

Chapter 13

Moral Absolutes and Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism

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In “Modern Moral Philosophy,” Elizabeth Anscombe makes a “disenchanted” move: she suggests that secular philosophers abandon a special “moral” sense of “ought” since she thinks this no longer makes sense without a divine law framework. Instead, she recommends recovering an ordinary sense of ought that pertains to what a human being *needs* in order to flourish *qua* human being, where the virtues are thought to be central to what a human being needs. However, she is also concerned to critique consequentialist views for their rejection of absolute prohibitions. This raises the question of whether the disenchanted form of Aristotelian ethical naturalism that she recommends to secular philosophers can support such absolute prohibitions. Anscombe expresses skepticism on this point and seems ultimately to recommend a divine law ethic, at least as a supplement to a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic.

This chapter takes issue with Anscombe’s view, in part: the author agrees that the disenchanted form of Aristotelian virtue ethics cannot support absolute prohibitions, but disagrees that appeal to divine law is the best way to understand these prohibitions since it misses the intrinsic reasons for them: namely, they concern that which is sacred or reverence-worthy and thus should be regarded as inviolable and as involving a “special moral ought.” This means that a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic that can properly recognize moral absolutes will need a *reenchanting* move: namely, it needs to recognize the special normative demands of the sacred. This chapter also explores the question of what “moral ontology” can best make sense of the moral phenomenology of the sacred, but the main aim is to show the significance of a common anti-consequentialist form of moral perception that involves a sense of the sacred.

Introduction

Elizabeth Anscombe’s 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” is widely regarded as having provided a key source of impetus for the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics in the last half-century or so. In this essay she criticizes modern moral theories, such as Kantianism and utilitarianism, which focus on providing action-guiding moral principles. She argues that such views depend upon a notion of moral obligation that is in fact merely a survival from an earlier divine law conception of ethics. The word “ought” continues “to be spoken with a special emphasis and a special feeling,” but it has lost the framework that originally made it intelligible.¹ Anscombe contends that this notion of moral obligation should be jettisoned by secular philosophers since it is only harmful without its original theistic framework, and she suggests that it “would be a great improvement if, instead of ‘morally wrong’, one always named a genus such as ‘untruthful’, ‘unchaste’, ‘unjust.’”²

Whatever one may think about the specifics of Anscombe’s criticisms of modern moral philosophy, one of the most important aspects of her essay is the suggestion that we would do well to move away from the narrow focus on action-guiding principles and instead take a more holistic approach that seeks to identify ways of being or types of character traits – the virtues – that contribute to a flourishing or good human life. In short, her recommendation is that we should seek to recover something like Aristotle’s account of ethics. However, what has not been

properly appreciated is that Anscombe is making a *disenchanted* move in suggesting that we should abandon – at least if we are not theists – a special “moral” sense of “ought” that is supposed to contain some sort of “peculiar” or “mesmeric” force.³ In other words, she wants us to acknowledge the full extent of the disenchantment that she thinks in fact occurs if we have abandoned theism. At the same time, Anscombe wants to block a further kind of disenchantment that would involve rejecting all claims of objectivity in ethics, that is, claims that we can derive an *ought* from what *is* the case or *value* from a *fact* about the world. She suggests that we can recover an ordinary (i.e., non-peculiar) sense of “ought” by focusing on what a human being *needs* in order to flourish *qua* human being, where the virtues are thought to be central to what a human being needs.⁴ This sense of ought can be expressed as follows: if you want to flourish *qua* human being (and it is thought that any rational human being should want to flourish *qua* human being), then you *ought* to cultivate the virtues.

Anscombe’s suggestions here have been taken up by other philosophers, such as Philippa Foot,⁵ Rosalind Hursthouse,⁶ and Alasdair MacIntyre,⁷ who have sought to articulate and defend a version of “ethical naturalism” that finds virtue ethics on an account of human flourishing (or well-being) that is understood on analogy with the flourishing of other living things. In other words, the focus is on providing a quasi-scientific account of human nature and human flourishing that can ground an account of the virtues that would contribute to such flourishing.⁸ I will refer to this as the disenchanted version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics – even though it seeks a minimal form of re-enchantment in defending objectivity in ethics – as a way of contrasting it with the re-enchanted version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics that I defend. This version – which is the dominant version – is disenchanted because of its appeal to an “ordinary ought” (in contrast to any special, set apart realm of obligation) and because of focusing on a third-personal, observational, or disengaged standpoint (as contrasted with focusing on a first-personal, participative, or engaged standpoint).⁹ The re-enchanted version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics that I defend does affirm a special realm of obligation that contains a “peculiar” or “mesmeric” force, that is, it places demands upon us that are set apart from other sorts of concerns.¹⁰ But to appreciate this we have to explore our engaged evaluative standpoint.

I will focus here on the issue of absolute prohibitions: are there some actions that are never to be done? Although the most influential aspect of Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy” is its call for a recovery of Aristotelian ethics, her greatest concern in the essay is in fact with consequentialist thinking that rejects absolute prohibitions. These two features of the essay raise the question: is the sort of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism that Anscombe recommends able to affirm and defend absolute prohibitions? Anscombe herself raises this question toward the end of the essay and expresses skepticism. In fact, her ultimate purpose in the essay seems to be to recommend a divine law conception of ethics.

