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Reply: Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe on Moral Unintelligibility

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There are two ways in which philosophers have tended to approach the question of how atheism and morality bear on one another: (1) by asking, broadly, whether morality *in toto* presupposes religious belief, and (2) by asking, more narrowly, whether the demise of religious belief has corroded *certain* features of morality. It is worth distinguishing these two ways of approaching the question. For even if one takes it to be obvious that atheism and morality are broadly compatible, that can still leave open whether certain features of our moral inheritance are at peril. Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe are three philosophers who approach the question in the second way and all three advance some version of the following thesis: in the wake of the demise of a Christian tradition of religious thought and practice, we are left with certain concepts which continue to appear – but which no longer are – intelligible.

My ultimate aim in this paper is neither to defend nor to attack the *specific* charges of moral unintelligibility which figure in the writings of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe, but simply to

clarify their logical structure in order to make clear what, in each instance, *would* count as a successful rebuttal of such a charge.[1] I hope thereby to shed some light on a widely misunderstood line of thought that runs throughout the work of this trio of provocative – and otherwise, in many respects, remarkably different – thinkers.

These three philosophers seem to be open to the following objection. They want to single out some particular (moral) concept presently in currency and mount a critique of it – a critique which purports to show the concept to be unintelligible. Yet in order to convince us that that particular concept is unintelligible, it would appear that these authors first need to make out *which* concept they have in mind. But if they can succeed in making this out, then – so the objection goes – they have undermined their own claim. For them to be able to single out the concept (which is to serve as the target of their critique) as *this* rather than some other concept, mustn't the concept at issue be at least a minimally intelligible one? If they can make out which concept is at issue, then they may go on to show that that concept (or any statement in which it occurs) is somehow incoherent, incredible, or otherwise flawed, but they are no longer in a position to claim that the concept in question is unintelligible. For that would amount to showing that there is *no* concept at issue, and hence nothing for their critique to be a critique of.

This objection harbours an important point (to which I will return): a point about the self-undermining nature of the charge – a charge that Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe each appears to be concerned to level – that someone is not just *saying* something unintelligible, but employing a particular concept outside the conditions which allow for its intelligibility. I will be concerned to argue that it is a misunderstanding to think that this point represents an objection to the charge of unintelligibility which is levelled in the writings of these three philosophers. But, before turning to consider why, I will first explore a related objection advanced by R. W. Beardsmore in his stimulating paper 'Atheism and Morality'.[2]

I BEARDSMORE ON ATHEISM AND MORALITY

Why atheism today? – God has been thoroughly refuted ... [Yet] it seems to me that the religious instinct is in the process of growing

powerfully – but the theistic satisfaction it now refuses with deep suspicion.

<div align="right">Friedrich Nietzsche[3]</div>

Beardsmore wants to show that we can be atheists and hang on to morality, too. In so far as his aim is to secure the thesis that we can be atheists and still make perfectly good sense of a great deal of our moral discourse, I am in agreement with him. In so far as his thesis is that the intelligibility of none of the central moral concepts of Western culture depend[4] on a prior tradition of religious thought and practice, I am not in agreement with him. I will call the former 'the unexciting thesis' and the latter 'the interesting thesis'. Beardsmore seems to slide back and forth between them. He begins his paper by circumscribing the category of views he wishes to criticise as follows:

> I have in mind the view that atheism is unreasonable, or in some way intellectually inadequate, because it is incapable of doing justice to the role that moral considerations play in our lives, or to put it rather more bluntly, but also more elegantly, because if God did not exist, then everything would be permitted.[5]

Initially we are told that the target of the paper is the view that atheism is not capable of 'doing justice to the role that moral considerations play in our lives'. Does this mean that Beardsmore is concerned to criticise only those views according to which atheism is unable to do justice to the role *any* moral considerations play in our lives? Apparently not, for later on he makes it clear that it suffices to place a view within his target-range if it involves the more modest claim that '*certain* central features of our morality . . . derive from a religious background' (my emphasis).[6] An effective criticism of this latter claim would be of considerable philosophical interest since it plays an important role in the writings of the three philosophers with whom this paper is concerned. But nothing in the thought of any of these three thinkers is felicitously paraphrased by the blunt and elegant formula which Beardsmore borrows from Ivan Karamazov: 'if God did not exist, then *everything* would be permitted'. (Ivan's worry is that once a religious framework is no longer in place *no* feature of morality will survive.)

The three thinkers with whom this essay is concerned are all

only too aware that the subtraction of a belief in God from our system of beliefs can appear (as it does to Beardsmore) to be without consequence for our moral thought or practice. Their question is not: does the absence of a belief in God *appear to us* to affect the kinds of moral thought available to us? (They assume that, on the whole, it appears not to: that is what each of them – each in a very different way – takes to be the problem.) Their question rather is: does the disappearance of God, *despite* its apparent lack of consequence, in some way (presently invisible to us) determine the sorts of shape our moral thought can, in His absence, intelligibly assume?

To assuage a worry of this sort one needs to do more than just show that Ivan's inference (from God's non-existence to everything being permitted) involves a *non sequitur*. Thus Beardsmore's way, in the above passage, of 'more bluntly, but also rather more elegantly' reformulating the import of the views he wishes to criticise does not merely reformulate, but actually significantly narrows, the range of views which fall under the scope of his criticisms. The blunt and elegant reformulation lends his discussion the appearance of offering a criticism which applies equally to an Ivan Karamazov and an Elizabeth Anscombe – to the antitheses of both the unexciting thesis and the interesting thesis. What we need to see more clearly is how very different an Elizabeth Anscombe is from an Ivan Karamazov. I will therefore, first, briefly indicate why I think the unexciting thesis both true and unexciting. I will then outline the form which the antithesis of Beardsmore's interesting thesis takes in the thought of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe, and explain why I think Beardsmore's arguments against it fail to engage it.

II KARAMAZOV, NIELSEN AND KOLAKOWSKI

As soon as men have all of them denied God . . . everything will begin anew . . . [E]veryone who recognizes the truth even now may legitimately order his life as he pleases, on the new principles. In that sense, 'all things are lawful' for him.

<div align="right">Ivan Karamazov[7]</div>

Ivan Karamazov's view of the relation between religion and morality is clear enough: to deny God is to eradicate the distinction

between those things which are permitted and those which are not. Dostoevsky's aim in vividly depicting the character of Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* is in part to make explicit what he takes to be the implicit nihilism of his contemporaries – to make explicit the degree to which the modern atheist has deprived himself of a basis for any coherent conception of moral obligation.[8] A rigorous and honest atheist should, Dostoevsky thinks, acknowledge that he is no longer *bound* by moral principles (though he can, of course, continue to conform his behaviour to their requirements 'as he pleases'). Beardsmore begins his paper by criticising two philosophers – Kai Nielsen (an atheist) and Leszek Kolakowski (a theist) – whose views belong to Ivan Karamazov's end of the spectrum of possible views concerning the relation between atheism and morality.[9]

Nielsen's aim is to argue against the claim that atheism undermines morality. This would appear sharply to distinguish him from someone like Dostoevsky (who was concerned precisely to uphold such a claim). According to Beardsmore, Nielsen arrives at his conclusion by way of an argument which turns on the assumption that morality rests on conventions which we are free to accept or reject as we choose. Beardsmore quotes the following lines from Nielsen:

> If we look at morality with the cold eye of the anthropologist, we will find morality to be nothing more than the conflicting mores of the various tribes spread around the globe. If we look at ethics from a purely secular view, we will discover that it is constituted by tribal conventions, conventions which we are free to reject . . . We can continue to act in accordance with them or we can reject them and adopt a different set of conventions.[10]

According to Beardsmore, Nielsen seeks to argue against the claim that 'if God did not exist, then everything would be permitted' by arguing that what is (or is not) permitted does not depend on God's existence but rather on a set of social conventions which any individual with capacity for critical reflection is free to either accept or reject. Now the fact that someone who does not believe in God (as Nielsen avowedly does not) is inclined to conclude that what is permitted is ultimately a matter of individual choice would hardly come as news to Dostoevsky. Indeed, there is much in the thought that Nielsen (as summarised by Beardsmore) is a

version of the sort of urbane, complacent atheist whose implicit nihilism Dostoevsky sought to expose. Though Nielsen wishes to question the relevance of the antecedent (concerning God's existence) to the consequent (concerning what is permitted) in Ivan's famous conditional, he still ends up in much the same place as Ivan. For he is willing to affirm something very close to the conclusion of Ivan's worry. He is willing to affirm that, in principle, just about anything *could* be permitted (it simply depends upon what 'conventions' you choose to follow).

It is the possibility of the existence of a divine law-giver which, for Ivan, introduces the possibility of genuinely distinguishing between what is permitted and what merely appears ('from a purely secular view') to be permitted. For Nielsen, there is nothing left to play this role and thus it is a contingent (partly sociological, partly psychological) matter what, for a given individual, is and is not permitted – one which could, in principle, be revised through an act of choice. Thus, according to Nielsen, something is only morally prohibited for me, in so far as I choose to accept a set of conventions which stipulate that matters of the relevant sort are prohibited. The fundamental resemblance between Nielsen and Ivan lies in the fact that they both want to go on speaking of what is and is not 'lawful', even though they urge upon us a conception according to which, in reality, nothing is any longer prohibited. They both employ a quasi-legal terminology of 'permission' and 'prohibition' as if it retained its original force, while having detached it from the framework of conceptual connections in which it is at home – a framework in which it only makes sense to speak of a person as prohibited from doing something if the prohibition has its source in something other than that person's choice to refrain from doing it.

Kolakowski wants to employ a variant of Ivan's reasoning – in much the same spirit as Dostoevsky himself – to mount a *reductio ad absurdum* of atheism. Kolakowski revises Ivan's conditional by substituting a version of Nielsen's conclusion as consequent, but takes Nielsen's *modus ponens* as his *modus tollens*: it's absurd to think that what is (and what is not) morally permitted is a matter of mere convention, therefore God exists. Kolakowski's reasoning parallels that of Ivan and Nielsen in that he agrees with them that without God we are free to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong:

This is the sense in which the saying 'if there is no God, everything is permissible' seems right to me ... [A]n imperative demanding that I be guided only by norms which I might wish to be universal has itself no logical or psychological foundation; I can reject it without falling into contradiction, and I may admit it as a supreme guideline only by virtue of an arbitrary decision unless it appears within the context of religious worship ... When Pierre Bayle argued that morality does not depend on religion ... he pointed out that atheists are capable of achieving the highest moral standard ... That is obviously true as far as it goes, but this matter-of-fact argument leaves the question of validity intact ... A Christian apologist may admit the facts and still consistently argue ... that atheists owe their virtues to a religious tradition they have managed partially to preserve in spite of their false philosophy.[11]

Beardsmore is surely right to think that the alternatives represent by Nielsen, on the one hand, and Kolakowski, on the other, present us with a specious dilemma: either our moral values are fixed by divine decree or they are the result of individual choice. A multitude of assumptions need to be in place before such a dilemma even begins to seem to exhaust our philosophical alternatives – in particular, assumptions which position the concept of choice (in relation to our moral emotions, convictions and actions) so as to leave no adequate foothold for the concept of moral *judgement*. To mention only four such assumptions:

1. There is the assumption that everything which forms part of our cultural inheritance is a 'convention' – something which we can, without further ado, simply choose to accept or reject. (Can we simply *choose* when and where we feel horror or shame or awe? Can we just choose what we are to count as meretricious or courageous or cruel?)
2. There is the assumption that – in the absence of an overarching sovereign or divine law-giver – in so far as our moral choices are constrained, the source of that constraint is to be explicated in causal rather than normative terms (in terms of sociological or psychological forces, rather than rational demands, to which we are subject).
3. There is the assumption that if we look at ethics 'from a purely secular view', we will discover that what is right is ultimately

'constituted' by what people in 'our tribe' think is right. (It is thus simply assumed that any view which is 'purely secular' no longer has the available resources to distinguish between what our tribe *thinks* is right and what *is* right.)
4. There is the assumption that if an individual is faced with a moral dilemma – circumstances in which he is torn as to what he ought to do, or in which he and someone whom he regards as fully reasonable (and perhaps even admirable) respectfully disagree about what one ought to do – then he arrives at his course of action by simply 'choosing' between two conflicting 'valuations'. (A soldier who on conscientious grounds disobeys a commanding officer – whom he respects and admires – may be described as 'choosing to disobey', but does he therefore *choose* to be in moral disagreement with his commander?)

