

G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Faith in a Hard Ground. Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics* by G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. XI, Imprint Academic, Exeter 2008, pp. xxvi + 273.

THIS is a collection of twenty-five papers, fifteen of which are published here for the first time. Most of the others appeared only in journals or in books not bearing Anscombe's name. It is the second such collection to come out since her death in 2001, thanks again to the diligent labors of her son-in-law Luke Gormally in collaboration with her daughter Mary Geach. (The other volume is *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. IV, Imprint Academic, Exeter, 2005.) Evidently a large body of Anscombe's writings is still waiting to see the light, and it is certainly to be hoped that they will carry on the work.

As in the previous volume, both the selection and the arrangement of the essays is topical rather than chronological. Some of the manuscripts carry no date; the dated pieces extend from 1957 to 1992. Of those that Anscombe never brought to publication, some were delivered as lectures, while others were never presented publicly in any form. One naturally wonders why. If she judged them unfit, then the standards that she set for herself were severe indeed. In any case, there is a good deal here that can shed light on things she did publish.

The topics are quite various: faith and belief (believing *someone*, as opposed to believing *in* someone); prophecy and miracles; "paganism, superstition and philosophy"; hatred of God; attachment to things; the immortality of the soul; the early embryo; transubstantiation; general moral matters (authority in morals, good faith, sin, moral education); contraception, chastity and natural family planning (4 papers); lying (and the spirit in which two theologians treat it); nuclear weapons; simony; usury; and to close the volume, an essay "On Wisdom."

The intended audiences also vary widely. Anyone familiar with Anscombe's writing will expect, and find, some tough going, but the pieces aimed at non-philosophers are surprisingly readable (and no less philosophical). For instance, many parents and educators could benefit greatly from "The Moral Environment of the Child." The essays on contraception, chastity and natural family planning deserve to be read by all educated Catholics.

What ties it all together is that in one way or another each essay brings out something about how philosophy and Catholicism interacted in Anscombe's thought. The volume's aptly chosen title echoes a line from Chesterton's *The Ballad of the White Horse*. ("But Mark was come of the glittering towns / Where hot white details show, / Where men can number and expound, / And his faith grew in a hard ground / Of doubt and reason and falsehood found, / Where no faith else could grow.") In the poem, the hard ground is classical pagan thought, in whose setting the only faith that could survive and grow was Christianity. The analogy with Anscombe's situation is

easy to see, especially in light of the delightful Introduction by Mary Geach – a fine philosopher in her own right, with an intimate knowledge of her mother’s mind. In addition to some very helpful reflections on the thinking that went into the papers, Geach offers a fascinating sketch of a woman who lived the lives of philosophy, Christian piety and motherhood with extraordinary intensity – and in extraordinary unity and harmony. Anscombe did not “compartmentalize.”

A recurring motif in the essays is the relationship between Christianity and “the world,” both as a doctrinal matter and as a historical phenomenon. Anscombe observes and examines the tendency among sophisticated pagans, both ancient and modern, to look favorably upon “spirituality” or “religiosity” – an attitude of “heart” – while despising the strict belief, and abhorring the exclusiveness, that (at least in principle) characterize both Judaism and Christianity. (Here and elsewhere one is struck by the importance that she assigns to the Old Testament, with which she is very familiar, for a sound understanding of the New.) As to the religious attitude, her final word is a question: «Why? Why should it matter?» (p. 60). (The next stanza of Chesterton’s poem is pertinent: “Belief that grew of all beliefs / One moment back was blown / And belief that stood on unbelief / Stood up iron and alone.”) As to the strict belief and the exclusiveness, she insists on them. Finding her Christian contemporaries strongly tempted, like the Israelites in certain periods, to want to “blend in,” she calls vigorously for a renewed sense of the Church as a people set apart to serve the one true God.

What she is advocating is certainly not a siege mentality; her own career shows that well enough. Nor is it what goes by the name of *contemptus mundi*. It is simply joyful fidelity, and witness, to Christ’s truth. Nowadays the temptation to blend in, to compromise with the world, regards not so much the worship of heathen gods (though that is on the rise) as the practice of heathen morals, especially sexual morals; and right here she finds a wonderful *opportunity* for Christians, *especially* the married ones, to bear witness. «Christian celibacy is indeed a glorious thing – but it is especially appropriate to our day (because of its special temptations) to charge into battle with the banner of the chastity of married people.... The virtues of married chastity can be joyfully preached as never before» (p. 203). She explains why, in her judgment, *Humanae vitae* constitutes a deep and rich foundation for this message.