I agree with Anscombe that the disenchanted form of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics cannot adequately ground absolute prohibitions; however, I also don’t think that appeal to divine law is adequate for grounding these prohibitions. I will argue that in order properly to defend absolute prohibitions we need to appeal to the common experience of *the sacred* (or what we can also call *the reverence-worthy*), which carries with it a sense of obligation that is especially set apart from other sorts of concern in virtue of involving a requirement of inviolability; that is, it conveys a kind of boundary marker that ought never to be crossed. I will also show how in her later work Anscombe does give recognition to a sense of the sacred in terms of what she calls “mystical perception” or a “religious attitude” of reverence for human life, which she thinks is in fact available to everyone, whether one is religious or not. But this does raise the question of

whether a religious (i.e., theistic) worldview is needed for best making sense of the sacred. While I don't think appeal to divine law is adequate for grounding absolute prohibitions, I will suggest that there are indeed features of a theistic worldview that can help to make sense of such prohibitions. However, the main focus of this essay is to show the significance of a common anti-consequentialist form of moral perception that involves a sense of the sacred.

Against Consequentialism

Let us begin by looking at what Anscombe has to say about consequentialism in "Modern Moral Philosophy." One of her main theses in the essay is that "differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance," because, in essence, they are all consequentialists of some form – that is, they believe that the ends justify the means – and thus show a "corrupt mind."¹¹ She writes:

The overall similarity is made clear if you consider that every one of the best known English academic moral philosophers has put out a philosophy according to which, e.g., it is not possible to hold that it cannot be right to kill the innocent as a means to any end whatsoever and that someone who thinks otherwise is in error. ... Now this is a significant thing: for it means that all these philosophies are quite incompatible with the Hebrew-Christian ethic. For it has been characteristic of that ethic to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever consequences threaten, such as: choosing to kill the innocent for any purpose, however good ... [It] would [take] a certain provinciality of mind not to see this incompatibility as the most important fact about these philosophers, and the differences between them as somewhat trifling by comparison.¹²

In referring here to the "Hebrew-Christian ethic" Anscombe is appealing to a divine law conception of ethics. But does she allow that other conceptions of ethics, such as the disenchanted form of Aristotelian ethics that she recommends to secular philosophers, could also reasonably affirm absolute prohibitions? As previously indicated, she is skeptical.

Toward the end of the essay, Anscombe raises the question "whether one might ever need to commit injustice, or whether it won't be the best thing to do?" For her, a paradigm case of injustice is the intentional taking of innocent human life (she also mentions the judicial condemnation of someone known to be innocent as another paradigm case). Among the different possible replies to this question, Anscombe mentions the following:

One man – a philosopher – may say that since justice is a virtue, and injustice a vice, and virtues and vices are built up by the performances of the action in which they are instanced, an act of injustice will tend to make a man bad; and essentially the flourishing of a man *qua* man consists in his being good (e.g. in virtues); but for any X to which such terms apply, X needs what makes it flourish, so a man needs, or ought to perform, only virtuous actions; and even if, as it must be admitted may happen, he flourishes less, or not at all, in essentials, by avoiding injustice, his life is spoiled in essentials by not avoiding injustice – so he still needs to perform only just actions. That is roughly how Plato and Aristotle talk.¹³

Plato and Aristotle do indeed seem to acknowledge absolute prohibitions. For instance, Plato has Socrates say in the *Gorgias* that it is better to suffer evil than to do evil,¹⁴ which is an idea central to any view embracing absolute prohibitions. Similarly, Aristotle remarks: “[There] are some things we cannot be compelled to do. Rather than do them we should suffer the most terrible consequences and accept death.”¹⁵ He mentions the act of killing one’s own mother as such a case. Elsewhere Aristotle qualifies his view of the virtues of character as consisting in attaining the mean between excess and deficiency with respect to some feeling or action by saying: “[Not] every action or feeling admits of the mean. For the names of some automatically include baseness—for instance, spite, shamelessness, envy [among feelings], and adultery, theft, murder among actions. For all of these and similar things are called by these names because they themselves, not their excesses or deficiencies, are base. Hence in doing these things we can never be correct, but must invariably be in error.”¹⁶ There is a lot left unexplained in these remarks. For instance, what explains the wrongness of murder (i.e., the intentional killing of an innocent human being) such that it always ought to be avoided? It does not seem enough to say – in line with the disenchanted form of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics – that it undermines the “good functioning of the social group” (and the virtues that maintain this) and runs counter to our social nature (and the virtues that fulfill this), though these claims are true; rather, the wrongness seems above all related to the violation of the inherent value of human life, which should be regarded as inviolable, irreplaceable, and reverence-worthy.¹⁷ Murder is fundamentally *impious*, given that piety (as part of the virtue of justice) is the virtue of being properly responsive to that which is sacred or reverence-worthy, which in this case is human life.¹⁸ The virtue of piety is also concerned to show reverence for the sources of our existence, and hence the example Aristotle mentions of killing one’s own mother is especially impious. Rather than do this “we should suffer the most terrible consequences and accept death.”

Additionally, if living in accordance with absolute prohibitions is seen as necessary for our own fulfillment (*eudaimonia*), it is because we have already accepted a moralized understanding of it, for example, in terms of a righteous, holy, noble, upright life, which is in part constituted by the virtue of piety in being properly responsive to that which is sacred or reverence-worthy. But if we do away with appeals to a special moral ought and only accept an ordinary (i.e., disenchanted) ought, where virtuous actions are ultimately justified by their conduciveness to our flourishing as human beings, where this is understood on analogy with the flourishing of other living things, then it seems difficult to see how certain actions could be ruled out as such. Indeed, Anscombe continues the previously cited passage as follows:

[It] can be seen that philosophically there is a huge gap ... which needs to be filled by an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of human ‘flourishing’. And it is the last concept that appears the most doubtful. For it is a bit much to swallow that a man in pain and hunger and poor and friendless is flourishing, as Aristotle himself admitted. Further, someone might say that one at least needed to stay alive to flourish. Another man unimpressed by all that will say in a hard case ‘What we need is such-and-such, which we won’t get without doing this (which is unjust) – so this is what we ought to do’.¹⁹

