

# The Modern Family and Modern Moral Philosophy: Anscombe's Legacy

David M. DiQuattro Ph.D.

## Introduction

G. E. M. ("Elizabeth") Anscombe (1919-2001) was one of the great philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her contributions to philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and philosophy of action are well known and well respected. She was a student of Wittgenstein, and he appointed her to be one of his literary executors. Her translation of his *Philosophical Investigations* is recognized as itself a great philosophical achievement. Anscombe's scholarly renown was not chiefly due to her work in ethics. Anscombe's article "Modern Moral Philosophy," however, is responsible for the rise and development of "virtue ethics" over the last 50 years. Anscombe's broad-side critique of the moral philosophy of her day began the so called "virtues revolution" in ethics which has injected life into a field that was pretty moribund in the mid-twentieth century.

Anscombe's writings on moral issues mainly come from lectures she gave to mostly Catholic audiences, or pieces she wrote to address particular issues. Many of these remained unpublished manuscripts until recently. Anscombe's daughter Mary Geach and Mary Geach's husband Luke Gormally have edited Anscombe's papers and published two volumes of material, much of it previously unpublished.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, following a brief biographical sketch, I introduce some core ideas from Anscombe's writings in ethics. I discuss her treatment of 'consequentialism'<sup>2</sup> at length. I argue that Anscombe's critique of consequentialism and her assessment of its role in the culture are

---

<sup>1</sup> The two volumes are as follows: G. E. M. Anscombe, *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005) and G. E. M. Anscombe, *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics*, eds. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008). Other writings on ethics by Anscombe are collected in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Vol. III* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Anscombe coined the term 'consequentialism' in G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, 33 (1958): 1-19. Reprinted in G. E. M. Anscombe, *Ethics*, 26-42.

largely correct. In the last section I examine what her ideas have to teach us about challenges to the modern family in connection with physical handicap. In light of the earlier discussion of the paper and in light of Anscombe's views of human dignity, I argue that our culture handles handicap badly and that Anscombe provides us with an alternative vision that respects human dignity in the context of physical handicap.

## **1 Biographical Sketch**

Anscombe was a remarkable person, and it is worth providing some sense of who she was in order to provide some context for her views and arguments in moral philosophy. She was born in Limerick, Ireland, in 1919. She converted to Catholicism in her late teens. She married Peter Geach, also a Catholic convert, and an important philosopher in his own right, in 1941. The couple had seven children.

Anscombe was a fellow of Sommerville College, Oxford from 1946-1970. In 1970, she was awarded a chair of philosophy at Cambridge University, where she remained until her retirement in 1986.

Anscombe seemed a contradiction to many. In many ways she seemed a very modern woman—she wore trousers long before that was widely acceptable for women, smoked cigars, and was known to wear a monocle. Yet she scandalized her Oxford colleagues with her traditional views of contraception, chastity, and marriage.<sup>3</sup>

Anscombe famously debated and defeated C.S. Lewis in a 1948 meeting of Oxford's Socratic Club. The debate focused on Lewis's criticisms of naturalism in his book *Miracles*. People have given different accounts of the effect this debate had on Lewis. A. N. Wilson has

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2014 ed., s.v. "Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe," Julia Driver, author, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/anscombe/> (accessed December 14, 2014).

even claimed that Lewis modeled the White Witch of the *Narnia* books on Anscombe.<sup>4</sup>

Anscombe's own assessment of the debate was as follows:

The meeting of the Socratic Club at which I read my paper has been described by several of [Lewis's] friends as a horrible and shocking experience . . . . My own recollection is that it was an occasion of sober discussion of certain quite definite criticisms, which Lewis' rethinking and rewriting showed he thought were accurate. I am inclined to construe the odd accounts of the matter by some of his friends . . . as an interesting example of the phenomenon called 'projection'.<sup>5</sup>

In 1956 Anscombe opposed Oxford awarding Harry Truman an honorary degree. In her view, Truman was guilty of mass murder due to his role in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Her opposition received quite a lot of attention in the press. Anscombe was also arrested several times in her seventies for blockading abortion clinics. This received considerably less attention in the press than her opposition to Truman's degree.

