
Action, Human Essence and Dignity: landmarks in the philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe

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Résumé

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Anscombe's philosophy is known for its central developments on the concept of action. That this philosophy of action is articulated in an original reflection on human essence and value is perhaps less explored. This is what we propose to do in this symposium.

1. Anscombe on Human Action and Human Essence (Valérie Aucouturier, Centre Prospéro, IRIS-L, UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles)

According to Elizabeth Anscombe, 'human essence' characterizes what it is for a human being to be a human being and confers 'dignity' to any member of humanity. She takes this to be a grammatical remark in Wittgenstein's sense, namely a logical feature of the concept 'human' ('Human Essence').

Anscombe also claims that some human agents (e.g. babies) are 'unable of human action' because they haven't 'reached the stage of deliberation and choice' ('Good and Bad Human Action').

I will explore how the concept 'human' articulates differently in 'human essence' and 'human action' and examine the importance of being human to perform human actions, which do not consist in 'the movements of these molecules – namely, the ones in a human being; or even in the movements of certain bodies – namely human ones' (*Intention*, §46). Rather, 'nothing is a human action unless it is a voluntary action on the part of a human agent. Otherwise, like digesting your food and breathing and sweating, your acts are the acts of a human agent but are not what I call human actions.' Because it is contingent that digesting, etc. are performed by a human being. This marks the difference between acts of a human being and human actions ('Action, Intention and Double-Effect').

These considerations lead me to the following questions: if being human is not enough

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to being capable of ‘human action’, what is? What does ‘human essence’ consist in, beyond the ability to perform ‘human actions’?

2. Should we act in such a way certain question never arise? Anscombe on action and dignity (Blandine Lagrut, Université de Lorraine – Facultés Loyola Paris)

‘The Dignity of the Human Being’ raises, *comme en passant*, a typical science fiction question: what would happen if the matrix gestation stage were to disappear? What if the human being were to develop in an artificial womb? According to Anscombe, the fact that procreation is no longer organically anchored will make it necessary to introduce a new legislation to establish legal parents distinct from the technician responsible for ensuring that the artificial uterus functions properly for 9 months. In other words, a gestation outside the mother’s womb would mean that the question ‘to whom does this human belong?’ could be asked in a meaningful way.

This passage is exemplary of Anscombe’s reinterpretation of the Wittgensteinian principle that ‘essence is expressed in grammar’(2). It shows that the malaise is not primarily ethical, or even legal, but grammatical: the senseless question of the owner of the human would in fact become legitimate. This philosophical gesture, just sketched out by Anscombe, deserves to be extended, because it can help philosophical thought to get rid of some of the reflexes it gets into when it tries to think about dignity. Rather than making dignity a quality that can be verified according to level of consciousness, sensitivity to pain or capacity for autonomy, it suggests another criterion: ”Act in such a way that these questions never arise”. Could this approach inspire not only another way of elaborating the concept of dignity, but also a new way of philosophizing?

3. Should the Numbers Count? Anscombe and Taurek (John Schwenkler, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign)

Elizabeth Anscombe’s early essay ”Who Is Wronged?”, responding in the *Oxford Review* to Philippa Foot’s ”Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect”, challenges the assumption that it is always wrong to act in a way that is less beneficial rather than more so, even if acting for the greater benefit would not involve violating any rights. For example, according to Anscombe there may be nothing wrong with using a dose of medicine to save the life of one person rather than five, or using a lifeboat to rescue a single drowning person rather than a group of five. As has been noted, this essay anticipates the influential anti-consequentialist argument in John Taurek’s 1977 paper, ”Should the Numbers Count?”, whose conclusion is broadly aligned with Anscombe’s.

My talk will consider the similarities and differences between Anscombe’s position and Taurek’s, focusing on Anscombe’s claim that a statement like ”because they are more” *can* express a ”perfectly intelligible reason” for choosing to benefit a larger number of people over a smaller number. There is reason to think that Taurek might deny even this, as he resists the assumption that ”the death of five innocent persons is a worse thing, a greater evil, a greater loss, than the death of one innocent person”.

However, something like this assumption seems to be presupposed in the traditional doctrine of proportionality in war, which requires an attacker to weigh the good that is to be achieved by an attack against the harm that may be done, and certainly to choose what will kill fewer innocents rather than a greater number, even if in each case the deaths are not intended. Anscombe, of course, is committed to this doctrine. So, I wish to ask: Does this commitment require her to think of human life as having a ”value” that can be summed up according to the quantity of lives saved or lost? Would such a commitment be in conflict with the notion that humans possess a special dignity? And, is it in tension with her denial that it is always wrong to benefit the lesser number rather than the greater?

Mots-Clés: Action, Dignity, Human Essence, Ethics