I draw attention to these four assumptions (which are shared by Nielsen and Kolakowski) only to bring out some of the many steps which need to be taken before one can move at all easily from rejection of the claim that 'what is right and what is wrong is determined by God's commands' to acceptance of the claim that 'what is right and what is wrong is constituted by conventions we are free to accept or reject'.[12]

Once we put aside these ways of thinking about what the immediate ethical costs of atheism might be, where does that leave the views of philosophers – such as Nietzsche or Kierkegaard or Anscombe – who think that it is, nonetheless, the case that (to quote Beardsmore) 'certain central features of morality *do* derive from a religious background which we once all shared'? Beardsmore seems to think that it is a short step from the sorts of considerations which impugn the views of a Nielsen or a Kolakowski to those that would allow us to dismiss the views of an Anscombe. It is at this point that Beardsmore's paper seems to me to move much too quickly.

III NIETZSCHE

'Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we

have killed him . . . There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.' Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and started at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. 'I have come too early,' he said then; 'my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightening and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars – and yet they have done it themselves.'

Friedrich Nietzsche[13]

A feature of Beardsmore's paper worth pausing over is its tacit suggestion that the thesis in question – that certain central features of morality derive from a religious tradition we once all shared – is one which necessarily is more attractive to someone who seeks to enter the theistic side of a quarrel between theism and atheism. One need only briefly consider the example of Nietzsche in order to realise that the thesis in question can function as a double-edged sword in that quarrel. Nietzsche's interest in such a thesis is as an instrument of moral reform. Nietzsche's way of disenchanting his reader with certain features of traditional morality – and of calling for a 'transvaluation' of those values – is to underscore the manner in which those values depend upon a now (as he was fond of putting it) 'bankrupt' tradition of religious thought. Nietzsche sees Christianity as providing a foundation for the relevant features of traditional morality in at least three different ways: (1) intellectual, (2) practical, and (3) physiological. I will say a little about each.

For Nietzsche, first Judaism and then Christianity provided an intellectual foundation for morality by articulating a theological framework in which one could make sense of the idea that certain moral principles are absolutely binding. His paradigm of such principles are the Ten Commandments. Nietzsche argues that it is only against the background of a conception of moral principles as expressions of the will of God that one is in a position to make sense of the idea that such principles are universally binding. Nietzsche, however, unlike Ivan Karamazov, does not hold that the present intellectual bankruptcy of the Christian con-

ception of an absolute moral order entails that one is now no longer bound by moral principles. Nietzsche has a name for such a view: nihilism. It represents a position which he predicts will become dominant in Western culture and which he views as both philosophically and ethically pernicious. Nietzsche describes nihilism as 'the sickness of our times', Christianity as 'the poison which brings on the sickness', and 'the task of the philosopher of the future' as one of providing 'the antidote'. Ivan Karamazov could serve as the prototype of the open-eyed nihilist.[14] Although Ivan is no longer able to believe in God, he knows that he is consumed by nostalgia for Him – and it is this piece of self-knowledge which distinguishes him from what Nietzsche likes to call 'the typical English moral philosopher' (that is, the typical urbane atheist). Nihilism is Nietzsche's name for the condition of melancholia we enter into when we are unable properly to mourn the death of God. Nietzsche's aim is to try to keep his reader from lapsing, out of a disappointment with the loss of the God of Christianity, into a refusal to countenance anything less than a surrogate deity as a possible source of value. He sees his readers as prone to recoil, out of the disillusionment brought on by the collapse of a highly specific, culturally entrenched metaphysical conception of the nature of value into its metaphysical mirror-image: a nihilistic conception of the nature of value – a conception which drains all values of their prescriptive force.

Christianity, however, according to Nietzsche, is not necessarily – and was not always – poison. It was, under earlier historical and cultural conditions, an important instrument in the development of civilisation and the enhancement of human potential:

> This fact can never be sufficiently pondered: Christianity is the religion of antiquity grown old; the presupposition of its existence is an ancient culture now degenerated . . . The Christianity of that culture . . . is now a balm only for someone who wanders through those past centuries as an historian . . . Otherwise . . . Christianity is poison.[15]

Nietzsche says here that a particular culture – a particular way of life – is a presupposition of the existence of Christianity. His point here and elsewhere does not rest on the twofold claim (commonly attributed to him) (1) that it is only possible to hold certain beliefs at certain times (though surely that is true) and (2)

that since the culture of antiquity has crumbled it is now no longer really possible to believe in God (which is surely false). Nietzsche's point here, rather, rests on the following thought: Christianity forms an integral part of a particular conception of how to live, one which grew up under particular historical and cultural circumstances, and is not properly comprehended when conceived apart from those circumstances. The point is directed against an alternative way of conceiving of Christianity: namely, merely as a system of *beliefs* – and thus in complete abstraction from the *practice* of a particular way of life:

> It is false to the point of absurdity to see in a 'belief', perchance the belief in a redemption through Christ, the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian: only Christian *practice*, a life such as he who died on the cross *lived*, is Christian ... *Not* a belief but a doing, above all a *not*-doing of many things, a different *being* ... States of consciousness, beliefs of any kind, holding something to be true for example ... are a matter of complete indifference ... To reduce being a Christian, Christianness, to a holding something to be true, to a mere phenomenality of consciousness, means to negate Christianness.[16]

Nietzsche's point is, first, one about what Christianity is, and, second, one about the conditions of the meaningfulness of a great many of our moral (and not only moral[17]) concepts: (1) what it is to be a Christian is to live a certain sort of life (modelled on the one that he who died on the cross lived), and (2) the meaning of those moral concepts which Christianity has bequeathed to us is internal to their application within the context of such a life.[18]

'It is false to the point of absurdity', Nietzsche says, to conceive of what it is to be a Christian in the manner in which philosophers tend to: to see the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian as a matter of an individual's adherence to a particular belief. Thus Nietzsche, as we shall see, agrees with Kierkegaard on the following grammatical point: only an individual engaged in a life of Christian practice is a Christian. But Nietzsche identifies such a practice with 'above all a *not*-doing of many things'. Christianity means, for Nietzsche, above all a life of *ascetic* practice – a life in which the individual goes to war against all his natural instincts: a life in which the individual first disciplines, then masters and ultimately transforms himself through the discipline, mas-

tery and transformation of his desires.[19] Christianity's glorious legacy to modern man, in Nietzsche's eyes, lies in its refinement of the discipline of *askesis*: 'the labour performed by man on himself' through which he learns to attain forms of 'mastery over himself'.[20] Christianity's inglorious legacy is nihilism – a nihilism brought on by the fact that the transformative potential of its values has been exhausted: what began as a call for a heroic effort of voluntary restraint is now culturally transmitted as a form of second nature. This is what Nietzsche means by his extraordinary claim that the ascetic ideal has brought about not only a philosophical and psychological but also a *physiological* metamorphosis of the human animal. An individual is Christian, for Nietzsche, to the extent that he exhibits what Nietzsche will hyperbolically refer to as a 'certain organization of instinct'.[21] Nietzsche sees most of us today as morally mutilated half-Christians. Christianity has left its mark on each of us through its having forged a certain relation between intellect and instinct, through its having determined what now seems to us a *natural* configuration of thought and desire. A responsible critique of Christianity, on Nietzsche's view, owes us not only a critique of that configuration, but also a vision of an alternative one – a vision of how we should seek to shape ourselves, of what sorts of beings we should strive to become.

Just as Nietzsche thinks 'it is false to the point of absurdity to see in a "belief" ... the distinguishing characteristic of Christianity', so he also thinks it is false to the point of absurdity to see any honest attempt to repudiate Christianity as having no implications for our ways of living and being. Nietzsche thinks that there may be a sense in which many of us are now able to decide not to believe in God, but he does not think we can just *decide* not to be shaped by Christian values. He does not think that ceasing to be a Christian is a matter of merely changing one's beliefs, but rather of changing one's self. (It is precisely this practical task of transforming ourselves, divesting ourselves of the ways in which Christianity has shaped us, that Nietzsche wishes to recommend to us.[22]) Hence the overcoming of Christianity for Nietzsche lies not in the disappearance of a certain belief, but in a radical transformation of human existence into an existence no longer informed by Christian practice – no longer shaped by a Christian conception of what is valuable. It is a transformation that Nietzsche thinks is well under way but only half-completed; and here lies the source, he thinks, of our present awkward relation to our values. Each

one of our evaluative concepts is internally related to, and often presupposes, a great many of the others; yet some are evidently obsolete, others indispensable – and, finally, some are of the sort which interest Kierkegaard and Anscombe as well: they appear indispensable but are in fact obsolete.

In Nietzsche's parable of the madman – which forms the epigraph to this section of the paper – we are told that the audience the madman addresses is comprised of 'many of those who did not believe in God'.[23] What those who do not believe in God do not know – and as yet, according to the madman, are unable to understand – is that God does not all of a sudden, at some point, simply cease to exist. Rather, God *dies*, and his death is a slow business. The madman sees the unfolding of the death of God where his audience sees only the onward march of progress and enlightenment.[24] The madman seems mad, provoking the laughter of those who do not believe in God, in his frantic insistence that we should prepare ourselves for the repercussions of this event – the death of God – which is now unfolding. Yet the time will come when even the most urbane of atheists will be able to smell the divine decomposition. The stench is not yet overpowering and so, at present, those who do not believe in God are able to imagine that the death of God marks nothing more than a change in what people should now 'believe'. One should now subtract the belief in God from one's body of beliefs; and this subtraction is something sophisticated people (who have long since ceased going to church) can effect without otherwise unduly upsetting how they live or what they value. The madman, on the other hand, thinks this tremendous event – the death of God – is still on its way. It will have arrived, not when people no longer believe in God, but when people realise that they are no longer able to make sense of many of the values in accordance with which they presently imagine they live. The process of divine decomposition is one in which many of the words which name the old values are gradually drained of their original meaning.