## 2 Anscombe and Consequentialism

Anscombe wrote on issues directly related to family life. In particular, she wrote on contraception, marriage, and chastity. I will not address these issues directly. Instead, I aim to provide a sense of the recurring ideas in her ethical writings. As important as her arguments about contraception are, I think it is useful to introduce her moral vision independent of the specific and controversial reasoning she employs regarding contraception.

"Modern Moral Philosophy" argued that moral philosophers had abandoned the rich Aristotelian categories that had shaped ancient and Christian ethics until the modern age. Anscombe also argued that all moral philosophy from Henry Sidgwick<sup>6</sup> to the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Alan Jacobs, "The Chronicles of Narnia," in *The Cambridge Companion to C.S. Lewis*, eds. Robert MacSwain and Michael Ward, 266-267 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> From Anscombe's introduction to G. E. M. Anscombe, *Metaphysics and Philosophy of Mind: Collected Philosophical Papers, Vol. II* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Henry Sidgwick, (1838-1900) was a very influential Cambridge philosopher whose classic work, *The Methods of Ethics* greatly, influenced subsequent moral philosophy.

present had endorsed what she called *consequentialism*. (Indeed there are deep connections between the rejection of Aristotle and the rise of consequentialism. I shall discuss some of these connections in the paper). She characterized consequentialism as any view that denies that there are ‘specifically wrong actions.’ A specifically wrong action is an action that is wrong because of the kind of action that it is – e.g., it is an intentional killing of an innocent person. Anscombe commented on the situation thus:

[E]very one of the best known English academic moral philosophers has put out a philosophy according to which, e.g., it is not possible to hold that it cannot be right to kill the innocent as a means to any end whatsoever and that someone who thinks otherwise is in error.... Now this is a significant thing: for it means that all these philosophies are quite incompatible with the Hebrew-Christian ethic. For it has been characteristic of that ethic to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever consequences threaten, such as choosing to kill the innocent for any purpose, however good; vicarious punishment; treachery...adultery; making a false profession of faith. The prohibition of certain things simply in virtue of their description as such-and-such identifiable kinds of action, regardless of any further consequences, is certainly not the whole of the Hebrew-Christian ethic; but it is a noteworthy feature of it; and if every academic philosopher since Sidgwick has written in such a way as to exclude this ethic, it would argue a certain provinciality of mind not to see this incompatibility as the most important fact about these philosophers, and the differences between them as somewhat trifling by comparison.<sup>7</sup>

It is important for my argument to recognize that Anscombe believed that the influence of consequentialism was not confined to academic moral philosophy. These ideas were profoundly reflected in cultural attitudes and actions.<sup>8</sup>

It will be helpful to have a few extended quotes from Anscombe before us in order to get a sense of the ‘flavor’ of her opposition to consequentialism and its cultural influence. Anscombe pulls no punches here. I will argue below that despite its apparent harshness, Anscombe’s assessment of the culture was largely accurate. Below is a well-known quote from “Modern

---

<sup>7</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> See, “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt Youth?” in Anscombe, *Human Life*, 161-167. Her argument there was that Oxford moral philosophy did not corrupt youth because it is “conceived perfectly in the spirit of the time and might be called the philosophy of the flattery of that spirit” (p. 167).

Moral Philosophy,” where Anscombe objects to consequentialism:

[I]t is clear that a good man is a just man; and a just man is a man who habitually refuses to commit or participate in any unjust actions for fear of any consequences, or to obtain any advantage, for himself or anyone else. Perhaps no one will disagree. But, it will be said, what is unjust is sometimes determined by expected consequences; and certainly that is true. But there are cases where it is not... 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.<sup>9</sup>

Consider also the following quote from Anscombe’s “Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt Youth?” (Note that her tongue is firmly in her cheek throughout this quote.):

Thus, both in the university and outside, people are surely getting rid of the merely legalistic and unphilosophical notion of the ‘nature and quality of an act.’ It survives in our older laws and hence in the minds of our judiciary, but newer laws are putting this right so far as concerns the essential business of calculating the improvement of the general state of affairs, as is shown by the correct legal decisions that I have cited; and that this is the correct procedure in making moral decisions is constantly taught in the university. A frequent occurrence that is much in the same spirit is the removal by authority of elderly widows from their dwellings, which anyone can see they are not keeping in accordance with the standards of hygiene which are desirable for their own and general welfare. How remote and alien—and indeed totally irrelevant—sounds the remark of Solomon ‘The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.’<sup>10</sup>

The idea of ‘the nature and quality of an act’ is an Aristotelian idea directly connected to the idea that certain actions are prohibited simply because they are bad sorts of things to do.

