

Anscombe & the *Anscombe Archive*

Presented by Collegium Institute and
Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society
(PRRUCS)

Nathan Hauthaler, *editor*
Nicholas Ogle, *managing editor*

PRRUCS Journal | Vol. 4 No. 2



COLLEGIUM
INSTITUTE
for Catholic Thought & Culture



PRRUCS
Program for Research on
Religion and Urban Civil Society
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

PRRUCS Journal Vol. 4 No. 2

A publication of the Program for Research on Religion and Urban Civil Society

Collegium Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture

P.O. Box 30730

Philadelphia, PA 19104

collegiuminstitute@gmail.com

www.collegiuminstitute.org

Anscombe & the Anscombe Archive / Collegium Institute for Catholic Thought
and Culture / Edited by Nathan Hauthaler

©2024 Collegium Institute for Catholic Thought and Culture

All rights reserved

The text of this book is set in Minion

Book designed by Michael Sayre



Printed in United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Understanding Anscombe's Absolutism

MARSHALL BIERSON

Marshall Bierson discusses Anscombe's absolutism: her view that certain moral requirements hold without exception. The author shows how certain construals of Anscombe's view, e.g., along agent-deontological lines, are problematic. The author goes on to offer a positive construal hinged on a distinction of different types of rule: *logoi* vs. reasons, or "true rules" vs. "penalty rules," as he puts them. Central to the distinction is the idea that certain rules constitute the framework within which actions are to be assessed, similar to the way that rules structure the game of chess. Bierson contends that Anscombe's absolutist rules are best understood along the lines of such framework rules—rules which cannot be questioned or suspended lest one wishes to question or suspend the framework itself.

The author references Archive manuscript(s):

File 289

File 291

File 295

File 304

File 390

File 455

File 507

ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE IS famous for her commitment to absolute constraints. In “Modern Moral Philosophy,” she suggests that the denial of moral absolutism is the most important mistake uniting all the major work in ethics between Sidgwick and Moore.¹ She argues further that such a ‘consequentialism’—for, to her, any ethical theory that denies absolute constraints, even threshold deontology, is consequentialist—is a “shallow philosophy,”² and that consequentialists “show a corrupt mind.”³ While Anscombe focuses on the absolute constraint against murder, she does not restrict her absolutism to murder. Her list of acts that are always and everywhere wrong includes “vicarious punishment; treachery...; idolatry; sodomy; adultery; [and] making a false profession of faith.”⁴

Yet, while Anscombe is recognized as an absolutist, her absolutism is frequently misrepresented. She is often read as just another agent-centered deontologist. To the extent that her views are considered distinctive, it is merely in the stringency of her absolutism. In fact, as I will argue, Anscombe’s view is not a form of agent-centered deontology, and reading her that way misses the conceptual richness of her account. Anscombe’s work, when properly understood, provides us with a satisfying account of absolute constraints and with unique conceptual resources for thinking about normative ethics.

It is unsurprising that contemporary deontologists have neglected Anscombe’s work. Her writing is often obscure, and many of her clearest articulations are buried in unpublished manuscripts. In this paper, I intend to help rectify this difficulty by presenting a clear articulation of Anscombe’s absolutism, through a close reading of her published and archival materials. I won’t argue that Anscombe’s absolutism is right—such a defense would take a much longer paper—but will rather explain what, for Anscombe, makes the idea of an absolute moral constraint so much as coherent.

1 G.E.M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” repr. in *Ethics, Religion and Politics, The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe, Vol. III* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 26-42, at 34.

2 Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 36.

3 Ibid., 40.

4 Ibid., 34.

I – WHAT ANSCOMBE ISN'T

If contemporary deontologists have a standard reading of Anscombe's absolutism, it is that Anscombe explains constraints by appealing to an agent-relative evil in constraint violation. For example, Larry Alexander and Michael Moore's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Deontological Ethics—which I take as a representative guide to the 'standard interpretation'—classifies Anscombe's view as an "inner wickedness" version "of agent-centered deontology." According to such views, "morality is intensely personal, in the sense that we are each enjoined to keep our own moral house in order. Our categorical obligations are not to focus on how our actions cause or enable other agents to do evil; the focus of our categorical obligations is to keep our own agency free of moral taint."⁵

This is not at all Anscombe's view. Rather, as I will argue below, Anscombe explicitly, and rightly, rejects such an account as an absurd basis for absolutism.

1.1 – AGENT-CENTERED DEONTOLOGY

The basic thought underlying agent-centered deontology goes something like this:

Let us suppose that I cannot kill one to save five. This cannot be because of the badness of human death, since if the badness of human death were really the operative moral concern, it would obligate me just as much to preserve life as not to take it. I would be compelled to do what I can to save more lives, even if it required killing a lesser number.

Clearly, then, if what explains the constraint is not the badness of human death, there must be some badness present in my killing that is not equally present when I allow others to die. The difference between the two cases is *agency*, and thus it must be something about objectionable agency, not death *per se*, that explains the constraint against murder.

Of course, it's not objectionable agency as such that makes the difference. I cannot murder one person even to stop two others from

5 Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, "Deontological Ethics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, October 30, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/>.

murdering. So, what explains why I cannot murder must be my *agent-relative* concern for the purity of *my own* moral agency.

For a deontologist whose position is agent-centered and also *absolutist*, this line of reasoning will continue:

Moreover, not only are my agent-relative reasons to keep my agency pure stronger than my reasons to save five lives—they are stronger than *any possible* countervailing reasons I might have.

If this were the correct reconstruction of Anscombe’s absolutism, then hers would be a species of the kind of deontological absolutism that Michael Huemer describes in “Lexical Priority and the Problem of Risk.” There, he explains absolutism as the position that “some normative considerations have categorically greater weight than others, in the sense that considerations of the latter kind, however multiplied, can never outweigh considerations of the former kind.”⁶ The peculiar reason one has against murder, the peculiar badness present in killing, is categorically stronger than other sorts of practical concerns.

