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BOOK REVIEW

No morality, no self: Anscombe's radical skepticism

By James Doyle

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James Doyle's *No Morality, No Self* is another manifestation of the rising interest in the British Philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe, but also of the increasing quality of the knowledge of her work. From this point of view, Doyle's book completes the ever-growing list of important published works on Anscombe, especially since the 2000s.

The book consists of two parts, each of which deals with a famous article by Anscombe: "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958—henceforth MMP) for the first part and "The First Person" (1975—henceforth FP) for the second. The choice of these articles is motivated by at least two things: on the one hand, the very controversial, yet true (according to Doyle), character of the theses they support and, on the other hand, the various misunderstandings and disputes to which they have given rise. Here is how Doyle summarizes the theses concerned: "The main claim of 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is that the term 'moral' (…) is literally senseless and should therefore be abandoned" (ix) = No Morality. "The main claim of 'The First Person' is that the word 'I' (…) is not a referring expression (…)" (ix) = No Self.

The title of the book, *No Morality, No Self* indisputably conveys the polemical dimension of these theses; its subtitle, *Anscombe's radical skepticism*—putting Anscombe together with the ancient skeptics, like Pyrrho, or the more recent ones, like Montaigne or Hume—even more so. Is Anscombe a radical skeptic? This question will constitute the guiding thread of the present review. I shall demonstrate that she is not.

Doyle advocates the theses he attributes to Anscombe and thus intends not only to defend them, but also, and above all, to expose their radicality and profundity, which can be measured in terms of "how much other philosophy [they] would put out of business were [they] true" (4). The book provides very detailed and thorough discussions of Anscombe's theses and endeavors to defend them in spite of their radicality and in the face of the various misunderstandings they have given rise to and the many criticisms that have been leveled at them. There is no room here to do justice to these discussions—see Wiseman (2019) and Frey (2018). Therefore, I will confine myself to a critical discussion of Doyle's account of Anscombe's two claims.

First, the two theses, no morality, no self, though presented as parallel in the title, are not. The first claim concerns the use of the word "moral" (not all uses—see 8–10) and its meaninglessness if it intends to grasp a part of *sui generis* reality. Anscombe criticizes modern moral philosophers for simply "tak[ing] the category of the moral as *given*" (4). The second claim concerns the use of the word "I," but the point is not to question and even less abandon its use (contrary to what the impersonal interpretations of it by Hume, Nietzsche, or Lichtenberg implied). The "no self" thesis is targeted at some misleading philosophical and logical accounts of the grammar of "I," which tend to treat "I" as a proper name or demonstrative of a sort (a referring expression). A temptation with important philosophical consequences since it forces us to decide *what*, if anything, "I" might be the referent of: a philosophical dead-end.

Thus outlined, Anscombe's theses seem very deflationary indeed. For, in the end, there is a parallel between the two claims: there is nothing to which the words "moral" and "I" refer to, so we cannot provide any extensional account of them or any ostensive definition of their meaning.

But this is not the end of the story. It is rather its beginning. Once we have noticed this, we are invited to provide a proper account of the meaning of these words. Now, although very fine and accurate and true in its criticism of most of the readings and alternative claims that have been put forward, Doyle's account of MMP and FP seems to stop at the threshold of the philosophical theses Anscombe intends to defend. It is true (with qualifications) that she argues that the term "moral" is senseless and that "I" does not refer to anything. But she does not confine herself to these negative theses. On the one hand, she intends to grasp the aspects of action that interest us (philosophers) when we talk about "moral" goodness or badness (Anscombe, 1982a: 208). On the other hand, her analysis of the first person aims at understanding what philosophers call "self-consciousness." This is why we cannot simply give up the word "moral." It is also necessary to recapture its meaning by abandoning its pseudo-uses and bringing it closer to Aristotelian ethics (where "All human action is moral action" Anscombe, 1982a: 209—see Frey, 2018). This is also why we cannot be content to say that "I" does not refer to anything. It is necessary to "explain philosophically the first person (FP 64), namely self-consciousness" (Descombes, 2014: 271).