Consequentialists must deny the special relevance of the nature and quality of an act for determining what we should do.

Anscombe identified characteristic modes of reasoning in both philosophical and cultural discourse that lend support to consequentialism. These modes of reasoning consider some purported specifically wrong action type (e.g. securing the judicial execution of the innocent) and seek to find an (often outlandish) example where it would be permissible or even required to

---

<sup>9</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 40.

<sup>10</sup> Anscombe, “Philosophy Corrupt Youth?” 165.

perform that type of action.<sup>11</sup>

Below, I provide a characterization of how consequentialist reasoning works. I imagine an argument about the justification of torture and enhanced interrogation methods. Justifications of torture often proceed by discussing extreme cases.<sup>12</sup> For example, a bomb is ticking in Midtown New York, and you have detained the only person who knows the code to disarm the bomb, but he won't talk. Is it permissible to use torture if that is the only way to save millions of lives?

Consider a debate between two interlocutors, one opposed to the CIA's program of enhanced interrogation methods to deal with terrorism, and the other, not opposed. The person opposed to the CIA's program argues that it used torture and that torture is a bad sort of thing to do, and always wrong. His interlocutor provides the ticking time bomb example that tries to show that torture would be permissible in that case. Perhaps the CIA critic might circumscribe his formulation of the prohibition against torture. For example, he could re-describe the prohibition as 'it is always wrong to torture in such and such a way.' He could then argue that the CIA program violated *that* prohibition. But his interlocutor can provide a counterexample to that circumscribed principle and so on. Notice, to this point the defender of torture has not *directly* defended the actual procedures of the CIA. He has only provided counterexamples to proposed prohibitions related to torture.

After a few rounds of this kind of discussion, you can imagine the CIA defender reasoning with his interlocutor as follows:

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Anscombe, "Philosophy Corrupt Youth?" 163, and Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," 37.

<sup>12</sup> I am mainly speaking of discussions in popular discourse. I do not claim that ticking bomb cases are used this way in academic discussions.

“Look, you are not going to get very far trying to say that the CIA interrogation techniques were bad sorts of things to do, because we can always find an instance where a supposed bad type of action is permissible. There is a problem with the notion of avoiding ‘bad kinds of action.’ The problem is that you think people need to keep their hands clean by not intentionally doing base sorts of actions in horrible circumstances. And you say that if even *worse* things happen as a result of the person being unwilling to get his hands dirty, so be it. You want people to be able to claim *innocence* because of the intentional actions they avoid. But I’ve cast doubt on the idea that there are these ‘base kinds of actions.’ So there isn’t a basis for your scruple that there are certain things you ‘just shouldn’t do.’ Since that is the case, the impression of maintaining innocence by avoiding such actions is illusory. There is no escaping responsibility for what happens just because you avoided performing a supposedly base action. You have to take responsibility for everything that came of your actions and omissions and for everything that could have been avoided if you were willing to get over your misplaced scruples about things you ‘just shouldn’t do.’”<sup>13</sup>

Notice the result of this kind of reasoning. It calls into question whether the nature and quality of one’s act is relevant to determining its permissibility. The above reasoning undermines the following kind of thought: “Normally I would think it is good to avoid torture, but I suppose certain factors *could* outweigh the reasons not to engage in that action which is normally wrong.” Consequentialist reasoning undermines the idea that it would require extreme or dire circumstances to override a normally prohibited action. It does so by arguing that there is no *special* reason not to do *that kind of thing* since the nature and quality of your action is irrelevant to your guilt or responsibility. The reason certain actions are normally wrong has nothing to do

---

<sup>13</sup> In this paragraph, I have drawn heavily on Anscombe’s assessment of how the culture and modern moral philosophy conceives of issues of responsibility and prohibition in her “Philosophy Corrupt Youth?”

with the intrinsic quality of the action, but with *other* factors regarding what comes of the action.<sup>14</sup> So this reasoning allows one to justify torture in cases very different and less extreme than the examples the CIA defender cites. As long as what comes of the action is better than what you gain by avoiding torture, you are justified in using torture.

The consequentialist mode of debate exercises strong influence on public and popular discourse, whether or not those who deploy it are consistent consequentialists. I call the tendency to engage in this kind of argumentation ‘the consequentialist impulse.’

