Comment: *A great philosopher*

What makes a great philosopher? Mostly, they have one or two simple ideas. Plato invented the Myth of the Cave, about our longing to rise into the immaterial realm of pure Ideas. Descartes held that 'I think, therefore I am'. Wittgenstein contended that there is no such thing as a language that I alone could understand. The simple thoughts of great philosophers become slogans, shibboleths, clichés, programmes. They are also vulnerable to misinterpretation, inflation, and distortion. We then get Platonism, Cartesianism, and so on; and it becomes a reasonable question to ask if Plato was ever a Platonist or Descartes a Cartesian.

It is much too soon for her work to have entered the history of philosophy in quite these ways but few who know what they are talking about would doubt that G.E.M. Anscombe, who died on 5 January 2001, a few weeks short of her eighty-second birthday, was in the handful of great philosophers of the twentieth century. As one of the literary executors, editors and translators of the work that Wittgenstein left behind when he died in 1951 she will always be remembered; indeed many of the phrases that philosophers cite from his *Philosophical Investigations* are actually hers, rather than his. When he speaks, graphically, of our being unable to understand people in a strange country with strange traditions even when we know their language, as being unable to 'find our feet with them', the image is not his but hers (*Investigations*, page 223). Most students of philosophy, who would not be able to read the original anyway, take it for granted that Anscombe's translation is what Wittgenstein wrote.

She will not, and should not, be remembered solely for her superb translation of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. In a narrowly Dominican context we remember she was instructed and received into the Catholic Church by Richard Kehoe at Blackfriars. Oxford; she arranged for Wittgenstein to have conversations in his last year or two with Conrad Pepler; her funeral Mass took place in the chapel at Blackfriars, Cambridge. She was also, in the wider world, a doughty exponent and defender of distinctively Catholic positions, particularly in ethical matters. She is remembered for her essay 'You can have Sex without Children' (a paper delivered before the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*): 'You might as well accept any sexual goings-on, if you accept contraceptive intercourse'. She should be remembered for 'War and Murder', in *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, edited by Walter Stein (1961), when she expounded the principle of double effect, lamenting however that 'Some Catholics are not scrupling to say that *anything* is justified in defence of the continued existence and liberty of the Church

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in the West'. She should be remembered for her CTS pamphlet on the doctrine of transubstantiation: 'It is easiest to tell what transubstantiation is by saying this: little children should be taught about it as early as possible'. There, of course, she is working in a distinctly late-Wittgensteinian mode: not meaning that little children should be taught the word but they should be initiated into a form of reverence at a certain point in the Mass. 'What is the primitive reaction', Wittgenstein asks, 'with which the language-game begins , which can then be translated into these words?' (*Investigations*, page 218).

Much of Anscombe's work is related to her little book, *Intention*, published in 1957, recently described by Donald Davidson, doyen of American philosophers, against whom she polemicized on occasion, as the most important contribution to understanding the nature of human action since Aristotle. She will be remembered for several other provocative arguments: whether the word 'I' *refers* to anything, for example. She will be remembered for her resistance to the utilitarianism which now almost completely dominates our culture (consequentialism, as she renamed it). With Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch she was at the forefront of the generation of young philosophers in Oxford in the 1950s who set out to challenge the then (and still) reigning moral philosophy, in her case (as in Foot's) recommending a return to Aristotle and what is now called virtue ethics (advocated by Peter Geach, Anscombe's husband, in his Stanton lectures at Cambridge in 1973–74). In her inaugural lecture at the University of Cambridge, when she succeeded to the chair once occupied by Wittgenstein, she challenged assumptions about causality that have been little questioned since they were put into place by Hume.

Above all, however, *Intention* is what will survive and be read as long as people are interested in will, responsibility and action. Her simple thought, perhaps inspired by Wittgenstein's declared suspicion of our inclination to locate intention in some mental state (*Investigations* § 653), is that, on the contrary, what our intentions are is normally plain in our actions. What modern philosophy has 'blankly misunderstood', to put it in technical terms, is 'what ancient and medieval philosophers meant by *practical knowledge*' (*Intention* § 32). More famously, perhaps, 'even though it can utter no thoughts, and cannot give expression to any knowledge of its own action, or to any intentions either', you only have to watch a cat, stalking a bird — 'crouching and slinking' — to be perfectly clear about its intention (§ 47).

It's a simple example, recapitulating her argument vividly and provocatively; it will be argued over for decades to come. As for the philosopher herself — *requiescat in pace.*

F.K.

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