

Anscombe's Moral Epistemology and the Relevance of Wittgenstein's Anti-Scepticism

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Abstract

Elizabeth Anscombe is well-known for her insistence that there are absolutely prohibited actions, though she is somewhat obscure about why this is so. Nonetheless, I contend in this paper that Anscombe is more concerned with the epistemology of absolute prohibitions, and that her thought on connatural moral knowledge – which resembles moral intuition – is key to understanding her thought on moral prohibitions. I shall identify key features of Anscombe's moral epistemology before turning to investigate its sources, examining the roots of connaturality in Aquinas and comparing it with rationalist ethical intuitionism, which Anscombe differs from in rejecting "good" as a simple, non-natural property. I then develop a two-stage argument about absolute prohibition: The first will be loosely Thomistic, while the second will suggest how Anscombe's absolute prohibitions can be seen as a continuation of Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism in *On Certainty*. I develop an account of absolute prohibitions as a form of Wittgensteinian hinge proposition – they are not the conclusions of deductive arguments, but the foundations for intelligibility in action.

Keywords: connatural knowledge; virtue ethics; "Modern Moral Philosophy"; ethical intuitionism; Aquinas; natural law; *Tractatus*; *On Certainty*; hinge propositions

Resum. *L'epistemologia moral d'Anscombe i la rellevància de l'antiescepticisme de Wittgenstein*

Elizabeth Anscombe és coneguda per la seva insistència que hi ha accions absolutament prohibides, tot i que no està molt segura de per què és així. No obstant això, sostinc en aquest article que Anscombe està més preocupada per l'epistemologia de les prohibicions absolutes, i que el seu pensament sobre el coneixement moral connatural, que s'assembla a la intuïció moral, és clau per comprendre el seu pensament sobre les prohibicions morals. Identificaré les característiques clau de l'epistemologia moral d'Anscombe abans de passar a investigar-ne les fonts, examinar les arrels de la connaturalitat en Tomàs d'Aquino i comparar-la amb l'intuïcionisme eticoracionalista, del qual Anscombe difereix en rebutjar el «bé» com una propietat simple, no natural. Després desenvolupo un argument de dues etapes sobre la prohibició absoluta: el primer serà poc tomista, mentre que el segon suggerirà que les prohibicions absolutes d'Anscombe poden veure's com una continuació de l'antiescepticisme de Wittgenstein a *On Certainty*. Desenvolupo una explicació de les prohibicions absolutes com una forma de la proposta de la frontissa de Wittgenstein: no són les conclusions dels arguments deductius, sinó els fonaments de la intel·ligibilitat en l'acció.

Paraules clau: coneixement connatural; ètica de la virtut; "Modern Moral Philosophy"; intuïcionisme ètic; Tomàs d'Aquino; llei natural; *Tractatus*; *On Certainty*; proposta frontissa

Summary

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1. Introduction

Elizabeth Anscombe’s reputation in moral philosophy is associated with two qualities in particular: An insistence on the existence of absolutely prohibited actions and an encouragement – to put it mildly – of an ethic based on virtue rather than obligation. These two themes are given prominence in her paper “Modern Moral Philosophy”, but, somewhat frustratingly, are never really developed beyond their philosophically embryonic form. In the decades following the publication of that paper in 1958, much more philosophical attention has been paid to the subject of virtue, and there is no denying that of the two, Anscombe’s thought on absolute prohibitions is the more idiosyncratic in presentation, even in her subsequent writings. But it ought not to be neglected, not least because it drives so many of her concerns in moral philosophy.

Indeed, no reading of “Modern Moral Philosophy” can be complete without a consideration of absolute prohibitions. Hence, it is there that I shall situate the underlying thesis of this paper, which is that Anscombe is more concerned with the epistemological side of the most basic moral prohibitions, and that this in turn lends itself to a Wittgensteinian reading. The purpose of this paper is hence partly exegetical: I will proceed by identifying the key features of Anscombe’s moral epistemology before turning to investigating its sources, in order to develop a two-stage argument about absolute prohibitions. The first stage is loosely Thomistic and naturalistic, and the second – which will be more speculative than exegetical – will attempt to suggest how Anscombe’s thought on prohibited actions can be seen as a continuation of Wittgenstein’s anti-sceptical arguments, most notably in his posthumous work *On Certainty*. I shall suggest that we can think of some of the most deep-seated moral intuitions we have as Wittgensteinian hinge propositions, on which the rest of moral knowledge turns.

2. “Modern Moral Philosophy” and absolute prohibitions

In “Modern Moral Philosophy” Anscombe contends that contemporary theories of ethics are so unprofitable that we should consider “*banishing ethics totally* from our minds” until we are able to investigate the concept of “virtue”

properly, which offers us a more promising path for understanding right and wrong. Yet at the same time Anscombe makes it clear that she is “not able to do the philosophy involved”, nor is anyone else, she claims, “in the present situation of English philosophy” (1958a: 15-16). If we are to take her quite literally, this clearly leaves us in an unsatisfactory position. As for absolute prohibitions, Anscombe seems to veer towards the level of *ad hominem* when she writes:

But if someone really thinks, *in advance*, that it is open to question whether such an action as procuring the judicial execution of the innocent should be quite excluded from consideration – I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind. (ibid.: 17)

Perhaps it is due to this double-obscurity that some have been tempted to adopt a more sceptical reading of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. Such a reading would view Anscombe as being doubtful of the possibility of ever developing a fully-fledged account of virtue ethics, and would therefore take the paper to be suggesting, in effect, that the only hope for ethics to ground any sort of absolute prohibition is through some notion of a divine law and lawgiver (Driver, 2018; see also Blackburn, 2005). Anscombe's own staunch Roman Catholic faith, which clearly animates her subsequent engagement with moral questions such as euthanasia and contraception, would seem on the face of it to confirm this thesis.