Anscombe gave an assessment of how consequentialist argument and the use of examples functioned in the culture:

The point of considering hypothetical situations, perhaps very improbable ones, seems to be to elicit from yourself or someone else a hypothetical decision to do something of a bad kind. I don’t doubt this has the effect of predisposing people— who will never get into the situations for which they have made hypothetical choices—to consent to similar bad actions, or to praise and flatter those who do them, so long as their crowd does so too, when the desperate circumstances imagined don’t hold at all.<sup>15</sup>

Anscombe diagnosed how the consequentialist impulse functions. One justifies doing a certain type of action in extreme circumstances. As I showed above, this kind of argument erodes confidence in the importance of the nature and quality of actions, so the idea that an act is bad presents no resistance to overriding considerations. We can see how this provides a formula for rationalizing bad actions in mundane circumstances when there is something (anything) to be gained from the bad action. Anscombe thought that the consequentialist impulse provided rationalizations for conventionally approved bad actions that have nothing to do with the consequentialist’s extreme examples.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> To be precise, the intrinsic nature can be relevant only insofar as it is an aspect of the overall state of affairs that an action brings about.

<sup>15</sup> Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 37.

<sup>16</sup> See Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 36-37 for Anscombe’s assessment of the conventional respectability



Anscombe's assessments of the culture can seem brisk and harsh, but there is much to be said for her assessments. It seems that in a number of important areas, part of justifying conventionally accepted behavior requires softening the idea of moral prohibitions. Abortion requires softening the idea that it is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being. I have already discussed the example of torture and enhanced interrogation. Lying provides another example. Alasdair MacIntyre (who has been heavily influenced by Anscombe) has written about our culture's erratic and inconsistent approach to lying.<sup>17</sup> Lying of various kinds seems to be accepted because the pattern of everyday life in modernity depends on it. And one way of allowing for this has surely been consequentialist style reasoning. In fact, the 'Nazi at the door case' (you are harboring Jews during the holocaust and a Nazi comes to your door and asks if there are any Jews inside) is a very recognizable instance of an example used to cast doubt on a prohibition that allows for exceptions far beyond the extreme case given in the example.

Anscombe's claims about the prevalence of the consequentialist impulse gain some plausibility when we consider related claims that Anscombe makes. The rejection of the idea of 'the nature and quality of the act' is emblematic of a more far-reaching loss of broadly Aristotelian ways of understanding nature, ethics, and the relations between the two. Anscombe elaborates on this loss in "Modern Moral Philosophy." In an Aristotelian framework, things have *natures* that specify their *functions*; these functions fit within the overall functioning of nature and society. In my view, the loss of these Aristotelian ideas is connected to the move toward *instrumentalization* in our culture. Instrumentalization involves using the powers and capabilities of things for the purposes we give to them. These purposes do not necessarily regard how they

---

of the prescriptions to be found in modern moral philosophy. See also Anscombe, "Philosophy Corrupt Youth?"

<sup>17</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Privatization of Good: An Inaugural Lecture," *Review of Politics*, 52 (1990): 344-361.

help or detract from the long-term flourishing of the things used. The categories of evaluation for the use of things are often *external* to the intrinsic flourishing of those things. So, to use an example from Wendell Berry, land use is evaluated based on how much the land *yields*, rather than the health and flourishing of the land so used.<sup>18</sup> Although it would take some elaboration, one can see the connection between the instrumentalist impulse that *imposes* purposes on things and the consequentialist impulse that disregards the nature and structure of action and only considers what comes of an action.

So the loss of Aristotelianism signals a loss of a conception of action as formative for us and for the world. So neither the intrinsic harm we do to the functioning of things nor the intrinsic nature of our actions hold any special weight in deliberations. Instead, the instrumental results of action (again, typically defined without reference to the functioning and flourishing of those things that contribute to the results) are primary in deliberation.

### **3 Consequentialism, Handicap, and the Family**

Anscombe believed that the consequentialist impulse was strong in the culture, and I think she was onto something. Furthermore, many critics have commented on the loss of an Aristotelian vision of the world and its replacement by confidence in technique—a confidence that severely downplays the intrinsic nature and flourishing of things and the formative power of our activities in the world.<sup>19</sup> From this point of view, it is not surprising that our way of life requires consequentialist reasoning that undermines prohibitions in order to make room for everyday bad behavior. The connection between consequentialism and the loss of

---

<sup>18</sup> See Wendell Berry, “Six Agricultural Fallacies” in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point Press, 1987), 123-132.