I.II – ANSCOMBE’S REJECTION OF SUCH REASONING

But this is not Anscombe’s view of moral constraints. On the contrary, she argues that attempts to explain constraints in terms of the “weight” of certain special normative considerations are profoundly confused. In her archival materials,⁷ Anscombe draws attention to “one powerful sentence” in G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*:

For it cannot be denied that the action will have consequences: and to deny that its consequences matter is to make a judgment of their intrinsic value, as compared with the action itself.⁸

6 Michael Huemer, “Lexical Priority and the Problem of Risk,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2010): 332–351, 335.

7 What immediately follows focuses on Box F, Item 507, The Collegium Institute Anscombe Archive at the University of Pennsylvania, Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts (hereafter CI-AAUP). The handwritten notebook covers an eclectic range of topics—from Newtonian mechanics to the problem of other minds. The section I focus on, pages 150–155 is a discussion of Moore’s consequentialism.

8 Box F, Item 507, 151, CI-AAUP. Anscombe also criticizes the Moorean move in other archival materials. For example:

This ... [assumption that if James ought to give John the book, then John ought to be given the book by James] is reminiscent of (and hangs together with) that exposition of consequentialism which we get in Moore’s *Principia Ethica*. He says that anyone with a moral opinion at all must mean what he does by an action’s being right, or ... wrong. For it will have consequences, and to say “No matter what the

Anscombe expects that it was “this sentence that was found strikingly convincing by those of Moore’s readers in whom there lingered the notion that murder, for example, is always to be excluded, no matter what the consequences.”⁹ And it was her view that once you accept Moore’s framing, the game is up and the consequentialists have won. If the justification of absolute constraints requires showing that there is always greater intrinsic disvalue in violating a constraint than not violating a constraint, then absolute constraints cannot be justified. This is true whether you look at agent-relative value and reasons or restrict yourself to agent-neutral value and reasons instead.

Anscombe argues explicitly that to think it is always worse to violate a constraint than not is to make an “absurd judgment.”¹⁰ She asks rhetorically whether she, or anyone, really has

truly so great a perception of the dreadfulness of a situation in which murder has been committed that I can say no matter how much good there might be in such a situation, no matter how much peace, joy, prosperity, personal affection, enjoyment of beauty and anything else you like to name that is good and fair, the total value of all that, when it includes the disvalue of an act of murder, is less than that of any situation which could possibly have developed if no murder had been done, even though all was strife, sorrow, adversity, hatred, ugliness, and pleasure in ugliness.¹¹

Anscombe thinks it is intuitively obvious that it is not—contrary to what an absolutist agent-centered deontologist must maintain—worse to compromise the purity of one’s moral agency than to let thousands perish. Anscombe regards as untenable any deontological view grounded in the thought that the violation of a constraint is more dreadful than any possible alternative. According to Anscombe, the absolutist convinced by Moore will think something along these lines:

consequences murder is wrong” simply means that the disvalue of the act of murder is always so great that when you tot up the total value and disvalue of doing the murder with the attendant consequences and those of abstaining from the murder with the attendant consequences of that, the sum will always come out as one of more value in abstaining, no matter what the consequences are. (Box 10, Item 390, 38-41, CI-AAUP)

9 Box 10, Item 507, 151, CI-AAUP.

10 Box 10, Item 507, 152, CI-AAUP.

11 Box 10, Item 507, 152-3, CI-AAUP.

“I thought I wasn’t called on to make any such judgment at all [i.e., a judgment whether to murder]; I thought I could say: Don’t think about the advantages if it’s murder that is proposed. But no: ‘It cannot be denied that your action will have consequences; and to deny that the consequences matter *is* to make a judgment of their intrinsic value, as compared with the action itself.’”¹²

Or, to put the point in terms of agent-centered deontology:

Whereas I thought “so soon as it is clear that a proposed course of action would be committing murder, that was enough to settle that it should not be entertained without any consideration of consequences,” in reality I must think the moral pollution that results from murdering is so terrible as to categorically outweigh the badness of the deaths I could prevent.¹³

Or, to put the point in more contemporary language:

Whereas I “thought I was refusing to admit the advantages produced by *this* wicked act as any kind of consideration,” I now see that I must actually think the moral utility of the action is swamped by the greater moral disvalue of violating the constraint.¹⁴

Such shifts in thinking corrupt absolutism. This, then, is why Anscombe says that Moore’s “doctrine of *consequentialism* has gravely distorted philosophers’ conceptions of human action.”¹⁵ Once we accept this Moorean framing, we can “secure no title to assert that obedience to such commandments as ‘thou shalt not lie’ or even ‘thou shalt do no murder’ is *universally* better than the alternatives of lying and murder.”¹⁶ Moore’s insistence that absolutism must rely on a judgment that there is something categorically terrible about injustice makes absolutism unintelligible.¹⁷

12 Box 10, Item 507, 153, CI-AAUP.

13 Quoting from Box 10, Item 507, 151, CI-AAUP.

14 Quoting from Box 10, Item 507, 152, CI-AAUP.

15 Box 8, Item 295, 1, CI-AAUP.

16 Box 10, Item 507, 154, CI-AAUP.

17 In a fun little argument, Anscombe shows that this inference actually runs afoul of Moore’s own open question argument:

Moore’s crunch sentence is refutable by a technique of argument which we learn from Moore himself. For, consider the following question:

“Is murder good, if the total value of it together with its consequences exceed the total value of any situation produced by abstaining from it?”

