

# Anscombe reading Aristotle\*

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## Abstract

Under one particular reading of it, Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is considered a seminal text in the revival of virtue ethics. Seen thus, Anscombe is implying that it is possible to do ethics without using concepts such as 'moral ought' or 'moral obligation', the perfect example being Aristotelian ethics. On the other hand, Anscombe claims that it is not useful at present to engage in moral philosophy since she finds that 'philosophically there is a huge gap... which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, ...and above all of human "flourishing"' (Anscombe, 1958: 18). The gap Anscombe refers to appears where there should be a 'proof that an unjust man is a bad man'. My aim in this paper is to discuss the various ways in which Anscombe's theses can be interpreted, recalling two other philosophers for whom Aristotelian virtue ethics was also essential: P. Foot and J. McDowell. I will argue that Anscombe did not expect Aristotelian ethics to answer the problems modern ethics poses.

**Keywords:** 'Modern Moral Philosophy'; Aristotelian ethics; virtue ethics; moral naturalism; Philippa Foot; John McDowell

## Resum. *Anscombe llegend a Aristòtil*

Fent-ne una lectura particular, «Modern Moral Philosophy» (La filosofia moral moderna) d'Anscombe es considera un text fundador en el renaixement de l'ètica de la virtut. Vist així, Anscombe insinua que és possible fer ètica sense emprar conceptes com «deure moral» o «obligació moral»; l'exemple perfecte n'és l'ètica aristotèlica. D'altra banda, Anscombe afirma que actualment no és útil fer filosofia moral, ja que troba que «filosòficament hi ha una gran bretxa [...] que s'ha d'omplir amb una explicació de la naturalesa humana, l'acció humana [...] i, sobretot, del "floriment" humà» (Anscombe, 1958: 18). La bretxa a la qual es refereix apareix on hi hauria d'haver una «prova que un home injust és un home dolent». El meu objectiu en aquest article és discutir les diverses formes en què es poden interpretar les tesis d'Anscombe, recordant dos altres filòsofs per a qui l'ètica de la virtut aristotèlica també era essencial: P. Foot i J. McDowell. Argumentaré que Anscombe no esperava que l'ètica aristotèlica respongués als problemes que l'ètica moderna ens planteja.

**Paraules clau:** «Modern Moral Philosophy»; ètica aristotèlica; ètica de la virtut; naturalisme moral; Philippa Foot; John McDowell

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### Summary

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### 1. Stating the problem

Elizabeth Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' was clearly seen as an attack on modern theories of morality, mostly those from Utilitarian and Kantian ethics, but also Social Contract theories. The problem with such traditional moral theories was that as secular approaches to morality, they wholly lacked a proper foundation or authority, in the sense that concepts such as 'moral ought' or 'morally right' ceased to be meaningful in a system in which the proper source of moral authority, God, is absent.

But what should we make of this? Not all interpreters of Anscombe's paper agree on this point. Under one particular reading of it – probably the most common one – Anscombe's paper is considered a seminal text in the revival of virtue ethics. Seen thus, it implies that modern moral philosophy is deeply misguided and an alternative account should be developed, one not revolving around the definition of what is the (morally) right thing to do and not focusing on concepts such as 'moral ought' or 'moral obligation'. Indeed, Anscombe states that these concepts are no longer necessary for modern ethics, and she argues that they have even become harmful and should accordingly be abandoned: 'the concepts of obligation, and duty – *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say – and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought", ought to be jettisoned' (Anscombe, 1958: 1). That is, when used in this special moral sense, the concepts of 'obligation' and 'ought' should be jettisoned since they are misleading – they invoke a normative force or authority that currently has no referent, no recognizable source. The problem with modern moral theories, according to Anscombe, is that they retain the figure of the legislator while losing sight of the only entity that could legislate. In Anscombe's own words, 'It is as if the notion "criminal" were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten' (Anscombe, 1958: 6). Used in this special moral sense, those concepts imply that we are forcefully obliged to act (or not to act) in certain ways, as if we were obliged or bound by law. 'Morally wrong' is equated with 'illicit'. But this 'law conception of ethics', as Anscombe calls it, is outdated and no longer makes sense because we no longer acknowledge an authority from which moral rules could be derived. This legalist conception of ethics is completely shallow if there is no such thing as a recognisable legislator, precisely the case in mod-

ern ethics. If we wish to have a secular ethics, God can no longer do the trick, and moral dictates are not required by divine law. The other available option would be the Kantian solution, but according to Anscombe, his idea – reason legislating itself – is simply an incoherent, ‘absurd’ idea. She rejects it as absurd in the sense that ‘the concept of legislation requires superior power in the legislator’ (Anscombe, 1958: 7).