<sup>19</sup> See Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Jaques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Random House, 1964); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

Aristotelianism raises many issues for the family regarding the raising of children. I would like to focus on issues connected to physical handicaps. Our culture presents challenges to respecting the dignity of those with physical handicaps. So raising children with physical handicaps and raising children to respect the dignity of those with handicaps is challenging in our consequentialist culture. Exploring what Anscombe has to teach us about this issue will help us understand broader challenges to family life in our consequentialist culture.

Anscombe wrote a little on handicap, but not as much as she wrote on some other topics related to human dignity. I focus on handicap for a few reasons. In light of advances in biotechnology, reflection on handicap serves as a good window into how we think of the dignity of the human being. The requirements of respect for human beings with physical handicaps give the lie to some of the ambitions we have for biotechnology. Handicap, therefore, is a matter of human dignity that is handled extremely inconsistently and clumsily in the culture. Anscombe's treatments of consequentialism and human dignity are highly germane to addressing these challenges.

Anscombe says the following about human dignity. "There is just one impregnable equality of all human beings. It lies in the value and dignity of being a human being."<sup>20</sup> Anscombe's point here is that simply being a human being *all by itself* is the source of the fundamental respect owed to a human being. Anscombe does not *define* the value involved or the respect it entails, but gives us a sense of what is involved by example. She contrasts vengeful killing with the thought that the person *deserved it* with killing for convenience. She writes,

To regard someone as deserving death is very definitely regarding him, not just as a human being but as endowed with a dignity belonging to human beings, as having free will and as answerable for his actions. I am not defending the murderer I am imagining. He has not the right to kill his victim. But I am *contrasting* him with the murderer who is willing to kill someone for gain or other advantage.... *He* is

---

<sup>20</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "The Dignity of the Human Being" in Anscombe, *Human Life*, 67.

not respecting in his victim the dignity of a human being at all. Similarly with 'active euthanasia' which is non-voluntary on the part of the victim. He is to be killed because of the 'disvalue' of his life; his living is of negative value and so things are better with him dead.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly Anscombe thinks it is a violation of human dignity to weigh up the value of a human life against other goods. The dignity of the human being is such that the goods of a human's life cannot be weighed in that way. The value of the human being is 'incomparably higher,'<sup>22</sup> and thus, cannot be brought into any consequentialist calculus.

We cannot treat a human being's life as just one more value to be weighed because we are *answerable* to other human beings, and they are responsible to us and for their actions. So we must not treat others as objects simply to be used for our ends but as subjects to which our actions must be justifiable.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to precisely formulate this idea that our actions toward another must be justifiable *to* that person who is himself responsible and capable of responding to reasons. But the idea is familiar enough. A criminal might *prefer* not to be punished, but he is at least *capable* as a rational agent to see that his punishment is for the common good, and so accept the justification for that action toward him.<sup>24</sup>

It is crucial to recognize that Anscombe affirms the dignity of every *human being* rather than every *person*. The consequentialist impulse often operates with respect to human beings by distinguishing between *persons* and human beings. On typical accounts of personhood, persons must *exhibit* (not just have the capacity to develop) many of the characteristic powers of human

---

<sup>21</sup> Anscombe, "Dignity of the Human Being," 68-69.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is from Charles Taylor. See, e.g., his *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant tried to capture this thought by saying we must never treat human beings merely as means but always also as ends. See his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> He might fail to accept the justification, perhaps being in the grip of fear or self-interest, but that does not change the fact that our reasons can be good ones that we can offer to him as a rational agent.

beings to a fairly high degree, including complex reasoning and linguistic ability.<sup>25</sup> So on this kind of account, the unborn (and young children) have not yet met the threshold of personhood, while many aged lose their personhood, and seriously mentally handicapped human beings are incapable of becoming persons. Typically, these views claim that dignity attaches to *persons* rather than to all human beings.