In other words, it seems that there could always be exceptions made for the sake of the end of flourishing (this parallels a similar common critique of rule-utilitarianism). And so here Anscombe points to a fundamental inadequacy in the disenchanted Aristotelian view, given that

she thinks justice requires acknowledging absolute prohibitions. In light of this inadequacy, she suggests the following as another possible reply to her question “whether one might ever need to commit injustice, or whether it won’t be the best thing to do?”:

The man who believes in divine laws will say perhaps ‘It is forbidden, and however it looks, it cannot be to anyone’s profit to commit injustice’; he like the Greek philosophers can think in terms of flourishing. ... [If] he is a Jew or Christian, he need not have any very distinct notion: the way it will profit him to abstain from injustice is something that he leaves it to God to determine, himself only saying ‘It can’t do me any good to go against his law’. (He also hopes for a great reward in a new life later on, e.g. at the coming of [the] Messiah; but in this he is relying on special promises.)²⁰

Ultimately, it seems then that Anscombe is recommending a divine law ethic, at least as a supplement to a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic, in order to ground absolute prohibitions.

Alasdair MacIntyre does the same in an essay titled “On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture.” There he draws the following lesson from the famous claim made by the character Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* that if God does not exist, then everything is permissible:

Dostoevski through Karamazov was not saying, that atheists are free from all moral constraints, that, if atheism is true, anyone is morally free to do anything at any time. ... [What] Dostoevski ... was saying, was that, if we take atheism to be true, then there is no type of action, no matter how horrifying, of which we can be sure that we could never find good reason to perform it, that it would never be overwhelmingly and overridingly in what we took to be the general interest to perform it. Dostoevski ... was not predicting Auschwitz or the Gulag. He was predicting the fire-bombing of Dresden and Tokyo, the saturation bombing of the Ruhr and the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was predicting not the crimes of the obviously wicked, but the crimes of the apparently good, types of action that it is rational to prohibit unconditionally only if one is a theist. But it [is] just this kind of position that will appear at best groundless, at worst unintelligible, to those whose presuppositions are those of our secularized culture.²¹

MacIntyre thinks that the reason why it is rational for the theist to regard certain actions as absolutely prohibited is because on the theistic view “we are unconditionally bound to obey a certain rule not in spite of our interests and natural inclinations, but because of them ... [Our] nature is such that our end is such that we cannot achieve it except by respecting a law to whose giver we are accountable.”²²

Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Reasons in Favor of Absolute Prohibitions

What should we make of Anscombe’s and MacIntyre’s appeals to divine law in order to ground absolute prohibitions? They do fit with what Sabina Lovibond identifies as an “element of anti-naturalism” in the idea of absolute prohibitions: “To say *fiat iustitia, ruat caelum* [“let justice be done though the heavens may fall”] is to give hostages to fortune: if there is even so much as one moral requirement that we are seriously going to treat as absolute, i.e. as a requirement that is

never to be called into question, then this policy is liable sooner or later to produce consequences which, by any normal human standards, will count as disastrous.”²³ For instance, if we are never to take innocent human life intentionally, then in some cases of warfare this can lead to disaster. We can also see the “anti-naturalism” or “other-worldliness” of absolute prohibitions in the “worldliness” of Callicles’ response to Socrates’ claim in Plato’s *Gorgias* that it is better to suffer evil than to do evil: “Tell me Socrates, are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking? For if you are in earnest, and these things you’re saying are really true, won’t this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won’t everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?”²⁴ There is certainly truth in this response, as there is a sense in which absolute prohibitions do run counter to the “ways of the world,” though we might regard this as counting in favor absolute prohibitions. And such prohibitions are also difficult to make sense of from within an ethic centered on the sort of disenchanting account of human flourishing that is put forward by a number of neo-Aristotelians. It is thus unsurprising that we find some who think that absolute prohibitions can only be grounded from within a religious framework.

But how exactly are we to understand Anscombe’s remark that “[it] can’t do me any good to go against [God’s] law,” or MacIntyre’s suggestion that we cannot achieve our interests “except by respecting a law to whose giver we are accountable”? One possibility is suggested by Anscombe’s parenthetical remark: following God’s law is a necessary condition for obtaining some “great reward in a new life later on,” whereas failure to do so is subject to divine punishment. However, there seems to be something shallow about following God’s law simply for the sake of reward and to avoid punishment. A better possible understanding for the claim that “[it] can’t do me any good to go against God’s law” is that it has to do with faith in divine providence, where God is seen as creating the world for good and as being on the side of the good and thus as working to ensure that good ultimately triumphs over evil. Thus, following God’s law, which includes certain absolute prohibitions, is a matter of aligning our lives with the will of God and ensuring that we also are on the side of the good and are helping to bring about the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Relatedly, it can also be a matter of achieving a right relationship with God, which is our highest good.²⁵

These considerations no doubt give the religious believer compelling extrinsic reasons to live in accordance with absolute prohibitions (e.g., never intentionally kill an innocent human being), provided they have been divinely decreed, but they miss what should be seen as the intrinsic reason for these prohibitions: they concern that which is sacred or reverence-worthy and thus should be regarded as inviolable. For instance, the reason why we should never intentionally kill an innocent human being is because doing so violates the special dignity or sanctity of human life. The other theological considerations may provide additional motivational support, but unless a theist embraces theological voluntarism (where something is thought to be right or wrong simply *because* God willed it to be so, and which is a position that I believe should be rejected because it makes morality arbitrary and undermines God’s praiseworthiness), he or she will believe that God decreed certain absolute prohibitions *because* they concern that which is sacred or reverence-worthy and thus should be regarded as inviolable. So there is a special moral ought here – that is, an ought that contains a “peculiar” or “mesmeric” force in that it makes unconditional demands upon us – not simply because something has been commanded by God, but because we are able to identify an important good: for example, human life as something inherently reverence-worthy, for which we ought to show reverence, where doing so is constitutive of a normatively higher, more meaningful way of life.