The most paradoxical aspect of the madman's message – that this event has already happened and yet is still on its way – forms a bond between Nietzsche's thought and that of both Kierkegaard and Anscombe. All three see us as prone to illusions of intelligibility when we draw upon moral and religious vocabulary. The fact that our moral discourse does not *seem to us* to lack intelligibility (and hence the fact that the question of its intelligibility

does not seem in any way tied to questions concerning the vitality of Christian modes of thought and practice) is not to be taken as a reliable index of when, and in what sort of ways, we are presently able to make moral sense.

IV   KIERKEGAARD

If then, according to our assumption, the greater number of people in Christendom only imagine themselves to be Christians, in what categories do they live? They live in aesthetic, or, at the most in aesthetic–ethical categories.

Supposing then that a religious writer has become profoundly attentive to this illusion, Christendom, and has resolved to attack it with all the might at his disposal – what then is he to do? First and foremost, no impatience. If he becomes impatient, he will rush headlong against it and accomplish nothing. A direct attack only strengthens a person in his illusion, and at the same time embitters him. There is nothing that requires such gentle handling as an illusion, if one wishes to dispel it. If anything prompts the prospective captive to set his will in opposition, all is lost.

Søren Kierkegaard[25]

Kierkegaard, in contrast to Nietzsche, does not think that atheism – or at least what we are apt to think of as atheism – is even a necessary, let alone a first step in the advent of a condition in which the greater part of society begins to hallucinate sense when they (apparently) employ moral or religious vocabulary. His name for the first and decisive step in the onset of such a hallucinatory condition is *Christendom*.

Kierkegaard is, however, in agreement with Nietzsche on the following point: Christianity is not a matter of simply believing that certain things are true; it is a matter of living in a certain sort of way. (Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's most profound disagreement concerns whether we should seek to abandon or to return to such a way of living.) For Kierkegaard, as for Nietzsche, to see whether someone is a Christian is not merely a matter of finding out what sorts of propositions he assents to or what sorts of beliefs he has (or what sorts of justifications he is prepared to supply for those propositions or beliefs), but rather also a matter

of looking to the way in which his conception of himsef as a Christian informs his life.[26] Almost everyone in the Denmark of Kierkegaard's day thought of himself as a Christian, yet Kierkegaard thought almost no one was. He thought most of his countrymen suffered from the illusion that they were Christians. The main source of this illusion, he says, is the confusion of objective and subjective categories.[27] Whether one is a Christian or not is now established with reference to certain 'objective' features of one's life (whether one goes to church on Sundays, or has been baptised, or lives in a Christian country and has Christian parents, etc.) regardless of how one comports oneself with respect to those features of one's life.[28] In this respect, Kierkegaard's view of the problem is diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's: Nietzsche wants to show his purportedly atheistic readers that they *are* still at bottom Christians, Kierkegaard wants to show his purportedly Christian readers that they are *not* Christians.

Kierkegaard does not take himself to be differing with his countrymen simply over what the word 'Christian' means. His claim is that by their own lights – if they reflect upon what it means for someone to become a Christian and if they also reflect upon their lives and get into focus how much of a claim Christianity actually exacts upon them – they will be able to see that they are not Christians.[29] They are tempted into various (what Kierkegaard calls 'categorical') confusions in order to disguise this fact from themselves. But, if provided with a perspicuous overview of the category of the religious, he thinks, they themselves will be in a position to acknowledge their confusions as confusions. If pressed to reflect upon their lives, Kierkegaard thinks his readers can be brought to see that they would be at a loss to say what licenses the claim that they are Christians.

Kierkegaard is a particularly provocative author to consider in the context of worrying (as Beardsmore invites us to) whether 'a religious background' is a necessary condition for the intelligibility of certain concepts. What the example of Kierkegaard shows is that even if we confine ourselves to the relatively uncontroversial thesis that 'a religious background' is a necessary condition for the employment of certain *religious* concepts, it will still by no means always be clear when the appropriate background is (or is not) in place. It is not something which can be determined by simply looking at the sort of vocabulary people employ.

Kierkegaard's aim is to bring his readers to see that (if they

reflect carefully upon what they want to mean when they say of themselves that they are Christians) they do not mean by their words what they want to. What they want to mean is at odds with what they say. They have an incoherent desire with respect to their words – and, in particular, with respect to the word 'Christian'. They want to use the word in its religious sense and, at the same time, use the word in such a way that it has application to their present lives. It is not that they mean something determinate but somehow flawed by the word. It is rather, according to Kierkegaard, that they mean it incoherently: their use of the word hovers indeterminately between aesthetic and religious categories without respecting the conditions for the application of either. (As we shall see, there is an affinity here between Kierkegaard's and Anscombe's respective conceptions of what is – and what is not – involved in the sorts of illusions of intelligibility which they seek to expose.)

Kierkegaard thinks there are a great many words which have a specifically religious meaning – words such as belief, authority, obedience, revelation, prayer, silence, awe, wonder, miracle, apostle, and so forth. These same words, however, can be used in contexts in which they take on a different meaning. These same words can be used to express different concepts – concepts which do not have a religious import. Kierkegaard's interest therefore is not merely in what *words* his readers employ, but in what *concepts* those words express. The problem is that it is not always easy to command a clear view of when a word is being used to express a religious concept. Kierkegaard's way of referring to the sort of confusion we enter into in such cases (when we take ourselves to be employing an ethical or religious concept, but no ethical or religious sense can be made of our use of a word) is to say that we have fallen into 'a confusion of the categories'. His name for the procedure he employs for unravelling such confusions is 'qualitative dialectic'.[30] A 'dialectical' examination of a concept shows how the meaning of the concept undergoes a shift – and therefore, properly speaking, what concept it is that shifts – as the context in which it is employed changes. Qualitative dialectic is the study of the decisive (or qualitative) shifts to which the meaning of a word is subject as its employment shifts from an aesthetic to an ethical to a religious context. A religious concept, Kierkegaard thinks, is only able to have its sense within the context of a certain sort of life. Sometimes therefore Kierkegaard

(or one of his pseudonymous authors) will want to paint a particularly vivid picture of what a Christian life would look like: a life that can only be understood in terms of – that is, one which is lived in – Christian categories. The point is to contrast that life with the life of a reader who imagines himself to be a Christian.[31] It is only in that other life, Kierkegaard wants to show, that 'the Christian categories have their full, mutually implicating meaning, and apart from it they may have any or none'.[32]

Kierkegaard's contemporaries are able to deceive themselves into thinking they are Christians because in the course of their lives they frequently employ religious vocabulary. The question Kierkegaard wishes them to focus on is not whether they think they have a use for such vocabulary, but rather *how* they use it. Only if their life as a whole has a certain shape – only if, as he likes to say, it is one which 'is lived in religious categories' – does that vocabulary, as they employ it, have a properly religious meaning.[33] What he suspects about the lives of most of his contemporaries is that the religious words which they wish to call upon either have come to assume an entirely different (non-religious) meaning – or, in many cases, no longer have any meaning whatsoever. The attraction to the use of such words is often tied, he thinks, to the user's wish to sustain for himself the illusion of being a Christian. Kierkegaard's sense of the difficulty of his project is thus tied to the suspicion that his reader may have deeply entrenched motives – motives which he conceals from himself – for not wishing to clarify for himself what it is that he means when he employs religious vocabulary. Those who live in Christendom are deeply attached to the idea that Christian concepts do indeed have application to their lives. For it is through the illusion that those concepts apply to their lives that they are able to imagine that their lives retain a religious dimension. Kierkegaard suspects that all this 'religious dimension' comes to in the end is a mere outward appearance – an aura – of solemnity, piety and profundity. Kierkegaard sees his contemporaries as thus wanting to be able to hold on to certain features of the concepts of Christianity while dispensing with all the others. On the one hand, they want their religious vocabulary to have application to a certain sort of life (one which was exemplified by him who died on the cross), while, on the other hand, they want it to apply to a very different sort of life (namely, that of someone who thinks of religion only when he goes to church on Sundays). They wish to

call upon religious words in order to invest their lives with an aspect of depth and significance, without otherwise reflecting upon (let alone striving for) the sort of life in which a religious concept would have its point. They thereby, in the end, succeed in reducing ther religious vocabulary to one which is able to convey a certain aura – and nothing more.

V CONCEPTS AND WORDS

This word 'ought' . . . [has] become a word of mere mesmeric force . . . a word containing no intelligible thought: a word retaining the suggestion of force, and apt to have a strong psychological effect, but which no longer signifies a real concept at all.

Elizabeth Anscombe[34]

In the previous brief overview of Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom, we uncovered four further moments which are common to the thought of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and (as we shall see) Anscombe: (1) an illusion of sense results when we seek to hold on to certain features of a concept while (unwittingly) jettisoning others; (2) the attraction to certain forms of moral (and religious) confusion is tied to a desire to evade certain moral (or religious) demands; (3) we attempt to retain those features of a moral (or religious) concept which confer on our lives the appearance of being in accordance with those moral (or religious) demands, while wishing not to be in any other way (theoretically or practically) inconvenienced by our attachment to those features of the concept; and thus it comes to pass that (4) certain stretches of our moral (or religious) discourse continue to retain an aura of evaluative force while having been drained of sense.

Neither Nietzsche's nor Kierkegaard's point is one about whether certain pieces of vocabulary have to be discarded. Their point is about what sort of concepts we are (presently) able to express with that vocabulary. Theirs is not a point therefore about what sort of *words* we have at our disposal, but about what sort of *use* we are able to make of those words – what concepts those words express. Indeed, Nietzsche's point is often that the old words can only make sense for us now in so far as they make a new and different (what he calls 'transvalued') kind of sense. Kierkegaard's

point is often that, if we wish to avoid certain forms of confusion, we must clearly distinguish between different (religious, ethical and aesthetic) concepts that are all expressed by the same word. In each of these cases, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard do not seek to prohibit us from using a certain word, but only to illuminate (1) the conditions under which that word expresses a particular concept and (2) the way in which our contemporary employment of that word fails to express that concept.

The same is true of the argument Anscombe puts forward in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.[35] The point of that famous but widely misunderstood article is not that we must jettison a certain part of our moral vocabulary (because it is now impossible to make sense of those ways of speaking); but rather that there are certain ways in which we are no longer able to make sense with those words.[36] It is not that there is nothing that those words can now mean, but that there are certain ways in which we are now no longer able to mean them. Beardsmore misses this point. He thinks that Anscombe's argument commits her to the claim that it is now impossible to make any sense at all of talk 'of being bound, permitted or excused'.