To this Moore’s answer must be: Murder is then good as a means. (For by ‘good as a means’ he does not mean ‘effective as a means to whatever end is envisaged, but

In other archival notes,¹⁸ Anscombe explicitly contrasts her objection to Moore with the objections given by threshold deontologists. She considers “intuitionists” like “Prichard and Ross,” and acknowledges that “Ross attacks Moore on the grounds that when one considers oneself bound not to break a promise or the like, one is *not* calculating consequences, one simply considers that the promise imposes an obligation on one.”¹⁹

But she does not think such criticisms of Moore do anything to escape the trap of consequentialism. They might show one has some extra reasons against certain actions, but not that any actions are categorically forbidden. She thinks this is confirmed in the fact that Ross thinks “the judicial punishment of the innocent” could “be justified ... ‘lest the people perish.’”²⁰ This shows that the “holding action” of philosophers like Ross and Prichard is “of no great account.”²¹ They don’t mark any sharp departure from Moore, since “Moore’s philosophy allows perfectly well for the inclusion of the intrinsic value or disvalue of an act or abstention from an act.”²² All Ross does is “*lay emphasis* on such intrinsic value or disvalue,” but without challenging the fatal assumption that the constraint is explained by such differences in value.²³ In characteristically colorful language, Anscombe says the result of Ross’s argument is that “the position is merely obscured by this wretched moralistic pretense.”²⁴

rather ‘effective as a means to the best that is attainable.’) Well, now what about the question:

“Is murder good, if it is good as a means? I.e. is it a good action?” (Box 10, Item 507, 155, CI-AAUP.)

Presumably that latter question is *open* in Moore’s sense. It is not answerable analytically. That means Moore’s assumption that constraints must be explained by the badness of constraint violation is not analytic.

18 This discussion is most explicit in one of her archival notebooks, Box 12, Item 455, CI-AAUP. The notebook discusses the way “official murder” has been accommodated by growing consequentialist assumptions in the law, academy, and society. Anscombe mentions the implicit consequentialism in philosophers like Ross and Prichard to illustrate the pervasiveness of these consequentialist assumptions.

19 Box 12, Item 455, 17-19, CI-AAUP.

20 Box 12, Item 455, 19-20, CI-AAUP.

21 Box 12, Item 455, 20, CI-AAUP.

22 Box 12, Item 455, 20, CI-AAUP.

23 Box 12, Item 455, 21, CI-AAUP.

24 Box 12, Item 455, 21, CI-AAUP.

So, if Anscombe does not think constraints can be explained by a peculiar badness in constraint violation, then how does she explain absolute constraints?

II – ANSCOMBE’S ALTERNATIVE

In introducing agent-centered deontology, I noted that the badness of human death seems insufficient for explaining a constraint against murder. If the horror of human death shows it is bad to kill, surely it equally shows that it is bad to let someone die. Sometimes another person will die whether I act or refrain from acting. A person will be just as dead whether I intend their death or foresee it as a consequence of my inaction. So, it seems, the constraint against the intentional killing of the innocent cannot be explained by the badness of human death.

It is rather surprising, then, that that is *exactly* how Anscombe does attempt to explain the absolute constraint against murder. In one archival notebook she says explicitly that “the objection to murder is the wrong done to the victim,” and that this wrong is explained by the fact that death is “*per se* a great evil to him” since “death is the destruction of the very substratum of well and ill faring.”²⁵ In another notebook she suggests that “to kill [a person] ... is to destroy that whose well-being is the point of all those subsequent requirements and prohibitions that govern people’s mutual relations.”²⁶ According to Anscombe, the evil that explains the constraint against murder is the badness of human death. But how does *that* give rise to a moral constraint? The evil of death is present just as much when someone dies of natural causes as when someone is murdered.

Anscombe is aware that this looks paradoxical. She acknowledges that an absolute constraint against murder is only intelligible if there is a morally relevant difference between intending and foreseeing, as well as a difference

25 Box 8, Item 289, 1, CI-AAUP.

26 Box 8, Item 291, 28–29, CI-AAUP. Parts of this archival manuscript eventually became “Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia”—which was in turn Anscombe’s contribution to the Linacre Centre for Healthcare Ethics’s report *Euthanasia and Clinical Practice*. I find the argument of the early manuscript somewhat easier to follow, largely because the writing is less compressed. The quote as it appears in “Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia” reads: “To kill him, then, is to destroy that being which is the point of those considerations.” See *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005), 271.

between killing and omitting to save.²⁷ But if the evil is present regardless of the action-theoretic profile of an agent's behavior, why do these action-theoretic distinctions bear on the morality of what one does?

Anscombe's answer is, in the end, that constraints do not function as considerations weighing against an action. Rather, they function to structure the very actions an agent deliberates about. To understand this view, however, we need first to introduce Anscombe's distinction between a reason and a *logos*.

II.1 – TWO TYPES OF NORMATIVE EXPLANATION

In the somewhat obscure article "Rules, Rights, and Promises," Anscombe distinguishes two types of explanation for the wrongness of an act. She calls one type of explanation a reason, and the other a *logos*. Anscombe gives a prototypical example of a reason explanation: "You can't move that, the shelf will fall down."²⁸ The precarious shelf provides a reason to not move the supporting object. To understand the sort of normative explanation involved in a reason, note that the following are two perfectly good replies to the statement above:

"I understand that the shelf will fall, but it's worth it. It is absolutely critical that we get the document that fell back here."

"Good point. Here, help me move the shelf so that I can safely move the object."

These are sensible replies because reasons work by citing a naturally intelligible consideration which one sees as bearing on action. We understand what it is for a shelf to fall, and we recognize that the shelf falling would be bad. So, realizing that moving the supporting object will cause the shelf to fall, we recognize a *reason* against that action.

This consideration enjoins us to avert the badness of a falling shelf. If we can avert that badness in some other way, we might as well do that. If that badness cannot be averted, and yet some more pressing consideration speaks in favor of moving the object, then we go ahead and act. Anscombe contrasts a reason with a *logos*, which has a different normative structure. She explains

27 Box 8, Item 289, 4-6 (typed copy), CI-AAUP; Box 8, Item 291, 23-30, CI-AAUP; and "War and Murder," repr. in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, 51-61.