Anscombe characterized the view that distinguishes persons and human beings thus:

A human being comes to be a person through the development of the characteristics which make something into a person. A human being in decay may also cease to be a person without ceasing to be a human being. In short: being a person is something that gets added to being a human being who develops properly, and that may disappear in old age and imbecility.<sup>26</sup>

Anscombe listed this view as one of twenty opinions common among Anglo-American philosophers. She commented on all twenty as follows:

A seriously believing Christian ought not, in my opinion, believe any of them...in saying these opinions are inimical to the Christian religion I am not implying that they can only be judged false on that ground. Each of them is a philosophical error and can be argued to be such on purely philosophical grounds.<sup>27</sup>

Anscombe's criterion for possession of human dignity was a *biological criterion*—being a member of the human species is sufficient to possess the special value and dignity discussed above. Anscombe understood the identity of human beings in Aristotelian/Thomistic terms.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the personhood criterion can be seen as an attempt to preserve some sense of the dignity of human beings without the broadly Aristotelian ethical framework that is needed to do the job. The concept of personhood as used in modern moral philosophy is a mystifying 'survival' from a

---

<sup>25</sup> The classic statement of this kind of view is in Mary Anne Warren, "The Moral and Legal Status of Abortion," *The Monist*, 57(1) (1973): 43-61.

<sup>26</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, "Twenty Opinions Common among Anglo-American Philosophers" in Anscombe, *Faith*, 66-67.

<sup>27</sup> Anscombe, "Twenty Opinions," 66, 68.

<sup>28</sup> See for example G. E. M. Anscombe, "The Early Embryo: Theoretical Doubts and Practical Certainties" in *Faith*, 214-223.

more coherent framework.<sup>29</sup>

This dispute over the criterion of dignity is clearly relevant to the dignity of those with physical handicaps.<sup>30</sup> According to the standard personhood view, seriously mentally handicapped humans do not satisfy the personhood standard, and hence do not possess the same dignity as other human beings. And I will suggest that employing a personhood standard for dignity also erodes our honoring the dignity of those with handicaps who *do* satisfy that standard.

Many individuals with physical handicaps will reach (currently defended) thresholds for personhood. So according to these personhood accounts, they possess human dignity. But this reasoning shows precisely what is wrong with a personhood account of dignity: It gives us, to adapt Bernard Williams's phrase, 'one thought too many' about a person's dignity.<sup>31</sup> According to personhood accounts, a (not too seriously) handicapped person has dignity because he is a human being *and* his handicap is not too serious.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the second part of that reasoning (the handicap is not too serious) is exactly the wrong thought with respect to physical handicaps. We care for those with handicaps because they need it, not because they need it *and their need is not serious enough to render them not a person*. But if personhood reasoning gives us one thought too many about the dignity of those with handicaps, it gives us one thought too many about *everyone's* dignity. On the personhood view, the conditions for *anyone* having dignity is not just that she is a human being but also that she is normal enough and hasn't suffered trauma or aging

---

<sup>29</sup> For Anscombe's discussion of modern moral concepts as mystifying survivals of a rejected moral framework, see "Modern Moral Philosophy."

<sup>30</sup> Throughout this section I mean the phrase 'those with physical handicaps' to also cover those with mental handicaps, since human mental handicaps are either physical conditions or inextricably tied up with our physicality.

<sup>31</sup> See Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality" in *Moral Luck*, 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> To be fair, many personhood accounts lend no special significance to being a human being that provides a presumption of respect over other species. On that kind of view, I have to admit that proponents don't want us to have one thought too many about dignity, but instead want us to have the *wrong thought*. They don't want parents of a seriously handicapped child to have the thought 'this is my child, so I will care for it'; they want them to have the thought 'this child who is mine does not have a handicap serious enough to render it not a person, so I will care for it.' Williams's 'one thought too many' phrase is still helpful here because it draws our attention to the fact that an idea *intrudes* into our deliberations that should not be there, even if we do not act badly in response to the idea.

to an extent that has removed her personhood. Anscombe raises this problem well in “The Dignity of the Human Being.” She writes:

This lack of reverence, of respect for that dignity of human nature so wonderfully created by God, is lack of regard for the one impregnable equality of all human beings. Lacking it, you cannot revere the dignity of your own human-ness, that is the dignity of that same human nature in yourself. You may value yourself highly as a tennis player or a natural scientist, but without a change of heart you cannot value yourself as being a human, a Mensch. For you have shewn the value you set on a human life as such. You are willing to extinguish it as suits you or as suits the people who want you to do so.<sup>33</sup>