All this, I fear, is somewhat misleading, for Anscombe is being nothing other than realistic about the philosophical difficulties involved in the directions she sets out for future travel. These include the need to develop “an account of human nature, human action, the type of characteristic a virtue is, and above all of ‘human flourishing.’” (Anscombe, 1958a: 18). But challenging as the task at hand may be, if one were to follow this route, then whatever one's religious beliefs one might still come to some degree of knowledge about ethics. The point, though, is that one has to ask *the right kind of question* – and this is a central contention of “Modern Moral Philosophy”. If one did not believe in divine law, then it is more profitable to ask questions of virtue and vice, like “Is this just?” or “Is this gluttonous?”, rather than “Is this morally right?” (Geach, 2005). The latter sort of question aroused Anscombe's hostility because it seemed to treat the word “moral” as conferring some special force to its accompanying injunctions, or else as denoting a particular sub-class of actions that alone were the province of moral inquiry (Anscombe, 2005c: 204).

Where do absolute prohibitions fit in? The considerations above are useful for situating our discussion because Anscombe does not treat the question of absolute prohibitions as wholly separate from the challenges enumerated above for understanding virtue. She would certainly be strenuously opposed to the popular misconception, very much alive even today, that virtue ethics represents a kind of “mushy middle” position between consequentialism and deontology, one that does not generally admit of absolute rules about certain actions.

Virtue ethics is not infrequently presented as differing from consequentialism and deontology in asking as its primary question, not whether an act is right or wrong, but what sort of character one ought to act or live by. If such an explanation is not wildly inaccurate, it is at best a partial truth. As John Haldane contends in this regard, the idea that “the good of actions and that of outcomes are nothing but a reflection of goodness of heart or intellect or will” sounds implausible or even incoherent (2011: 381). An excessively agent-centred view which really replaces “virtue”, properly understood, with “motive” could excuse just about anything.

Such a desiccated form of virtue ethics hardly resembles what Anscombe means by asking questions such as “Is this just?”. In fact, one might think that what Anscombe says about justice or other virtues has very little to do with “character” as we understand the word in ordinary language. She says, for instance, that an act such as “bilking” is contrary to the virtue of justice “in a merely ‘factual’ way”; bilking is bad for humans just as it is bad for machinery to run without oil (1958a: 4-5). She accepts that the evaluation of some actions from the perspective of virtue will depend on circumstance and intention, but there will be other actions that are *intrinsically* incompatible, for example, with the virtue of justice and hence are always excluded (ibid.: 15). Anscombe’s paradigm example in this respect, as we have already seen in her “corrupt mind” remark, is “procuring the judicial execution of the innocent”.

But here we immediately run into a difficulty: Anscombe appears to simply assume the intrinsic unjustness of such an action, at least as far as “Modern Moral Philosophy” goes. Or else, for all her talk of jettisoning a divine law conception of ethics for the purposes of philosophy, she is really relying on Roman Catholic doctrine here to push her point. After all, she is not exactly averse, elsewhere, to speaking of ethics in terms of the natural law, properly understood as a form of divine legislation (2008: 179).

The role of the natural law in Anscombe’s view on absolute prohibitions is one we will return to later, but for now what must be said is that the suggestion that a “covert divine law theory” is at work here overlooks an important feature of the natural law, which as an ethical theory makes two distinct claims – one concerning ontology, and the other epistemology. Regarding ontology, natural law in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas is undeniably theistic. Aquinas himself could not be clearer about this. The natural law, he writes, is “nothing else than the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law” of God (*ST*, I-II, q. 91, a. 2, co.).¹ But the epistemological claim of the natural law is that one does not, in principle, require religious belief to know its precepts. Hence Anscombe writes in “Contraception and Chastity”:

“Natural law” is simply a way of speaking about the whole of morality, used by Catholic thinkers because they believe the general precepts of morality are *laws* promulgated by God our Creator in the enlightened human understanding

1. All references to Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* are taken from Aquinas (1920) and will be cited as “*ST*” in the text.

when it is thinking in general terms about what are good and what are bad actions. That is to say, the discoveries of reflection and reasoning when we think straight about these things *are* God's legislation to us (whether we realise this or not). (2008: 179)

Anscombe is on the whole more concerned with the epistemology than the ontology of the natural law, and that is indeed why I will be focusing on the epistemology of absolute prohibitions in this paper. Seen from this perspective, any "covert" reliance on a divine legislator would not therefore conflict with Anscombe's thesis in "Modern Moral Philosophy" about virtue being the most promising route for doing ethics. It helps to think of ethics as being, in a way, more like the natural sciences than theology. For example, one who believes in God as creator would hold that anyone examining and reasoning about the natural world, whether they know it or not, is studying God's creation. God's revelation may give an additional dimension to one's study, or provide an independent reason for favouring a particular scientific hypothesis (say, the Big Bang as opposed to Steady State theory), but this does not mean that science cannot make progress by its own non-theological tools and standards. This, I think, is an apt analogy with ethics from a natural law standpoint.