Before attending to these two "positive" accounts, let us consider how Doyle nonetheless paves the way to a proper understanding of them.

We cannot provide any referential account of the meaning of "moral" and "I," but does this entail that they do not have a meaning at all, that is, that they play no role, or perhaps only a cosmetic one, in our language and practices, no role other than to lead us astray? This is where, on Doyle's account, the two theses are distinct: "moral" is supposed to have no meaning (which is why it "ought to be jettisoned"—3, MMP quote) while "I" is supposed to have one, only its account is flawed.

To some great extent, this is right. Anscombe condemns the use of the term "moral" for being responsible for the philosophical illusion (all the more dangerous as it deludes us far beyond the field of philosophy in our daily lives) that we ought to search somewhere outside our actual practices for some guiding principles for our actions, some guiding principles that are meant to replace the "old-fashioned" divine law and on the grounds of which we could decide whether some particular action is either good or bad. To that extent, reading Anscombe as a virtue ethicist is at best misleading (87–91) if virtue ethics is supposed to consist in a mere alternative view of morality distinct from other deontological, utilitarian, consequentialist, etc., views.

Anscombe's claim is indeed more radical, for she is claiming that modern moral philosophy does not have an object at all. But the argument is not that there is nothing "out there" to be called "moral goodness or badness" (or some version Mackie's argument for queerness—Mackie, 1977). Doyle has a very nice way of putting this when he reminds us that the sort of vision of morality Anscombe is targeting is not just, as most readings suggest, the inconsistency of a secularized version of moral obligation: "the problem is not that external circumstances [the secularization of morality and the resulting absence of a legislator] have rendered the specified concept inapplicable; the problem is that something has gone badly wrong with the attempted specification itself" (48). Rather Anscombe is targeting any law-like or principle-based or remanent conception of ethics, *whether or not* it refers to a legislator. For, telling whether a human action is good or bad is not something we do in reference to an independent or abstract system of values, that is, independent and abstract from *what* we do and *why* we do it.

In fact, Anscombe does not so much want to reject the use of the adjective "moral" as she wants to point to the fact that the specific aspect of human action it is trying to grasp is not detachable from the concept of human action itself. Anscombe's claim is not so much that "moral" is "senseless" and should be abandoned (ix), but rather, as she will later argue (1982a; 2005), that it is *redundant* and no more specific than "human" when used as an adjective for "action" (9). In other words, she is not claiming that there can be no such thing as moral philosophy, but that if we want to do moral philosophy we need to concentrate on the conditions under which one can judge whether a particular action is right or wrong, rather than making such a judgment depend on transcendent principles.

Doyle is somewhat uncareful in his rejection of the adjective "moral" in that he sometimes minimizes the fact that Anscombe's target is "*moral* obligation and *moral* duty," "what is *morally* right and wrong" and "the *moral* sense of 'ought'" (MMP: 25) and not "moral" *tout court*. In other words, human beings do have specific obligations and duties with respect to their being human (rational beings) and their actions can be good or bad *qua* human actions.

So it does make sense, to some extent, to speak of the "moral" appreciation of some action. But all it means is that the action considered is a "human action," that is, "a voluntary action on the part of a human agent. Otherwise, like digesting your food and breathing and sweating, your acts are the acts of a human agent but are not what I call human actions" (Anscombe, 2005: 203). If anything is the object of moral philosophy, human action (i.e., an action caused by a rational human agent) is. In other words, morality does not concern any abstract or general principle or trigger of action. No *generic* action is either good or bad in this sense, although some descriptions of actions can "suggest good or bad" (Anscombe, 1982a: 213). Rather, if it has a topic, morality concerns what we are interested in when we assess the goodness or badness of a *particular* human action (in particular circumstances), insofar as goodness or badness are integral to its being a human action: "They played that Rasumowsky Quartet very well – it was a good piece of playing; but it was bad on their part to play – or perhaps to play it in those circumstances"—that is, there was good playing but it was bad behavior. Here it will be redundant to say: "You mean, it was *morally* bad" (Anscombe, 2005: 204). Rational human agents are responsible for what they do not merely as the *cause* of what happens but because of their "*callability to account*" (Anscombe, 1982b: 261). The redundancy thesis indeed makes the use of the adjective "moral" dispensable but does not deny the importance of a sphere of action evaluation that would come under the heading of moral appraisal. However, this sphere is not a bit of given reality. It relates to an aspect of what humans do that interests us as humans. Therefore, I would rather be careful about calling Anscombe a radical skeptic about morality altogether. She is rather skeptic about the philosophical and even practical consequences of looking at the language of morals as if it pointed to a piece of reality whose content remains to be appreciated.