A related problem for the personhood account is that it presents obstacles to seeing the dignity *of* those with physical handicaps, even if it grants them personhood. Consider someone with a mental disorder that nonetheless crosses the threshold of mental capacity to be a person according to the standard account. Someone with the personhood view has to see that person’s disability as presenting a threat to her personhood that nonetheless hasn’t managed to prevent her from being a person. The best gloss on this is to say that according to a standard personhood view, she is a person *despite* her handicap. This is exactly the wrong way to think of those with handicaps. It fails to see the dignity and value in the way those with handicaps ‘stick themselves into the world’<sup>34</sup> in ways that negotiate the challenges of doing so. That is why I say they fail to see the dignity *of* those with physical handicaps. Indeed, the personhood view fails to properly appreciate the centrality to human life of negotiating the weakness, frailties, and challenges of our bodies and the world.<sup>35</sup>

It is my view that the personhood standard of dignity and the consequentialist impulse work in tandem in the culture with respect to ideas about dignity and how to handle weakness,

---

<sup>33</sup> Anscombe, “Dignity of the Human Being,” 72.

<sup>34</sup> I owe this phrase to my colleague Collin Messer.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that doing this well is a *condition* of an individual possessing the value and dignity of a human being. It is simply to say that this sort of thing is so tied up with the human ‘form of life’ that it is impossible to understand the value of human life without taking adequate stock of this.

frailty and infirmity. Certainly, consequentialist reasoning plays a big role in justifying programs of human genetic engineering, and these programs present serious threats to treating people with handicaps with dignity. And consequentialism *always* gives us one thought too many about human dignity. (I would never do *that* sort of bad action...well, *unless*...).

Both the personhood account of dignity and consequentialism have the same problem regarding dignity, and the problem comes into stark relief when thinking about physical handicap. Because of their physical infirmities, those with handicaps have a *harder* time than others showing that they pass muster to not have their persons and bodies violated for some end. We have seen how this works in the case of the personhood view of dignity. But the same structure holds for consequentialism. Many people with handicaps *in virtue of their handicaps* are less capable of enjoying and producing whatever good end a given consequentialist view seeks to maximize than they would be without their handicap. Insofar as that is the case, on a consequentialist view, it is easier to justify actions toward them that would normally count as violations of dignity for the sake of good ends to be enjoyed by others who do not share these infirmities.

This problem is pervasive in deliberation that aligns with the personhood view of dignity or consequentialism. The weakest and most vulnerable typically count less in these deliberations, which is exactly the opposite of what respect for human beings demands. But the problem does not show up as starkly in issues like active euthanasia or abortion. In the case of active euthanasia, the act is ostensibly done to ease the suffering of the person who is killed. Abortion presents the complexities of the mother's bodily integrity. Thinking about handicap shows us the problem clearly. I think it is clear that these views lead us to think about handicap in exactly the wrong way. The idea of human dignity does not place a *higher* burden on those with infirmities



to justify their rights not to be violated. The idea of human dignity means that we are *protected* regardless of our infirmities from those who would exploit or violate us for some end.

These issues raise many challenges for parents and expecting parents, whether or not they are raising children with physical handicaps. I will focus on one. The challenge has to do with the testing for physical handicap, especially through pre-natal and post-natal genetic testing.

Testing has become an integral part of becoming a parent. This makes sense in light of Anscombe's assessment of our cultural ambitions and moral commitments. The loss of a broadly Aristotelian notion of the nature and quality of an act, and a corresponding elevation of the importance of what comes of our actions has meant in our culture an elevation of the importance of *technique* to achieve the good ends we want to come of our actions.<sup>36</sup> Testing, particularly genetic testing, means greater awareness not only about genuine handicaps and disorders but of all manner of frailties, disease proclivities, and potential problems for future offspring (e.g. if a tested child has an allele for a disorder inherited in a recessive pattern).