That is all well and good, but it does not explain Anscombe's apparent question-begging in relation to the wrongness of killing the innocent. Furthermore, her "corrupt mind" remark might be taken as suggesting that moral knowledge of this sort is owed to the possession of a certain refined, or at least unadulterated, moral sensibility. Is that true? Why exactly is killing the innocent intrinsically wrong?

Here again Anscombe's advice about asking the right kind of question is important. It is easy to ask "Why?" of any statement of moral belief, or indeed of any belief – and the sceptical tradition in philosophy is long if not venerable – but the sceptic might himself be asked, "What kind of answer are you looking for? Are you looking for a rational requirement, for instance?" When a putative prohibition such as that against the intentional killing of the innocent is "so basic" that it is hard to explain why it is so (Anscombe, 2005d: 266), might it be rather that the question "Why?" has no application – or at any rate cannot be meaningfully posed?

What I should like to suggest is that Anscombe shies away from "Why?" questions about absolute prohibitions because they are, without further qualification at least, the wrong kind of question to ask. But to get there, I shall first investigate Anscombe's treatment of our knowledge of such prohibitions, which – "corrupt minds" notwithstanding – appears to have the character of commonly-shared intuitions. This, however, should not be confused with the rationalist ethical intuitionism associated with G.E. Moore. Anscombe instead uses the term "connatural knowledge", a term which comes from Aquinas and which, while being at the centre of Anscombe's epistemology of moral prohibitions, requires much clarification.

3. Connatural knowledge in Anscombe: “as common as humanity”?

Having situated our discussion of absolute prohibitions in Anscombe’s thought on virtue, we can see her account of the relationship between both concepts raises the following question: In relation to justice, do we come to know of the intrinsic unjustness of certain actions having reflected on the nature of justice, or is it through such paradigm cases as killing the innocent that we learn of the virtue of justice – and indeed what is at its core? Provisionally, I would suggest that Anscombe would side with the latter explanation, on account of her understanding of connatural knowledge.

A major theme running through Anscombe’s moral philosophy is her contention that certain basic moral prohibitions or values are known to us almost instinctively. Such knowledge is called connatural knowledge, which, as its etymology might suggest, is that which is “readily known” on account of one’s nature (Anscombe, 2005a: 60). In some ways such a concept resembles ethical intuitionism, though its roots in Thomistic philosophy ultimately suggest certain key differences – chiefly to do with the object of such moral knowledge.

Anscombe addresses the subject of connatural knowledge most clearly and directly in a paper entitled “Knowledge and Reverence for Human Life”, where she makes three claims of particular relevance to our discussion. Firstly, connatural knowledge is not concerned exclusively with ethics; it also includes forms of knowledge as basic as the knowledge of material substances. Such knowledge can be considered “connatural” because of an affinity in nature between ourselves, as material beings, and such substances.

Secondly, where it concerns ethics, connatural knowledge is a “capacity to recognise what action will accord with and what ones will be contrary to” a certain virtue. With actions contrary to virtue in particular, connatural knowledge involves a kind of inclination against an action, a ready “perception” of its immorality, which Anscombe compares to the “revulsion which is sometimes part of the perception of something as disgusting, as, for example, if someone were to spit into one’s glass” (ibid.: 60). However, there is no reason to suppose that Anscombe has only absolute prohibitions in mind here (if she even does at all); one who is well formed in a particular virtue might also recognise connaturally a wide variety of actions contrary to that virtue in particular circumstances. That being said, Anscombe stresses that connatural knowledge is insufficient for virtue. One needs “not only a connatural ‘pro’ or ‘anti’ reaction” but also knowledge of the specifics of one’s given situation and practical wisdom in order to act virtuously (ibid.: 63).

Thirdly, Anscombe claims that the most important instance of connatural knowledge is the knowledge of the dignity of a human being, which is essential to possessing the virtue of justice (ibid.: 61-63; see also Anscombe, 2005b). This, *presumably*, is what is involved in knowing the intrinsic unjustness of intentionally killing the innocent – Anscombe’s absolute prohibition *par excellence* – though it is also at the heart of the just person’s response to someone who is hungry or cold, a response which nonetheless is not governed by the

same sort of absolute rule. To restate the point made above, one requires practical wisdom to work out what exactly is to be done in the particular situation (Anscombe, 2005a: 64-65).

These claims alone do not suffice for establishing, at least on Anscombe's view, that the absolute prohibition against intentionally killing the innocent is known connaturally and *prior* to acquiring the virtue of justice, and hence our question at the outset of this section remains unanswered as yet.

Anscombe herself recognises a problem of circularity with regard to connatural moral knowledge – that one needs the virtue of justice to have its relevant connatural inclinations, but that one also needs certain inclinations to possess such virtue in the first place. Her response to this problem of circularity is a classic Aristotelian one: Moral education. Getting into the habit of performing just actions makes a person “*inclined* to do them *qua* just. This is already inchoate virtue and makes him have good inclinations, i.e. inclinations to the ends that a just man has” (ibid.: 63-64). This may well be a practical solution to the problem of circularity, but it does not address the theoretical question of whether the virtue of justice is discovered, so to speak, by intuitive knowledge of certain prohibitions.

