

Rediscovering the Voice of Elizabeth Anscombe in the Modern Discussion of Marriage, Family and Sexual Ethics

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For those who have been impressed by the writing of Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe, the impression that she leaves is often one of contradiction. She stands as a convinced student of Aristotle and at the same time Wittgenstein's prized disciple. She is an avowed Roman Catholic who is steeped in the British analytic philosophical tradition. She is a wife and mother of seven who nonetheless became one of the 20th century giants in a male-dominated academic tradition. Whether drawing ire or admiration, Anscombe is decidedly unusual.

For these reasons, her value in contributing to the modern day discourse on ethics, particularly the ethics of marriage and family, may seem compromised. She is an odd figure at a time when those debating issues of child rearing and marriage increasingly seek to make themselves palatable to a conventional audience – the brevity, clarity and stylistic simplicity of the proposals of Cardinal Walter Kasper come to mind, as do the perpetual cycle of sleek re-presentations of the personalism and anthropology of St. John Paul II's clunky masterpiece *The Theology of the Body*. In contrast, Anscombe's offerings to the field are dense and rarely straightforward, distinctly analytic even when written for a more casual forum. Her academic writing requires the type of patience for which, if we are convinced by the style of the bulk of modern argumentation, has little appeal to a general readership.

And yet I wish to propose in this essay that the voice of Elizabeth Anscombe is precisely the voice that needs to see greater prominence in modern discourse on marriage and family, not in spite of those odd characteristics of her work but because of them. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that Anscombe contributes uniquely and valuably to

the field for three principle reasons. First, she contributes her perspective as wife, mother, and woman in a debate concerning mothers and families that is (or is at the very least is perceived to be) dominated by celibate, male theologians. Second, she contributes her rigorous and unconventional proofs and conclusions to argumentation that is too often framed according to platitudes and a reiteration of conventional and sometimes hackneyed principles. And finally, her argumentation style is of the type that, once imbibed and thoroughly understood, should be able to form an essential compliment to the dominant (albeit important) method of proclaiming the truth of marriage and family in the Church today. Hopefully, in rediscovering Anscombe's voice, the Church can find an ally not only to help counteract the arguments against traditional marriage family of today and yesterday, but better equip the Church to anticipate and refute the concerns of tomorrow.

I.

I imagine that some may consider the recognition of the importance of Anscombe's status as woman, wife and mother in the defense of traditional marriage and family to be irrelevant at best and perhaps misogynistic at worst – is truth, after all, not always truth, regardless of how (or from whom) it is proclaimed? This romantic notion of truth as the only relevant aspect of argumentation is appealing in a vacuum, but the current state of the debate does not permit for tone-deaf idealism insofar as the Church wishes to engage those outside of theological circles. Without a doubt, the lacuna of women's voices in the Church's debate on sexual ethics has been noticed. "The bishops and the Vatican care passionately about putting women in chastity belts¹," says New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, and the Washington

Post's E.J. Dionne opines similarly, "Might the bishops consider that their preaching on abortion would have more credibility if they treated women in the church, including nuns, with the kind of generosity they are asking of potential mothers?"² Decrying the character, fairness or agenda biases of the authors may undercut their claims, but there is little doubt that their columns are more widely circulated and read than would be most responses from the Church.

More problematically, the authors, biased as they may be, do have a point – women's voices are noticeably absent from many of the current debates. In the recent discussion on pastoral care for the divorced and remarried, for instance, Cardinal Kasper stands as perhaps the most recognizable figure for his publication *The Gospel of the Family*.³ The controversial work drew at least two notable response publications, one by two male professors of theology at the Lateran University in Rome⁴ and one edited by Augustinian Father Robert Dodaro – a collection of nine essays, all of which were written by men, eight of whom are clerics.⁵ This is not to suggest their contributions are not valuable – pontifical theologians should weigh in on debates on dogma – just that a quick survey of the field would do little to overturn a perception of male domination.

More positively, the Church has made quite clear that she, too, is well attuned to the need for a female perspective. *Familiaris Consortio* speaks of the equal dignity and, simultaneously, unique contributions of men and women throughout salvation history, and emphasizes that their mutual contributions to society help "the image of God...to be seen with added luster."⁶ *Mulieris Dignitatem* is dedicated to exploring the unique contribution of women and states strongly that understanding God's plan in salvific history entails an understanding of the mystery of the woman.⁷ Further, the family is lauded for its indispensable role in the evangelization of the world.⁸ In this sense, one could even argue that the presentation of the truth in absence of some

sort of feminine perspective would be necessarily incomplete.