28 G.E.M. Anscombe, "Rules, Rights, and Promises," repr. in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, 97-103, at 101.

this structure in terms of rules, rights, and promises, but for now I'll look only at the example of rules.²⁹

Imagine you are explaining the rules of chess to a child. After the child attempts a certain move, you say, "Sorry, that move is against the rules. You can only move your pawn forward two spaces if it has not already moved." Here, Anscombe argues you are not giving the child a *reason* against the move. Rather, you are citing a *logos*. We can see the difference by running through analogues of our two replies from above:

Suppose the child retorts, "Sure, and I get that it is bad to break the rules, but it is worth it in this case. I really need to force your queen to retreat."

At this point you will be somewhat flummoxed. The child understands the rule, but misunderstands the sort of thing that a rule is. The child thinks that "you can't move there, it's against the rules" is like "you can't move that, the shelf will fall." To the latter, it is perfectly appropriate to reply, "Sure, and that's bad, but I think it is worth it in this case. I really need to reach behind here to recover my toy." Such a reply is *sensible*. The reply could be mistaken—it might not be worth causing the shelf to fall—and then we could understand what it would be to reason with the child about the tradeoff. But in the chess case, it is not that the child is reasoning poorly about the tradeoff. Rather, the child is mistaken to think of it as a tradeoff at all. You must start from the beginning; the child does not understand what a rule is.

Now suppose instead the child retorts, "Ah, true. Then let's just change the rules so that you can always move the pawn forward two spaces."

Once again, it's hard to know what to say. Again, the child misunderstands the sort of thing that a rule is. "Let's just move the shelf" is a sensible reply to the assertion, "you can't move that, the shelf will fall." It might be mistaken, say, if

29 Not everything we call a 'rule' counts as a *logos*. Rules of thumb, like 'arrive at the airport at least 2 hours early,' and strategic rules, like 'use minor pieces to control the center of the chessboard,' are only rules in an extended sense. These heuristics are *rule-like* because they often preclude deliberation—the whole point of such a rule of thumb is to rule in or out various options without trying to run through the relevant reasons. Yet, they only influence deliberation by showing an act is *unlikely* to be correct, not by ruling out the act's possible rightness. Rawls makes this point in "Two Concepts of Rules" where he argues that such 'summary rules' merely report on a certain pattern of reasons which are "logically prior" to the rule. See John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," *The Philosophical Review* 64, no. 1 (1955): 3-32, at 22.

it would be too difficult or costly to move the shelf. But at least it represents the *grammar* of the consideration correctly.

In the chess case, the child does not get the grammar of the consideration. The problem with the child's suggestion is not that the rules are really difficult or costly to change. Changing the rules might be effortless. The problem with the child's suggestion is that it reveals a misunderstanding of the sort of consideration in play. In the shelf case, there is positive utility in moving the supporting object, and negative utility in letting the shelf fall. Thus, if, by moving the shelf, you can get the positive utility without the negative utility, you have reason to do so. But that a move breaks the rule is not a piece of 'negative utility.' You don't follow rules to avoid the badness of 'rule breaking.' You don't have the same 'reason' to change the rules to fit your actions as you have to change your actions to fit the rules.³⁰

Rules do not provide considerations against certain moves. Rather, they structure which moves one is to consider. The kind of normative explanation involved in rules is fundamentally different from that involved in reasons. Reasons work within deliberation, whereas rules structure deliberation. Reasons identify the good and bad features of your various options, whereas rules specify what the various options are in the first place.

11.1.1 – TRUE RULES AND PENALTY RULES

Before we move on, it will be useful to pause and make a few distinctions.

First, we can contrast rules that operate as a *logos*—what I will call 'true rules'—with rules that operate as a *reason*—what I will call 'penalty rules.'

A penalty rule—which is a type of reason—identifies a negative consequence of performing some action. This gives you some reason against performing the action, but it can sometimes be worth accepting the penalty. Fouls in basketball are a nice example. Sometimes it is worth fouling an

30 At this point, readers may begin to wonder how 'cheating' fits into this picture—and we will say more about cheating below. For now, cheating gives us another way to see the reason/logos contrast. A cheater, unlike one who plays fair, *does see* 'breaking the rule' as a piece of negative utility. The cheater's reason to follow the rules is just to avoid being caught. Thus, the cheater will be willing to break the rules either if they know they won't be caught, or if the strategic upside outweighs the risk of getting caught—in those cases the positive utility will outweigh the negative utility. Those who play fair are different—not because they assign a greater negative utility to 'performing an act of cheating' than the cheater assigns to getting caught—but because their refusal to cheat is not grounded in the avoidance of the negative utility of rule-breaking.

opposing player even if that means they get to take a free throw. With these kinds of rules, you must (in playing the game) deliberate about whether or not it is worth breaking the rule. These rules give some consideration against fouling, but you can ask whether the consideration is decisive in any given case.

In contrast, a true rule—which is a type of *logos*—doesn’t give a consideration against a certain action. Instead, it structures which actions you are free to consider. In chess, it’s not that it is not worthwhile to castle through check because of how bad it is to do so. Rather, you just *can’t* castle through check if you are playing chess. If, during an informal game, you and your opponent discover that you had castled through check five turns ago, then you might agree on a fair penalty rather than try and backtrack the game. (Perhaps you give up a pawn.) But the reason to not castle through check was not because you expected the penalty would be too large. The extent to which you start strategically castling through check because you know your friend will agree to a weak penalty, is the extent to which you are now playing a very different type of strategy game.

For Anscombe, moral constraints are like true rules. They are *logoi*. They structure which actions an agent can consider the reasons for and against. By contrast, for the agent-centered deontologist moral constraints are rather like penalty rules. In Anscombe’s terms, they provide *reasons* against certain actions (albeit strong ones). “You should not kill him, it will soil your soul” is like “You should not foul him, they will get to take a free throw.” You can ask whether it is worth giving up the free throw, just as you can ask whether it is worth soiling your soul.

It might be that the penalty is so great that it is never worth violating the constraint. If the penalty for a certain foul were that you automatically lose all future basketball games, then it would never be rational (within the considerations of the game) to commit the foul. Similarly, if the moral penalty to violating a constraint is of “categorically greater weight,” then it is never worth violating the constraint.³¹ Such a view is a form of absolutist, not threshold, deontology. But it is closer to threshold deontology than it is to Anscombe’s view. It still takes constraints as identifying *reasons*, not *logoi*, against an action.