Anscombe also claims that it is possible *to do ethics without using such concepts*, the perfect example being Aristotelian ethics. Aristotle was not concerned with defining the criteria by which an action is morally right. Instead, he was concerned with defining what constitutes excellence in a human being. He sought not to determine what good is, or what a right action is supposed to be, but simply to establish what a good life for us is – how we are to understand human flourishing. Virtue ethics aims to define what the just action is, not the right action, and in doing so, no rule of thumb will be helpful. One must rely on thick concepts like *just*, *cruel* and *generous* rather than thin ones like *good/bad* and *right/wrong*.

Thus, Aristotelian ethics is not contaminated by the meaningless legislative use of ‘morally ought’. In virtue ethics, virtues take the place of (moral) law, and the requirements of virtue don’t have the force of law. Of course, virtue ethics also involves some conception of what should not be done, and Aristotle certainly thought that there were actions that no good man would consider under any circumstance. Aristotle would not object to the idea that there are things we should not do, but he would object to the idea of a special category of such principles marked as specifically moral (meaning: having the force of law, mandatory). Aristotle does not provide an account of what a ‘moral’ obligation is, and even the notion of ‘norm’ has a completely different meaning in the context of a virtue-based ethics. If Aristotle willingly grants that a human being displaying the whole range of virtues is the norm, this is not to be understood in the modern sense of ‘norm’. A human being displaying or manifesting the whole range of virtues is the norm in precisely the same sense as a human being with ‘a complete set of teeth is a norm’ (Anscombe, 1958: 14). There is no sense of ‘moral’ obligation attached to this idea of norm, in the sense of one being obliged or bound by law – just as we cannot consider there to be some notion of obligation involved when we say that having a complete set of teeth is the norm. Here is how Anscombe describes this distinct notion of norm:

in this sense, ‘norm’ has ceased to be roughly equivalent to ‘law’. (...) if someone looked in this direction to give ‘norm’ a sense, then he ought to recognize what has happened to the notion ‘norm’, which he wanted to mean ‘law – without bringing God in’ – it has ceased to mean ‘law’ at all. (Anscombe, 1958: 14-15)

The problem is that even if Anscombe considered virtue ethics a reasoned alternative, a kind of way out for modern ethics in the sense that Aristotelian ethics is not contaminated by the meaningless legislative use of ‘morally ought’,

she still finds somewhat of an issue with an account of virtue ethics. Virtue ethics is concerned with what makes a human being just (and courageous, and generous). But of course, we may ask why one should or ought to be just, or whether acting justly is the right thing to do, as she herself acknowledges: ‘can’t it reasonably be asked whether one might ever need to commit injustice, or whether it won’t be the best thing to do? Of course it can’ (Anscombe, 1958: 18). A divine law, or a moral law with truly authoritative force, would not permit unjust actions *by forbidding injustice*, and as she also recognizes, ‘it really does add something to the description “unjust” to say there is an obligation not to do it’ (Anscombe, 1958: 18). Now, can a virtue-based ethics tell us why we shouldn’t be unjust? (Or is this just a nonsensical, absurd question?) As stated above, a virtue-based ethics is concerned with human flourishing and with what a human being has to be and do to flourish. And the most important step in this line of reasoning is that a human being’s flourishing should be equated with the virtues, with acting accordingly with the virtues. Anscombe puts it this way:

an act of injustice will tend to make a man bad; and essentially the flourishing of a man *qua* man consists in his being good (e.g., in virtues); but for any X to which such terms apply, X needs what makes it flourish, so a man needs, or ought to perform, only virtuous actions; and even if, as it must be admitted may happen, he flourishes less, or not at all, in inessentials, by avoiding injustice, his life is spoiled in essentials by not avoiding injustice – so he still needs to perform only just actions. That is roughly how Plato and Aristotle talk. (Anscombe, 1958: 18)

But here is the problem: if that is ‘roughly how Plato and Aristotle talk’, it is not at all clear that it should be the way modern philosophers talk or that we should be thinking along the same lines.<sup>1</sup> Why shouldn’t modern philosophers simply follow Aristotle on this? Because, Anscombe thinks, this connection between human flourishing and the exercise of virtues is not as straightforward and obvious as it might have seemed to him. In fact, she thinks that the concept of ‘human flourishing’ is a highly dubious one, and that there is a leap which we are still not able to make between this idea of human flourishing and the idea of virtuous action. Anscombe goes even further: she claims

