

Aristotelian Necessity

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Abstract

At the center of contemporary neo-Aristotelian naturalism is the thought that we can account for a great deal of ethics by thinking about what is needful in human life generally. When we think about practices like promising, virtues like justice or courage, and institutions that serve to produce, maintain, and help to reproduce well-ordered social life we can make some headway we consider the sense in which our topic makes some forms of human good possible and even, in some cases, actualizes the very good made possible thereby. G.E.M. Anscombe introduced this kind of thinking about ethics, which Philippa Foot named ‘Aristotelian Necessity’. In this essay, I take a hard Look at Anscombe’s work on the topic, and then consider her later insistence that crucial aspects of ethics could not be understood in these terms.

Introduction

At least as early as 1960,¹ Elizabeth Anscombe made arguments drawing on thought about things that are necessary in the sense that without them some good cannot be or come about, or some evil be expelled or avoided.² She drew this sense of the term *necessary* from Book V of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* – what she called Aristotle’s

¹ I have in mind Anscombe’s ‘Authority in Morals,’ read at a 1960 conference at Bec Abbey in Normandy, and first published in John Todd, editor, *Problems of Authority*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1962).

² This gloss on the relevant sense of *necessity* is from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Ch. 5, Lesson 6: *Secundum modum ponit ibi, et sine dicit, quod secundo modo dicuntur necessaria, sine quibus non potest esse vel fieri bonum aliquod, vel vitari aliquod malum, vel expelli; sicut bibere pharmacum, idest medicinam laxativam, dicimus esse necessarium, non quia sine hoc vivere animal non possit; sed ad expellendum, scilicet hoc malum quod est infirmitas, vel etiam vitandum. Est enim hoc necessarium ut non laboret, idest ut non infirmetur aliquis. Similiter navigare ad Aeginam, scilicet ad illum locum, est necessarium, non quia sine hoc non possit homo esse; sed quia sine hoc non potest acquirere aliquod bonum, idest pecuniam. Unde dicitur, quod necessaria est talis navigatio, ut aliquis pecuniam recipiat.*

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‘dictionary’.³ And she later described the source passage from Aristotle as a ‘pregnant remark’.⁴

In the early paper, her midwifery drew from the pregnant remark her thought about moral authority – the ‘the authority to declare to someone else what is true – in this case what is right and what is wrong, and to demand that he accept what one says and act accordingly’.⁵ It informed her discussion of the authority of the state where, again, authority is, as she puts it, ‘a regular *right* to be obeyed in a domain of decision’.⁶ More generally, it underwrites her account of rights and her account of rules. All turn on how some possibilities of good are created and then made actual through our understanding, deployment, and obedience to the dictates of what she called ‘stopping modals’. She writes:

I want to arouse interest in...what I’ll call ‘stopping modals’. These are of course negative; corresponding positive ones...we may call ‘forcing modals’. The negative gets priority; it is I think more frequent than the positive, which restricts one’s action to one thing. (Just as ‘thou shalt nots’ tend to leave you freer than ‘thou shalts’).⁷

She continues:

‘You have to’ and ‘you can’t’ are the first words used by one who is making you do something (or preventing you), and they quickly become themselves instruments of getting and preventing action.

After all, once this transformation has taken place, the following is true: in such a case you are told you ‘can’t’ do something you plainly can, as comes out in the fact that you sometimes do. At the beginning, the adults will physically stop the child from doing what they say he ‘can’t’ do. But gradually the child learns. With one set of circumstances this business is part of the build-up of the concept of a rule; with another, of a piece of etiquette;

³ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*,’ reprinted in Anscombe, *Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Vol. III, Ethics, Religion and Politics*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), hereafter, ‘CP’, 15.

⁴ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘On the Source of the Authority of the State,’ in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 139.

⁵ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Authority in Morals, in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 43.

⁶ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘On the Source of Authority of the State, in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 132.