The Moral Phenomenology and Ontology of the Sacred

If this is so, then it is not immediately clear that a non-theist could not have experiences of the sacred or the reverence-worthy that are the basis of absolute prohibitions. In fact, the force of Anscombe's argument against consequentialism seems to depend on our having such experiences of the sacred or the reverence-worthy. Without this we might wonder why the consequentialist rejection of absolute prohibitions is so significant. We might imagine that a modern, secular moral philosopher, such as the utilitarian Peter Singer, could respond: "So what? We are well past such a superstitious conception of ethics, and we are better for it." Such philosophers often regard their moral views as "enlightened" in comparison to traditional views that affirm the sanctity or special dignity of human life.²⁶ Clearly Anscombe does not think such views are enlightened but rather they are benighted; hence she charges consequentialists with having a "corrupt mind." But this charge seems to presuppose that there is some *common anti-consequentialist moral perception* – for example, about the special dignity or sanctity of human life such that "it cannot be right to kill the innocent as a means to any end whatsoever" – and there is a natural potentiality to realize this through proper ethical formation, and we can fail to realize it because of corruption by bad moral theory.

In "Modern Moral Philosophy," Anscombe does apparently accept a natural law ethic according to which God's law is "written on our hearts" (as something to which our conscience bears witness).²⁷ She refers on two occasions (*en passant*) to the "natural divine law,"²⁸ though this is never filled out and deployed in the main arguments of the essay. However, she does fill out the idea of a common anti-consequentialist moral perception (which can be seen as an integral part of the natural moral law that is "written on our hearts") elsewhere. In her later work Anscombe appeals to what she calls "mystical perception" in order to make sense of certain normative demands upon us (including absolute prohibitions) that in fact appear to contain a "peculiar" or "mesmeric" force. Such perception seems essentially to involve a recognition of that which is sacred or reverence-worthy, which involves overriding normative demands. Anscombe thinks that this perception is "as common as humanity": for example, it is present in the perception that we dishonor our bodies in casual sex, in our sense that we owe respect to someone's dead body, and in our horror at the evil of murder.²⁹

In light of this, she distinguishes between two kinds of virtue. Some virtues, such as temperance in regard to food and drink and honesty about property, "are fundamentally utilitarian in character." "Utilitarian" here just means that they are instrumental to things going well for us. By contrast, some virtues, "though indeed profitable, are supra-utilitarian and hence mystical." One example is chastity. Anscombe writes: "Not that this virtue isn't useful: it's highly useful. If Christian standards of chastity were widely observed the world would be enormously happier. ... But it ... is a supra-utilitarian value ... [This] is what comes out in the perception that the life of lust is one in which we dishonour our bodies."³⁰ We can say that there is something fundamentally sacred or reverence-worthy about human sexuality to which the virtue of chastity (as involving right intention in sexual desire) is properly responsive.³¹ Another example of a mystical or supra-utilitarian virtue is what Anscombe describes as the virtue of "respect for life," which I think can be seen as part of the virtue of piety. Although the prohibition on murder certainly "makes life more commodious," she says: "everybody perceives quite clearly that the wrong done in murder is done first and foremost to the victim, whose life is not inconvenienced, it just isn't there any more. He isn't there to complain: so the utilitarian

argument has to be on behalf of the rest of us. Therefore, though true, it is highly comic and is not the foundation: the objection to murder is supra-utilitarian.”³²

Elsewhere Anscombe speaks similarly of a “religious attitude” of “respect before the mystery of human life” – or what I would call the sacredness or reverence-worthiness of human life – which is “not necessarily connected only with some one particular religious system.”³³ Given that this “religious attitude” appears to be equivalent to what she calls “mystical perception,” and given that she thinks the latter is “as common as humanity,” we can say that Anscombe would in fact affirm that one does not have to be part of a religious system at all in order to have a “religious attitude” of reverence for human life (though we might also say that having this attitude makes one religious in a broad, non-conventional sense). Indeed, there are philosophers who are not religious (or theists) who have sought to make appeals to something like this “religious attitude.” For instance, Cora Diamond writes of “[the] sense of mystery surrounding our lives, the feeling of solidarity in mysterious origin and uncertain fate: this binds us to each other, and the binding meant includes the dead and the unborn, and those who bear on their faces ‘a look of blank idiocy’, those who lack all power of speech, those behind whose vacant eyes there lurks a ‘soul in mute eclipse.’”³⁴ And in a recent essay titled “The Problem of Impiety,” Diamond seeks to show how certain ways of acting – she discusses suicide, genetic engineering, and other issues – can be absolutely ruled out as impious without appealing to divine prohibition, and in doing so she draws on Anscombe’s discussion of “mystical perception” and the “religious attitude” of reverence for human life.³⁵

These ideas, I contend, mark an important conceptual advance – over appeals to divine law – for understanding absolute prohibitions, since they are able to identify the intrinsic reason for such prohibitions: namely, they concern that which is sacred or reverence-worthy and thus should be regarded as inviolable. However, it might still seem that such talk of “mystical perception” or a “religious attitude” of reverence for human life is suggestive of a religious worldview, and we might think, more specifically, that a theistic worldview is best able to ground the sense of the sacred or the reverence-worthy here. Anscombe in fact seems to suggest as much when she writes:

A religious attitude may be merely incipient, prompting a certain fear before the idea of ever destroying a human life, and refusing to make a ‘quality of life’ judgment to terminate a human being. Or it may be more developed, perceiving that men are made by God in God’s likeness, to know and love God. ... Such perception of what a human being is makes one perceive human death as awesome, human life as always to be treated with a respect which is a sign and acknowledgement of what it is for.³⁶

I think a theistic worldview is important in the way suggested by Anscombe here: it can ground absolute prohibitions not in virtue of appealing to divine law, but rather because it enables *a way of seeing* human beings as made in the image of God and so as being worthy of reverence. In other words, we can say that theism provides a “moral ontology” that can support and make sense of the “moral phenomenology” of the sacred or the reverence-worthy in regard to human life.³⁷ I think we need some such moral ontology or worldview that can make sense of the moral phenomenology of the sacred or the reverence-worthy here, that is, that can provide an account of what it is about human beings and their place in the cosmos that makes them worthy of reverence. Failing to provide this can have a deflationary effect on our moral experience.³⁸

To fill out this point: the kind of moral ontology that seems particularly important is a teleological one, and we see this in Anscombe’s remark about what a human life, as made in the

image of God, is *for*: namely, “to know and love God,” and, I think we should also add, to know and love one another as well as the wider world created by God. The idea is that there is something worthy of awe and reverence *here*: our having been created for such a higher purpose makes the experience of awe and reverence before human life *appropriate* or *fitting*, and indeed it make sense of the idea that there are normative demands for a reverential attitude toward human life and for appropriate actions following from this. However, if there is no underlying moral teleology in the universe, no way in which the universe is ordered toward the good, and if we are just the result of “blind,” mechanistic causal processes, then it is difficult to see how we can make sense of the idea that there are normative demands upon us for a reverential attitude toward human life whether or not we are responsive to these demands. It seems we have here what Bernard Williams has identified as the problem of the radical contingency of ethics, where our ethical beliefs are seen as entirely dependent on the contingencies of our personal, cultural, and evolutionary histories. Williams writes: “This sense of contingency can seem to be in tension with something that our ethical ideas themselves demand, a recognition of their authority.”³⁹ In other words, the normative authority of ethics, as commonly understood, seems to carry with it a sense of necessity that is at odds with seeing our ethical beliefs as radically contingent. For instance, as ethical agents we do not typically experience it as a contingent fact that we should show reverence for human life, but rather we see it as something that is “categorical”: that is, we ought to show reverence irrespective of what we happen to desire. To give up this sort of normativity means that only a significantly reduced form of ethics remains possible, and hence there is a deflationary effect on our ethical experience. With such a reduced form of ethics there will likely still be things about which we deeply care; for instance, we may deeply care about being kind. The point, however, is that this will be based merely on happening to possess certain caring dispositions—for whatever contingent personal, cultural, or evolutionary reasons—rather than on categorical judgments concerning things about which we ought to care. Insofar as such categorical judgments are often linked to many of the things about which we deeply care, giving up making these sorts of judgments would constitute a significant loss.

I think there are non-theistic moral ontologies that could also support the moral phenomenology of the reverence-worthiness of human life. For instance, I think, if we can find it convincing, support can be found in the non-theistic cosmic teleological perspective of Thomas Nagel, who argues that the universe is apt (in a non-accidental way) to give rise to beings like us such that “[each] of our lives is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up and becoming aware of itself.”⁴⁰ Human beings can be said to have a special purpose here because the universe comes to consciousness in human life as we come to understand and appreciate it, which is to say, as we engage in contemplation. And I think we can find something worthy of awe and reverence in such a picture of human life. But does it make sense to think that there could be such a purpose in the universe without a purposive Being (*viz.*, God) who created it? Nagel himself says: “I am not confident that this Aristotelian idea of teleology without intention makes sense, but I do not at the moment see why it doesn’t.”⁴¹

My aim here is not to settle the issue of moral ontology, though I do want to highlight its significance. My primary aim is to show that we need to take account of a common anti-consequentialist form of moral perception that involves a sense of the sacred or the reverence-worthy, since this is needed for defending absolute prohibitions and for making sense of the sorts of evils (e.g., murder) that these prohibitions seek to avoid. Indeed, although I acknowledged that absolute prohibitions are in a sense “anti-natural” in that they run counter to the “ways of the world” and they are difficult to understand from within an ethic centered on a disenchanting

account of human flourishing, I have also shown that there is a sense in which the recognition of such prohibitions is completely “natural” to human beings in that they are based on a common anti-consequentialist form of moral perception. Hence such prohibitions have been a central feature of traditional conceptions of morality.⁴²

To see the significance of this common anti-consequentialist moral perception we need to engage our moral experience. For instance, recalling my earlier discussion, if we consider our horror at murder, it does not seem that it can be explained simply in terms of how it violates the “good functioning of the social group” and runs counter to our social nature, or in terms of how it “robs” someone of future enjoyment or how it violates autonomy; rather, the horror primarily concerns the violation of human life itself, where there is properly a sense of something sacred or reverence-worthy having been violated. Likewise, the horror of sexual violence cannot be explained simply in terms of being an “unpleasant experience,” or in terms of violating consent, since we need to explain why this violation is so much worse than other violations of consent; again, we need the language of the sacred or reverence-worthy, since there is rightly a sense of desecration here. We might make a similar case with regard to other examples, but the general point is that we should recognize the apparent validity of a common anti-consequentialist moral perception involving a sense of the sacred or the reverence-worthy.