1. And this is what gives rise to different interpretations of Anscombe’s ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’. Some people doubt whether she is really suggesting that virtue ethics could be a solid alternative to modern secular moral theories (see, for instance, Roger Crisp, 2004, and Blackburn, 2005). Not all interpreters of Anscombe’s paper agree that it should be considered a seminal text in the revival of virtue ethics; rather they believe she is trying to show that the force that divine law conveys to the moral ought is still necessary. According to this interpretation, modern moral philosophers who ‘suppose that the divine law notion can be dismissed as making no essential difference’ (Anscombe, 1958: 18) to morality are essentially wrong. And some argue that this view is much more in line with Anscombe’s well-acknowledged absolutist views on moral matters – she has written extensively on ethical issues rooted in traditional Catholic moral teaching on marriage, sexuality, war, etc. (see Solomon, 2008).

that the reason why it is currently not worthwhile to do moral philosophy at all has to do with this big gap that prevents us from having a general account of the concepts of virtue, human nature and human flourishing, a gap which cannot be filled before we have attained a 'sound philosophy of psychology'.

In her own words, 'philosophically there is a huge gap, at present unfillable as far as we are concerned, which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is and above all of human "flourishing"' (Anscombe, 1958: 18). This idea is so important to Anscombe that she claims it as the first thesis of her 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Right on the first page of the paper, she already states that this will be one of her three main theses: 'it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, which we are conspicuously lacking' (Anscombe, 1958: 1).

But how exactly should this idea be understood? What is Anscombe aiming at? Is she really claiming that an Aristotelian virtue ethics can be a reliable alternative to moral modern theories when there is this huge philosophical gap and we apparently cannot rely on Aristotle to overcome it? This will be my main concern in this paper.

## 2. Aristotelian ethics

The philosophical gap that Anscombe refers to appears where there should be 'proof that an unjust man is a bad man' (Anscombe, 1958: 5). She develops the idea thus: 'In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics, but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology' (Anscombe, 1958: 4).

But what exactly does this entail? What could count as a proof that an unjust man is a bad man? Is Anscombe implying that if we were equipped with an adequate philosophy of psychology and with an adequate account of human nature and human flourishing, we would be able to find this proof that an unjust man is a bad man? Even if such an 'explanation belongs to ethics', it seems like a task that must begin with some kind of descriptive work; does this mean that an adequate account of human psychology and human nature would somehow constitute a basis or a foundation for ethics? Could this natural basis or foundation be the bedrock that ethics is lacking since it lost the idea of an authoritative legislator?

First of all, it is important to see how an Aristotelian virtue ethics can be interpreted – why Anscombe thinks that such a conception: i) doesn't involve the modern notion of 'moral' obligation and 'moral' ought, and ii) cannot provide an adequate account of human nature and human flourishing.

It seems that an alternative to a modern moral theory which has lost the idea of an authoritative legislator could be a theory in which this idea of authority has no use – an account of ethics based on moral psychology, on facts of human nature and on an account of the good for humans based on this

approach. This is what Aristotle's ethics provides. Because it is an eudaimonistic ethics, an Aristotelian account needs to neither invoke the figure of an authoritative legislator nor talk about moral obligations. In such an account, people are not bound by law; they are bound by virtue in the sense that it is conducive to the human good, or happiness. But 'virtue' [*aretê*], in the original sense, does not even carry a moralistic tone. Aristotle wrote that 'human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting virtue' (Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*: 1098a15), and that 'Happiness is an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue' (Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*: 1102a5), but 'virtue' [*aretê*] means 'done in an excellent manner'. Aristotle believed that for every F, there is an excellent way for F to be, and happiness will consist in achieving it. Thus, to be virtuous (to reach excellence) is to be a perfect exemplar of a certain kind; to be virtuous means 'being good at being what we are'. In other words, a virtuous person is simply someone who excels in what s/he does.

Therefore, the question to be addressed in the context of a virtue ethics is not 'why should one be virtuous', for in this context, this question makes no sense at all. If being virtuous means being good at being what we are, then virtue benefits its possessor in an intrinsic, not an instrumental, way. That is why virtue is presented as linked with the virtuous person's happiness or flourishing. And that is why the figure of the legislator is absent – there is no need for an external (or internal) authoritative entity, there is no (moral) law to which one is bound. The Greeks had no use for this notion of 'obligation' as something that makes no reference to our own interests.

Rather, the question that needs to be addressed is what makes for a good human being (in the sense of being a perfect exemplar of a human being). What makes one good *at being* a human being? The main point is that the traditional 'moral' virtues – like justice, benevolence or generosity – may be but are not necessarily part of this description (in any case, they are not the whole of it). It is not a conceptual truth that a good human being is a just human being. Thus, it makes sense to ask, for instance, why one ought to be just. That is why Anscombe claims we need a proof that being just is necessary for being good (at being a human being).