Anscombe also considers the encyclical a powerful defense of human dignity; or more precisely, of the dignity of human life *as such*, which is *not* what the world means by human dignity (p. 198). This theme of course extends well beyond the issue of contraception. In the essay on the early embryo, besides raising some very interesting questions about when the embryo becomes a human being, she stresses that the Church has always judged procured abortion gravely wrong, no matter when “hominisation” was thought to occur, because it is at least the destruction of a new human life’s *beginning*; that is, of what will naturally develop into a human being if nothing hinders it. She even suggests that it would not be unreasonable to term such destruction “murder” (p. 221). But it is in a remark bearing on “end-of-life” issues that she is most eloquent about the distinctively Christian take on human dignity:

What people are for is, we believe, like guided missiles, to home in on God, God who is the one truth it is infinitely worth knowing, the possession of which you could never get tired

of, like the water which if you have you can never thirst again, because your thirst is slaked forever and always. It's this potentiality, this incredible possibility, of the knowledge of God of such a kind as even to be sharing his nature, which Christianity holds out to people; and because of this potentiality every life, right up to the last, must be treated as precious. Its potentialities in all things the world cares about may be slight; but there is always the possibility of what it's for. We can't ever know that the time of possibility of gaining eternal life is over, however old, wretched, 'useless' someone has become. (p. 173)

The essay "Two Moral Theologians" is a subtle study of two works, an article by Arthur Vermeersch SJ (1858-1936) and a book by Bruno Schüller SJ (1925-2007). She focuses mainly on their handling of the morality of lying; there is also a brief discussion of killing in self-defense. Along the way she offers several extremely acute observations of her own on both topics. But her deeper concern is with the spirit of the two works. The touchstone is again the relationship between Christianity and the world. In Vermeersch, she judges, «there is a strong atmosphere of one using his quite powerful talents to go along with the world, to reassure and flatter it. This characteristic is raised to a higher degree in Schüller's *Die Begründung sittlicher Urteile*» (p. 169).

The longest piece in the volume, "Sin," is a set of four lectures in which she weaves together the philosophy and theology of sin with a magisterial breadth and profundity that I cannot do justice to. One issue given important treatment there, and also in two other essays, is the teaching of St Alphonsus Liguori that one of the conditions for a sin to be mortal is "full advertence." Drawing on Aristotle and St Thomas, Anscombe raises serious doubts about this teaching, at least as it is often taken (she hesitates somewhat about how Alphonsus takes it). It cannot be right that the agent must fully consider that what he is doing is gravely wrong; indeed, he need not even have full knowledge that doing something of that sort is so. For the failure to know or to consider may itself be both gravely wrong and voluntary. Some people do not even care whether what they are doing is wrong, and that can hardly exonerate them. Usually not even ignorance of the law, let alone failure to consider it, excuses; rather it aggravates, showing "scoundrelism" (p. 104). For mortal sin, it normally suffices that you know or believe yourself to be doing such-and-such, e.g. «putting poison in your husband's soup» (p. 115), and that doing such-and-such be in truth gravely wrong. And sometimes not even being unaware of doing such-and-such exonerates, if it is through culpable negligence.

I do not quite know what to make of "The Immortality of the Soul." It seems to be a fairly early piece, probably from the late 1950's. She never published it. To assess it fully one should probably compare it with the two papers on the soul that are included in the other posthumous volume (pp. 3-25). A good part of the discussion is devoted not to the soul's immortality but to a feature commonly associated therewith, its spirituality. Anscombe is not convinced that the immateriality of thought provides an argument for the soul's being an immaterial substance (even in the sense in which a part of a substance, such as a hand, can also be called a substance). She grants that "a thought" is not a physical description, and that thought and understanding have no "organ"; but she thinks it a mistake to conceive of thought as a distinct event occurring in an immaterial subject and existing somehow alongside the physical events

that are associated with it. Her way of arguing this is very Wittgensteinian. She imagines writing down a calculation on a piece of paper. This is a clear case of thinking, and no mere physical description, nor even a description of feelings or images then occurring, can characterize it *as* thinking. Nevertheless

it is the thought that I mean to convey to you, and do convey to you, if I show you the calculation; but I only show you the bit of paper, perhaps uttering some sounds as I do so; if the thought were an additional secret element, I could not convey it at all, and further it could not matter whether I conveyed it or not. (p. 70)

I wonder whether this does not turn on an ambiguity. "Thought" can refer either to an act of thinking, or to something like an idea or an opinion (a "thought product," a "thinkable"). It is in the latter sense that what the marks on the paper suffice to convey is a "thought." If I see written on a wall the words, "Dog is man's best friend," and I say to myself, "What a silly thought!," I do not mean, "What a silly act of thinking!" But the question here is about just that, what an act of thinking is. The fact that the "thought" expressed by words or symbols cannot be a spiritual event occurring in someone's soul seems rather beside the point, merely incidental to the question whether thinking itself is so. However, the ambiguity seems too obvious for her to have overlooked, and I fear that I simply have not understood her drift.

In any case, Anscombe also questions the very concept of "immaterial substance." She says that "substance" means something that can answer the question "What is it?," as asked in the ordinary way in which one might ask it of some object that one points to – which of course is something sensible and material. So it would hardly even make sense to speak of an immaterial substance. This discussion too leaves me unsatisfied. For although she does not cite it here, it seems obvious that she is drawing on the account of the meaning of "substance" given in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Yet she say nothing about Aristotle's own acceptance of the existence of a good number of immaterial substances.

I should add that she is not doubting the existence of spirits, but only the description of them as immaterial substances. She takes "a spirit" to mean an incorporeal person. In that sense, and assuming that an ingredient of a person cannot itself be a person, a soul would certainly not be a spirit. She does however think that there is a perfectly valid sense in which human persons are spiritual: they are capable of relationship with the eternal. And she is not at all doubting that human souls are immortal or that the dead will rise again.

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