For Anscombe, constraints are instead like the rules of chess. I don’t permanently lose all future chess games if ever once I cheat. In fact, there

31 Huemer, “Lexical Priority and the Problem of Risk,” 335.

need not be *any* penalty at all to cheating in chess. It is just something that one cannot do so long as one is playing chess rightly. The rules *structure* what options one can consider in proper 'chess deliberation.' Likewise, Anscombe thinks that moral constraints *structure* the options that are available to consider in proper practical reason.

This is how Anscombe thinks about justice, for example. We do not have a reason against committing injustice, but a *logos*. Anscombe illustrates this with property explanations. If you say, "you can't take that, it's N's" you are not giving a reason like, "you can't move that, the shelf will fall down."³² In the shelf case, one can understand what it is for a shelf to fall, and understand it as bad, without understanding that it bears on moving some object. The reason is naturally intelligible. The *logos* involved in property claims is not. "You can't take that" cannot be independently explained by its "being N's," because to understand that something is N's *just is* to understand it is not for you to take.

To understand that a move is against the rules *just is* to understand that it is not to be considered no matter how good the reasons are to make the move. Similarly, for Anscombe, to properly appreciate that something is unjust *just is* to understand that it is not to be considered no matter how good the considerations in favor of the action.³³

There is this important difference between the rules of a game and the rules of justice: I can have reasons to step outside the game, but not outside of morality. Perhaps it is worth cheating if it means I win the prize money. The rules of chess only structure my actions so long as I conceive of them merely as chess moves; while moral rules are just part of the proper structure

32 This is a slight adaptation of an example in Anscombe, "Rules, Rights, and Promises", 322.

33 Readers might worry that my account commits Anscombe to thinking the wrongness of constraint violation is analytic—as though understanding that something is murder *just is* to understand that it is wrong. But Anscombe insists repeatedly that we must not understand murder as 'wrongful killing.' For Anscombe, 'murder is always wrong' is a substantive thesis, not a mere matter of definition. Put otherwise, one might say that murder is a type of act that 'breaks the moral rules.' But that does not mean that the definition of murder is 'something that breaks the moral rules.' For example, it breaks the rules of chess to castle through check. It is something one may never do. But that does not mean that 'castling through check' is defined as 'the illicit castling of the king.' Illegality is not built into the definition of castling through check. Yet someone who understands what it is to castle through check, and who understands chess, *just* understands that it is not the sort of move that can be considered. So, similarly, immorality is not built into the definition of murder. Yet when a virtuous agent understands an act would be murder, they thereby understand that it is not an act to be considered.

of practical reason itself. They share the same normative structure as the rules of a game, but while the rules of a game are escapable, the rules of morality—if there are any such things—are not.³⁴

II.1.II – LOGOI VS. PRACTICE RULES

So far, in illustrating true rules we have focused on examples like the rules of chess. For example, in footnote 28 we distinguished the true rules of chess—e.g. ‘don’t castle through check’—from what Rawls calls ‘summary rules’—e.g. ‘use minor pieces to control the center of the board.’ This contrast might seem to suggest that Anscombe’s true rules are what Rawls calls ‘practice rules’ or what others have come to call ‘constitutive rules.’³⁵ This, however, is not quite right. While practice rules are logoi, other sorts of rules can be logoi as well.

Practice rules constitute a practice. There is no such thing as castling through check except within a game of chess; and something is only a game of chess if it is an activity governed by a certain set of rules (a set which includes the rule against castling through check). And while Anscombe thinks that some moral rules are practice rules (for instance the rule against theft is part of what constitutes the societal practice of property), there are other

34 That my move castles through check shows that it is bad as a *chess move*; it does not necessarily show that it is bad “as a *human action*” (cf. G.E.M. Anscombe, “Good and Bad Human Action,” repr. in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 195-206, at 201). Anscombe reserves the terms ‘moral goodness’ and ‘moral badness’ to refer to those properties which apply to a voluntary action conceived *as a human action*. Something can be defective as a chess move, but I can always step outside the game of chess and conceive of the action from a broader standpoint. Anscombe thinks it would be a category mistake to try to ‘step outside morality’ because morality are just those norms that govern our voluntary human actions. “Moral goodness or badness is not some new, higher order ingredient which gets injected into a fully human action from what is called the agent’s *Gesinnung*. If you take *that* view, you will call fully human, fully intentional particular actions not yet as such ‘morally’ good or bad ... [t]his is awful nonsense” (G.E.M. Anscombe, “The Controversy Over a New Morality,” repr. in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 227-236, at 235). According to Anscombe, it is only in the grip of a philosophy like Kant’s or Sidgwick’s that there seems to be some other practical vantage from which to ask if a *moral failure* is also a *practical failure*. This point is often misunderstood by those who are only familiar with Anscombe’s discussion of ‘moral ought’ in the context “Modern Moral Philosophy.” The confusion comes because in MMP Anscombe means to be criticizing that notion of ‘moral ought’ she thinks is implicit in Kantian or Utilitarian accounts of normative authority. For a related discussion, see Box 9, Item 304, CI-AAUP.

35 Rawls, “Two Concepts of Rules,” 24; cf. G.C.J. Midgley, “Linguistic Rules,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1959): 281.

moral rules that are non-practice rules, which still have the *logos* structure.

To be a *logos*, the rule must constrain consideration of reasons (rather than providing or summarizing reasons). A rule can do this without constituting a practice. One source of non-practice true rules is the commands of a rightful authority. If God commands one to not work on the last day of the week, then that command operates as a *logos*. For Anscombe, other non-practice-based rules include the prohibitions on murder, on idolatry, on the use of contraceptives, on covetousness, and on breaking the seal of confession.³⁶ These rules all exclude certain actions from the space of reasons but don't do so by constituting a practice.