On all of these counts, Anscombe is an ideal candidate to fill the apparent void of women's voices. That she is a woman is obviously established, but she was further a woman well acquainted with marriage and child rearing – her long marriage to fellow philosopher Peter Geach produced seven children. Her daughter, Mary Geach, paints her mother as a particularly engaged parent in developing her children in faith as well as intellect.⁹ Simultaneously, she thrived in academia in the field of analytic philosophy at a time when the discipline was dominated by men. Her close relationship with Wittgenstein is well established, despite his apparent general dislike for academic women, and Berkley's Donald Davidson praised Anscombe's masterful work *Intention* as "the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."¹⁰

She is thus able to answer the calls for a mother's and a wife's voice in the debate on marriage, and to do so with considerable academic weight. From this perspective, consider, for instance, the immense value of a piece like 1972's "Contraception and Chastity." *Humanae Vitae* is rightly held up as a prophetic voice for the inevitable ill-effects that contraception would produce regarding sexual license and mistreatment of women, but I estimate that Anscombe's piece should be regarded even more so. She writes:

If contraceptive intercourse is permissible, then what objection could there be after all to mutual masturbation, or copulation *in vase indebito*, sodomy, buggery...when normal copulation is impossible or inadvisable?... I am not saying: if you think contraception all right you will do these other things; not at all. The habit of respectability persists and old prejudices die hard. But I am saying you will have no solid reason against these things.¹¹

That a piece of such foresight (including far more than is encapsulated above) was written in 1972 is astonishing; that it was

written by a woman dedicated to living by the principles therein is of inestimable value for any defense of traditional marriage and family.

II.

Anscombe's perspective as wife, mother and philosopher is compelling and eminently relevant in today's marriage and family debates, but it is primarily her philosophical genius and creativity in defending her positions that merits a revival of her thought in the current ethical debates. For sure, the Church is not wanting for volume in defense of her positions – magisterial sources alone comprise a huge body of work. The deposit of faith, combined with works derived from the theological principles outlined by the Magisterium, is enormous. For all their value (and there is much), they are perpetually in danger of becoming stale and exhausting in their argumentation. To read Anscombe in contrast to these sources provides a sort of enlightenment and refreshment that is produced by her unique style and reference to an uncommon philosophical perspective.

I believe that official pronouncements of the Magisterium and subsequent theology tend to become banal primarily as a result of two factors. First, the monolith "Magisterium" title gives a sense of a uniformity of authorship, even as Popes, bishops and priests with distinct perspectives and styles succeed each other. There is an expectation of uniformity that is reinforced by the formal similarities of many magisterial sources. Hopefully, the discussion of Anscombe's perspective above suggests some relief to this difficulty. The second is a certain tendencies to circulate ideas among magisterial and theological sources, sometimes to the point of creating theological platitudes. Undoubtedly, when it was presented freshly in John Paul II's theological anthropology and philosophical personalism, the concept of spouses making a "gift of self" to each other would have seemed quite novel and enlightening. Although the principle never loses value *per se*, the term is used so constantly in modern defenses of the Catholic marital principles that it has almost become

shorthand for the general sacrifices a person must make to remain in a marriage; it risks becoming unmoored from its foundations altogether.¹²

To this point, the work of Anscombe is undoubtedly refreshing. Her philosophical grounding traces its roots back to the Classical period, but is heavily influenced by her training in modern analytic philosophy. The result is unique and captivating – if at times a bit dense – and offers a foundation that permits for entirely unique and at times nearly original theological defenses.¹³

For instance, in "Contraception and Chastity," Anscombe applies an analytic precision to the question of the moral value of contraceptive sex versus a marital act performed during a period of known infertility. Intention, she insists, must be considered under the aspect of the immediate act and the further intention that act carries with it. Using this principle and a commonplace example of a man building a table to earn a living, she illuminates the issues at stake with elegance and novelty.¹⁴ Her philosophical bearing further allows her to object to principles that are useful for theological defense but otherwise unsatisfying, all the while searching, as well-grounded in Catholic teaching, for the more convincing truths. This can be seen in her dissatisfaction with geneticist Jérôme Lejeune's posit, popular among those who oppose abortion, that a zygote can genetically be considered an individual human being even at the early stage of being composed of three cells. She objects not with an eye toward permitting abortion, but on the grounds that it does not well account for some metaphysical principles (the human soul) and some physical principles (the phenomenon of identical twins).¹⁵ She also has the uncanny capacity to recognize when an issue calls not for analytical rigor, but commonplace wisdom; a short essay entitled "Why Have Children?" laments the necessity of the question in the first place before offering a deceptively compelling reason: "as we used to hear of 'occasions of

sin,' we should now... think of a child as an 'occasion of love' – to be embraced."¹⁶

III.