⁷ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Rules, Rights and Promises,’ in *CP* op. cit. note 3 100-101.

with another of a promise; in another, of an act of sacrilege or impiety; with another of a right. It is part of human intelligence to be able to learn the responses to stopping modals without which they wouldn't exist as linguistic instruments and without which these things: rules, etiquette, rights, infringements, promises, pieties and impieties would not exist either.⁸

By tying our capacity to operate with stopping modals to human intelligence, and to the practices of human reason, Anscombe links the capacity to distinctively human goods. Rules, rights, and the like are linguistic instruments caught up in making possible such things as economic and legal systems, the moral education of children, peaceful modes of conflict resolution, good manners, and so on. In this sense, the capacity to use, understand, and follow the strictures at issue in stopping modals is, as Peter Winch put it, 'humanly necessary'.⁹

Anscombe's development of Aristotle's remark may be one of the most important aspects of her legacy in contemporary Anglophone practical philosophy. For, while Anscombe used her work on these topics in support of David Hume's famous observation that both the existence of such things as promises and the obligation to do one's word were 'naturally unintelligible', an *anti*-Humean form of contemporary ethical naturalism draws some of its inspiration, sustenance, and direction from Anscombe's work on this topic – a topic that Philippa Foot named 'Aristotelian necessity'.¹⁰ Foot's work on natural goodness grows from this strand of Anscombe's thought, and some of Michael Thompson's work – to which Foot owes a special debt – can be read as a concerted effort to provide a more detailed, more thoroughly articulated, more advanced, and more clearly defended version of this strand of Anscombe's practical philosophy.

At the center of Anscombe-inflected neo-Aristotelian naturalism is the thought that we can account for a great deal of ethics by thinking about what is needful in human life generally. When we think about practices like promising, virtues like justice or courage, and institutions that serve to produce, maintain, and help to reproduce well-ordered social life we can make some headway in understanding both our topic and its *logos* or *ratio* if we consider the sense in

⁸ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights and Promises', in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 101.

⁹ Peter Winch, 'Professor Anscombe's Moral Philosophy', in Lilli Alanen, Sarah Heinamaa, and Thomas Wallgren, editors, *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 185.

¹⁰ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

which our topic makes some forms of human good possible and even, in some cases, *actualizes* the very good made possible thereby. It is against the backdrop of thought about human life and what is good for the human as such that claims about Aristotelian necessity get some traction in this region of contemporary Anglophone practical philosophy.

I will focus on Anscombe. I will start by trying to disentangle different ways in which thought about Aristotelian necessity informs her practical philosophical writings, with special emphasis on her discussion of ‘stopping-modals’. On the face of it, at least, very different kinds of negative considerations are at work in stopping-modals, according to Anscombe. I will try to say something about what these have in common.

Having tried to isolate what her varied examples share, I will consider how thought about human good gets caught up in discussion of stopping modals. Finally, I will turn to the cases where she thinks that appeal to what is generally needful in human life *fails* to help us understand the point or force of a family of key ethical considerations, even as she holds fast to the idea that the sphere of the ethical is the sphere of distinctively human life and distinctively human good.

2. Anscombe’s Examples

Aristotelian necessity is a fairly broad topic, as Anscombe understands it. She gives a wide range of examples of stopping modals that express Aristotelian necessity, among them ‘You can’t wear that!’ and ‘You have to move your king’.¹¹ Unlike Aristotle’s examples (needing to take a drug to relieve physical distress; needing to sail to Aegina to collect a sum of money) the special sub-class of interest to Anscombe does not point to some contingent facts independent of the stuff of the stopping-modal to trigger its applicability. Her stopping-modals seem to have three interrelated distinctive features in common:

1. The justification for ‘you can’t...’ or ‘you have to...’ does not involve mention of any additional fact in support of the prohibition or prescription. If you ‘can’t’ do such-and-such because it is N’s to do (hence, you ‘have to’ let N do it), and this expresses N’s right (or obligation), then the right (or obligation) is partly

¹¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Rules, Rights and Promises’, in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, 100.