The knowledge gained by testing is highly problematic in a culture where personhood standards of dignity and the consequentialist impulse work in tandem in the ways I have suggested. Testing allows us to identify a host of ways in which a person's life (or the lives of their potential offspring) could be compromised as a result of the person's genetic makeup. As our ability to detect these potential problems increases along with our ability to reduce the incidence of people born with these problems—through selective abortion and genetic engineering—I think the following will happen (and is happening): All manner of genetic anomalies, deficiencies, and potential problems will be handled the same way that physical handicap is treated in the culture. And I have argued that physical handicap is handled quite badly indeed. The point is that *all* or *most* children will have to grow up in, and learn to negotiate

---

<sup>36</sup> See Taylor, *Ethics*, and Ellul, *Technological Society*.

a world, in which knowledge of their various genetic frailties is readily available and where these genetic frailties are handled in a manner inconsistent with human dignity. So it is crucial that parents understand the problems with the way physical handicap is treated in the culture. They must have a sense of the threats to the dignity of those with handicaps as well as the threats of testing to the dignity of all children. They must understand the way in which full genetic testing is taken as an unmitigated good in some circles of the medical community.

Family life is not the only context in which the cultural trajectories regarding human dignity will be relevant. But the obvious implications these trajectories have for what it means to procreate, to have and raise children, and to teach them to acknowledge the dignity of themselves and others make family life fundamental to how all of this will play out. The ends of two of Anscombe's essays—"The Dignity of the Human Being" and "Morality"—summarize these points more eloquently and forcefully than I could. I will quote both, and close by briefly commenting on the closing line of the second quote. First, the ending of the "Dignity of the Human Being" which I have been discussing at length:

Like very many people I have observed something of the celebrations of VE Day, celebrations of the victory of the allies over Nazi Germany. I have been bitterly amused at the solemn pratings about how the human spirit shewed that it could not be suppressed; the love of freedom must win in the end—but, it was added, we must never forget, because we must be resolved never to let such things happen again. We must remain in the sun of morality triumphant over evil; we must preserve our happy state and be determined to fight against monstrous evils when they threaten. 'Fools!' I thought. 'You talk of being armed in spirit against possible future threats of evil. You seem all unconscious of living in an actually murderous world.' Each nation that has 'liberal' abortion laws has rapidly become, if it was not already, a nation of murderers. There are nearly a million abortions in the United States every year (perhaps more now) and in my own country it is proportionate. I assume that it is about the same in any advanced nation that has embraced abortion.<sup>37</sup>

And the closing of "Morality":

---

<sup>37</sup> Anscombe, "Dignity of the Human Being," 72-73.

To quote Scripture: ‘The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.’ Remember that we have just been celebrating one of those ‘Years’ that are announced nowadays: the ‘Year of the Disabled’. And one of the ways in which we celebrated it in this country was to have the green light given to people who want to kill babies that their parents don’t want. We have landed up in the position of an alcoholic who has installed a thousand gallons of ethyl alcohol, assuring everybody—and himself—that he doesn’t mean to drink it at all, but he must have it, just in case. We are, in short, surrounded by murder. The second great sin recorded in Scripture. The first was disobedience, the second murder.

The belief that murder is something absolutely prohibited, that those whose feet are swift to shed innocent blood are utterly condemned, used not to be a peculiarity of those who conformed to the Christian religion, Protestant or Catholic. It is rapidly becoming, and I hope it will really become, a mark of those who adhere to the Catholic religion, at least. But we are surrounded by murder. First, a million or so abortions; second, the sophisticated weaponry we have recently been told about for overcoming the sophisticated defences of the city of Moscow; and third, the policy of killing born babies. And I mention murder because the prohibition of it is one of the most grave of the divine prohibitions. Take away justice, said St. Augustine, and what are governments but Mafias? That is the situation we are in; and we ought to regard ourselves, as we do not, I fear, as separate.<sup>38</sup>

“That is the situation we are in; and we ought to regard ourselves, as we do not, I fear, as separate.” In both quotes Anscombe chides us for our naïveté about the world we live in and its proneness to disregard and abuse human dignity, sometimes in the name of humanitarian ends (“The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel.”). Her comment that we do not regard ourselves as separate serves as a good way to sum up my paper. The consequentialist impulse is pervasive, and we are all prone to it. And it is part of a culture that does not know what to do or say about human frailty or handicap, and therefore, cannot respect human dignity. But we are entrenched in that culture, and our institutions for raising and educating children do not help them understand the ways we must be separate in order to respect human dignity. ‘And that is my complaint.’<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> G. E. M. Anscombe, “Morality” in Anscombe, *Faith*, 116.

<sup>39</sup> This line is the closing line of Anscombe’s “Modern Moral Philosophy.”