As we have seen, according to Anscombe, 'In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man' (Anscombe, 1958: 4). But why do we need such a proof 'in present-day philosophy', and why didn't Aristotle need this proof? This is the point at which it would be fruitful, for our purposes, to bring to the discussion two different approaches to and interpretations of Aristotelian ethics put forth by two distinguished philosophers: Philippa Foot and John McDowell.

### 3. Philippa Foot's reading of Aristotelian ethics

P. Foot and J. McDowell are two other moral philosophers for whom Aristotelian virtue ethics was crucially important. But their interpretations of it are quite distinct, and I think that bearing in mind those two perspectives and

grasping the differences between them will help us to better understand Anscombe's aims and concerns.

Drawing on Aristotle and on Anscombe, P. Foot argued that a virtue-based ethics inspired by Aristotle could be the solution for all the blind spots in any ethical theory. Foot was deeply concerned with the rise of non-cognitivist approaches to ethics; she found those approaches highly harmful, undermining any possibility of ethical thought altogether. If the essential element in any kind of moral assessment or moral evaluation is the agent's attitudes, and not fundamentally something about the way the world is, this introduces an element of arbitrariness that she did not find acceptable.

Foot thought it possible to give an objective account of ethics and find a grounding for it only if we take the Aristotelian project seriously. According to Aristotle, all living beings have needs, and thus all living beings have a good. What is good for a living being is that which promotes the activities or faculties that normal members of the species to which the living being belongs need in order to flourish. What a living being needs depends on what the optimal functioning of a normal member of the species is. For instance, in order to flourish – to do well in a specific life form – oak trees need water and thus need to have deep roots, owls need to have a powerful night vision and humans need a highly developed memory. Thus, the organs of any living being have a purpose or function, which is to contribute to the success of its life. So, it is possible to evaluate the functioning of our organs, for example, or the functioning of the organs of other living beings, as being *good* or *bad* based on certain facts about the life form in question.

It is then possible to determine what having *good* eyesight is for an owl, or having *good* roots for an oak tree. The goodness of any organ lies in its performing its function properly (in a non-defective way), enabling the plant/animal/human being to pursue the characteristic activities of a living being of that species. Foot's main point is that these notions – the idea of a characteristic activity, of proper functioning, of having a good eyesight – are already *normative* notions in its complete and proper sense (they are determined once what a proper specimen of that kind is has been determined). We can determine what is it for an owl to have good eyesight because we can determine how an owl *should* be (what a non-defective owl is). This is how Foot puts it:

We start from the fact that it is the particular life form of a species of plant or animal that determines how an individual plant or animal should be. (...) And all the truths about what this or that characteristic does, what its purpose or point is, and in suitable cases its function, must be related to this life cycle. The way an individual should be is determined by what is needed for development, self-maintenance, and reproduction. (Foot, 2003: 32-33)

Therefore, according to Foot, it is perfectly reasonable to consider there to be 'patterns of natural normativity' and 'natural norms'. In fact, she refers to them as 'Aristotelian necessities' – an expression she takes from Anscombe. In her own words, an Aristotelian necessity or categorical is 'that which is necessary

because and in so far as good hangs on it' (Foot, 2003: 15). An Aristotelian necessity is not, thus, a mere statistical proposition. Because those necessities are related to the teleology of the species, they do describe norms – normative assessments on how a particular individual of that species should be.

Based on this piece of Aristotelian philosophy, all that Foot needs to prove is that the same conceptual framework applies to the evaluation of human action and human will. It is obvious and clear to her that the evaluation of human action and human will also depends on the essential facts that characterise human life, and therefore that morality depends on the life form that characterises our species. Her thesis is that 'there is *no change in the meaning of "good" between the word as it appears in "good roots" and as it appears in "good dispositions of the human will"*' (Foot, 2003: 39, italics in the original). Of course, human actions are much more complex than the actions of other sentient beings and can be evaluated in many different ways, but her point is that the *conceptual structure of evaluation* remains the same. It is true that human good is *sui generis*, in the sense that we cannot simply equate it with self-maintenance and reproduction, as in the case of animals and plants.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, following Aristotle, in the case of human beings some necessities are also related to the teleology of the species (what is generally needed for human good), and therefore it is possible to determine what character virtue or flaw are by determining what kind of a living thing a human being is.