Anscombe does, in setting up her argument, say the following:

In consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted, or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought.[37]

Her point is not, however, that – given the demise of a divine law conception of ethics – it is no longer possible to make sense of these ways of talking; it is not about the *words* 'bound', 'permitted' or 'excused'. Her point is about certain concepts and what happens when we now try to avail ourselves of them. The following two facts serve as the point of departure for her discussion: (a) that certain modern moral philosophers have found it difficult to uncover *any content at all* in talk of what one 'morally ought' to do, and (b) that they have gone on to try to rescue such ways of talking by attempting to find 'an alternative (very fishy) content' for the concept in order to retain the psychological force of the word.[38] Part of what allows Beardsmore (and not only Beardsmore) to mistake Anscombe's point for one about words (rather than concepts) is that he does not appreciate the extent to which what occasions Anscombe's historical speculations is pre-

cisely this feature of modern moral philosophy – namely, that 'our present-day ethicists' have been unable to discern any content in the very notion of moral obligation that *they themselves* wish to employ. One of Anscombe's aims, in her famous article, is to offer a diagnosis of how modern moral philosophy came to find itself at these particular crossroads.[39]

VI   BEARDSMORE ON ANSCOMBE

Anscombe seems to take it largely for granted that if a concept has outlived the practices or ways of thinking in which it originally had its sense, then in so far as it is still used it will have no sense.

R. W. Beardsmore

Though he speaks, following Anscombe, of a *concept* which 'has outlived the practices or ways of thinking in which it originally had its sense', Beardsmore takes Anscombe to be saying that we should abandon certain ways of speaking because *those ways of speaking* prevent us from making sense. He finds this claim in a passage of Anscombe's which he quotes as follows:

Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of 'obligation', of being bound or required by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word 'ought' has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of 'obligation', it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and a special feeling in these contexts ... The situation, if I am right, was the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.[40]

From now on I will refer to this as the focal passage. The passage is a puzzling one. If one tries to understand it apart from the role it plays within the essay as a whole, one is bound to misunderstand it. Anscombe speaks here of 'the survival of a concept' when (for reasons she herself helps to make clear) it seems

at best peculiar to speak of what has survived as a 'concept'. Beardsmore takes this passage to imply that there is something which would count for Anscombe as *using* a concept outside the framework of thought which makes it a really intelligible one. Once one attributes this thesis to her, one is forced to read her – when she speaks of 'the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one' – as making either an incoherent point about the survival of a concept or a perfectly coherent but self-evidently false point about the survival of a term.

Beardsmore's full comment on the focal passage runs as follows:

> Though Anscombe may appear to be resting her case on an assertion of historical fact, there is nevertheless a concealed assumption in her argument, which gives it whatever appearance of plausibility it may have. For as has been pointed out by others, Anscombe seems to take it largely for granted that if a concept has outlived the practices or ways of thinking in which it originally had its sense, then in so far as it is still used it will have no sense. Since the notions of being obliged or permitted had their source in a religious context, where they were equated with what is obliged or permitted by a divine will, then they must lose their sense in a society where no such equation is made.

I'm not sure who the 'others' are that Beardsmore has in mind, but here is Peter Winch:

> It clearly does not *follow* from the alleged disappearance of circumstances which once gave a certain intelligibility to a linguistic usage that such a usage now has *no* intelligibility. The most we can conclude is that it now has to be understood rather *differently*. Whether it means anything, and if so what, can only be determined by an examination of its present use.[41]

Now this point strikes me as correct, but it is one that Anscombe can perfectly well take in her stride. (I hasten to add that Winch does not take it to constitute on its own an argument against Anscombe. He offers it merely as 'a preliminary point'.[42] Beardsmore, however, seems to think that something like Winch's 'preliminary point' suffices to dispose of Anscombe's claims. Hence

he goes on to offer a series of examples of secular uses of various moral terms by way of an answer to the following rhetorical question: 'in a society where religious belief is losing its hold, why should it not be the case that institutions other than the church are thought of as imposing limits on what is or is not permitted?' Beardsmore writes:

> Suppose for instance that as a member of a trade union, I feel that I have an obligation to respect a picket-line, or that as a doctor I feel myself bound to respond to an emergency call in the middle of the night. Why should it be said that in these cases my reference to what I ought to do has a 'mere mesmeric force'? True, in such cases what obliges me cannot be said to be the will of God, but this does not mean that there can be no answer to the question 'What obliges me?' What obliges the trade unionist to observe the picket-line is simply his membership in a trade union. What obliges the doctor to answer the emergency call is the rules of his profession. In what way can these ways of speaking be said to lack sense?[43]

Beardsmore wants to point out that there are contexts in which it makes perfectly good sense to say someone is 'obliged' to do something. He takes this to dispose of the claim Anscombe makes in the focal passage. This argument only has force, however, if Anscombe is indeed making the sort of broad claim about the possibility of the continued meaningful employment of certain words (such as 'obliged') which Beardsmore attributes to her. What we need to see is whether such an interpretation of Anscombe fits what she says either in the immediate vicinity of the focal passage or anywhere else.

Let us first consider the immediate vicinity of the focal passage. In the first sentence of the portion of the focal passage omitted by Beardsmore, Anscombe writes: 'It is as if the notion "criminal" were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten.' To explore Anscombe's point here, let us imagine a future utopia which is utopian in two respects: (1) everyone shares a common ideal of community and a common conception of the virtues of a citizen which flow from that ideal, and (2) everyone acts in conformity with the virtues of a citizen so conceived. Hence in this society there is no longer any need for either law courts or a body of positive law. To citizens

of this future utopia, the concept of crime (in the sense of a violation of a positive criminal code) – like that of ritual human sacrifice – seems a remote and barbaric feature of primitive civilisations. Such words as 'prison', 'police' and 'felony' (along with the concepts those words once expressed) have long since fallen into disuse. However, the word – but not the concept – *criminal* survives. In this future utopia, people continue to use the word 'criminal' in ways which resemble some of our present figurative uses of the word (uses which for us are parasitic upon, and grasped through, a prior understanding of the *concept* of criminal as one which is logically related to notions which articulate what is involved in the breaking and enforcing of criminal laws). In this future utopia, people might speak of the omissions or commissions of umpires, journalists, editors and philosophical commentators as 'criminal'. Anscombe's claim is not that people in such a future utopia will not be able to make any sense of such uses of the word.[44] Her point is just that there is a concept – which we at present have – which they can no longer mean when they use that word to describe their contemporaries. For there is no sense to be made of meaning *that* concept apart from its relation to the set of practices and institutions in which it has its life – apart, that is, from its relation to a nexus of other specifically *legal* concepts (such as infringement, *mens rea*, culpability, punishment and so forth).

Anscombe further imagines that the citizens of this utopia lead themselves into confusion through an incoherent desire to employ the word 'criminal' so that it continues to have the same force (of violating a legal prohibition) that it did back in the days when it was still possible to think of someone as violating the law. They want the word both to express a concept which applies to their lives (as lived within their utopian society) and to retain the same prescriptive force it had when it was applied (back in the old days) to individuals who had committed a crime. The citizens of this utopian society thus manifest a sort of incoherent desire with respect to the word 'criminal' similar to that which Kierkegaard discovered among the citizens of Christendom with respect to the word 'Christian': they want the word both to express a concept which applies to their lives as they presently lead them and to retain a feature of a concept the intelligibility of which requires that it does not so apply.[45]

Let us now consider the remainder of the missing portion of the focal passage:

A Hume discovering this situation might conclude that there was some special sentiment, expressed by 'criminal', which alone gave the word its sense. So Hume discovered the situation in which the notion of 'obligation' survived, and the word 'ought' was invested with that peculiar force having which it is said to be used in a 'moral' sense, but in which the belief in divine law had long since been abandoned: for it was substantially given up among the Protestants at the time of the Reformation. The situation, if I am right, is the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.[46]

We resemble the citizens of the future utopia (sketched above) in that we live – so Anscombe claims – in a time when certain legal concepts no longer have application.[47] We, too, are often drawn to continue to employ certain bits of vocabulary which were once expressive of legal concepts (and which, when they were employed within a legal framework of thought, carried prescriptive force). And we, too, lead ourselves into confusion through an equally incoherent desire to employ these bits of vocabulary (such as 'obliged' or 'ought' or 'morally wrong') so that they continue to have the same force (of violating an absolute prohibition) that they did back in the old days (when it was still possible to think of someone as disobeying God's commandment).[48] The point of the focal passage therefore is about the conditions of intelligibly applying certain concepts – that is, that we fail to make sense when we attempt to use certain words ('obliged', 'ought') in a very particular way: such that they retain some but not other features of a concept which has its life only within a 'law conception of ethics'.[49]

We are now in a position to outline the general structure of Anscombe's argument and why it is that Beardsmore's objection fails to make contact with it. Anscombe's claim about a certain contemporary pseudo-notion of 'moral obligation' can be broken down into two parts: (1) the pseudo-notion shares some of the features of the notion of obligation which figures in a law conception of ethics, yet (2) it lacks the requisite relation to the framework of thought essential to the intelligibility of a concept with those features. There are thus two possible ways to criticise Anscombe.[50] One can challenge the first or the second half of her claim. (1) One can concede that there *is* a notion of 'moral obligation'

presently in currency which has the features she says it does; and then one can try to show that it is not a pseudo-notion (but rather a perfectly coherent concept of moral obligation). Alternatively, (2) one can try to show that there is *no such notion* (that is, no notion with *those* features) to be found in modern moral philosophy. But one cannot dispute Anscombe's claim in the manner Beardsmore (and not only Beardsmore) attempts, ignoring both *which* pseudo-notions she thinks have only 'a mere mesmeric force' and *why* she thinks so.[51] One has not entered an objection to Anscombe's view, if all one does is identify some contemporary moral notion which is both perfectly intelligible and which happens to be expressed by the same word as the pseudo-notion in question.

Let us now restore the sentence (also omitted by Beardsmore) which immediately precedes, and with which Anscombe introduces, the focal passage:

> To have a *law* conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad *qua* man (and not merely, say *qua* craftsmen or logician) – that what is needed for *this*, is required by divine law.[52]

That is the conception Anscombe says it is not possible to have 'unless you believe in God as a law-giver'. It is *a* conception of 'what is needed for conformity with the virtues' ('failure in which is the mark of being bad' *qua* human being). It is, however, for Anscombe, by no means the only available conception of what is needed for conformity with the virtues. The whole point of her paper was to suggest that modern moral philosophy might free itself of certain confusions if it returned to an Aristotelian conception of what is needed for conformity with the virtues. So far was she from suggesting what Beardsmore takes her to be saying – that is, that non-believers can never make sense of what they mean when they say that someone 'ought' to do something – that she proposes an alternative way of understanding what might be meant by 'ought': we should understand what is meant in each such case with reference to the genus of some particular virtue ('truthfulness', 'chastity', 'justice').[53] The justification of a moral claim about someone's behaviour, on this (Aristotelian) conception, rests on a conformity or lack of conformity with some particular virtue. Such a justification does not require us to in-

voke some prior overarching notion of what one 'morally ought to do'.[54] It is only this latter overarching notion (and not the entire fabric of our moral discourse) that Anscombe sees as an interesting case of 'the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one'. She traces this latter notion to a particular conception of ethics: one in which the prescriptive force of a moral claim depends exclusively on its relation to a set of overarching moral laws – it is this framework of thought which she thinks has not survived.[55]

Beardsmore is not entirely unaware of the fact that Anscombe's thesis is a more nuanced one than his first round of arguments against her allows. He realises that her argument has something to do with what is peculiar to a divine law conception of ethics. He therefore attempts to present her with a dilemma: either (a) she thinks that secular uses of locutions such as 'bound', 'permitted' or 'excused' are ways of speaking which lack sense (in which case his first round of arguments comes into play), or (b) she thinks that, even if such locutions do not strictly speaking lack sense, they nonetheless – in the absence of a belief in a divine law-giver – are unable sufficiently to bind, permit or excuse (in which case his second round of arguments comes into play).

