

One of the leading philosophers of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Anscombe, who was born in Limerick a century ago this month, remains an important and influential figure both in academic philosophy and in Catholic apologetics / **By JOHN HALDANE**

Firm intentions

ELIZABETH Anscombe was a remarkable and formidable woman, an exceptional philosopher and a devoted and faithful Roman Catholic. While orders of intellectual greatness are hard to assign, particularly when the person belongs to one's own time, there is no doubt that Anscombe was one of the most gifted and accomplished philosophers of the twentieth century. Her work will continue to be read long into the future and a place for her in the history of philosophy is assured.

Considering her standing in the category of women philosophers she is the clear leader, marked out by her creativity, imagination, industry, insight, range and rigour. There is also a kind of singularity about her writings: she proceeds directly to the topic of her investigation, makes few if any references to academic contemporaries or current trends, writes in a concentrated and often indirect manner, eschews academic jargon, generally avoids footnotes, and sometimes ends with an expression of perplexity.

Again, unlike most philosophers of her standing, she engaged in philosophical analysis and argumentation before non-academic audiences, usually Catholic ones. In this connection, while she proportioned the depth of her thinking to their likely knowledge and

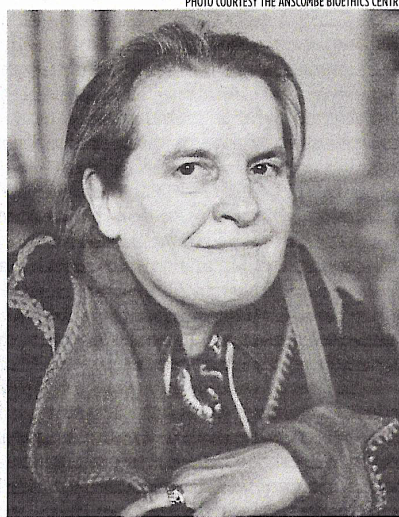


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comprehension, she never resorted to glibness or misleading oversimplification.

Wherein lies her greatness? She had considerable intellectual commitment, stamina, and toughness. Of themselves these do not make for brilliance, but without them there tends only to be, at best, unsustained cleverness. There was an occasion on which she is reported to have said to the famous logical

positivist, A.J. Ayer: "If you didn't speak so quickly people wouldn't think you were so clever," to which, to his credit, he speedily replied: "And if you didn't speak so slowly people wouldn't think you were so profound." But the fact is that Ayer was merely clever, while Anscombe was penetrating and profound.

In addition, she had tremendous powers of analysis and argument, and a "nose" for fakes and mistakes – not the superficial yet pervasive sort that characterise the work of many philosophers in any period, but the deeper kind that give rise to ways of thinking that seem inescapable until the error and the escape routes are pointed out. She was invariably frank and often brusque. I am not sure to what extent she intended to be rude, though something perceived as such might be in evidence where she regarded what had been said as stupid or vacuous, or suspected vainglorious pretension.

She had no inclination to suppose that contemporary philosophy was in general an improvement on the thought of the past, and she had a particular feeling for philosophers from the pre-modern period, particularly Plato, Aristotle, Anselm and Aquinas, but also, though she studied them less, Spinoza and Kierkegaard. She was, however, deeply

LIFE AT THE GEACHCOMBES

Unconventional talents

Philosophy flowed through the Oxford family home of Elizabeth Anscombe and her husband Peter Geach, as one regular visitor recalls / **By ANTHONY KENNY**

AFTER MY ORDINATION in 1955 I studied theology and philosophy for two years in Oxford as a graduate student. In the 1950s, the English Dominicans used to organise an annual gathering of Catholic philosophers at their priory at Spode in Staffordshire. It was there that Herbert McCabe introduced me to a remarkable

couple – Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach. It quickly became clear to me that Elizabeth and Peter were the most talented philosophers in the Catholic community. While Peter taught philosophy at Birmingham, Elizabeth at that time was a lecturer at Somerville College, Oxford.

I began to see a great deal of Elizabeth. She kept open house at 27 St John Street: one could drop in at any hour of day or night and start a discussion of a philosophical problem. Elizabeth had a household of children, to which she would attend from time to time but that did not interrupt the flow of philosophy. She was also a chain smoker, dropping butts into a large wooden bowl. She had an earthy side: she frequently used four-letter words, and from time to time would give me graphic accounts of various aspects of sex that she thought I needed to know about when hearing Confessions, and about which she believed (rightly) I was not well informed.

I left Oxford to take up a curacy in

Liverpool without having finished my dissertation. I more than once went to stay with the Geachcombes in their house in Oxford, where no door was ever locked. When I took a bath, Elizabeth would come and sit on the edge of it to continue a philosophical discussion.

Many legends circulate about the unconventional style of family life in St John Street. Some of them are very likely true. Here, I will repeat the only story on the topic that I had from Peter himself. Some neighbour had reported them to the NSPCC for cruelty to their children. When the inspector arrived, it was explained to him that one of the boys had indeed been beaten for breaking some precious object. According to Peter, the inspector, having surveyed the damage to the treasure and the damage to the boy, decided that what had been inflicted was merited and proportionate.

I wrote from Liverpool to confess to Elizabeth that I was suffering grave doubts about the Catholic faith. She responded

influenced by the methods of Wittgenstein, with whom she studied and who chose her to translate his masterpiece, *Philosophical Investigations*, one of the major turning points in twentieth-century philosophy.