To sum up, Foot believed that: i) there is objectively something that can be called 'natural goodness and defect in living things' (there is some way each individual of a certain species *should* be), and ii) evaluations of human action (and, more restrictively, moral evaluations) are but evaluations that can be made against that backdrop, which means that they depend on essential features of a specific natural life form, human life. What she means by this is that virtues and character dispositions that we evaluate as good in a moral sense are also determined by general facts about human needs and human nature. The human good is associated with meeting not only basic needs but also socially minimal needs that are a prerequisite for the successful pursuit of a fulfilling life, and virtues play an indispensable part in this:

Men and women need to be industrious and tenacious of purpose not only so as to be able to house, clothe and feed themselves, but also to pursue human ends having to do with love and friendship. They need the ability to form family ties, friendships, and special relations with neighbours. They also need codes of conduct. And how could they have all these things without virtues such as loyalty, fairness, kindness, and in certain circumstances obedience? (Foot, 2003: 44-45)

2. Foot acknowledges it: 'The goods that hang on human cooperation, and hang too on such things as respect for truth, art and scholarship, are much more diverse and much harder to delineate than are animal *goods*' (Foot, 2003: 16).

But Foot goes even further: she also states that this dependence and grounding of morality on the life of our species is an idea she gets from Anscombe (from her ‘On Promising and its Justice’). Here, Anscombe defends that what makes institutions like promises necessary for human beings are certain facts about human life.<sup>3</sup> Human beings must bind each other to action in exactly the same sense that owls must have accurate vision, says Foot. Much human good and human coordinated activity depend on this possibility of one person binding another by means of a contract like a promise. This is why a just person aims to keep promises, and why we see breaking promises as something *bad* or *wrong*. And we can only prove this idea by identifying what human beings can and cannot do and what the elements of human good are (that is, what one needs in order to live a good life). Given our specific particularities and our particular way of life (namely our social nature), morality and the exercise of the so-called moral virtues are necessary for us.

This is sufficient, Foot holds, to bring morality back to a steady place, to move away from non-cognitivist and subjectivist approaches and grant it some kind of objectivity. This is how she puts it:

What, then, is to be said about the relation between ‘fact’ and ‘value’? The thesis of this chapter is that the grounding of a moral argument is ultimately in facts about human life. (...) In my view, therefore, a moral evaluation does not stand over against the statement of a matter of fact, but rather has to do with facts about a particular subject matter. (...) It is obvious that there are objective, factual evaluations of such things as human sight, hearing, memory, based on the life form of our own species. Why, then, does it seem so monstrous a suggestion that the evaluation of the human will should be determined by facts about the nature of human beings and the life of our own species? (Foot, 2003: 24)

One question still remains: is Foot right in thinking that morality’s dependence on facts about human life is sufficient to prove all she needs to prove: a natural foundation for ethics – and is that what Anscombe is truly seeking? Would this constitute Anscombe’s sorely needed ‘proof that an unjust man is a bad man’? I think this question can be illuminated if we bring J. McDowell’s perspective on Aristotelian virtue ethics to the discussion.

3. Here is what Anscombe explicitly says about these type of institutions, like promises: ‘Getting one another to do things without the application of physical force is a necessity for human life, and that far beyond what could be secured by those other means. Thus such a procedure... is an instrument whose use is part and parcel of an enormous amount of human activity and hence of human good; of the supplying both of human needs and of human wants so far as the satisfactions of these are compossible. It is scarcely possible to live in a society without encountering it and even actually being involved in it’ (Anscombe, 1969: 74).

#### 4. John McDowell's reading of Aristotle

In fact, there is yet another way to look at the need for virtues. For instance, J. McDowell claims that Foot misunderstood Aristotle in two fundamental ways. First, Aristotelian virtue ethics does not view virtues in an instrumental way – as a characteristic we need to possess in order to have a good life. It is a conceptual truth that a virtue benefits its possessor, but Foot and McDowell understand this very differently. According to McDowell, the just action is the thing a virtuous man aims at because that is what it means to be a virtuous man, that is what constitutes in itself the good life for the virtuous man; according to Foot, the good life is a kind of by-product of virtuous conduct, something a human being will attain if s/he acts properly.

In other words, according to McDowell, Aristotle is not telling us how one should act (for instance: to act justly, or not to break promises) if one wishes to live a fulfilling life; instead, Aristotle is simply describing how a virtuous man acts *because* he is virtuous. Virtues are intrinsically good, not a means to achieve something else. To the virtuous person (and Aristotle is only addressing the virtuous) who has moulded his/her ethical character and outlook through training and education, having a good life is simply equated with acting virtuously. The good to which virtue leads us is virtuous action itself.

It is intriguing how both these contemporary moral philosophers seek a warrant or an Aristotelian underpinning to their disparate views on the need for morality. Foot was inspired by Aristotle to defend the idea that we can rationally and instrumentally justify the ethical appeal. McDowell, in turn, denies that Aristotle ever produced such an argument – when Aristotle argues that there is a certain good we cannot achieve without virtues, that good is precisely a virtuous life. A virtuous life is not good in a derivative way, but it is admittedly good in itself, even if only for those who can acknowledge it. Virtues have intrinsic value in the sense that they are needed for the good of man, but they are also partly constitutive of the good man.

