

Review of Doyle 2018: “No Morality, No Self”

Katharina Nieswandt

Ethics 2019, 130(1), 102–106, (DOI [10.1086/704346](https://doi.org/10.1086/704346))¹

James Doyle: *No Morality, No Self: Anscombe’s Radical Skepticism*.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2018. Pp. 256. \$41.00 (cloth).

James Doyle’s book is provocative and timely. It is an important contribution to the current wave of Anscombe scholarship, and it offers valuable insights into general metaethical questions, such as: In what senses might morality be “unintelligible”? Or: To what extent does a divine law ethics rest on practical reason? Here, I do not want to summarize the many admirable features of Doyle’s book. I will instead focus on his two main theses, of which I remain unconvinced.

No Morality, No Self consists of two parts, which can be read independently. The first, “No Morality,” is a detailed discussion of Anscombe’s paper “Modern Moral Philosophy,” henceforth MMP (in: *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Vol. 3: Ethics, Religion and Politics*. [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981]). The second, “No Self,” discusses her “The First Person” (in: *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe, Vol. 2: Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind*. [Oxford: Blackwell, 1981]). I will focus on “No Morality,” but I begin with a comment on the overall structure of the book.

The uniting feature of the two papers, according to the preface, is that they “have been widely and deeply misunderstood by critics and advocates alike,” who “have not really taken the measure of the problems that Anscombe raises for our ordinary understanding” of both topics (ix). Another uniting feature is that Doyle interprets Anscombe as rejecting the very concepts ‘morality’ and ‘self’. Hence, the two main theses of the book are that (1) traditional interpretations of Anscombe are wrong and (2) Anscombe is a radical skeptic about morality and the self.

As Doyle admits, this bipartite structure requires more motivation than he offers. In the epilogue, Doyle argues that his book “has at least somewhat more unity than is secured by the mere fact that those papers were written by the same person” because our “Cartesian

¹ I am indebted to Ulf Hlobil and Charles Côté-Bouchard for many helpful suggestions.

conception of the mind" is "promoting a false account of mental states" and hence "a false picture of intention," which "made possible the central element of consequentialist ethical doctrines," viz. "the erosion of any ethically significant distinction between the results of an action that are properly intended and those that are merely foreseen" (178). This connection strikes me as plausible; unfortunately, Doyle does not develop it. Other similarities between the two papers are left unexplored. One could, e. g., see both as prime examples of Anscombe's philosophical method: If we cannot give definitions of what "morally ought" or "I" mean, then the most informative accounts often consist in a description of how we think about, talk about and act with respect to the *definienda* (Ulf Hlobil and Katharina Nieswandt, "On Anscombe's Philosophical Method." *The Life and Philosophy of Elizabeth Anscombe*, ed. By John Haldane [Imprint Academic: Exeter, 2019]).

While the connection between the two topics would have been worth exploring more, another structural feature of Doyle's book strikes me as problematic: Each part focuses almost exclusively on one paper. Take "No Morality:" Anscombe was a prolific writer, who wrote several dozen other papers on moral philosophy alone. "No Morality," however, analyzes one of these papers—and one of her earliest—in isolation. It seems to me that some exegetical questions that Doyle raises for MMP have straightforward answers if we consider other works. An extensive discussion of 'necessity' in Chapter 3, e. g., ignores multiple papers in which Anscombe develops her account of necessity, viz. "On Promising," "Rules, Rights and Promises" and "On the Source of the Authority of the State" (all in: *Ethics, Religion and Politics*). There, Anscombe provides an interesting theory of "ought," and she introduces new conceptual machinery, such as the idea of *logoi* and of *stopping/forcing modals* (Katharina Nieswandt, "Anscombe on the Sources of Normativity," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* [2016]: 141–163).

I also have doubts about Doyle's interpretation of Anscombe's larger view here. Towards the end of "No Morality" (subsections 5.4-5.5), Doyle finally mentions some of this conceptual machinery, but in an entirely different context: to make sense of Anscombe's understanding of divine law ethics. Doyle argues that "noncooperation with the institution of commanding and complying tends to block access to the goods [which] that institution makes available," and that this justifies acceptance of "the institution of legitimate authority," such as divine authority (81). I see three problems with this reading of Anscombe: First, commanding is not an institution (or a "practice" or a "convention") in Anscombe's sense but is an integral element of many institutions. Anscombe's notion of institution is closely related to Wittgensteinian games and customs (see: Anscombe, "On Promising," 16.) Examples are promising, private property or the English language. *Within* such games, we can issue commands (or obey them), and to do so means to issue a stopping or a forcing modal. Second, Anscombian institutions are not something humans could share with God. Institutions are social arrangements that solve certain practical problems, like the