The second horn of the dilemma (with which Beardsmore confronts Anscombe) rests on the assumption that Anscombe will find any notion of obligation other than that provided by a divine law conception defective, on the grounds that what is prescribed on such a conception will fail to be absolutely binding.[56] What escapes Beardsmore is that Anscombe contributes her remarks about the character of obligations prescribed by divine law not in order to champion theism,[57] but rather to illuminate the logical differences between a law conception of ethics and alternative conceptions.[58] Beardsmore assumes that Anscombe's aim in drawing attention to what is peculiar to the modal concepts which figure in a divine law conception of ethics is to disenchant us with secular ethics. He combines that mistaken assumption with two further misunderstandings. The first of these has to do with how Anscombe's argument bears on a more general quarrel between a theist and an atheist. Anscombe, in adumbrating a law conception of ethics, is concerned with someone who has a very particular conception of the place occupied by God in an account of the source of moral obligation. The opposition that she is concerned with is not one that pits the Christian believer against the

non-believer.[59] Second, Beardsmore introduces his own proposal concerning what the notion of 'the absolute nature of God's commands' really comes to for a religious believer: a religious believer recognises God's commands as 'absolute' because he recognises that a certain sort of life – and no other way of life – is the life for him.[60] But this notion of 'absolute obligation' fails to mark what Anscombe was after in her discussion of divine law ethics: namely, a distinctive logical feature of one particular conception of ethics which distinguishes it from other conceptions of ethics held by both believers and non-believers.[61] The second horn of the dilemma (with which Beardsmore confronts Anscombe) thus fails to engage her thought for the same reason that the first horn does: because it fails to get hold of her central contention (that there is a *particular* concept of moral obligation the intelligibility of which depends on a *particular* conception of ethics).

VII   HOW CAN A CONCEPT SURVIVE THE CONDITIONS OF ITS INTELLIGIBILITY?

How is it that one can, as it were, see a meaning that is no meaning?

Elizabeth Anscombe[62]

The views of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe have the following three features in common. First of all, these thinkers are, as we have seen, interested in cases in which we continue to employ certain words but are no longer able to use them to express the concepts which those words formerly expressed. Second, they attribute this loss of concepts to the loss of a religious framework in which those concepts formerly had their life. Third, they see us, when we call upon these words, as prone to hallucinate a meaning where there is none. It is, I think, the difficult and paradoxical character of this third feature of their views which leads to a misunderstanding of each of the first two features. This, in turn, occasions the sort of wholesale misunderstanding of their claims that one finds in Beardsmore (and others).

The misunderstanding is a natural one. These authors seek to direct our attention to cases in which a particular concept apparently lives on in the absence of the framework of thought essen-

tial to its intelligibility. But one might well ask: how are we to make sense of the idea of the survival of a concept outside the framework in which it has its life? (If it can only have its life within *that* home, and it is now outside it, then why isn't it dead?) Anscombe flaunts this paradox, in the final sentence of the focal passage, when she writes: 'The situation, if I am right, is the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.' If we take to heart what is said in the last half of this sentence (that the intelligibility of the concept in question depends on that framework of thought), then we will be unable to take to heart what is said in the first half (we will be unable to identify a concept which is an instance of 'the interesting situation'). Anscombe's sentence, when we try to understand it, comes apart on us. If we try to imagine such a concept, we end up identifying something which either (1) is a concept or (2) is not a concept. If (1), then it must be possible to *intelligibly* make out which concept is at issue; but in that case what we have is not an instance of 'the interesting situation'. If (2), then what is at issue is at most something which can be *mistaken* for a concept; but in that case what we have is not an instance of 'the survival of a concept'. Thus there are questions that Anscombe's discussion naturally invites – questions such as: 'Precisely *which* concept of "moral obligation' is she objecting to?', or: 'How does she know the modern concept is the *same* as the one which figures in a divine law conception?' – which it cannot answer without undermining its own thesis. It may be thought that this points to an incoherence in Anscombe's thought to which she herself is oblivious. But that would be to mistake a transitional feature of her method for her conclusion.

It is natural to read Anscombe's argument as if what she were saying is that there is a particular concept of moral obligation which is logically flawed for such-and-such reasons. If *that* were what she were saying, then she could identify which concept is flawed but she would have to back off from her strong charge of unintelligibility. In an article entitled 'The Reality of the Past', Anscombe provides a detailed discussion of the method which underlies such a charge. She offers the following example:

Suppose that a child wanted a cake that it had eaten. That it cannot have it again is a mere physical fact. But suppose that it wanted a bang it had heard, that is, that actual individual bang . . .

If a bang were made in response to this request and satisfied it, then this would show that 'A' was not being used as the proper name of a bang... That 'A' is the proper name of a bang means that we do not speak of getting A again. 'Getting A again' is an expression similar to ones which have use in other contexts, as when 'A' is the name of a cake. When we transfer it to this context we do not transfer its use; for to describe its use we should have to describe in what circumstance we should say we had got A again, as we could do if 'A' were the name of a cake. But though we do not transfer its use we think we transfer some meaning and so we think that what is meant is something impossible.[63]

The case resembles the one discussed in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Both are cases in which we transfer an expression from one context to another without transferring its use, and in which 'though we do not transfer its use we think we transfer some meaning'. This leads us in both cases to want to identify the case as one in which what is meant is something logically flawed, something impossible – in the one case, something which possesses some but lacks other logical features of a proper name of an event; in the other case, something with some but not other logical features of a particular prescriptive concept. But each of these characterisations of the use of the transferred expression is unstable in the way in which we saw that the final sentence of the focal passage is unstable.[64] The (logically flawed) meaning which we believe we perceive in each of these cases is, in the end, to be recognised as a mere illusion of meaning. Anscombe makes this point explicit in 'The Reality of the Past'; the discussion continues:

We think we cannot imagine getting A again because of the essential character of what is denoted by the name. But the real reason is that 'getting A again' is an expression for which we have yet to invent a use in this context; so far no use for it exists. This doesn't seem enough, however: we think we *could* not give it a use – meaning that we could not give it the use it has in other contexts, the use that the form of expression suggests or reminds us of... The senselessness seems to consist in the fact that we have no use for this combination of words. But it follows from this that the only sense that can be made of the

philosophical assertion that the past cannot change is that to speak of a change in the past is to produce an expression for which no use exists and which therefore has *no* sense.[65]

What Anscombe says here applies to her discussion in 'Modern Moral Philosophy'. Anscombe's objection to the locution of 'moral obligation' as it figures in modern moral philosophy is not that it expresses a logically incoherent concept, but rather that it simply fails to express any concept whatsoever. When we transfer this expression outside a law conception of ethics we 'produce an expression for which no use exists and which therefore has *no* sense'.[66]

The initial realisation, however, that our words do not quite mean what we want them to say does not dissipate their appearance of sense. They retain (what Anscombe calls in 'Modern Moral Philosophy') a certain 'atmosphere of meaning'. What happens in such cases, according to Anscombe, when we attempt to transfer the meaning of an expression but the use does not transfer, is that an *appearance* of meaning is engendered – an apparent meaning which, upon reflection, we perceive not to be a legitimate meaning but which we nonetheless take to be some sort of meaning. Thus, in 'The Reality of the Past', she goes on to say:

It remains true, nevertheless, that an idea of a change in the past retains an apparent meaning which is one of the sources of perplexity. For this appearance is such that one wishes to say that one can see that it is somehow not a *legitimate* meaning, and because of this one seems to be saying something positive in saying that the past cannot change. This might be expressed by saying that 'a change in the past' is an expression that *could* not be given a sense, meaning that the vague sense that one perceives in it could not be embodied in a use – as if one could understand the sense that it could not be given.[67]

What emerges clearly here is that Beardsmore's characterisation of Anscombe's thesis is a characterisation of something which figures in her discussion (of cases of appearances of intelligibility), but not as her thesis. Rather, it forms one of the threads of the fabric of confusion she wishes to unravel. Beardsmore thinks that Anscombe's view is that certain expressions (such as 'moral obligation') are ones 'that *could* not be given a sense'. If such expressions

were *per impossibile* examples of the use of concepts outside the framework of thought which makes them really intelligible, then they would have an, as it were, impossible sense – they would combine logically incompatible features. But to think this is not only to fail to appreciate the instability of the final sentence of the focal passage, it is to fail to appreciate the entire method of elucidation which it subserves. To regard such expressions in this way is to be drawn in to the appearance of meaning which they engender – an appearance which Anscombe ultimately seeks to explode.

We can see more clearly now why Anscombe's thesis must be understood to be about the impossibility of intelligibly using certain concepts rather than about the impossibility of intelligibly using certain words. When she charges certain uses of the expression 'moral obligation' with unintelligibility, she is not claiming that these expressions have an, as it were, incoherent sense. Her charge – like Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's – is not directed at the words, but at the user: in such cases, it is *we* who have failed to mean something by them. Her thesis, *pace* Beardsmore, is not that these words cannot be given a sense but that we have failed to give them one. But how are we to square this with her apparent eagerness to encourage us to exclude or discard certain expressions from the language? At one point she writes: 'It may be possible, if we are resolute, to discard the term "morally ought".'[68] Elsewhere she writes:

> It might remain to look for 'norms' in human virtues . . . But in *this* sense, 'norm' has ceased to be roughly equivalent to 'law'. In *this* sense the notion of a 'norm' brings us nearer to an Aristotelian than a law conception of ethics. There is, I think, no harm in that; but if someone looked in this direction to give 'norm' a sense, then he ought to recognize what has happened to the term 'norm', which he wanted to mean 'law' – without bringing God in: it has ceased to mean 'law' at all; and *so* the expressions 'moral obligation', 'the moral ought', and 'duty' are best put on the Index, if he can manage it.[69]

How are we to hear this call to put certain expressions on the Index? Such remarks can appear to confirm the impression that Anscombe thinks these expressions have an impermissible sense – that the problem lies with the flawed concepts these words seek

to express. But this would be a misunderstanding of the philosophical method she means to employ and which she takes herself to have learned from Dr Wittgenstein.[70] Elsewhere she writes:

> Wittgenstein said that when we call something senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless, but a form of words is being excluded from the language . . . But the argument for 'excluding this form of words from the language' is apparently an argument that 'its sense is senseless' . . . The result of the argument, if it is successful, is that we no longer want to say [what we thought we wanted to say] . . . Hence Wittgenstein's talk of 'therapies'. The 'exclusion from the language' is done not by legislation but by persuasion. The 'sense that is senseless' is the *type* of sense that our expressions suggest.[71]

An argument for excluding a particular expression from the language (for example 'moral obligation') will, at first, have the appearance of being an argument that the sense of the expression is senseless. But this appearance is itself to be overcome. What at first appears to be an argument about the incoherent sense of certain words turns out to be one about our incoherent relation to the words. The result of the argument, if it is successful, is not that we take the expression to have a different sort of sense (that is, a flawed one) than we had originally imagined, but that we no longer want to call upon the expression at all; there is no longer anything we want to say with it. But not because we are in any way (logically) barred from using this form of words. 'The "exclusion from the language" is done not by legislation but by persuasion.' Anscombe seeks to persuade us to avoid the expression in question because we are evidently tempted to mistake certain combinations of words (in which the expression in question figures without a sense) for meaningful propositions – because we are prone to see a meaning where there is no meaning.