Elizabeth Anscombe was born on 18 March 1919, the youngest of three children and only daughter of Allen Anscombe, a science master at Dulwich College, and of his wife Gertrude Elizabeth, a classics teacher, after whom she was named. Her father was a captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers during the Irish War of Independence and Elizabeth was born in Limerick during the first year of his service there. While he was an atheist, Elizabeth's mother was a nominal Anglican. Before she entered her teenage years and up to the middle of them Elizabeth discovered Roman Catholicism by reading a book on the lives and work of English recusant priests, and went on to read her way into the Catholic faith.

After graduating from Oxford, in 1942 she moved to Cambridge to take up a postgraduate research studentship at Newnham College. It was in Cambridge that she met Wittgenstein, who then held the chair of philosophy and whose lectures she attended, becoming increasingly enthusiastic about his revolutionary ideas.

ALTHOUGH HE is quoted as saying of Anscombe and of another philosopher convert that he "could not possibly believe all the things they believe", in his final year, when he knew he was dying, Wittgenstein asked Anscombe to put him in touch with a "non-philosophical priest". That she did, calling upon Fr Conrad Pepler OP of Blackfriars, Cambridge. Although she effected the introduction, Anscombe never presumed that Wittgenstein had resumed the faith of his childhood, and speculations to that effect are wishful thinking.

Anscombe's short book, *Intention*, first published in 1957, is universally regarded as a classic account of the nature of intentional behaviour, and as the founding text of the theory of action. Anscombe's motive in investigating intention was her perplexity and frustration at attempts to excuse or minimise culpability by saying that an agent only intended immediate acts and that their foreseen and desired consequences were something distinct for which he might not be morally responsible.

THUS SHE FORGED a link between philosophical and moral psychology, which was further adverted to in her 1958 article, "Modern Moral Philosophy", which introduced the term "consequentialism" into the English language. That article is rightly credited as being the principal cause of the revival of an ethics focussed on virtue rather than on rule or outcome, though Anscombe never supposed that the whole of ethics could be done in terms of the concept of virtue and on that account she cannot correctly be termed a "virtue ethicist".

Anscombe's work was for the most part highly academic, usually difficult to comprehend, and often combative in expression. From her student days, however, she had discussed and written about issues of moral, political and religious interests. In 1939 she co-authored a then highly controversial pamphlet predicting that Britain's conduct in the Second World War would be unjust, and in 1956 and 1957 she protested the award by the University of Oxford of an honorary degree to President Truman, charging that he had commanded the murderous use of nuclear weapons against Japanese civilians.

Troubled by how people found it easy to defend Truman she came to the conclusion that they failed to understand the nature of his actions. In *Intention*, she showed that in doing one thing (moving one's hand) one may

intentionally be doing another (directing the death of human beings).

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

IN 1967 ANSCOMBE was elected Fellow of the British Academy. She subsequently received a number of other distinctions including foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1999 along with her husband, the Catholic philosopher Peter Geach, a papal medal Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice. Since her death in 2001 four volumes of her writings have been published: *Human Life, Action and Ethics* (2005); *Faith in a Hard Ground* (2009); *From Plato to Wittgenstein* (2011); and *Logic, Truth and Meaning* (2015); several collections of essays and studies of her work have also appeared. These have contributed to the significant revival of interest in Anscombe's work in her centenary year.

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with great generosity to my confession of faltering belief, and we corresponded for months about the nature of knowledge, certainty and faith. We also had an exchange of daily postcards arguing for and against the existence of God. But this was not sufficient to restore my faith. I came to think that the right thing for me to do would be to seek laicisation. She told me that this would make no difference to our friendship. "You are the kind of friend," she said, "whose good is our good, and harm to whom is harm to us."

When, after laicisation, I went back to Oxford, we resumed our close philosophical friendship. While I was a philosophy tutor at Balliol, I gave a number of joint classes with Anscombe, and we benefited from the flexibility of Oxford tutorial arrangements to exchange students. I sent some of my most promising Balliol undergraduates to

her, and she allowed me to give tutorials to some of her brightest Somerville students.

Elizabeth was a feminist but one of an unusual kind. She resolutely refused to change her name on marriage, and letters to Mrs Geach were returned unopened.

But she was hostile to any concessions being made to women as women.

One week, a delinquent student made some stammering excuse on a tutorial for not having written the week's essay. "Let me show you what I've been doing since last week," Elizabeth said, and produced a five-day-old baby.

Sadly, our friendship came to an abrupt end. Elizabeth reacted with indignation when, in 1965, I told her that I planned to get married without a papal dispensation: "Our dearest wish for you," she said, "must be that you will be desperately unhappy in your marriage." Thus excommunicated, I hardly saw her

again for many years, until I found myself doing business with her as a fellow trustee of Wittgenstein's literary estate. Early in 2001, I wrote to another trustee, Georg Henrik von Wright, to narrate the story of Elizabeth's death and burial. I reported that after a requiem Mass in Blackfriars, Cambridge, my wife Nancy and I had accompanied the family and a dozen other mourners to the Ascension Parish Burial Ground, where Wittgenstein was buried. Though the cemetery was officially closed, Elizabeth had secured special permission from ecclesiastical lawyers to be buried beside Wittgenstein: they dug her grave at twice the usual depth to leave room for Peter, who was eventually buried there after his death in 2013.

Sir Anthony Kenny is a former master of Balliol, president of the British Academy, and pro-vice chancellor of the University of Oxford. His most recent book is *Brief Encounters* (SPCK, 2018), from which these recollections are taken.