McDowell looks at this particular issue in his article 'The Role of Eudaimonia in Aristotle's Ethics' (McDowell, 1980). Here, he argues that Aristotle never tries to convince his audience that moral excellence makes our lives better. What he shows is that by holding a certain conception of excellence, each individual has a particular understanding of what counts as advantageous and disadvantageous, desirable and undesirable, just and unjust. Whether a virtuous life served a set of interests that would be defined *independently of the agents' ethical view* was a question Aristotle never wished to tackle. Furthermore, Aristotle also considered that a necessary condition to be a holder of a certain virtue is choosing virtuous actions *only in so far* as they are actions that accord with virtue *for their own sake*, not for the advantages that may accrue. (In this sense, there is an important difference between performing a just act and doing it in a just way: i.e., handing over the wallet to someone who dropped it is itself a just act that can be done *because* it is a just act or only for fear that someone will see me. Only the first action is truly virtuous, according to McDowell's reading of Aristotle.)

Foot is mistaken, McDowell thinks, in another important sense: Aristotle had no concern with the foundations of ethics, natural or otherwise. It is anachronistic to ascribe any such conception to Aristotle, because looking for the grounds of an ethical conception is a modern project attached to the advent of modern science and the notion of (scientific) objectivity. The connection between virtue and eudaimonia is not supposed to account for an external validation of an Aristotelian ethics. As McDowell puts it, the concept of eudaimonia wouldn't provide any human being with a kind of 'blueprint for a life, capable of being recognized as determining what it is rational to do even from a standpoint outside the valuations that result from being brought up in a particular ethical outlook' (McDowell, 1998: 41). It is true that the demands of ethics are not alien to the contingencies of our lives as human beings, and both Foot and McDowell recognize that. But this doesn't mean that one can point to some set of objective neutral facts about what it is for a human life to be fulfilling, for there are no such neutral objective facts about that; only if we already occupy a certain (ethical) standpoint can we discern the facts about what it is for a human life to be fulfilling. According to McDowell's reading, 'the notion of a fulfilling life figures in Aristotle in a way that is already ethical through and through' (McDowell, 1994: 83).

Furthermore, Aristotle had no concern with providing this type of external, rational validation that Foot is seeking. Aristotle was not aiming to prove that an unjust man is a bad man because he didn't think that his ethical account, or any ethical account, should be grounded on a set of objective, foundational facts. In the cultural environment in which Aristotle lived, the question 'why should I be just, or noble?' would not even make sense. Someone brought up in that environment learned to delight in the nobility and fairness of actions, and thus s/he just knows that such actions must be performed simply because they are just and noble. Aristotle had no concern for ethical justification because it was sufficient to appeal to the beliefs, value judgements and habits that were inculcated in his audience through their upbringing. This becomes obvious if we consider that he addressed his ethical lessons only to those who had been properly trained — that is, those who already recognised the goodness of a virtuous life.

The project of grounding ethics is a modern one not shared by classical Greek thinkers. McDowell charges Foot not only with misinterpreting Aristotle but also with 'philosophical revisionism' by attributing straightforwardly modern positions to Aristotle. In fact, this 'anguish' of looking for objective ground for ethics is a modern aspiration that Aristotle would not recognise. Foot is not alone in this project, though; according to McDowell, both Bernard Williams (1985) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) also follow a reading of this sort, which he considers a 'historical monstrosity':

Modern readers often credit Aristotle with aiming to construct the requirements of ethics out of independent facts about human nature. This is to attribute to Aristotle a scheme for a naturalistic foundation for ethics. (...)

But I think this kind of reading is a historical monstrosity. This reassuring role for nature can seem to make sense only as a response to a kind of anxiety about the status of reasons – ethical reasons in this case – that is foreign to Aristotle. (McDowell, 1994: 79)

## 5. How to interpret Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy'?

Given these different readings of Aristotelian virtue ethics, how should one interpret the first thesis of Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy'? As we saw, Anscombe claims that 'In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man' (Anscombe, 1958: 4), but I think that despite Foot's best efforts, Anscombe does not see Aristotelian virtue ethics as a way to find a (naturalistic, objective) grounding for ethics. Aristotle could not provide us with the proof or explanation we want because Aristotle was not giving any proof; that was not what he was doing (as McDowell rightly showed us).