constituted by the fact that it is not anyone else's place to do the thing in question. N's right (or obligation) is not an independent fact that can be adduced in support of the prescription or prohibition. Rather, the prohibition and prescription are joint aspects of N's right (obligation).¹²

2. The 'because'-clauses that one might attach to the prescription or prohibition – in this case, 'because N is the only one who has a right/obligation to do such-and-such' – do not provide extra reasons to do or forbear doing the thing in question.¹³ Instead, they help to classify or thematize the stopping-modal/forcing-modal pair. The stuff of the 'because'-clause is, in the same sense – *dependent*. Anscombe writes: 'Let me now restrict the word 'reason' (in the context of action) to something independent which someone puts forward as his reason for what he does. And let me adopt the word 'logos' (I might also use 'theme') for the second half of 'you can't...because...' where the two halves are not independent. I shall say that there are various logos-types, and that the name of the general logos-type is an abstraction from many particular cases: a label which tells you the formal character of the stopping-modal'.¹⁴
3. Learning to deploy and abide by stopping-modals of a *logos*-type is learning both the concepts associated with the *logos*-type and the practical orientations that actualize the relevant *logoi*. The typical way in which this happens is through social interaction standardly governed in accordance with the relevant *logoi*. Recall Anscombe's remark about how this moral education works: 'With one set of circumstances this business is part of the build-up of the concept of a rule; with another, of a piece of etiquette; with another of a promise; in another, of an act of sacrilege or impiety; with another of a right'.¹⁵

¹² In a brilliant discussion of this topic, in the context of a larger exploration of Anscombe's practical philosophy than any I will attempt here, Katharina Nieswandt marks the crucial aspect by saying that rules, rights, and promises are necessarily 'self-referential'. See Katharina Nieswandt, 'Anscombe on the Sources of Normativity,' *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 51 (2017): 141-163.

¹³ If I understand him, this is part of what Roger Teichmann brings out in stressing that such "reasons" are categorical rather than hypothetical. See Roger Teichmann, 'Explaining the Rules,' *Philosophy*, 77 (2002): 597-613.

¹⁴ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights and Promises', in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 101-102.

¹⁵ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Rules, Rights and Promises', in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, 101.

I take it that her list is a sample list of *logos*-types. Compare: ‘one does not learn morality by learning that certain propositions – ethical ones – are true, but by learning what to do or abstain from in particular situations and getting by practice to do certain things, and abstain from others’.¹⁶

Our capacity to operate effectively with stopping-modals, then, is grounded in the order they help to provide in our shared social lives, and serves to help participants realize those very kinds of order in those very domains of decision.

How does Anscombe’s work on stopping-modals connect to the way in which philosophers like Foot and Rosalind Hursthouse turn to thought about human nature to illuminate work on virtue, on human flourishing or happiness, and a host of other ethical concepts?

Recall that Anscombe remarked that the practical education at issue in deploying and abiding by stopping-modals counted as an actualization of basic human capacities: ‘It is part of human intelligence to be able to learn the responses to stopping modals’.¹⁷ We are the chatty animals – the rational ones. Anscombe takes a step in the direction of more recent extensions of her thought precisely by linking her exploration of stopping-modal/forcing-modal pairs to thought about discursive human reason. And her discussions of rules and rights – generally, and in the specific context of her discussions of authority – make direct reference to common human good – to what is generally needful in human life, in a way echoed by more recent neo-Aristotelian work.

For example, when invited to locate the source of the obligation to do one’s word – the sense in which I do not merely risk *being* reproached if I break my promise, but *deserve* reproach – Anscombe points out that it is generally needful in human life to get other people to do things, and that this need dramatically outstrips anyone’s power to get others to do his will because they love him or fear him. ‘Thus,’ she writes, ‘such a procedure [as promising] is an instrument whose use is part and parcel of an enormous amount of human activity and hence of human good; of the supplying of both human needs and human wants so far as the satisfaction of these are compossible. It is scarcely possible to live in a society without encountering it and even being involved in it’.¹⁸

¹⁶ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Authority in Morals’, in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, 47.

