

A Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy

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Elisabeth Anscombe, in her 1958 article “Modern Moral Philosophy,” criticized modern moral philosophy for its preoccupation with a legal conception of ethics.¹ The theories she criticized were Mill’s utilitarianism and Kant’s deontology. These approaches to ethics rely on universal principles that are derived from the legal conception of ethics of Christianity. According to Anscombe, it is impossible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver. In its place, she called for a different way of doing moral philosophy. Taking her inspiration from Aristotle, she advocated a return to concepts such as character, virtue and flourishing. Much of Charles Taylor’s and Alasdair MacIntyre’s works on ethics can be read as addressing the matters that Anscombe had thrust into the foreground.

Under the influence of liberal neutrality or what Taylor calls “procedural liberalism,”² modern moral theory

1 G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19.

2 Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Argument* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 186.