Does Anscombe provide us with other resources with which to address this problem? Here it is worth remarking that elsewhere Anscombe seems to refer to a similar phenomenon of intuitive moral knowledge, perhaps somewhat unhelpfully, as a “mystical perception” – a choice of term she immediately qualifies:

I don't mean, in calling it a mystical perception, that it's out of the ordinary. It's as ordinary as the feeling for the respect due to a man's dead body: the knowledge that a dead body isn't something to be put out for the collectors of refuse to pick up. This, too, is mystical; though it's as common as humanity. (2008: 187)

Nevertheless, the term “mystical” in context serves a rhetorical function of being contrasted with mere utilitarian value – indeed Anscombe wants to define “mystical” as “supra-utilitarian”, and she considers the absolute prohibition on murder as falling under this category as well (ibid.). Perhaps more curiously than any of the examples already given, Anscombe also speaks of the value of participation in democratic decision-making as being “mystical”, along with the perception of having been part of the “we” that made a decision even though one personally voted for the losing side (1976: 162-163).²

One might reasonably hypothesise, therefore, that “mystical” perceptions are a particular kind of connatural knowledge – the kind concerned with things which have value in and of themselves, and not merely instrumental value. This will, unsurprisingly, involve absolute prohibitions at times, though not always – I do not think that Anscombe meant to say that there was an

2. Mary Geach provides a helpful discussion on Anscombe's use of “mystical” in her paper “Anscombe on Sexual Ethics” (2016: 231-232).

absolute prohibition involved in safeguarding democratic rights to vote, even if we can recognise its supra-utilitarian value.

In any case, looking back again at “Modern Moral Philosophy”, where Anscombe seems to take for granted that killing the innocent is always wrong – specifically in contrast with utilitarian or consequentialist moral philosophy – we are now in a better position to see this as a point involving connatural knowledge, indeed of the “mystical” kind. This would offer a far more satisfactory response to the question of circularity, if certain absolute prohibitions are known connaturally before the acquisition of virtue by habituation. The philosophical “cost” of that position would, I suppose, be to accept that everyone therefore already possesses the virtue of justice, for example, albeit in its most inchoate form possible. But I see no reason why this would be inconsistent with Anscombe’s moral philosophy. To be sure, that a certain piece of knowledge or perception is “as common as humanity” does not imply that every single person must possess it. One might make room for “corrupt minds” who do not.

4. A brief note from the Thomistic tradition

All that being said, some loose ends regarding connatural knowledge need to be tied up to make progress with our investigation into absolute prohibitions. No doubt, interpretative difficulties regarding connatural knowledge are not unique to Anscombe – the subject is a controversial one even in Aquinas himself, who does not give a systematic account of connaturality (Suto, 2004: 65), and among scholars of Aquinas’s thought (Lisska, 1996: 28, 228).

Among Thomists, the philosopher most associated with the concept of connatural knowledge is arguably Jacques Maritain,³ who describes it as “a kind of knowledge which is produced in the intellect but not by virtue of conceptual connections and by way of demonstration,” (2001: 13) but rather “through inclination, by looking at and consulting what we are and the inner bends or propensities of our own being”. The intellect, Maritain writes, “is at play not alone, but together with affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will, and is guided and directed by them” (ibid.: 15). These “dispositions of the will” surely refer to the virtues, and this therefore echoes Aquinas’s own use of “connatural”, which is to refer to someone who, possessing a particular virtue, “judges rightly of what concerns that virtue by his very inclination towards it” – inclination here being contrasted with intellectual knowledge (*ST*, I, q. 1, a. 6, ad. 3).

However, as Taki Suto points out (2004: 68), Aquinas really has two distinct uses of the term “connatural”. Its primary meaning, in fact, refers to natural inclinations prior to the inculcation of virtue; its secondary meaning concerns the inclinations to the good developed by the virtues subsequently

3. I am not aware, however, of any engagement that Anscombe may have had with Maritain’s thought.

acquired in life through habituation. Both are natural, so to speak, but Suto here points to a classic Thomistic distinction between “first nature” and “second nature” – the former being what we have at birth and the latter what we develop based on the former.

In the light of this, we can restate our thesis about Anscombe's view of absolute prohibitions with some more precision. Our intuitive grasp of at least some of these prohibitions – as well as the most fundamental “mystical” values – would be connatural knowledge in the primary sense, and reveals to us the core of the relevant virtues. But as one grows in virtue, one may also acquire a connatural grasp of how to act in accordance with those virtues even in matters which do not admit of absolute rules or prohibitions. Connaturality, after all, is the product of “affective inclinations and the dispositions of the will”, which are the subject of virtue and its acquisition. One learns to become disposed, particularly through the ordering of one's emotions, towards certain actions or goods and one becomes more habituated to the practice of the virtues in a reasonable range of situations. That is Aristotelian virtue in a nutshell. While practical wisdom is still indispensable to the virtuous person, since the circumstances of life are so variable, the possession of the virtue of justice in its full-fledged form may mean that someone will already know connaturally what to do and what not to do in the usual circumstances that he encounters a cold or hungry person on the streets.