¹⁷ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Rules, Rights and Promises,’ in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, 101.

¹⁸ G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘On Promising and its Justice, and Whether it Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*’, in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, 18.

Of moral authority, she writes: '[The authority to declare what is right or wrong, virtuous or vicious], however distasteful it may be, is a sort of authority that can hardly be denied to exist by the most recalcitrant moral philosopher. For it is exercised by people in bringing up children; and if there is such a thing as authority of a commanding kind at all, or if there is such a thing as a right, this authority and this right can hardly be denied, since it is quite necessary, if children are to be brought up, that their bringers-up act as if they were exercising such authority; and since what is a necessity can hardly fail to be a right, so anyone who wants to bring children up must have this right'.¹⁹ The requirement that we bring up children, of course, is perfectly general. No society is possible without meeting the requirement, and the bringing-up of children is what makes it possible for children to come into their own as the maturing, discursively reasoning, social animals that they are born to be.

In her discussion of the authority of the state, by a similar token, she argues that the right of civil authority to back up its strictures with coercive force, although it must have some standing in custom, cannot be merely a customary right. She argues that people in general need protection against violence, and also protection in law against violation of their customary rights. Partly because we are vulnerable to personal violence, partly because different systems of customary right can clash within a single complex society, and partly because we have come increasingly to inhabit complex societies, we need the kind of civil authority that is lodged in the state. That authority is nothing other than the state's claim to our regular obedience in, for example, matters of the establishment, promulgation, and enforcement of positive law. Of course, the state can forfeit its right to our obedience if it fails to discharge the tasks for the sake of which we need civil authority, and it can overreach its authority in some areas if it enshrines or extends a customary right – say, through legislation – beyond what one might call a reasonable limit. Winch imagines a case in which a society uses queueing as a mechanism of fair access in many contexts and a government eager to penalize queue-jumping by imposing strict penalties on jumping the queue as one possible instance of overreach.²⁰

What matters for my purposes is that in all of these cases, Anscombe adverts to Aristotelian necessity as a way of arguing *for* a right, a rule, an institution, a practice, and the sorts of practical dispositions might actualize these in the lives of practitioners *without*

¹⁹ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Authority in Morals', in *CP*, op. cit. note 3, . 43.

²⁰ Op. cit. note 8, 187-189.

appeal to particular customs, or instances of positive law, or contract, or pure principles of Reason that might seem to operate independently of the business of specifically human life. By the same token, appeal to Aristotelian necessity can give some leverage in arguing that what is taken to be a customary right could, actually, count as a customary *wrong*.²¹ Anscombe, then, finds in perfectly general thought about what is needful in human life a source of support for *some* substantive ethical claims, and a *check* on others. The sort of justification at issue on both sides is instrumental. Uses of stopping-modals are *instruments* for creating and actualizing possibilities for human good. *We need* virtues in order to live well. Some forms of authority are *required* in human life if we are to manage to do the things that we must. And so on. Aristotelianly necessary matters in Anscombe's practical philosophy are collective means to common ends – where the 'commonality' points to shared human nature, rather than to some amalgamated measure of private interests that happen to crop up in any particular group of human beings. Part of what Aristotelian necessity can sometimes explain is *why* some such interests might crop up in many members of a particular group of human beings – for example, interests in marrying or making contracts or raising children

We can quarrel with Anscombe's justification of the state – noticing, for example, that the reach of the modern state dramatically exceeds the reach of, say, a Lockean umpire state. We can doubt the extent of the authority of bringers-up of children. We can notice that Anscombe does not argue that individual people will tend in general to go along with any of it, even if the justification for the relevant forms of obedience rests in what is humanly needful. In short, we can raise any number of concerns about her substantive use of thought about what humans in general need to provide such justifications. But the basic form of argument she develops in these specific contexts has been undeniably attractive to many philosophers working in contemporary neo-Aristotelian ethics. And while I do not think that she should, or even *could*, accept every such development of her teaching, for better or worse, her teaching has inspired an entire school of contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy. This is part of the reason that I want now to have a look at her sense of the points where thought about Aristotelian necessity fails to illuminate crucial aspects of the ethical.