Absolute Prohibitions without the Sacred?

But might there be other ways of affirming absolute prohibitions apart from invoking the sacred? Sabina Lovibond – who we saw raised the issue of anti-naturalism – seeks to defend absolute prohibitions not only apart from divine law and divine promises, but also apart from appeals to the sacred or the reverence-worthy. Instead, she attempts to show how such prohibitions can be seen as an important part of a tradition-informed ethical way of life. She writes:

The customs of our ethical ‘ancestors’, interpreted as best we can from our own historical standpoint and held up to scrutiny against the background of a constant awareness of our own limitations: ... these seem to be the available sources for a code of human conduct within which some actions would be excluded from consideration, though not because a supreme being had given orders to that effect. ... [Some] people ... manage to remain at their posts—to keep the ‘commandments’ of the morality they acknowledge—even without hope: at any rate without the hope that things will turn out all right for them ... How do they do it; what is their incentive? Perhaps it is simply that they have become accustomed, or even attached, to the post in question and lack the desire to make alternative arrangements.⁴³

Stuart Hampshire similarly writes about how certain “conduct is impossible as destroying the ideal of a way of life that one aspires to and respects, as being, for example, utterly unjust or cruel or treacherous or corruptly dishonest.”⁴⁴ David Wiggins also writes about being “bound by our moral nature, i.e., bound by those sentiments without which ... we should not recognize ourselves.”⁴⁵ In all of these cases the idea is that avoiding certain actions is a necessary condition (a “practical necessity”) for maintaining our moral identities. However, we can ask the further question: why should I have *this* (or *that*) particular moral identity?

The worry about the contingency of our moral beliefs can again arise here, which if recognized can have a deflationary effect, since, as discussed in the previous section, recognizing this contingency can seem to be in tension with recognizing the normative authority of morality. Perhaps one way to get around this worry about contingency is if we can show that our moral beliefs (and thus our moral identities) are at least partially based on what we think we need in order not to fall into a state of moral anarchy where everything is permitted. Hampshire seems to take this approach when he writes: “In arguing against utilitarians I must dwell a little on these epithets usually associated with morally impossible action, on a sense of disgrace, of outrage, of horror, of baseness, of brutality, and, most important, a sense that a barrier, assumed to be firm and almost insurmountable, has been knocked over, and a feeling that, if this horrible, or outrageous, or squalid, or brutal action is possible, then anything is possible and nothing is forbidden, and all restraints are threatened.”⁴⁶ But such epithets themselves depend upon there being features of the world that make them appropriate and which demand certain responses, and they can’t just be based on the thought that without certain moral beliefs we will fall into moral anarchy, which is a consequentialist form of reasoning (akin to rule-utilitarianism) and so cannot be used to argue against consequentialism. Consider again the case of murder. What is horrible about murder isn’t simply that if we allow it then we will fall into a state of moral anarchy (though this may be true, at least if it becomes widespread enough); rather, as Anscombe says, “the wrong done in murder is done first and foremost to the victim.” And to make sense of this wrong we need to appeal to the sacredness or reverence-worthiness of human life such that it is properly regarded as being inviolable. The objection to murder, then, is “supra-utilitarian.” My general line of contention seems to hold: in order to justify and make sense of absolute prohibitions we need to appeal to the sacred or the reverence-worthy.

Wiggins seems to acknowledge this by making conceptual space for a sense of the mysteriousness of human life, where this is equivalent to a sense of sacredness. Central to our “moral nature,” he thinks, is a capacity for solidarity that responds to the “indefinable influence” that other human beings have upon us (which recalls Anscombe’s “mystical perception” and Diamond’s comments about solidarity and its connection to “the sense of mystery surrounding our lives”).⁴⁷ This solidarity involves a “primitive aversion from acts that appear as a direct assault by one personal being upon another, acts such as murder, wounding, injury, plunder, pillage, the harming of innocents, the repaying of good with gratuitous evil, false witness ... [Such] acts pass beyond the valuations bad, disappointing, ... lamentable, and trespass onto the ground marked forbidden.”⁴⁸ To go against such solidarity by failing to recognize some actions as “utterly forbidden,” Wiggins maintains, “menaces the very fabric of the ethical by threatening to destroy the basis of the ethical in solidarity.”⁴⁹ I take his concern here not just to be about falling into moral anarchy, but more fundamentally it is about lacking proper responsiveness to other human beings. This suggests that a lack of acknowledgement of absolute prohibitions is much more corrosive to the ethical life than MacIntyre acknowledges in the passage cited earlier. The sort of solidarity to which Wiggins appeals and which involves recognition of some actions as “utterly forbidden” (especially in relation to human life) is at “the root of the ethical” in that it is the condition for the possibility of any viable ethical life whatsoever. Wiggins writes: “Human solidarity ... is not an ordinary human pursuit. Its role is to condition, to civilize, and to humanize human pursuits.”⁵⁰

We can also see such solidarity as a path of re-enchantment in that it enables proper recognition of the sacredness or reverence-worthiness of every human life. This is a path not taken both in consequentialist moral frameworks such as utilitarianism and in the disenchanting

version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. Utilitarians like Peter Singer depend upon human solidarity for whatever appeal their quality of life assessments possess, but they end up undermining this solidarity in their willingness to come out against their fellows whenever it serves some supposedly more beneficial outcome in terms of overall quality of life.⁵¹ They are clearly not properly responsive to the sacredness of every human life. The disenchanted version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics also overlooks the sort of solidarity whereby we can become properly responsive to the sacredness of every human life; it overlooks this by virtue of its denial of a special realm of obligation and because of its disengaged approach that focuses on what conduces to human flourishing where this is understood on analogy with the flourishing of other living things. To regard such solidarity as being at the root of the ethical life is to take an engaged approach that reveals to us a special realm of obligation containing a “peculiar” force that is derived from the sacredness and “indefinable influence” of every human life.⁵²

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NOTES

¹ G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume III* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 26, 30–31.

² Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 26, 33.

³ Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 31–32.

⁴ Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 27, 29, 31–32, 38, 41.

⁵ See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).

⁶ See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtues Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

⁸ I say "quasi-scientific" because this version of neo-Aristotelian ethical naturalism takes a third-personal or observational approach that is akin to that which is adopted in the natural sciences.

⁹ This is not to say that those who endorse the disenchanted version of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics give no recognition to the first-personal or engaged standpoint, but the issue here concerns the focus. Another way to put the point is that they do not go far enough in exploring our engaged evaluative standpoint.

¹⁰ Anscombe seems to use "peculiar" and "mesmeric" in ways that are for her pejorative, but I mean to use them in a positive, non-pejorative way here. "Peculiar" can mean odd, but it can also mean special or

set apart in some way. “Mesmeric” can mean hypnotic, but it can also mean compelling or attracting our attention.

¹¹ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 26, 40.

¹² Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 33–34.

¹³ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 41.

¹⁴ See Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987 [ca. 380 BC]), 469c.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999 [ca. 325 BC]), III.1, 1110a26–28.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.6, 1107a10–15.

¹⁷ The phrase “good functioning of the social group” is from Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, 201–202, 209, 218, 226. Rosalind Hursthouse, it should be noted, affirms that a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethic should acknowledge some absolute prohibitions, though she does not explain their basis except to appeal to Aristotle’s remark that the names or descriptions of certain acts “connote depravity” (or “baseness,” in the translation I used) (*On Virtue Ethics*, 58, 87). But what we need to know is: in virtue of what is something depraved? We see the same problem in Hursthouse’s remarks on the wrongness of killing: “What is wrong with killing, when it is wrong, may not so much be that it is unjust, violating the right to life, but, frequently, that it is callous and contrary to the virtue of charity” (6). This agent-centered explanation gets things backwards: someone is callous in this case *because* he or she fails to be properly responsive to the value of human life.

Philippa Foot affirms a “limited moral absolutism” according to which “certain ... actions are held to be such as to rule out circumstances in which it could ever be right to perform them.” The example she gives of an action that is absolutely prohibited is torture: “If the frequently unchallengeable description ‘torture’ applies to an action, then, whatever the circumstances, it is in my firm opinion morally ‘out’” (*Natural Goodness*, 77–78). However, she doesn’t explain why this should be so, though the most natural explanation would involve an appeal to human dignity or the sanctity of human life. Elsewhere Foot does speak of “a morality which refuses to sanction the automatic sacrifice of the one for the good of many because it secures to each individual a kind of moral space, a space which others are not allowed to invade,” which it does by virtue of a “demand for reciprocity” (“Morality, Action, and Outcome,” in *Moral Dilemmas: And Other Topics in Moral Philosophy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 103). She goes on to say of this moral perspective that “it seems to define a kind of solidarity between human beings, as if there is some sense in which no one is totally to come out against one of his fellow men” (104). In a footnote she says: “Perhaps it is this idea that is partly responsible for the peculiar outrage that we feel about torture” (104, n. 20). However, in regard to the “moral space” that others are not allowed to invade, I think it is best not to see this as being “secured” by reciprocal agreement, but rather as being a matter of the inherent sanctity (i.e., inviolability) of every human life. This seems needed for making sense of our outrage or horror when this moral space is violated, and also for providing a firm grounding for the demand for reciprocity and solidarity.

¹⁸ The virtue of justice is concerned with giving what is due, and the virtue of piety is a part of this, as it is concerned with giving the reverence that is due to that which is worthy of reverence.

¹⁹ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 41–42. Peter Geach provides what can be seen an addendum to Anscombe’s remarks: “[Somebody] might very well admit that not only is there something bad about certain acts, but also it is desirable to become the sort of person who needs to act in the contrary way; and yet not admit that such acts are to be avoided in all circumstances and at any price. To be sure, a virtuous person cannot be ready in advance to do such acts; and if he does do them they will damage his virtuous habits and perhaps irreparably wreck his hard-won integrity of soul. But at this point someone may protest ‘Are you the only person to be considered? Suppose the price of your precious integrity is a most fearful disaster! Haven’t you got a hand to burn for your country (or mankind) and your friends?’ This sort of appeal has not, I think, been adequately answered on Aristotelian lines” (*God and the Soul* [London: Routledge, 1978], 123).

²⁰ Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 42.

²¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture,” *Proceedings of the ACPA* 84 (2011): 29–30.

²² MacIntyre, “On Being a Theistic Philosopher in a Secularized Culture,” 29.

²³ Sabina Lovibond, “Absolute Prohibitions without Divine Promises,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 54 (2004): 148.

²⁴ Plato, *Gorgias*, 481c. See Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004 [1991]), 20 and ch. 12 (titled “Ethical Other-Worldliness”).

²⁵ Candace Vogler mentions faith in divine providence as a basis for upholding absolute prohibitions, though she leaves the appeal somewhat vague (“In Defense of Moral Absolutes,” *Villanova Law Review* 57, no. 5 [2012]: 904–905); I have tried to clarify such an appeal here. Elsewhere she discusses the case of Sir Thomas More, and she says of his choice to side with fidelity and obedience to God over King Henry VIII (which cost him his life): “It is a matter of siding with knowledge of one’s nature, one’s right relations with others, and the relation between humans and God” (“Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe, and the New Virtue Ethics,” in *Aquinas and the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Tobias Hoffman, Jörn Müller, and Matthias Perkams [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 256).