problem of “getting human beings to do things” who neither love nor fear you (Anscombe, “On Promising,” 18.) Anscombe’s view of this is deeply influenced by Hume’s *Treatise*, according to which, e. g., the institution of private property developed because it enables human beings to live together in large, anonymous groups (*T* 3.2.1-4). Third, and most importantly, Doyle’s reading turns Anscombe into a rule-consequentialist: “[T]he distinctive obligation to keep promises is generated via the Aristotelian necessity arising from the enormous utility of the as-yet-groundless practice” (79). On this understanding, I should keep promise *P* because the institution of promising generates benefits for me (or for humanity?) by-and-large and in the long run, even if not for *P*. But Anscombe, following Wittgenstein, does not think that obligations created within an institution are justified by the *telos* of that institution. A move within a game is not justified by whatever justifies the game (John Rawls, “Two Concepts of Rules,” *Philosophical Review* [1955]: 3–32).

Let me now move on to Doyle’s thesis that Anscombe is a radical skeptic. In the rest of this review, I shall argue that this misunderstands Anscombe’s larger view, focusing on “No Morality.”

Doyle defines Anscombe’s position as a “thoroughgoing eliminativism,” about the concept ‘morality’, as “more skeptical than error theory” (54). “Anscombe’s view,” he says, “is not that the concept of morality is fatally defective—for example, inconsistent,” rather it is “a pseudo-concept” (42). There are two different ways to understand this claim. I will argue that, on the first reading, there is decisive textual evidence against it. On the second, Doyle’s claim does not differ from the traditional interpretation of MMP he officially rejects, nor does Anscombe turn out to be a radical skeptic.

On the first reading, Anscombe denies that any concept like ‘moral’ is available—even a defective concept or one with an empty extension. This is the view that Doyle seems to take when he claims that “on Anscombe’s view, ‘moral’ cannot perform one of the basic functions of concepts, namely the facilitation of inferences,” that it is not “intelligible” and resembles “Prior’s invented pseudo-connective ‘tonk’” (43). “[I]t follows that you don’t legitimate the *concept* of morality by defining a distinct, fully intelligible concept that determines reasons, considerations, principles, issues, and so on that are *coextensive* with what we would call the moral ones” because all you would demonstrate is that your concept “meet[s] a bogus criterion” (44). It also follows that the standard interpretation of MMP must be wrong: Neither is it the case that “morally ought” had a meaning within divine law ethics, which was lost with the loss of these frameworks—just like “criminal” currently has meaning but would lose this meaning if we abolished all legal systems (48-51, 56-58). Nor does the neo-Aristotelian project of building a moral philosophy around concepts such as ‘character’, ‘virtue’ or ‘happiness’ make any sense (11-15, 42-44). If the term “moral” cannot be given any meaning, it never had meaning in a past conceptual framework nor can we hope to ever construct a framework in which it will.

If this were Anscombe's position, one might wonder why she published dozens of papers in moral philosophy after MMP and regularly commented on public issues, such as abortion, euthanasia or just war. Most readers furthermore find that she has strong opinions about these and takes an objectivist position. Even as an interpretation of MMP in isolation, however, this first reading is exegetically implausible. Why does Anscombe, in the introduction, announce that "it is not profitable for us *at present* to do moral philosophy" if doing so has always been and will always be unprofitable (MMP, 26, *emph. added*)? Why does she offer suggestions, toward the end of MMP, for how we can build a new, post-theological moral philosophy (MMP, 38 *seq.*)? And why would she condemn consequentialists as showing "a corrupt mind" if 'morality' is a confused folk 'concept' (MMP, 40)?

On the second reading, Anscombe makes the much more modest claim that the term "moral" is often understood to delineate a special set of actions, demands, dispositions etc. whereas, in truth, these are just a sub-set of the actions etc. that are practically reasonable, and they are not importantly different from the other members of that set. Anscombe claims that there is only one standard to measure the goodness of actions, persons etc., and that standard is practical reason. The demand to brush your teeth twice a day, e. g., and the demand to help your friend move into their new apartment as you promised are both demands of practical reason. This is the view Doyle seems to take when he emphasizes that Anscombe, and the Greek tradition, understand the demands of morality to not be *sui generis* (18-19, 25-30, 40-41 and 52-66). It would be "a misconception of the Greek's conception of virtue" to think of these "as amounting to *moral* virtue" (10, *emph. orig.*), given that the "root meaning of the Greek word is 'excellence,' in the sense of a quality that makes a thing good of its kind" (12), in this case "a quality that makes one good *at being* a human being" (13, *emph. orig.*). "Virtue ethics' in the Greek sense, then, makes no mention of a special category of the *moral*," which also enables it to dodge standard problems of modern moral philosophies. For instance, the question "Why be moral?" becomes akin to asking "Why do what is rational?" On this second reading of "No Morality," Anscombe does not reject the very concept of morality but only the concept of an "ethically sovereign 'ought'" (40). Instead, the term "ought" as used in moral contexts works in the same way as in any other context. The moral ought, the mathematical ought, the biological ought etc. all express a necessity that is either based in a system of rules or in a *telos*. (The first would be conventional, the second natural necessity.) Modern moral philosophers, on the other hand, depict the moral "ought" as referring to other-regarding actions—Doyle calls this "Victorian virtue" (52)—and depict the respective set of justifications as categorically different from, e. g., justifications for instrumental "oughts."