Suto, helpfully, gives the example of saving a drowning child – deliberation may prove too slow to make a meaningful difference, but thanks to connatural knowledge the virtuous person can act according to the demands of the situation and of virtue “without hesitation, immediately, reliably, and even with pleasure” (ibid.: 75). This almost certainly involves an interplay of both kinds of connatural knowledge – the visceral pull of a life hanging in the balance before one's eyes is surely connatural in the primary sense, though the readiness to jump into cold water is connatural in the secondary sense, if one has been habituated to such action whether interiorly or exteriorly.⁴ In this way, virtue can be seen to be built on the most basic prohibitions and connatural perceptions of value, while also requiring moral education.

5. A naturalistic account of absolute prohibitions

It should be clear by now why, as I have been hinting, Anscombe's conception of connatural moral knowledge differs fundamentally from standard accounts of rationalist ethical intuitionism. Given what Anscombe says about unjustness potentially being seen as a “factual” description of sorts, which is in turn con-

4. Pinckaers (1962: 72-75) writes that it is not always feasible to acquire virtue by exterior action – one does not gain fortitude necessarily by always placing oneself in situations of danger. Hence, “interior acts of mastery” over fear or other undesirable tendencies are essential for habituation.

nected to what it means to flourish as a human being, Anscombe would certainly not have shared the metaphysical commitments of intuitionists like G. E. Moore who thought of “good” as a “simple, unanalyzable property” (MacIntyre, 2002: 242). Such non-natural properties are, famously, the object of J. L. Mackie’s scorn in his argument from queerness, which considers their existence too wildly implausible and “so utterly different from anything else in the universe” to be true (Mackie, 1977: 38).

Consider also how an earlier intuitionist, Richard Price, writes that it is:

palpably absurd... to ask, whether it is right to obey a command, or wrong to disobey it; and the propositions, obeying a command is right, or producing happiness is right, would be most trifling, as expressing no more than that obeying a command, is obeying a command, or producing happiness, is producing happiness. (Stratton-Lake, 2013: 349)

For Anscombe, it would be a mistake to treat such statements as analytic truths – that would be a neglect of human flourishing – or as expressing some kind of non-natural property of “good”. “Good” is simply the evaluation of human action *qua* human action (Anscombe, 2005c). Furthermore, the concept of connaturality would seem to stipulate that connatural knowledge of what is good is possible only because it belongs to someone’s nature to be inclined in a particular way – this applies even to the secondary sense of connaturality, since virtue is not an artificial disposition but one that coheres with a being’s first nature and brings it to fulfilment.

Yet it is true that where epistemology is concerned, there are apparent similarities to be found between connatural knowledge and rationalist ethical intuitionism. This is especially so when contrasted with sentimentalists like David Hume, who thought of right and wrong as akin to secondary qualities – that is to say, not residing in actions or objects themselves but referring primarily to the feelings of approbation or disapprobation caused in us. Price saw right and wrong, rather, as properties of actions which are apprehended immediately and self-evidently, much as we apprehend other simple ideas such as substance, space or time (Stratton-Lake, 2013: 344-346). Mackie, in fact, saw this as a fairly significant challenge to the argument from queerness (Mackie, 1977: 39), and one might note its resemblance to Anscombe’s claim that connatural knowledge includes our knowledge of matter.

I do not think Anscombe would want to speak of connatural knowledge as apprehending “properties” of actions, but does she share intuitionist epistemological commitments to immediate and self-evident perception of rightness or wrongness? Is that not what is happening with mystical perceptions and connatural knowledge in the primary sense? I will return to address this question more directly in the next section, for in order to answer it, the first step is to ask whether we can now attempt to articulate a naturalistic account of absolute prohibitions – on the basis of Anscombean connatural knowledge and taking into account the relationship between absolute prohibitions and virtue.

For this task, we must, I think, use the primary sense of connatural knowledge here, and in that respect the most significant passage in Aquinas is the following excerpt from his treatise on the natural law – an excerpt which, despite the absence of the word “connatural”, clearly accords with its meaning in its reference to natural inclinations:

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that all those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law. Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to its nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. (*ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co.)

The inclination to preserve life is shared by all living things; the passage then moves on to the inclinations pertaining to sexual intercourse and the education of offspring – which we share with animals – and finally the inclinations to know the truth about God and to live in society, unique to us as rational animals. But for our present purposes it is the first inclination, regarding life, that will concern us the most.

Understanding connatural knowledge in relation to these basic inclinations helps us better interpret a particular feature of Anscombe's description of the absolute prohibition on killing the innocent. This is her insistence that when it comes to killing the innocent, “the victim is the primary one to be wronged, and this is enough objection to murder in most cases” (Anscombe, 2005d: 266). For Anscombe, this point is especially what separates her view from utilitarian philosophy. Again, asking the right kind of question is of central importance here. Anscombe suggests that it is “exceedingly comic” to think that the prohibition on murder is fundamentally about making life “more commodious” – that “life is pleasanter for all of us” were everyone to observe the prohibition:

Because utility presupposes the *life* of those who are to be inconvenienced, and 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. (2008: 187)

This is one of the most striking passages in Anscombe's moral philosophy; it is one of the most earnest attempts to get to the bottom of a prohibition that is, by Anscombe's own admission, difficult to explain. What exactly is the

basis of perceiving that “the wrong done in murder is done first and foremost to the victim” despite the victim no longer existing afterwards (beliefs in the afterlife notwithstanding)?⁵

Given Anscombe’s debt to Aquinas in her philosophy and in particular her account of connatural knowledge, it seems reasonable to suggest that one way of interpreting this passage is to say, first of all, that we do not fundamentally grasp the wrongness of murder by any kind of deductive or inferential reasoning. We do not, for example, imagine what it would be like to sit behind a veil of ignorance and think up what rules would be necessary for society to function well – without denying that if we did, we would most likely think of prohibiting murder.