VIII   NIETZSCHE, KIERKEGAARD AND ANSCOMBE

A farther proceeding in philosophy doth bring the mind back again to confront religion.

Francis Bacon[72]

In the preceding pages I have, on the whole, refrained from re-
marking upon the many significant differences between the views
of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Anscombe. My aim has been to
highlight a thesis they hold in common. All three are interested
in how the possibility of certain sorts of thoughts depends upon
the presence of a religious background. All three direct our attention
to cases in which – in the absence of the relevant background –
we continue to employ certain words but not the concepts which
those words once expressed. Each of these philosophers offers a
different analysis of what constitutes the relevant background:
Nietzsche understands it, in the first instance, as a historical and
cultural configuration, Kierkegaard as an individual's way of life,
Anscombe as a framework of thought.[73] Their respective analyses
of the problem of moral unintelligibility consequently overlap and
diverge in various ways.

In answer to the question 'Which moral concepts can our words
express?', Anscombe directs our attention to the conception of
ethics to which we subscribe; whereas Nietzsche and Kierkegaard
direct our attention to how it is that we live. In answer to the
question 'What religious background do we overlook?', Kierkegaard
wants to show us that a religious background we think is there
is not (we imagine it is flourishing when it is dead); whereas
Nietzsche and Anscombe want to show us that a religious back-
ground we think is not there *is* (we know that it is dead but not
that it continues to haunt us). In answer to the question 'How is
it that we are subject to illusions of moral intelligibility?', Nietzsche
directs our attention to the general way in which the meaning of
a moral concept presupposes a whole set of historical and cul-
tural circumstances; whereas Kierkegaard and Anscombe direct
our attention to the local ways in which the meaning of a word
changes as its use shifts, and how we imagine we transfer the
meaning when we have failed to transfer the use.

Each of these differences between one of these philosophers
and the other two is a function of more fundamental differences
in their respective philosophical ambitions. Anscombe's aim, in
the first instance, is to clarify a logical confusion; Nietzsche's and
Kierkegaard's to clarify an existential one.[74] Kierkegaard seeks to
show his contemporaries that they are much further from Chris-
tianity than they imagine; Nietzsche and Anscombe seek to show
theirs that they are not quite as far from it as they imagine. Finally,
Nietzsche is only secondarily interested in our confusions con-
cerning what we mean by our words (he thinks we have other

confusions of the soul which are far more profound); while
Kierkegaard and Anscombe think some of our most profound
confusions of soul show themselves in – and can be revealed to
us through an attention to – our confusions concerning what we
mean (and fail to mean) by our words.

Notes

1. Part of the point of this paper is that such a defence or attack is of
   necessity an arduous task. Given the premise (which it is the bur-
   den of this paper to establish) that there is no *a priori* incoherence
   to the sort of charge of unintelligibility which these philosophers
   are concerned to level, then the task is arduous for two reasons: (1)
   a rebuttal or a defence of such a charge requires considerable at-
   tention to the ways in which those who are the target of the charge
   actually talk and think, and (2) each individual charge must be exam-
   ined separately and on its own merits.
2. It should be noted that the objection in question forms only a small
   part of the business of Beardsmore's contribution to this symposium.
   It should also be noted that the objection in question – though ar-
   ticulated in a helpfully explicit and succinct manner by Beardsmore
   – is one which lingers either in the background or the foreground
   of much of the secondary literature which takes the trouble to ad-
   dress the views of any one of these three philosophers on the dis-
   appearance of moral or religious concepts.
3. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §53, trans. W. Kaufmann (New
   York: Vintage, 1966), p. 66.
4. The dependence which is at issue here is a conceptual one – whether
   the *meaning* of certain concepts depends upon a religious frame-
   work. It is no part of Beardsmore's business to deny a historical
   claim to the effect that many of our moral concepts first evolved
   within a religious context.
5. Beardsmore's paper is also in this volume. All subsequent quota-
   tions from Beardsmore are from this paper.
6. This formulation occurs as part of Beardsmore's summary of
   Anscombe's position.
7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, (Constance Garnett trans-
   lation), (New York: Macmillan, 1912).
8. Dostoevsky writes in his *Notebooks*:
   > Ivan is profound, he isn't one of the contemporary atheists who
   > merely show the narrowness of their world-view and the dull-
   > ness of their dull little capacities in their disbelief... Nihilism
   > has appeared among us because at bottom *we are all nihilists*. It
   > is only the new, original form of its appearance which scares us.
   > (*The Norton Critical Edition of The Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Ralph
   > Matlaw (Norton, 1976), p. 769).
9. Beardsmore then tries to go on and show that Anscombe is vulner-
   able to the same arguments as Nielsen and Kolakowski.

10. Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (London: Pemberton, 1973), p. 48. Beardsmore quotes these lines out of context. Only after writing this paper did I succeed in laying hold of a copy of Nielsen's book. The context (of the lines Beardsmore quotes) is one in which Nielsen is taking up an adversarial point of view. He begins by directing an objection against himself; he then 'concedes' to his theistic interlocutor that as long as we restrict ourselves to an overly pared-down conception of morality (one from which we only 'look at morality with the cold eye of an anthropologist') we place ourselves in a dialectically vulnerable position ('theologians are then in a position to press home a powerful dialectical point' concerning 'the true nature of such conventionalism' (p. 48)). Beardsmore seems to think that Nielsen himself is prepared to bite the conventionalist bullet. But Nielsen's proximate aim in these pages is to 'make apparent the dialectic of the problem' (p. 50). It is not at all clear to me that Nielsen means his reader to identify the dialectically vulnerable position with his own (though where Nielsen does mean to end up on this issue is not easy to make out). I suspect that, in attributing a conventionalist account of moral obligation to Nielsen, Beardsmore has mistaken Nielsen's exposition of a particular stage of (what Nielsen calls) 'the dialectic between the theist and the atheist' for an exposition of Nielsen's own views. All subsequent references to Nielsen in this paper should accordingly be read as references to Nielsen as read by Beardsmore.
11. Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press 1982), pp. 189, 191-2.
12. It is worth noting that yet further philosophical assumptions are required before it seems to be self-evidently the case (as it does to Kolakowski) that the prescriptive force of the requirements of morality is somehow specially tied to the availability of a divine law-giver in a manner in which that of other sorts of normative requirements are not. Descartes thought that the necessity of the laws of logic and arithmetic was to be accounted for by the fact that God willed those laws to be among the basic principles of reason which governed our thought. However, a contemporary refusal to appeal to God in one's account of logical or mathematical necessity hardly, in and of itself, commits one to the claim that 'what is and what is not a correct logical inference (or a valid mathematical proof) is simply constituted by conventions we are free to accept or reject'. In the absence of considerable additional philosophical argument, the claim that 'if God did not exist, everything would be permitted' is no more evidently true in ethics than it is in mathematics. (This is not to deny that there are, of course, those who will wish to attempt to furnish a conventionalist account of the nature of logical or mathematical necessity.)
13. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 181-2.
14. Indeed, as the remarks (quoted in note 8) from his *Notebooks* indicate, this is precisely how Dostoevsky himself conceived of Ivan.

15. F. Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches II* (Leipzig: A Kroner, 1925) (*Human, All Too Human, Part II*), §224 (my translation).
16. F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §39, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 151.
17. Thus Nietzsche will include much of the philosophical terminology of the ancients and the medievals within the scope of his analysis. Nietzsche's point is meant to cut in both historical directions: not only do certain words fail to express certain concepts because those concepts depend upon 'an ancient culture now degenerated', but other concepts depend upon a very different and much more recent culture – one whose fundamental presuppositions fail to cohere with those of antiquity. Hence Nietzsche's suspicion of any philosopher who combines a sympathy for Christian modes of thought with a fondness for the fashionable philosophical concepts of his day – such as (Hegel's favourite) *Geist*: 'Our whole concept, our cultural concept, "spirit" had no meaning whatever in the world Jesus lived in' (*The Anti-Christ*, p. 141).
18. In making this sort of point, one of Nietzsche's favourite examples of a moral concept that depends on a Christian way of life is the concept of *chastity*.
19. Nietzsche sees Christianity – in its waging of a war against the natural desires and instincts of the human animal – as further extending and radicalising an asceticism already present in both Jewish and Hellenistic thought and practice. One should be clear, however, about how complex and nuanced Nietzsche's attitude is towards this historical development. For he thinks it is through such forms of violence against one's animal nature – in particular, those forms of violence voluntarily inflicted by an individual on himself – that a deepening of the human being, a dilation of the human self, was achieved. Thus, however harmful Nietzsche finds the ascetic ideal in its present form, he thinks that it is only through its tyranny that the human animal first became *interesting*:

> All instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly *turn inward* – this is what I call the *internalization* of man: thus it was that man first developed what was later called his 'soul'. The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited* . . .
> [I]t was on the soil of this *essentially dangerous* form of human existence, the priestly form, that man first became *an interesting animal* . . . only here did the human soul in a higher sense acquire *depth* and become *evil* – and these are the two basic respects in which man has hitherto been superior to the beasts! (*On the Genealogy of Morals*; in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 33, 84).

20. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 59-60.
21. A parallel point holds for Nietzsche's conception of what an atheist

is – that is, someone who has truly overcome Christianity. Being an atheist is not being someone who has arrived at a certain intellectual 'result' or 'conclusion' but a way of being which a person inhabits 'as a matter of course' and 'from instinct' (see *Ecce Homo*, p. 236). Thus, as we have seen (in *Beyond Good and Evil*, §53), Nietzsche will often refer to those who take themselves to be atheists as still unwittingly dominated by 'the religious instinct'.

22. I explore this region of Nietzsche's thought in my 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism', in R. Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche as Educator* (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

23. The parable begins:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit the lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God!' – As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter). (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §125, pp. 181–2)

24. 'The death of God' is Nietzsche's name for a crisis into which our civilisation is in the process of being plunged. Thus in so far as it names an event it is one which will take centuries to transpire.