II.II – DON'T THINK ABOUT IT

We can now explain one of the most misunderstood aspects of Anscombe's absolutism. In numerous places, Anscombe dismisses the idea that good consequences could justify violating a constraint by arguing that, regardless of the consequences, one should not even be considering violating the constraint as a possible course of action. Thus, in "Modern Moral Philosophy" she says that "the strictness of the prohibition has as its point *that you are not tempted by fear or hope of consequences*."³⁷ And in an unpublished manuscript she describes the absolutist as "refusing to admit the advantages produced by *this* wicked act as any kind of consideration."³⁸

This thought is often misunderstood as a sort of evasion, sometimes classified as a "don't think about it" response:

Consider first the famous view of Elizabeth Anscombe: such cases (real or imagined) can never present themselves to the consciousness of a truly moral agent because such agent will realize it is immoral to even think about violating moral norms in order to avert disaster. Such rhetorical excesses should be seen for what they are, a peculiar way of stating Kantian absolutism motivated by an impatience with the question.³⁹

36 You can disagree with Anscombe about whether such actions are constrained and still acknowledge that were such constraints to exist that they would be *logoi*. In fact, you can think the only adequate basis for a *logos* is a practice rule (as may have been Hume's view), and yet still recognize the *concept* of a *logos* is broader than the concept of a practice rule.

37 Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 34.

38 Box F, Item 507, 152, CI-AAUP.

39 Larry Alexander and Michael Moore, "Deontological Ethics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

But we can now see that there is actually a great deal of insight in these supposedly “rhetorical excesses.” What Anscombe is revealing is the distinctive normative structure of *logos*-kind explanations.

Consider again the analogy with games. If you suggest castling through check to a chess player, they will dismiss the suggestion out of hand. You might then point out strategic advantages of such a move. The chess player will still dismiss them. And you might continue to propound more and more reasons why it would be best to castle through check. You might show them that such a move would guarantee their victory and that any other move guarantees their defeat. Still, they won’t even *consider* whether the move is worth it. This refusal to consider is not an *evasion*, nor is it a defensive refusal to face a difficult reality.⁴⁰ Rather, their refusal is a demonstration that they grasp what a rule is.

When one has a strong *reason* against a certain action, it can be tempting to just not think about countervailing considerations. If acting might risk losing my job, send me to prison, or cost me my life, I may be tempted to not even consider if it is the right thing to do. It takes courage even to deliberate about actions that one has strong reason not to perform. But there is no similar courage in deliberating about whether to perform an action ruled out by a *logos*. To deliberate is to already have failed to grasp the nature of the act you are considering.⁴¹

Because constraints *structure* our moral reasoning, rather than entering as considerations within the reasoning, it is clear why one cannot consider whether or not to violate a true constraint. A virtuous agent does not see the question of whether to violate the constraint as a sensible one.

40 We can imagine cases where a refusal to consider breaking the rules is an evasion. We can imagine a ‘goody two-shoes’ who won’t consider breaking the rules no matter how important it is. We might try to convince them that, in this case, they must cheat to save a life. But here we need to make a distinction. The person might have reasons to castle through check, but only in so far as they have reason to cheat. Since there probably is no absolute constraint against cheating, a categorical refusal to consider cheating no matter the situation is a kind of failure. The failure is in refusing to consider whether to exit the practice of playing chess, not in the refusal to consider castling through check as the best chess move.

41 For a related discussion of this, see Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London, UK: Routledge, 1991), ch. 17.

II.III – EVERY THEORY INCLUDES A REASONS/LOGOS DISTINCTION

One might think that Anscombe's view bears a complexity penalty. On the ordinary view, the only normative explanations we need in doing moral theory are reasons explanations. On Anscombe's account the moral theorist needs two different types of normative explanations: those that appeal to reasons and those that appeal to *logoi* instead. But this is to misunderstand the distinction. If Anscombe is right, just about every ethical theory must distinguish between a reason and a *logos*.⁴² The theories just differ in what they consider the *logoi* to be.

Take the Moorean approach to constraints. Suppose you think that there is a certain intrinsic disvalue to constraint violation. You thus have a *reason* not to murder. But your reasoning is also structured by a *logos*, a *logos*—in Moore's case—requiring you to perform the action that maximizes goodness. For Moore, human actions are, ultimately, subject to a single rule: maximize the good. And this optimific rule must be a true rule. That the act will maximize the good is not just one consideration among many. Once I know the act maximizes the good, I do not need to ask whether that reason is overridden by some other consideration. The optimific rule is not a penalty rule that gives you some new reason to perform the action (over and above the reasons that showed the act optimific). Rather, the optimific rule describes the structure within which you integrate all the first-order reasons.

Put another way, the act utilitarian has something *like* a deontological absolute. There is *never* a reason which justifies breaking the rule 'maximize utility.'

The same is true of the threshold deontologist. The threshold deontologist understands deontological constraints as penalty rules. There is a moral badness in murder that gives one *reason* not to murder even if you can save five lives. However, for the threshold deontologist, that penalty rule is still situated within an absolute rule. The threshold deontologist who says you cannot kill one to save five, but can kill one to save a thousand, accepts as *absolute* the rule that tells you how much good must be done before a constraint can be violated.

Of course, Anscombe thinks the utilitarian and the threshold deontologists are *wrong* about which *logoi* govern practical reason. But the difference

42 I say 'just about' because some peculiar theories, such as scalar utilitarianism or particularism, might be exceptions.

between Anscombe and others is in *what* Anscombe regards the absolute rule to be, not whether she thinks there are any.

