to expose and analyse the presuppositions and complexities of important human theoretical and practical thought and action. Second that with regard to the things that mattered most to her, her religious faith and practice, she viewed the role of philosophy rather differently. Here she recognized the limits of constructive reason but also allowed the credibility of revelation as a source of knowledge about *what* human beings are, about *how* they ought to live, and about what they are *for* in the sense of their *telos*. In both endeavours she drew on what she had learned from Wittgenstein and from Aquinas and the fruits of this are a large body of writings that still remain to be comprehended. But where she is clearest is where she was most certain: that morality consists in large part of prohibitions, that these cannot really be made sense of apart from belief in a Divine legislator and that belief in such a providential creative source is philosophically defensible even if it is not philosophically demonstrable. Having previously mentioned Chesterton it is apt to end with a quotation from an essay by Graham Greene which, applied now to Anscombe, in part captures an aspect of the singular style and multiple modes of her thought as shown in her treatment of faith and of transubstantiation. He writes:

<sup>60</sup> See 'Why Anselm's Proof in the *Proslogion* is not an Ontological Argument' and 'Russell or Anselm?' in M. Geach and L. Gormally eds *From Plato to Wittgenstein: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe* (Exeter: ImprintAcademic, 2011).

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[Chesterton] succeeded as a religious [writer], for religion is simple, dogma is simple. Much of the difficulty of theology arises from the efforts of men who are not primarily writers to distinguish a quite simple idea with the utmost accuracy.

He restated the original thought with the freshness, simplicity, and excitement of discovery. In fact, it was discovery: he unearthed the defined from beneath the definitions, and the reader wondered why the definitions had ever been thought necessary.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 'GK. Chesterton' in *Graham Greene Collected Essays* (London: Bodley Head, 1969) 136.