25. S. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as An Author*, trans. W. Lowrie (New York: Harper, 1972), p. 25.

26. It is against the background of this sort of issue (concerning what sort of life the person who calls himself a Christian leads) that one should understand Kierkegaard's incessant remarks about how Christianity is not a doctrine. The connection between these two topics is explicit in the following passage:

Christianity is not a doctrine . . . Christianity is a message about existence . . . If Christianity (precisely because it is not a doctrine) is not reduplicated in the life of the person expounding it, then he does not expound Christianity, for Christianity is a message about living and can only be expounded by being realized in men's lives (*The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, ed. P. Rohde (New York: Citadel, 1960), p. 117).

27. Some comment on Kierkegaard's confusing philosophical terminology is appropriate here. The categories, for Kierkegaard, have to do with the relation between a subject and an object. A category is objective if what matters is the object, subjective if what matters is the relation to the object. The aesthetic is the category of objectivity, the mode of disengaged reflection; whereas the ethical and the religious are the categories of subjectivity, modes of relation which turn on the character of one's concern. The category of the aesthetic is one in which one relates oneself to an object so that the accent of one's concern falls on the object and not on one's relation to it. This contrasts with the category of the ethical where one's relation to the object is 'interested' and the category of the religious where the relation is one of 'infinite interest'. A relation is 'interested', for Kierkegaard, if it is tied to the task of forming one's self (into the sort of person one wishes to become) or leading one's life (in accordance with one's conception of what is valuable). Thus,

Kierkegaard says, a relation is objective if the accent falls on the *what*, subjective if the accent falls on the *how*. These are not, as such, terms of praise or blame. Kierkegaard's criticisms are never directed at some mode of thought which properly belongs to one of the categories, but at a mode of thought that involves what he calls a 'confusion of the categories'.

Kierkegaard's writings have been subjected to catastrophic misunderstandings because commentators have failed to realise that the terms 'the objective' and 'the subjective' represent pieces of terminology for distinguishing the relative priority of subject and object within each of the categories. Virtually all of the secondary literature on Kierkegaard assumes that the terms 'subjective' and 'objective' have roughly the meaning in Kierkegaard's work that they have in traditional epistemological discussions which distinguish between objective and (merely) subjective forms of knowledge. The objective in this sense is that which can be intersubjectively known, the subjective that which can only be known by me. This leads to the unhappy assumption that when Kierkegaard characterises the categories of the ethical and the religious as 'subjective', he means that they concern a kind of truth which is (epistemically) private and hence incommunicable. This misunderstanding is reinforced by a failure to attend to the authorial strategy of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works. (See my 'Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and Nonsense', in Ted Cohen, Paul Guyer and Hilary Putnam (eds), *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock Tx.: Texas Tech University Press, 1992).)

28. The question of whether one has been baptised or not (or lives in a Christian country, etc.) counts as an 'objective' matter for Kierkegaard because it does not have to do in the relevant way with what kind of person one strives to be or what sorts of values inform one's life – the character of one's concern with such a fact (in this case, a fact about oneself) and the manner in which that concern reflects itself in one's life are not pertinent to determining whether the bare fact obtains or not. Whether one has faith in God (that is, whether one is a Christian) is not a fact that does or does not obtain regardless of who one is and how one lives. It is, according to Kierkegaard, something which involves an essential reference to the character of the subject's concern and hence is (according to this terminology) not an objective but a subjective matter. A community of pseudo-Christians – who sustain their belief in their own Christianity through a purely 'objective' understanding of what it is to be a Christian – is what Kierkegaard means by his term 'Christendom'. Christendom is the illusion of a flourishing Christian community.

29. He claims that all his reader requires in order to be able to arrive at this discovery is 'some capacity for observation' (*The Point of View for My Work as An Author*, p. 22).

30. I attempt below a brief description of Kierkegaard's conception of qualitative dialectic. I go into these matters in more detail in my 'Putting Two and Two Together: Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein and the Point of View for their Work as Authors', in Timothy Tessin and

Mario von der Ruhr (eds), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London & New York: Macmillan St Martin's Press, 1995).
31. We can now give a slightly more precise definition of 'Christendom'. It refers to the illusion which results when it comes to pass that the majority of people who employ an ostensibly Christian vocabulary use it to describe lives lived in aesthetic (or at most aesthetic–ethical) categories. As the epigraph to this section of the paper indicates, Kierkegaard's aim is to dispel this illusion.
32. I am quoting here from Stanley Cavell, 'Kierkegaard *On Authority and Revelation*', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 170. The preceding discussion is indebted to this article.
33. This raises the question whether someone who does not lead a religious life can understand a religious concept. The problem does not differ in principle from that of the anthropologist who attempts to understand an ethical or religious concept belonging to a different culture. One can be said to grasp such a concept to the extent that one can imaginatively project oneself into the sort of life in which it has its point, sympathetically enter into the interests of those who employ the concept, and thereby comprehend its use.
34. G. E. M. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in *Ethics, Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers, Vol. III* (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 32.
35. Thus in the epigraph to this section of the paper Anscombe is concerned with whether a particular word still *signifies a real concept*.
36. I am here in agreement with Cora Diamond's article 'The Dog that Gave Himself the Moral Law' (in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, eds. French, Uehling and Wettstein (Notre Dame IN.: Notre Dame University Press, 1988)) where she argues that Anscombe's argument 'must be understood to be about the survival of concepts or notions, not about the survival of words or expressions' (p. 161).
37. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 30.
38. Anscombe applauds 'Hume and our present-day ethicists' for showing that the relevant notion is without content, but she chides our present-day ethicists for attempting to retain the psychological force of the term:

> I should judge that Hume and our present-day ethicists had done a considerable service by showing that no content could be found in the notion 'morally ought'; if it were not that the latter philosophers try to find an alternative (very fishy) content and to retain the psychological force of the term. It would be most reasonable to drop it. It has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics; they are not going to maintain such a conception; and you can do ethics without it, as is shown by the example of Aristotle ('Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 32).

Anscombe distinguishes here – as she does throughout the paper – between the *notion* (what I have been calling the concept) 'morally ought' and the *term* (what I have been calling the word). But she may appear not to honour that distinction in so far as she speaks

of something's being a notion while maintaining that it has no content. I take it that she courts this confusion intentionally (for reasons taken up in the penultimate section of this paper).
39. I will not in this paper attempt to explore the details of that diagnosis.
40. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', pp. 30–1.
41. Peter Winch, 'Who is my Neighbour?', in *Trying to Make Sense* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p. 160.
42. Winch's own argument against Anscombe turns on the claim that one can already find in the New Testament a conception of moral obligation which does not presuppose the notion of divine law. He also appears to think that this point is connected to an internal tension in Anscombe's own views. Winch elaborates his disagreement with Anscombe through a discussion of the parable of the Samaritan:

> Jesus tells the parable ... in a way which presupposes that the moral modality to which the Samaritan responded would have a force for the parable's hearers *independently* of their commitment to any particular theological belief ... According to Miss Anscombe, the intelligibility of the obligation to help the injured traveller to which the Samaritan responded depends on accepting that it is a divine law that one should act thus. I think, on the contrary, that the concept of a divine law can itself only develop on the basis of our response to such modalities ('Who is my Neighbor?', p. 161).

Anscombe, however, would be happy to agree that the 'ought' in 'one ought to help an injured traveller' could have (and, indeed, should have) had a force for the parable's hearers independently of their commitment to any particular theological belief. What she would deny is that a *Christian* understanding of why one ought to render aid to an injured traveller (that is, the understanding that Jesus accepted and was concerned to teach) is one which is really intelligible apart from a conception of divine law. (Though she would presumably agree with Winch that Jesus' understanding of divine law differed significantly in certain respects from that of the Pharisees.) Thus Winch is in disagreement with Anscombe only if he wishes to claim that Jesus, (or, more generally, a Christian) understanding of why one ought to render aid to an injured traveller is one which can be fully grasped 'independently of a commitment to any particular theological belief'.

It is also not clear that Winch's point in the last sentence of the passage quoted above really expresses a disagreement with Anscombe. As Winch is aware, elsewhere Anscombe herself is concerned to insist that our modal and deontic concepts can only develop against the background of certain responses:

> God himself can make no promises to man except in a human language ... What we have to attend to is the use of modals. Through this, we shall find that not only promises, but also rules and rights, are in essence *created* and not merely captured or expressed by the grammar of our languages ... [Y]ou are told

you 'can't' do something you plainly *can*, as comes out in the fact that you sometimes *do*. At the beginning, the adults will physically stop the child from doing what they say he 'can't' do. With one set of circumstances this business is part of the build-up of the concept of a rule; with another, of a piece of etiquette; with another, of a promise; in another, of an act of sacrilege or impiety; with another, of a right. It is part of human intelligence to be able to learn the responses to ... modals without which they wouldn't exist as linguistic instruments and without which these things: rules, etiquette, rights, infringements, promises, pieties, impieties would not exist either ('Rules, Rights and Promises', in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*, pp. 99–101).

Winch takes this 'later work' of Anscombe's 'to undermine her earlier views about the moral "ought" but without explicit recognition on her part that this is so' ('Who is my Neighbor?', p. 162). Anscombe's later work only undermines her earlier article if the following two claims are in tension with one another: (1) to identify *which* (modal) concept a particular concept is, we need to examine its role within the framework of thought which makes it a really intelligible one, and (2) the acquisition of certain modal concepts presupposes the *prior* acquisition of certain other more primitive modal concepts (and the correlative development of the capacities for response upon which those concepts rest). 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is concerned only with (1), but nothing in that article is incompatible with (2). I take it that Anscombe holds both (a) that in order to acquire the concept of moral obligation which figures in a law conception of ethics we must first have learned to respond to various non-legal modals, and (b) the content of the concept which figures in a law conception of ethics cannot be analysed in terms of such modals.

43. Beardsmore's examples here are rather slippery since they are poised between ethical and non-ethical conceptions of what one 'ought' to do. If what 'obliges' the doctor to answer the call is, as Beardsmore has it, 'the rules of his profession' (and what obliges the trade unionist is the rules of his union) then we are not obviously on ethical ground; any more than we would be if we were to say to someone: 'Your king is in check, you are obliged to move it.' In these cases it is appropriate to invoke the (philosophically dangerous) language of being 'obliged' since there are rules that lay down what one is obliged to do and what one is prohibited from doing. If, on the other hand, we consider the doctor who fails to make the call as deficient in certain virtues (both charity and prudence come to mind!) and the trade unionist who crosses the picket-line as deficient in others (above all, fidelity, both to a cause and to his friends), then we are on moral ground when we say of either one that he did not do as he 'ought' to have done. But in the latter sort of case, what is gained by insisting on the language of (the doctor's or the trade unionist's) being 'obliged' to act in certain ways? What Beardsmore has given us is a pair of cases about which it seems right to say

that the individual in question is both 'obliged' to do something and furthermore he really 'ought' to do the thing he is obliged to do. (There are cases – think of doctors in Nazi Germany – where the two will not coincide. In such cases, we want what a person ought to do to trump what he is obliged to do. Anscombe's point is that it is only in the context of a law conception of ethics that we have a coherent notion of a source of obligation which always trumps.) I think Beardsmore is probably confused as to which of these two kinds of examples – a moral or a non-moral one – he is after. Neither example, properly described, is a problem for Anscombe. She is happy to allow talk of what is 'obliged' where there are rules or laws which prescribe what is permitted and prohibited; and she is equally happy to allow talk of what the virtuous person 'ought' to do. What she is suspicious of is our wanting to characterise cases of the latter sort as cases of 'obligation' (in the absence of any notion of a law or rule which obliges us): not because it is impossible to assign the *word* 'obligation' a sense in such a context, but because she thinks one is apt to become confused – as, I believe, Beardsmore in this very passage has become confused – about what it is one wants to say.