Aristotle was not trying to come up with proof, nor did he need it, for various reasons. We require such proof because some Aristotelian philosophical presuppositions are hard for us to accept, namely his teleological and essentialist assumptions. This idea that there is an excellent way for every living being to be, because all living things have a function or purpose (or 'characteristic activity', as Anthony Kenny, for instance, prefers), is controversial (although some important contemporary philosophers – for instance, P.M.S. Hacker (2007) – still see it as a valuable insight for a philosophical anthropology<sup>4</sup>). This teleological view of nature also applies to human beings, and that is why, according to Foot, it is possible to define what the good life is for the kind of living being that a human being is. This essentialist teleology is problematic, and it is hard to follow Aristotle on that, especially if we are willing to include human beings in it. That is, even if this 'functionalist' naturalism could explain the sense in which we can say an owl has 'good' eyesight, it seems far more controversial to extend the same approach to define what a 'good' specimen of human being is, or what a good human life would be like. From a contemporary point of view, it is much more difficult to argue that the human species has an essence or a function, or a certain 'characteristic activity'; that is probably why Anscombe claims that 'philosophically there is a huge gap... which needs to be filled by an account of human nature..., and above all of human "flourishing"' (Anscombe, 1958: 18).

From the standpoint of population genetics, there are reasons to think otherwise – that there is a considerable level of variation regarding what can

4. Hacker argues, for instance, that the concept of purpose and the notion of what is beneficial for an organism don't need to be eliminated from a naturalistic biology. He claims that a causal explanation cannot replace a teleological explanation.

be considered human beings' 'normal' or 'proper' functioning. Could it still be possible to somehow identify the kind of abilities or activities that a typical human being would acquire during his/her development under normal conditions? The neo-Aristotelians' answer is usually that it is not necessary to define what a good life consists in from the point of view of the cosmos, as Aristotle did, for their theory to be sustained; instead, we must simply be able to determine with some degree of precision what the humanly good life is, the kind of interests and desires that typical human beings seek and manifest. But is this last objective even attainable? There seems to be too much cross-cultural variation to admit that what counts as wellbeing for Western populations, for example (freedom, associated with a certain degree of self-satisfaction at personal, family and economic levels), matches what is characterised as a 'good life' for other populations (see, for instance, Tiberius, 2003).

The teleological view of nature also means that from an Aristotelian point of view, purpose and value are part of the world; they are built into it. In antiquity, there was no fact-value distinction. But since the Scientific Revolution, teleology was eliminated from nature and natural science. A natural explanation can no longer involve the concept of what is beneficial or good, or any other axiological concept; nature is no longer conceived as purposeful, and the only possible objective description of things is in mathematically quantifiable terms. This notion of scientific objectivity propagated by the development of modern science was responsible for the distinction between fact and value and correspondingly for the need for an objective, external validation for ethics, which is what Foot and other modern moral thinkers pursue.

Aristotle did not need this proof or external validation because he viewed describing a person as 'honourable' or 'just' as nothing more than a straightforward statement of fact. But in her 'Modern Moral Philosophy', Anscombe also shows how this is not the case for modern philosophers; how, for instance, Hume 'defines "truth" in such a way as to exclude ethical judgments from it and professes that he has proved that they are so excluded' (Anscombe, 1958: 2).

Given the global Aristotelian conception of the world, and given that this approach cannot yield the proof modern philosophers seek, how can Foot contend that this dependence and grounding of morality on the life of our species is an idea she gets from Anscombe's reading of Aristotle?

She states: 'The terms "should" or "ought" or "needs" relate to good and bad: e.g., machinery needs oil, or should or ought to be oiled, in that running without oil is bad for it, or it runs badly without oil' (Anscombe, 1958: 5). But as Pigden puts it, these 'oughts' that can be derived from the fact that a machine needs oil are merely hypothetical. For instance: 'My lawnmower needs oil - *so if I want to use it (ceteris paribus)*, I ought to oil it. This is about the most adventurous conclusion the facts can be said to warrant' (Pigden, 1988: 25). When it comes to living beings, it is also perfectly acceptable to consider the transition from 'is' to 'needs' in the case of an organism which

needs an environment, and the transition between what an organism needs and what is good for it. Those are the so-called Aristotelian needs. But it doesn't seem to me that Anscombe views those Aristotelian needs – when applied to human beings – as yielding the proof that we need, that is, as providing or describing objective norms on how a human being should act. An Aristotelian need, like the need not to break promises, does not prove, *tout court*, the need to act justly – ‘it only shows that a man will not act well – do what is good – if he does not do so’ (Anscombe, 1969: 75). But, in her ‘On Promising and its Justice’, she also states that ‘if someone does genuinely *take* proof that without doing X he cannot act well as proof that he must do X, then this shows not that he has an extra premise, but that he *has a purpose* that can be served only by acting well, as such’ (Anscombe, 1969: 76). This means that only someone who is able to see, from his own normative perspective, that he has a purpose that can be served by acting well will see the need to do so; this will not constitute a need for any rational human being. Promising is an act possible only for those who already think in evaluative/normative terms; Anscombe does not come up with a demonstration that any human being *qua* human being should be interested in justice or honesty or in keeping promises.