The almost immediate perception of the wrongness of killing another person, rather, is the result of that most basic natural inclination towards the preservation of life that we feel within ourselves and which makes the thought of one’s own suicide so psychologically intolerable at first glance for most people, in the absence of complicating factors. Our capacity for empathy, which can produce perceptions of a rather direct kind – and such knowledge of another’s perspective is arguably a kind of connatural knowledge as well – is perhaps what helps us make that leap towards seeing that murder extinguishes another “me”, as it were. In knowing what one loses oneself by suicide, one knows what another thereby loses by being murdered. One perceives, in a mystical way, that there is something deeply wrong about this action.

So the wrongness of murder is not the conclusion of an argument; it is a basic mode of seeing the world. And what is more basic than taking what one is attracted to as good and something to be sought? This, in essence, is also the founding claim of utilitarianism, though perhaps when Anscombe famously laments the shallowness of utilitarianism in “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958a: 12), part of what she has in mind is that it does not really go beyond the thought that pleasure and pain are constitutive of good and evil. The distinction between higher and lower pleasures, or the move from act-to-rule-utilitarianism, does not disguise this fact.

Connatural knowledge in Anscombe’s (and Aquinas’s) worldview, by contrast, is about taking our most elementary attractions – and things contrary to them – as signs of good and evil, not good and evil itself. Beyond those basic inclinations, more work needs to be done, and that is where virtue comes in. Those inclinations point to what is good, and may reveal to us their oppositions – actions that directly contradict them and which are absolutely excluded. But in between these two poles is a whole range of actions whose alignment with virtue will depend on, as we said earlier, circumstance and intention. In between the inclination towards continued preservation of life and the prohibition of murder are questions, for example, of whether one is obliged to do everything *at all cost* to preserve life – one’s own and others – and answering these questions requires virtue.

5. One might say that this is an inverted non-identity problem.

Nevertheless, these thoughts do not necessarily suggest that the perception of the wrongness of murder is “justified” in the way epistemologists would generally use the term, even if they do go some way in explaining how one perceives such a thing. What their justification might depend on, where Anscombe's account of virtue is concerned, would be evidence of the alignment between our connatural inclinations to perceived goods and the goods of human flourishing. Precisely what kind of evidence might be admitted for such an inquiry is, indeed, a difficult question to answer. I shall call this the “justified belief objection”, though it may well be called the “verifiability objection” if one were a logical positivist, for one is reminded here of A.J. Ayer's criticism of ethical intuitionism – that there is “no relevant empirical test” in the appeal to moral intuitions (Ayer, 1952: 139).

A further question one might pose, which I shall term the “differentiation objection”, is how we might differentiate the supposedly genuine basic inclinations of our first nature from all other kinds of inclinations and attractions we experience, to which Anscombe would surely not give the same kind of weight. No doubt the inclination concerning the preservation of life has a particular existential gravity attached to it, but once we proceed to other inclinations in the realm of, say, food and sexual intercourse it is less obvious by what criteria one is meant to distinguish between different kinds of inclinations – between the weightier or more “mystical” ones and those that only concern utilitarian value.

These challenges present obvious difficulties for us, even as connatural knowledge may present a plausible psychology for certain basic prohibitions like that of murder. But it seems that to overcome these objections we may have to hold these thoughts where they are and approach the epistemology of absolute prohibitions in a different key – a Wittgensteinian one.

6. Wittgensteinian anti-scepticism and the possibility of ethics

To respond adequately to the “justified belief objection” would require lengthy discussion of teleology, which is beyond the scope of this paper. But in what remains I shall try to suggest one way of averting (if not exactly refuting) the “differentiation objection” – and that is by adopting a more Wittgensteinian reading of connatural knowledge.

Part of the problem with the account we have developed thus far is that we have taken connatural knowledge in overly mentalistic terms. Anscombe herself, as mentioned, does seem to accord connatural knowledge the character of an intuition or perception, and this is, I think, true to an extent. But returning to the question of how similar it is to intuitionist epistemology, even if connatural knowledge is a kind of immediate intuition, whether it produces *self-evident* moral judgements is questionable. In relation to murder, just as Anscombe wants to say we *clearly* see it is wrong because the victim is wronged by being killed, she also recognises that there might be exceptions like killing enemy combatants in a just war (2005d: 266-267). So although we have thus

far been speaking of the connatural knowledge of the wrongness of killing the innocent, there is an unexplained gap between the ready perception that there is something wrong with killing someone in general and the conviction that it is killing the *innocent* that is precisely what is absolutely prohibited, but those who do not fall under that category – however defined – do not necessarily fall under that prohibition.

This is where I think it is fruitful to see Anscombe's account of absolute prohibitions in the light of Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism. While there is room for preserving the intuitive aspect of connatural knowledge, the concept can also be expanded to include knowledge that is gained from a kind of *practical* certainty.⁶ Mystical perceptions, as Anscombe seems to suggest, point us towards something of great, supra-utilitarian value; but to turn that intuition into knowledge of an absolute prohibition may involve more than just a kind of perceiving. Our connatural intuitions therefore need further refinement or specification by our knowledge of human activity – patterns of acting and forms of life – although by “knowledge” I do not mean the product of extensive reflection and deduction. I simply mean knowledge from our embeddedness in human communities. From our forms of life, we already have, for example, some knowledge of what “innocence” might mean in relation to not killing the innocent. In this way, with both intuition and practical certainty we come to a clearer, but still truly connatural knowledge of particular prohibitions, and this is all still prior to the acquisition of virtue by habituation.