²¹ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On the Source of Authority of the State,' in *CP* op. cit. note 3, 145.

3. 'Mystical' Value

In a recent essay, directed primarily to Foot's account of natural goodness, Anselm Müller traces out Anscombe's concern about attempting to rely upon thought about Aristotelian necessity to capture the whole of morality.²² Müller stresses that the kind of justification that Anscombe offers is fundamentally instrumental in character. The good or point of the virtues, rules, rights, institutions, and social practices that Anscombe finds in appeals to what is generally needful in human life sees the objects thereby justified as instruments for satisfying these general needs – as ways of promoting or actualizing human good. The justifications are, in a peculiar sense, utilitarian, although the 'beneficiary' of the good in questions is not in the first instance an individual, or a group of individuals, or a mass of human individuals. The good in question is, as I mentioned, in a special sense, *common* good, where common good need not be the good of any arbitrarily large collection of individual human beings.

On Müller's reading, Foot attempts to use Anscombe-style thought about Aristotelian necessity to reach all the way down to particular individuals facing particular practical situations. This is, he thinks, why she seems to take it that a 'Why should I be moral?' question will cease to arise once we have fully appreciated the character of natural goodness. Because Foot ties morality explicitly to rationality, it looks like a 'Why be moral?' question, when pushed, will slide toward something on the order of a 'Why be rational?' question, and there are well-known arguments to the effect that it is hard to see how such a question ever could be given a sensible answer.

Although Anscombe explicitly links her discussions of stopping-modals and forcing-modals to general concern over human intelligence and the practices of human reason, she *does not take* this extra step. More than this, she comes to reject the suggestion that all important points about the virtues and their exercise can be grounded in thought about what is humanly needful.

Müller puts her point this way:

Anscombe...came to argue that not all virtue can be understood as serving our well-being. Or rather, since virtue belongs to the human form of life so that all virtuous conduct is part of our well-being: that some of virtue's requirements can be said to 'serve' a good

²² Anselm Müller, "Why Should I?' Can Foot Convince the Sceptic,' in John Hacker-Wright, editor, *Philippa Foot on Goodness and Virtue*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 151-185.

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human life only in the sense that satisfaction of these requirements is an ingredient – not an instrument – of human good.

Where a virtuous practice cannot count as virtuous because it serves an aspect of human well-being other than the practice itself, we cannot explain its goodness in terms of Aristotelian necessity. Otherwise, the functionality signified by this term could not supply is with grounds for, e.g., viewing generosity and reliability, but not vindictiveness and arrogance as virtuous motivational patterns.²³

Anscombe argued that central aspects of virtue, for example refusing to engage in murder as a means or an end, could not be understood in terms of Aristotelian necessity. Müller's gloss on her refusal to seek a grounding for the prohibition on murder in Aristotelian necessity is, I think, right. Anscombe's writing on the topic takes a less abstract tack.

Given that the one wronged by murder is, in the first instance, the victim, Anscombe writes:

If someone is wronged, he has a right which is violated. But the wrongfulness of murder seems to be the basis of the right, rather than vice versa, because (a) there is not a simple right to life, but rather a right not to be murdered, and (b) if there were a certain right to life upon which the wrongfulness of murder is based, it would be difficult to see why it should not be waivable.

The prohibition on murder is indeed a great charter right to all of us, but it is the prohibition that comes first, and not the right.²⁴

She goes on to argue that the aspect of human nature at issue in the prohibition on murder is something on the order of the spiritual nature of human beings, a source of supra-utilitarian value.

In other writings, she brings together this thought with specifically theological concerns about our ultimate end. We may be unwilling to follow her that far. But she does, I think, supply is with grounds to be suspicious of the general extension of her thought about Aristotelian necessity to cover the whole field of morality.

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²³ Op. cit. note 22, 162-163.

²⁴ G.E.M. Anscombe, 'Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia', in Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, editors, *Human Life, Action, and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), 266