Thus, I don't really think that Anscombe sees an Aristotelian account as providing a theory of the virtues based on facts of human nature by which one could come to see the objective facts or truths of morality; rather, I think she acknowledges (as McDowell does) that an Aristotelian account was already normative through and through, and so it cannot yield the proof required by a modern moral theory – one in which fact and value are completely disentangled.

In her ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’, Anscombe claims not to be ‘impressed’ by the charge that an argument incurs the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, because she does not ‘find accounts of it coherent’ (Anscombe, 1958: 2). But what she means by that is that it is perfectly acceptable to consider that an evaluative/normative statement can be true given certain facts and a certain context. It is perfectly acceptable, for instance, *contra* Hume, to go from ‘I ordered potatoes’, ‘you supplied them, and you sent me a bill’, to ‘I owe you such-and-such a sum’. As she claims, ‘it would be ludicrous to pretend that there can be no such thing as a transition from, e.g., “is” to “owes”’ (Anscombe, 1958: 4). Nonetheless, this does not mean that it is perfectly acceptable to go from ‘is’ to ‘morally ought’, given the sense that ‘moral ought’ has acquired as something bound by law. In fact, she admits that it remains impossible to infer ‘morally ought’ from ‘is’:

following Hume, someone might say: Perhaps you have made out your point about a transition from ‘is’ to ‘owes’ and from ‘is’ to ‘needs’: but only at the cost of showing ‘owes’ and ‘needs’ sentences to express a kind of truths, a kind of facts. And it remains impossible to infer ‘morally ought’ from ‘is’ sentences. This comment, it seems to me, would be correct. (Anscombe, 1958: 7-8)

The reason why it remains impossible to infer 'morally ought' from 'is' is that this moral ought, which now has a 'mesmeric force', cannot be derived from anything. One can only move from 'is' to 'ought' provided that the 'ought' is not the peculiarly moral kind.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Anscombe's thesis is the following: in the current state of modern moral theory, we need proof that an unjust man is a bad man, but we could not have gotten this proof so far since a great deal more work is required in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of psychology before anyone will be in a position to do it. Moreover, if we agree with McDowell's reading of Aristotle, as I think Anscombe would, we will also agree that an Aristotelian ethics cannot provide that proof. I do not think Anscombe expected Greek ethics to answer the problems modern ethics poses. This enthusiasm for a new moral philosophy was not conceived in naturalistic terms for a theory of virtue, or even for a psychology of virtue, as Foot supposed. What Anscombe believes is needed is a conceptual exploration of the notions of 'virtue' and 'human flourishing' (as she herself did regarding the concept of 'intention'), not an attempt to explain human virtue in purely naturalistic terms. If the value of the virtues is intrinsic and not instrumental, this means that virtue ethics forces us to aim at the good for reasons that cannot be assessed by means-driven rationality, that is, reasons that are not shared by every human being and not available to every rational being, regardless of his/her ethical outlook.

But then why does Aristotelian virtue ethics matter? Why should we take it as an example, and why do we currently need to develop a new theory of virtues? An Aristotelian approach to ethics reminds us precisely that moral terms did not always have this 'mesmeric force' that Anscombe recognises in modern moral terms. An Aristotelian ethics not only helps us to see how 'morally ought' does not necessarily involve the idea of an absolute verdict, something bound by law; it also helps us to understand that an ethical point of view does not simply match the modern moral point of view: having an ethical point of view is not simply a matter of distinguishing good from bad, right from wrong, permissible from mandatory. In fact, perhaps one of the fundamental advantages of Aristotelian ethical thought is that it lacks the concept of 'morality' in the sense of a set of motivations or demands that are in some way essentially different from other types of motivations and demands; it lacks the idea that the moral is a distinct, *sui generis*, perfectly well-defined category. Having Aristotle in mind enables us to raise serious questions about the coherence of the modern notion of 'morality' as a distinct, autonomous sphere of human life and evaluation. Virtue ethics reminds us that doing the right thing is not all that matters, that there is more to ethical thought than morality and that to reduce an ethical appraisal to some kind of deontic appraisal is to have a very narrow conception of ethics. In this sense, virtue ethics is not even a true 'rival' to deontology or consequentialism because

there is no way we can derive a decision procedure for correct action from it. Perhaps now it is difficult for us to think differently, but an Aristotelian approach shows us that morality is a modern invention. And the whole point is that, even if we cannot answer today in the same way Aristotle did, the ethical question *par excellence* is not ‘what duties do I have?’ but rather ‘how should I live my life?’

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