This sense of practical certainty is one that comes from Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism, to which we shall now turn. Recall once again the insight that when we reach something as basic as the wrongness of murder, so readily perceived by many people, the reason why the invidious “Why?” questions of the moral sceptic seem difficult to answer is because they do not perhaps ask a meaningful question. This thought is very much in line with Wittgenstein's anti-scepticism, which is of great use to us precisely because, while the sceptic asks the realist for the grounds for his belief, Wittgenstein in turn asks the sceptic for his grounds for scepticism. A key idea in Wittgenstein's early anti-scepticism is the following statement in the *Tractatus*:

Scepticism is *not* irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical, when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked.

For doubt can exist only where a question exists, a question only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*. (Wittgenstein, 2001: 6.51)

This thought is taken up again in some ways during Wittgenstein's subsequent return to anti-sceptical arguments in *On Certainty*, in which he suggested that doubt needs grounds and must “*amount to something*” (Kenny, 2006:

6. See Müller (1994) for a helpful discussion of the contrast between intuitionist ethics and practical certainty.

162). It is imaginable, Wittgenstein says, that “my skull should turn out empty when it was operated on” but grounds for doubt are lacking (1969: § 4). As to the latter point, Wittgenstein asks what difference the doubt makes “in practice” (Kenny, 2006: 162). If one doubted one’s bodily existence, preferring either Berkeley’s idealism or a brain-in-the-vat as an explanation for one’s sensations, does this make a difference to how one goes about acting? Perhaps not at all in the first case, and perhaps little discernible difference in the second, practically speaking.

The effect of Wittgenstein’s anti-scepticism is, I think, to suggest that doubt is parasitic on belief. “Doubt comes *after* belief” (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 160). We have to begin by taking certain propositions for granted before we can even begin to doubt, let alone doubt *intelligibly*. Doubt, furthermore, “presupposes the mastery of a language-game. In order to express the doubt that *p*, one must understand what is meant by saying that *p*” (Kenny, 2006: 162). If one really wants to doubt everything, as did Descartes, one should try doubting even the meaning of one’s words (Wittgenstein, 1969: § 114), in which case one’s doubt starts to appear far more nonsensical than the propositions it is doubting!

Translating these insights into the sphere of ethics is not straightforward, nonetheless: How does one mean that the question “Why?” is not meaningful in response to a putative absolute prohibition? Is that not what all the thought experiments about utilitarianism – Jim and the Indians, or any other scenario contrived such that the intentional killing of one has disproportionately greater positive consequences – are for?

We need to take a few steps back from the preceding discussion of Anscombe’s connatural knowledge and pose a yet more sceptical question than the “Why is murder wrong?”. Is it possible to not have ethics at all? More radically than disagreeing over what counts as good and what counts as evil, can we meaningfully doubt the proposition that “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided”, which for Aquinas is *the* first principle of the natural law and is self-evident to the practical intellect just as the principle of non-contradiction is self-evident to the speculative intellect (*ST*, I-II, q. 94, a. 2, co.)? Do we even have any grounds to doubt this proposition? Such a doubt could only be parasitic on pre-existing belief in the proposition itself, I would suggest.

Wittgenstein’s point about doubt presupposing language-games is not a simple matter of doubting words. Language-games, for Wittgenstein, arise from human practices (Wittgenstein, 2009: § 7-26); “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (*ibid.*: § 23). How – not simply as a matter of logic but as a matter of a form of life – could we live in such a way that did not embody some sense of “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided”? A global doubt of ethics is simply not possible, practically if not psychologically – or should we say, it would amount to nothing. It is impossible not to act, and impossible not to act according to the logic of right and wrong, because so long as one is acting *intentionally* then one is always acting according to an end. “There is no ethics,” someone says to me. “Well

then, how should I act?” Is there a possible language-game in which there is no ethics? It seems not. Learning a language is itself a “normative activity” (Proessel, 2005: 329-330); to learn a language and concepts is not merely to assign labels but to make evaluations.

Before we get to absolute prohibitions, it is worth reflecting a little more on the matter of language-games. Let us return for a moment to Price’s intuitionism and the “trifling” nature of statements such as “obeying a command is right” or “producing happiness is right”. To simply consider these things right by definition, no doubt, is a kind of analytic sleight-of-hand, but if one were to reconsider this statement without the Moorean metaphysical baggage of intuitionism, there is perhaps an insight to be gained.

A reading more congenial to Anscombe’s moral epistemology – and to Wittgensteinian thought – would be to consider concepts such as commands or producing happiness from the perspective of the “natural history of man” – to look at our “institutions, culture and society” in order to find out which activities, practices, behaviours, physiological and environmental factors such concepts are “interwoven” with (Wiseman, 2016: 60). In isolation from human institutions, the question of obeying a command is almost meaningless. But in context, one might say that the language-game of obeying commands⁷ is constituted by practices and concepts such as legitimate authority, hierarchy, law, enforcement and duty. It does not make obeying a command right by definition, but it might suggest that obeying commands is a characteristically human mode of living well.