²⁶ Singer writes: “The traditional ethic is still defended by bishops and conservative bioethicists who speak in reverent tones about the intrinsic value of all human life, irrespective of its nature or quality. But, like the new clothes worn by the emperor, these solemn phrases seem true and substantial only while we are intimidated into uncritically accepting that all human life has some special dignity or worth” (*Rethinking Life and Death: The Collapse of Our Traditional Ethics* [New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995], 4)

²⁷ The phrase “written on our hearts” is adapted from Romans 2:14–15.

²⁸ This phrasing is somewhat strange, as it seems to run together distinctions that Aquinas makes between: (1) the eternal law (i.e., the dictates of divine reason); (2) the natural (moral) law (i.e., the eternal law as grasped through human reason/conscience; it reveals our natural end); (3) the human (positive) law (which should be derived from the natural law and promote our natural end); and (4) the divine law (i.e., law known through special divine revelation, namely, in the scriptures; it reveals our supernatural end) (see *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 91).

²⁹ G. E. M. Anscombe, “Contraception and Chastity,” in *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally. Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2008: 186–187.

³⁰ Anscombe, “Contraception and Chastity,” 187–188.

³¹ Anscombe does say that “[sexual] actions are not sacred actions” (“Contraception and Chastity,” 187), however, I am not sure what she means by “sacred” here. According to my usage of “sacred,” we can say that there is something sacred about human sexuality in that we regard it as being reverence-worthy and as having demands of inviolability. We can see this sacred value perhaps most clearly in cases where it is violated (i.e., in the horror of sexual violence).

³² Anscombe, “Contraception and Chastity,” 187.

³³ G. E. M. Anscombe, “Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia,” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G. E. M. Anscombe*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Charlottesville: Imprint Academic, 2005), 269–270. Consider also the following remarks from Anscombe on abortion: “[A] woman of today may find a possibility of becoming pregnant, letting the baby grow to twenty eight weeks (because bigger ones are worth more) and then going somewhere where they will pay her for a late abortion, which yields the foetus for resale, say, as valuable material. If you act so, are you not shewing that you do not regard that human being with any reverence? Few will fail to see that. But the same is true of one who has an abortion so that she can play in a tennis championship; or for any reason for which someone might choose to destroy the life of a new human being. This lack of reverence, of respect for that dignity of human nature so wonderfully created by God, is a lack of regard for the one impregnable equality of all human beings. Lacking it, you cannot revere the dignity of your own human-ness, that is the dignity of that same human nature in yourself. You may value yourself highly as a tennis player or a natural scientist, but

without a change of heart you cannot value yourself as being a human, a *Mensch*. For you have shewn the value you set on a human life as such. You are willing to extinguish it as suits you or as suits the people who want you to do so” (“The Dignity of the Human Being,” in *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, 72).

³⁴ Cora Diamond, “The Importance of Being Human,” in *Human Beings*, ed. David Cockburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 55.

³⁵ Cora Diamond, “The Problem of Impiety,” in *Spirituality and the Good Life: Philosophical Approaches*, ed. David McPherson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 29–46. Consider another example: Raimond Gaita describes an experience of witnessing a nun’s behavior when she came to visit the psychiatric ward at which he worked when he was seventeen, and he marvels at the power of the nun’s love – as expressed through her demeanor toward the patients – “to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible” (*A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* [New York: Routledge, 1998], 20). Gaita does not think that this revelation depends upon sharing the nun’s religious views, though he does think that only someone who is religious “can speak seriously of the sacred,” and so he says that the non-religious person will instead have to say something like: “all human beings are inestimably precious” (23). However, I don’t see why a non-religious person can’t also speak seriously of the sacred since this language can be used to describe that which is experienced as reverence-worthy, irreplaceable, and inviolable, or as Gaita puts it, “a unique kind of limit to our will” (24).

³⁶ Anscombe, “Murder and the Morality of Euthanasia,” 270.

³⁷ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 5–11; “Ethics and Ontology,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 100, no. 6 (2003): 305–20.

³⁸ For more on this general issue, see chapter 4 of David McPherson, *Virtue and Meaning: A Neo-Aristotelian Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³⁹ Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 21.

⁴⁰ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 85.

⁴¹ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 93.

⁴² See David McPherson, “Traditional Morality and Sacred Values,” *Analyse & Kritik* 39, no. 1 (2017): 41–62.

⁴³ Lovibond, “Absolute Prohibitions without Divine Promises,” 157–58.

⁴⁴ Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 90.

⁴⁵ David Wiggins, “Categorical Requirements: Kant and Hume on the Idea of Duty,” in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 310; see also Wiggins, *Ethics: Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 135, 234–235.

⁴⁶ Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, 89.

⁴⁷ The phrase “indefinable influence” is Simone Weil’s. She characterizes it as follows: “Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his very presence, and a power not exercised by him alone, that is the power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, it is not the same thing as stepping aside to avoid a bill-board” (quoted in Wiggins, *Ethics*, 243).

⁴⁸ Wiggins, *Ethics*, 246–247.

⁴⁹ Wiggins, *Ethics*, 248.

⁵⁰ David Wiggins, “Solidarity and the Root of the Ethical,” *The Lindley Lecture*, The University of Kansas (2008): 18; accessed at: <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/12420>.

⁵¹ In regard to the phrase “coming out against one’s fellows,” see n. 17.

⁵² This essay draws from parts of chapters 1, 3, and 4 of my book *Virtue and Meaning*. I am grateful for the permission to use this material here.