II.IV – WHEN ANSCOMBE CONSIDERS CONSEQUENCES

Understanding logoi can also help us understand how Anscombe’s absolutism can accommodate her insistence that *sometimes* considerations of consequences justify actions that would otherwise be constrained. Anscombe discusses many such cases throughout her published and unpublished work. For example, she says that the rule requiring the keeping of promises does not apply if the promise is wicked,⁴³ or if the consequences of keeping the promise would be sufficiently awkward.⁴⁴ Her most famous example is in “Modern Moral Philosophy” where she argues that the consequences “sometimes” justify destroying another’s property, since “a man’s claim to a bit of property can become a nullity when its seizure and use can avert some obvious disaster.”⁴⁵

This case does not contradict Anscombe’s absolutism, since it is not her position that the consequences sometimes justify violating the constraint against theft. Rather, in this case, the consequences bear on *whether the act is theft at all*. In an unpublished manuscript, Anscombe discusses this matter at greater length:

The question of injustice is complicated by the fact that to-be-expected consequences may take away from the injustice of a proceeding which would otherwise be unjust; e.g. to seize a man’s property. For example, if someone catches fire and I seize your rug or curtains to roll him in to put out the fire, I do you no wrong. This is because the resources of the earth are for the supplying of human need in general. These goods need manipulation and control to serve human need; also, human need is served only if finished products are enjoyed quietly by individuals. For both reasons there is property, whether corporate or private. And for this reason infringement of it for one’s private purposes is unjust. But in extreme and urgent need the right to it lapses; there is a right to be served by it on the part of whoever is in such need deriving from the fact that the resources are in the first place for mankind as such and in general.⁴⁶

43 Anscombe, “Rules, Rights, and Promises,” 319.

44 “It is significant that Ross should take promise keeping as an example; for it is uncontroversial that sufficiently awkward consequences would remove the obligation of ordinary not very important promises.” (Box 12, Item 455, 19, CI-AAUP)

45 Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 39.

46 Box 8, Item 289, 1-2 (typed copy), CI-AAUP.

For Anscombe, it is not that the consequences sometimes justify violating property rights. Rather property rights simply don't extend to cases of emergency.⁴⁷ While Anscombe and a threshold deontologist will both allow a starving man to take bread from a bakery without paying, the structure of the explanation is fundamentally different. For the threshold deontologist, the consequences can override the badness of stealing, and so justify violating the constraint against theft. In contrast, for Anscombe, the consequences can never justify violating a constraint, but in certain cases can show that an act did not violate the constraint at all.

This is much more than a verbal difference. For Anscombe, the relevance of the consequences for a constraint must be *internal* to the logic of the rule. Where there is no such 'internal' logic, no degree of terrible consequences can justify violation. Consequences concerning need are relevant to whether something is an act of theft, only because Anscombe thinks that property as an institution exists for the purpose of securing human need in general. But, since our right to life does not derive from our lives being generally valuable to society, the consequence will never "take away from the *injustice* of killing the innocent."⁴⁸ Likewise, for the threshold deontologist, you could justify stealing either to save one life or to secure many instances of a lesser good—perhaps by stealing someone's magical fishing net you can procure twenty million delicious lobster dinners for people who already have enough to eat—but for Anscombe it does not matter how many lobster dinners you can secure, humans don't need such dinners and so it will remain an impermissible act of theft no matter how good the totaled-up consequences are.

II.V – PRACTICAL WISDOM AND CONNATURAL KNOWLEDGE

Once we draw a distinction between reasons and logoi, we need to explain how consideration of each enters into practical deliberation. And this brings us to one of the most important elements of Anscombe's account. For Anscombe, distinguishing reasons and logoi requires distinguishing "information about what has happened" on the one side, from "good inclination" on the other.⁴⁹

47 For a defense of this view of property right see Marshall Bierson and Tucker Sigourney, "Famine, Affluence, and Aquinas," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2023): 307-322. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 66, a. 7.

48 Box 8, Item 289, 2 (typed copy), CI-AAUP.

49 G.E.M. Anscombe, "Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life," repr. in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 59-66, at 63.

There are two different types of knowledge necessary to practical wisdom. We might say there is a difference between *what* agents think about and *how* they think about it.

Let's first put this in terms of our chess example. An honest chess player and a cheater might share 'information about' the rules of chess. They both know what the rules allow and disallow. In this case, the difference is not in *what* the agent thinks about a move. (They agree about which moves are licit and which illicit.) Rather, they differ in *how* they think about illicit moves. An honest chess player does not think about illicit moves as a live possibility. A cheater attends to the rules so that they can be careful not to get caught.

Anscombe discusses this kind of difference in a 1981 lecture titled "Knowledge and the Reverence for Human Life":

The person who has no meanness in him, but rather generosity, is liable to avoid or reject some course of action, without difficulty perceiving it to be ungenerous. Or it simply won't occur to him as a possibility, and if someone else suggests it he rejects it, brushes it aside, does not deliberate within himself whether to follow that course of action. A clever person might also know that the suggested action was mean, though he lacks generosity himself; he knows it out of a certain sharpness of intelligence. The one with connatural knowledge⁵⁰ is inclined against the action and that inclination itself is a sort of peception [sic] of the meanness of acting even without the judgments being formulated.⁵¹

A generous person and a clever miser might both recognize that an act is ungenerous. *What* they think of the act is the same, but *how* they think of the act is different. The generous agent does not just know an act is ungenerous; they connaturally know it in the way of a generous person. They know it in a way that rules the act out as a possibility.

50 Anscombe defines connatural knowledge, in this context, as "the sort of knowledge someone has who has a certain virtue: it is a capacity to recognise what action will accord with and what ones will be contrary to the virtue" —though she acknowledges a broader sense where it merely picks out knowledge one has "by means of one's nature" ("Knowledge and Reference for Human Life," 63). A particularly helpful discussion of it comes in Aquinas: "Now rectitude of judgment is twofold: first, on account of perfect use of reason, secondly, on account of a certain connaturality with the matter about which one has to judge. Thus, about matters of chastity, a man after inquiring with his reason forms a right judgment, if he has learnt the science of morals, while he who has the habit of chastity judges of such matters by a kind of connaturality" (*Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 45, a. 2).