To some extent, so it goes with "I." Except that Anscombe never purported to get rid of the word or its use. Nevertheless, in FP, she similarly targets the way philosophers (reaching back to Descartes' and even Augustine's *cogito*) have been misleadingly led to understand "self-consciousness" as consciousness of one *self*, my "self" being the reflexive object of my consciousness (FP: 26). And the question raised is "What sort of grammatical confusion (Wittgenstein, 2001) has led philosophers to think of self-consciousness as consciousness of *a* self?" The answer is that they have missed the specificity of the first person by treating "I" as a very special kind of third person. In other words, they have tried to understand the use of "I" as an expression whose function would be to pick out some one among other ones: a referring expression. So the "main thesis" of FP is not simply, as Doyle and most commentators present it (with the exception of Descombes, 2014, Narboux, 2018 and Wiseman, 2019), that "I" is not a referring expression. Therefore, it is wrong to say that it "is generally well understood" (x).

Anscombe's main thesis is rather that self-consciousness is "something manifested by the use of 'I'" (FP: 25), namely "unmediated conceptions of actions, happenings, and states," which are "subjectless" in the sense that "they do not involve the connection of what is understood by a predicate with a *distinctly conceived* subject" (FP: 36—my emphasis). In other words, Anscombe's main point is not that "I" is not a referring expression—this is just the wrong understanding of the logical function of "I" leading to philosophical mistakes. Anscombe's main point is that a thought (or its expression), which is first-personal (whether or not it is expressed by the use of "I" or an equivalent), is a thought for which one *need not "look for a subject"* (FP: 36). This is the point of Anscombe's central A-user's example (where A is a proper name everyone uses only to refer to himself—FP: 24) and of Baldy's (FP: 36): "When we speak of self-consciousness (…) we mean something manifested by the use of 'I' *as opposed to 'A'*" (FP: 25—my emphasis). So "I"s not being a name everyone uses only to refer to himself is a distinctive feature of self-consciousness. The use of "I," in that it manifests self-consciousness, does *not* instantiate a special relation (such as "guaranteed reference" – FP: 30) to a special object (me). The reason why A-users lack self-consciousness is that they need to consider *who* they are talking about when they talk about themselves. They are, in other words, unable to speak for themselves, in their own name. Here, Anscombe illustrates what self-consciousness is by figuring its absence. Baldy instantiates such a lack: "[Baldy] had just fallen out of the carriage, he was conscious, and he had the idea that someone had fallen out of the carriage – or he knew that someone had, but *wondered who*!" (FP: 36—my emphasis). Having self-consciousness precisely is *not needing to ask who* is having my thoughts, performing my actions, saying my words, etc. I would lack self-consciousness if I needed to attend to who is acting when I am, experiencing something when I am, and speaking when

I am. This makes my own relation to the things I do, experience, think and say, etc., "wholly different from other people's" (Wittgenstein, 2001: 163). To conclude, I agree with Wiseman's (2019) criticism of the "No self" thesis: Doyle is very impressive and ingenious in his defense of the thesis that "I" does not refer against the strong objections that have been addressed to it. Indeed, this part of the book is an important contribution to the long-standing debate on this issue. But Doyle's reading of FP is not as precise as that of MMP. And again, he fails to show that Anscombe really is a "radical skeptic."

That said, nothing in all these remarks calls into question the significance and originality of this book, both for Anscombe's readers and more broadly for moral philosophy and for the philosophy of mind and language.

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