This second reading is, I believe, indeed Anscombe's position. It is, however, also the orthodox interpretation of MMP. On this reading, it is not true that decades of scholarship misunderstood Anscombe. In fact, the whole neo-Aristotelian project that MMP sparked—

together with papers such as Geach's "Good and Evil" (*Analysis* [1956]: 33-42)—is built on the ideas just sketched. Take Philippa Foot's *Natural Goodness* (which explicitly attributes several of these ideas to Anscombe). The central chapter, "Practical Rationality," argues precisely the point that the moral "ought" is not special: "[O]ne who acts badly *ipso facto* acts in a way that is contrary to practical reason," says Foot (*Natural Goodness* [Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001], 62, *emph. orig.*) I. e., "[c]onsiderations about such things as promising, neighbourliness, and help for those in trouble have, I maintain, the same kind of connection with reasons for action as do considerations of self-interest or of means to our ends: the connection going in each case through the concept of practical rationality [...]" (Foot, 18). The preceding chapters, "Natural Norms" and "Transition to Human Beings," argue the same point for other-regarding virtues: "These are excellencies qua human being, just like good eye-sight is. "[T]here is *no change in the meaning of 'good' between the word as it appears in 'good roots' and as it appears in 'good dispositions of the human will'*" (Foot, 39, *emph. orig.*) These three ideas—that moral excellencies are just one type of excellencies, that other-regarding considerations are just one type of considerations entering into a fully rational practical judgment, and that human nature partly determines what can count as practically rational—are the three pillars of neo-Aristotelianism. To read Anscombe in this way can hardly count as opposing the orthodoxy.

Nor is Anscombe a radical skeptic on the second reading. Doyle claims that "Anscombe's line of thought [...] is fatal to the metaethical project as such, if this is thought of [...] as the project of giving a semantics for the moral vocabulary" (45). But all that has been demonstrated is that metaethics should be renamed "meta-practical-reason theory" or "meta-theory of other-regarding practical reasons" or something else along these lines. (In fact, contemporary metaethics largely adopted Anscombe's suggestion: Many authors discuss normativity across domains rather than only moral normativity.) On the second reading, the claim that 'morality' is a pseudo-concept amounts to the narrow, technical claim that what Victorians demarcate by "moral" is a non-special subset within the larger set of what is practically rational. For this reason, the term "moral" indeed adds nothing of substance to the "ought" in "You (morally) ought to help a friend in need." It is important to see, however, that in this sense, too, morality is not *sui generis*: The same is true for the term "mathematical" in "You (mathematically) ought to divide this sum by one third now." To acknowledge the latter, however, is certainly not to be an eliminativist about mathematics. There furthermore are special contexts in which the adverb does add information. "You *morally* ought to pay your taxes" is informative if opposed to "You *legally* ought to pay your taxes." My two "oughts" here designate necessities created within different frameworks, and the adverbs "morally" and "legally" indicate these frameworks. The first framework is that of species-specific flourishing, of coherent maxims, of best overall consequences, or the like. The second framework is that of the institution "legal system," which has certain rules and

enforcement mechanisms for these. Metaethics, on this view, is simply the study of 'ought', 'action', 'intention' and similar concepts as they pertain to the theme *good and bad dispositions of the human will* as Foot would say—*actus morales* in Aquinas (*ST*, IaIIae, Q1, art. 3, response).

In conclusion, I think a reading of Anscombe as an eliminativist about morality is exegetically implausible, whereas a reading on which all that she says is that “‘should’ and ‘ought’ are not used in a special ‘moral’ sense when one says that a man should not billk” (MMP, 29) is neither radical nor radically skeptical. I hence disagree with the two main theses of “No Morality.”

Nevertheless, Doyle's book is worth reading. It invites the reader to think carefully about whether 'morality' is unintelligible and how 'I' is different from referring expressions. And although I do not agree with Doyle's conclusions, I find many of his discussions extremely helpful—such as when he considers whether the modern concept 'moral' is more similar to that of 'honor' outside of an aristocratic society (46) or 'kosher' outside of Judaism (72), to Stalin's 'bourgeois formalism' (61), Prior's 'tonk' (43) or to 'phlogiston' (53). Doyle provides a stimulating, even if to my mind unconvincing, interpretation of one of the most important and underappreciated philosophers of the 20th century. I hope his book will be widely read.

Katharina Nieswandt
Concordia University, Montreal