51 Anscombe, "Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life," 60.

For Anscombe, we come to such connatural knowledge *in* the possession of certain virtues. Certain kinds of knowledge “strike one as being like virtues, or even some of them as being virtue: the knowledge that a human being is of more worth than many sparrows, for example.”⁵² Such knowledge is connatural “to the just: it belongs with a just way of looking at things.”⁵³ Knowing that a human being is worth more than many sparrows is *not* like the economist’s knowledge that the price of a bar of gold is higher than many bars of silver. It is to recognize that humans are simply not things that it is ever good to kill.

Anscombe thinks this connatural knowledge comes in degrees. The “knowledge of . . . the dignity of human nature . . . is strong only in good people.”⁵⁴ But that does not mean it is non-existent in others. Indeed, one part of moral education is the development of increasingly direct inclinations.

Let us contrast two chess players. First, we have the elite chess player. This person has internalized the rules of chess. They do not consider moves that are against the rules. They immediately see what moves are possible and only invest cognitive energy in deciding between those moves. Second, we have the novice chess player. This person knows the rules of chess, but has not yet internalized them. They think it would be great to move a pawn to d4, but then need to run through the rules of chess to make sure that the move is allowed. The elite and novice players differ in what they know connaturally. They both have an internalized *logos*, but not the same *logos*.⁵⁵

The novice player has practically internalized the *logos* ‘follow the rules of chess.’ Once they see that a move is against the rules, they recognize that it is not to be done. But they don’t yet recognize individual moves as not to be done. Rather, whenever they want to make a move, they must check to make sure the move is licit. They thus need to waste a lot of cognitive effort on illicit moves, consciously ruling them out of consideration. In contrast, the expert chess player has internalized a much richer *logos*. They have internalized all the rules of chess, and so they only consider licit moves in the first place.⁵⁶

52 Ibid., 62.

53 Ibid., 62.

54 Ibid., 66.

55 Or perhaps they have grasped the same *logos* but in deeply different ways; either way of talking could be defended and Anscombe’s own usage does not seem to mandate one way or the other.

56 Our cheater, meanwhile, lacks any connatural knowledge of the rules of chess. They have theoretical knowledge of what the rules are, but they don’t grasp the rules of chess in

The novice chess player imperfectly grasps the rules—i.e. it is not yet second nature, but only first nature.⁵⁷ The novice’s grasp of the rules is not yet fully integrated and habituated into how the player practically reasons about chess moves. The player’s grasp of the rules requires development, just as the sensibility of developing moral agents requires development. When one is first introduced to the moral law, one has practical knowledge of ‘sin as not to be done,’ or of ‘breaking the rules as not to be done,’ or of ‘disobeying parents as not to be done,’ or of ‘injustice as not to be done.’ They then pair that with a theoretical recognition of an action as so classified, recognizing, say, ‘lying as against the rules,’ or ‘adultery as sin,’ or ‘false testimony as unjust.’ By theoretically recognizing the appropriateness of the label ‘sin’ or ‘injustice’ or ‘against the rules,’ one comes to practically see the act as not to be done.

The fully developed virtuous agent, in contrast, does not require that extra theoretical step. They simply don’t register such acts as options. To grasp a *logos* is not to theoretically know that something is against the rules. It is rather to be properly disposed to see that action as ruled out. In developed moral agents that happens directly, in developing moral agents it is often affected by the categories of moral education.

Anscombe frames this what/how distinction in terms of “two kinds of knowledge.”⁵⁸ The first kind of knowledge is connatural knowledge, which is a matter of *virtue*. It is manifested in *how* agents think about reasons. The second kind of knowledge is the sort “you get from experts, look up in works of reference, ask witnesses of events about.”⁵⁹ And while this knowledge is not virtue, it is still related to virtue because the “virtuous person will get the knowledge that he needs and which is available to him.”⁶⁰ The virtuous person

will need, often, information, knowledge of the second kind, in order to know what actions to do and abstain from, not only a connatural ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ reaction. That is to say, if he has justice he must also

the way proper to ‘chess reasoning.’

57 John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 84.

58 “Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life,” 63.

59 *Ibid.*, 63.

60 *Ibid.*, 63.

have prudence, practical wisdom, in order to know what is just in the particular case, and the prudence will often have to call upon specialist information.⁶¹

The virtuous person will often acquire knowledge of the second kind where the vicious would not. While the “recognition that someone is hungry or cold is the merest observation,” an agent “not interested in helping someone hungry or cold will probably not make the observation.”⁶² We vicious agents deceive ourselves: “people often do not want to know things that are readily available to be known if those things put their own opinions in a bad light.”⁶³

The virtuous are thus doubly set apart from the vicious. First, they differ in *what* reasons they consider since the virtuous are more likely to notice the real reasons for action. Second, they differ in *how* they deliberate about such things. Their deliberations will be structured by the connatural knowledge of virtue, conforming their actions to the logos of the moral law.

II.VI – BACK TO THE BEGINNING

We now can understand why Anscombe says that the objection to murder is the evil of human death. It is true that the evil of human death counts against both killing and letting die. *What* the agent sees as bad is the same in killing and letting die. But *how* the agent thinks about the badness differs.

Identifying the evil of human death underdetermines ethics. We need to know the logoi that structure our consideration of such reasons. If the utilitarian is right, then the just will recognize the need to save the greater number. If Anscombe is right, the just will recognize that the destruction of a human being is ruled out as something evil, something that cannot be shown good by the consequences.

Here I have tried only to explain Anscombe's position. I have not argued that she is right. I believe she is, but showing that must wait for future work.

61 Ibid., 63.

62 Ibid., 65.

63 Ibid., 65.

CONCLUSION

So far, I've presented this way of thinking as though it's unique to Anscombe. It is not. The view I've propounded is the view of Aristotle and Aquinas. It is even, in important respects, the view of Plato and Kant. Anscombe, then, is not developing a novel account. Rather, she is giving us the tools to recover an understanding of constraints that contemporary deontologists have all but lost. And if Anscombe is right, we have lost it because "moral philosophers of the English tradition for the last hundred and fifty years" have been "eroding" a clear grasp of absolutes.⁶⁴

64 Box 12, Item 455, 10-11, CI-AAUP.