Anscombe’s point on bilking as contrary to justice in a “factual” way is also, I think, to be understood in this vein. It is not that “bilking is wrong” is an analytic truth. In the context of our institutions, we can transition from the merely factual “is” of someone carting potatoes to my house to the relatively less “brute” fact that so-and-so “supplied” me with potatoes (rather than *just* leaving them there) and the certainly normative fact (if that is not an oxymoron) that I *owe* him money – and that I may be bilking. (Anscombe, 1958a: 3-4, 1958b) If we can go from “is” to “owes” or “bilking”, as Anscombe suggests, then we already have in our institutions – in our language-game – something that is *contra* justice or honesty. If doubt were to be introduced here as to the viciousness of bilking, we should like to ask whether this is permitted by the language-game.

Whether, of course, owing someone money constitutes bilking is something that will depend on circumstance and motive. The same goes with whether disobeying a command counts as insubordination – perhaps the command was altogether unreasonable. So we are not quite at absolute prohibitions or intrinsically unjust actions yet, though we are close. Putative absolute prohibitions – and let us focus just on killing the innocent here – are not indubitable in the way that “do good and avoid evil” might be, psychological-

7. Coincidentally, “Giving orders, and acting on them” is the first in a list of language-games Wittgenstein provides early on in the *Philosophical Investigations* (2009: § 23).

ly or practically. But is there a case for considering them “hinge proposition” nonetheless?

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of hinge propositions, as they have come to be called, in the following passage:

341. That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

342. That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

343. But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put. (1969: § 341-343)

Wittgenstein has in mind, not simply the most basic, absolutely indubitable propositions, but also beliefs like knowing my two hands are in front of me or that the world has not just come into existence. These too can be “exempt from doubt”. He also contends that there are some things about which one simply cannot be *mistaken*; if someone, for instance, doubts that *all* his calculations were uncertain and unreliable, Wittgenstein says that “perhaps we would say he was crazy” (1969: § 217). I cannot help but recall once again Anscombe's infamous assertion, “I do not want to argue with him; he shows a corrupt mind”, of one who thinks that it is open to question whether procuring the judicial execution of the innocent is always prohibited.

Anscombe has a sense, I think, not simply that the wrongness of murder is connatually grasped, but that it is also the kind of proposition – assumption, if you like – without which the door cannot turn, to use Wittgenstein's potent metaphor. If we are to have ethics at all – and this, as we have seen, is a human necessity – then we need hinge propositions in the form of absolute prohibitions. And this is a kind of practical certainty. Part of Anscombe's distaste therefore for thought experiments that contrive to prove consequentialism right is that they require one “to assume some sort of law or standard according to which there is a borderline case” (1958a: 13) for the experiment to even have intuitive force. The consequentialist's doubt of absolute prohibitions is therefore parasitic on belief in it.

Perhaps, then, it is the nature of moral discourse that we *just* need certain exceptionless norms, and these are to be chosen – nay, discovered – not arbitrarily but by our “mystical” perceptions, as refined by practical certainties arising from our forms of life. These simply form part of our basic worldview, not as conclusions of any arguments but as foundations for intelligibility in action and moral discourse.

Proessel writes that a mistake about hinge propositions is to think that they are empirical; propositions like the age of the earth certainly have an empirical element, but the role they play in providing the background picture against

which we do our thinking and play our language-games and live our forms of life is a *logical* one: “certainty shows itself in what we *do*”, not on the basis of facts (2005: 337). So the whole consequentialist attempt to empirically test, or falsify absolute prohibitions is a wrong-footed one if we can accept that these prohibitions are candidates for Wittgensteinian hinge propositions. Similarly wrong-footed would be any notion that agreement, or consensus, is what proves the status of hinge propositions (ibid.: 331). One thinks here of the role Hume assigns to interpersonal agreement in moral sentiments. Anscombean connatural knowledge, I contend, is not justified by this sort of consensus – that is not the meaning of “as common as humanity”. Rather, agreement takes place through our form of life (ibid.: 332), which is really to say, in our language-games. The form of life we share already presents to us potential candidates for absolute prohibitions – murder, rape, and theft immediately come to mind. That modern societies not infrequently introduce all kinds of exceptions to some of these prohibitions in law can, nonetheless, make it difficult to tell to what extent these prohibitions truly need further refinement, and whether any of these prohibitions are hinge propositions of the sort that are changeable depending on specific cultural or historical factors at a particular time.⁸

This account does not present a perfect response to the differentiation objection, but at the heart of the response is the thought that one need only to look at how we live to find work-in-progress answers, which in some ways are far more important than the answers of intellectual argumentation. Wittgenstein writes, almost pre-empting this line of response, “Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions’ striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game” (1969: § 204). This thought, as I have tried to argue, helps to refine our understanding of connatural knowledge, which anchors us psychologically in the normative practices of our lives and institutions not simply by intuition but also by practical certainty. But it also serves to emphasise the primacy of acting over intellectual argument in ethics, for ethics is most fundamentally a form of practice, a way of thinking embedded in human action *qua* human action. And in this sense, we can never truly *banish ethics totally* from our minds.⁹

8. Wittgenstein’s conception of hinge propositions does allow for those that are more changeable than others – perhaps as a result of intellectual conversion, or else because circumstances have changed and new empirical evidence, for example, has come to light.
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