Of course, there is one natural objection to the heavy employment of Anscombe's thought in the modern debates on marriage and family ethics: having died in 2001, Anscombe is no longer able to formulate original defenses or critiques. With the bulk of her publication done at a time when some of the current issues at stake would have been remote or even unforeseeable, it seems that Anscombe's utility is definitively bounded.

To this criticism, I wish to offer a two-fold response. The first is minor but not irrelevant. Though bounded in life by what she was able to produce, there are issues to which Anscombe provides a direct reply in a sort of clairvoyant show of foresight. For instance, again in 1972's "Contraception and Chastity," Anscombe wrote the following on marriage:

We don't invent marriage, as we may invent the terms of an association or club, any more than we invent human language. It is part of the creation of humanity and we're lucky we find it available to us and can enter into it. If we are very unlucky we may live in a society that has wrecked or deformed this human thing.¹⁷

Certainly, such advice holds relevance in the modern discussion of what constitutes marriage; it almost seems prophetic.

The second is far more important and properly the reason for my writing the paper. To come to appreciate the thought of Elizabeth Anscombe and truly imbibe her methodology and ideas is far more than to be impressed by clever arguments to be remembered and then be put to use in such and such a circumstance. Coming to grasp her foundations, her methodology, even her wit – her general means of philosophizing – is to reason for truth in a way that would have been almost unknown before her. To reason through *Intention* or "Modern Moral Philosophy" gives rise not only to

particular conclusions, but also to a new way of understanding – one that has a natural concomitance with the truths of the Catholic faith and remarkable relevance to the concerns of the modern age. Whether it be on her aggregate of knowledge derived from her experience as woman, wife and mother (e.g. consider the motherly wisdom that shines forth in her defense of the Eucharist "On Transubstantiation"¹⁸), her synthesis of Aristotle and the analytic philosophical school, her stalwart trust in the truth of the Catholic Church or (most likely) a combination of all of those, Anscombe's thought and way of thinking are a philosophical call to attention to proceed further in the way that she has illuminated.

In enduring advice for preaching the Gospel in the modern age, Bl. Pope Paul VI recognized in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that "modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."¹⁹ His age, as well as ours, has been gifted with the remarkable witness and teaching of Elizabeth Anscombe. In gratitude and for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, we ought to heed the example and teaching of so great thinker.

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NOTES

¹ Maureen Dowd, “Father Doesn’t Know Best,” *The New York Times*, May 22, 2012.

² E.J. Dionne, “I’m Not Quitting the Church,” *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2012.

³ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014).

⁴ Juan José Pérez-Soba and Stephan Kampowski, *The Gospel of the Family: Going beyond Cardinal Kasper’s Proposal in the Debate on Marriage, Civil Re-Marriage, and Communion in the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

⁵ Robert Dodaro, OSA, ed., *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [Apostolic Exhortation Regarding the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World], November 22, 1981, secs. 22 and 23 (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, Inc., 1982), 20-21.

⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year], August, 15, 1988, sec. 21 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), 85.

⁸ See *The Family and Human Procreation*, particularly number 20, issued by the Pontifical Council for the Family [The Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Family and Human Procreation* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2006), 35-37.

⁹ Mary Geach is the co-editor of a four volume collection of her mother’s essays, and her introduction to each volume gives colorful details to her upbringing and family life. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, eds., *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G.E.M Anscombe* (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic: 2008).

¹⁰ See G.E.M Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹¹ G.E.M Anscombe, “Contraception and Chastity,” in *Why Humane Vitae Was Right: A Reader*, ed. Janet E. Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 136.

¹² In the course of research, I found the phrase used as such throughout *Familiaris Consortio* (see Part II especially), as well as in The Pontifical Council for the Family’s *The Family and Human Procreation* (11) and *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* (10) without particularly seeking it.

¹³ Both of these characteristics are on display in what are likely Anscombe’s two greatest contributions to modern philosophical thought *Intention* and “Modern Moral Philosophy.”

¹⁴ “Chastity and Contraception,” 135-136.

¹⁵ G.E.M Anscombe, “Embryos and Final Causes”, in *Finalité et Intentionnalité. Doctrine Thomiste et Perspectives Modernes*, eds. J. Follon and J. McEvoy (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin and Leuven Editions Peeters, 1992), 293-303.

¹⁶ G.E.M Anscombe, "Why Have Children?", in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1989), 53.

¹⁷ "Contraception and Chastity", 138.

¹⁸ G.E.M Anscombe, "On Transubstantiation" in *Ethics Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 107-112.

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* [Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World], December, 8 1975, sec. 41 (Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 1975), 36.