44. Indeed, she need not deny that they may happily continue to use the word in many contexts which resemble those in which we now employ the word figuratively. If they are, as assumed, ignorant of the strange legal institutions of their barbaric ancestors, then we can imagine that this word for them will perhaps no longer be inflected figuratively. What was once its figurative meaning will simply become its literal meaning and so they will mean something like 'outrageous' or 'reckless' or 'irresponsible' by the word. But even to imagine this is still to imagine a scenario according to which the literal meaning of the word – and hence the concept which that word expresses – has changed.

45. A citizen of this future utopia is presumably interested in calling someone other than himself 'criminal'. The analogy between the citizens of this future utopia and those of Christendom thus has its limits. One feature of a Kierkegaardian diagnosis of the investment in such forms of confusion does not extend to this case: the citizens of the future utopia are not attracted to this confusion because they are deeply attached to the thought that they themselves lead lives which are steeped in crime!

46. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', pp. 30–1.

47. This formulation is misleading in two ways. It might be less confusing to characterise the concept of moral obligation the intelligibility of which is at issue here for Anscombe as an *ethical* (rather than as a 'legal') concept – albeit a quasi-legal ethical concept – in order to clearly distinguish it from a secular legal concept. Second, I take it that Anscombe's view (although she does not say so in the article) is that it is only *most of us* late moderns who lead lives in which the relevant quasi-legal concepts are unable to gain a foothold; thus her argument is not meant to rule out the possibility that cer-

tain individual Jewish or Catholic believers may continue to have a use for these concepts.

48. The parallel between Anscombe's point about modern moral philosophy and Kierkegaard's about Christendom is quite far-reaching. Kierkegaard says of his contemporaries that (1) they detach the word 'Christian' from its relation to a family of other concepts (whose content is tied to their application within the context of certain practices), and (2) they nonetheless seek to retain the aura of the word after having drained it of its meaning. Anscombe can be seen to be making both of these points in the following passage:

> All the atmosphere of the term ['morally wrong'] is retained while its substance is guaranteed quite null. Now let us remember that 'morally wrong' is the term which is the heir of the notion 'illicit', or 'what there is an obligation *not* to do'; which belongs in a divine law theory of ethics ... And it is because 'morally wrong' is the heir of this concept, but an heir that is cut off from the family of concepts from which it sprang, that 'morally wrong' *both* goes beyond the mere factual description 'unjust' *and* seems to have no discernible content except a certain compelling force ... But actually this notion of obligation is a notion which only operates in the context of law. And I should be inclined to congratulate the present-day moral philosophers on depriving 'morally ought' of its now delusive appearance of content, if only they did not manifest a detestable desire to retain the atmosphere of the term ('Modern Moral Philosophy', pp. 40–1).

49. Thus Anscombe's aim is much less general than is often supposed: it is only to show that *particular* locutions (such as 'moral obligation', 'moral ought') – in so far as they are now used apart from a certain framework of thought – continue to retain a certain atmosphere without having a meaning. Anscombe does not think all our moral concepts are in trouble. It is thus a mistake to identify Anscombe's thesis with that of other authors – who have been influenced by her and with whom she is now often grouped together (such as Alasdair MacIntyre) – who argue that the possibility of coherent moral thinking *as a whole* depends on a background we have lost. If Anscombe held (as is sometimes presumed) that all of our secular moral thought is unintelligible then her view would be that every moral concept is in trouble. This would leave no foothold for the sort of argument that Anscombe actually does make – one which requires that we be able to identify how a particular concept fails to cohere with the rest of our moral thought.

50. This point is brought out very nicely in Cora Diamond's article ('The Dog that Gave Himself the Moral Law') and the present discussion is indebted to it.

51. I remind the reader that the aim of this paper is neither to defend nor to attack Anscombe's claim, but simply to clarify how that claim can and cannot be disputed. If I were to undertake such a dispute, I would want to go after the first half of her claim. I would want to draw upon the tradition of thought about the normativity of juridi-

cal and moral concepts which has its origins in Kant and Hegel. This would require taking issue with Anscombe's cursory dismissal of Kant's conception of the moral law (as a law one gives oneself) as 'absurd' ('Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 27).

52. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 30.

53. Thus she proposes that we 'discard the term "morally ought", and simply return to the ordinary "ought"' (ibid., p. 41). She goes on to remark that 'the ordinary "ought" ... is such an extremely frequent term of human language that it is difficult to imagine getting on without it' (ibid.).

54. Thus Anscombe writes:

> It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong', one always named a genus such as 'untruthful', 'unchaste', 'unjust'. We should no longer ask whether doing something was 'wrong', passing directly from some description of an action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it was unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once ('Modern Moral Philosophy', pp. 32–3).

Her point here is not that we should no longer ask 'is doing such-and-such wrong?' because the word 'wrong' is necessarily meaningless and to be avoided at all costs, but rather that we should no longer – when uttering these words – take ourselves to be asking a *certain sort of question*: one which would allow us to explicate the content of what we are asking in such a way as to isolate a notion of what it is for something to be 'morally wrong' which has prescriptive force independently of the particular virtue to which the action in question fails to conform.

55. On a law conception of ethics, it suffices to make a particular action right or wrong if – independently of any further reasons for thinking it good or bad – it is the sort of action which has been (divinely) commanded or prohibited. That is why Anscombe says that on a law conception of ethics it really does *add* something to a description of a particular unjust act (in a way that it does not in the absence of such a conception) to say of it that it is 'morally wrong':

> In a divine law theory of ethics ... it really does add something to the description 'unjust' to say there is an obligation not to do it; for what obliges is the divine law – as rules oblige in a game. So if the divine law obliges not to commit injustice by forbidding injustice, it really does add something to the description 'unjust' to say there is an obligation not to do it. And it is because 'morally wrong' is the heir of this concept, but an heir that is cut off from the family of concepts from which it sprang, that 'morally wrong' *both* goes beyond the mere factual description 'unjust' *and* seems to have no discernible content except a certain compelling force, which I should call purely psychological ('Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 41).

This is connected to a further feature of what makes Anscombe (in the absence of a divine law-giver) so nervous about an overarching quasi-legal notion of moral obligation:

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., p. 40).

Anscombe sees recent attempts to reinfuse an emphatic 'moral ought' with content – to supply an alternative source of overarching moral justification – as a temptation to moral rationalisation (and ultimately moral lunacy) in so far as it encourages us repeatedly to ponder whether something we otherwise have every reason to think morally abominable might not nonetheless be (given our alternative conception of the overarching source of moral justification) something which we 'morally ought' to do.

56. In this connection, Beardsmore writes:

Anscombe does not claim that *any* sense of 'obligation' has, and must have, its basis in divine law, but only that what she calls the 'special moral sense' or sometimes the 'absolute' sense must do so ... Though membership in a trade union may well carry with it the obligation to respect the picket-lines, though doctors may have various professional obligations, these cannot be thought to be absolutely binding, since it is always possible for the trade unionist to resign from membership, possible for the doctor to find another profession. By contrast, where an obligation is thought of as the will of God, then there can be no question of the believer choosing to avoid it.

Beardsmore goes on to differ with Anscombe over why it is that for the religious believer God's commands 'possess the status of absolute obligations'. His differences with her here, again, rest on misunderstandings. Anscombe herself, as far as I know, never actually employs the locution 'absolute obligation'. She does distinguish between conditional and unconditional obligations, as well as between what is intrinsically unjust and what is unjust given particular circumstances. The intelligibility of neither of these distinctions, however, rests for her upon a notion of divine law. Neither of these distinctions therefore marks the sort of distinction between 'absolute' and 'non-absolute' obligations which Beardsmore reads into Anscombe.

Beardsmore (in his remarks quoted above) runs together a happy and an unhappy point: (a) only when employed in the context of a law conception of ethics does the term 'obligation' acquire a special moral sense, (b) what makes an obligation the sort which only God can prescribe is whether or not one can choose to avoid it. Beardsmore conflates these two points into a single notion of 'absolute obligation' which he attributes to Anscombe.

As to (a), though Anscombe would agree with it, she would not take it to imply that the term 'obligation' is deprived of modal force when employed in secular contexts (nor would she take it in such contexts to be necessarily conditional on roles of which one can divest oneself). The passage from 'Modern Moral Philosophy' which Beardsmore appears to have in mind (in his remarks quoted above) is the following:

The terms 'should' or 'ought' or 'needs' ... have acquired a special so-called 'moral' sense – i.e. a sense in which they imply some absolute verdict (like one of guilty/not guilty on a man) on what is described in the 'ought' sentences used in certain types of context ...

The ordinary (and quite indispensable) terms 'should', 'needs', 'ought', 'must' acquired this special sense by being equated in the relevant contexts with 'is obliged', or 'is bound', or 'is required to', in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law (pp. 29–30).

Anscombe's point here is not that the terms 'is obliged', or 'is bound', or 'is required to' only have genuine modal force given a conception of divine law. It is rather that a non-legal modal vocabulary ('should', 'ought', 'needs', 'must') acquires the modal force of terms such as 'is obliged', or 'is bound', or 'is required to' – and thus acquires a special moral sense (the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law) – when it is employed in the context of a law conception of ethics; and only when it is employed in the sense in which something is required by law can this vocabulary be understood to imply an 'absolute' verdict (as opposed merely to retaining an empty atmosphere as of a verdict). So understood, Anscombe does not take (a) (as Beardsmore assumes) to impugn conceptions of ethics other than a divine law conception. She would take (a) merely to express a logical point concerning the difference between the prescriptive force of divine law and the prescriptive force the word 'ought' carries on a conception of ethics which is not a law conception. In particular, she would not take (a) to impugn an Aristotelian conception of ethics.

As to (b), it is not always the case that a status which incurs an obligation can be peeled off through an act of choice (as membership in a trade union can). But perhaps Beardsmore thinks that Anscombe is confused about this and that she thus holds that one can escape all obligations except divinely decreed ones by divesting oneself of membership in the sorts of status which incur them. However, as far as I can see, nothing Anscombe says in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' invites the attribution of such a view to her. Moreover, she explicitly repudiates such a view in 'On the Source of the Authority of the State' (in *Ethics, Religion and Politics*) where she contrasts one's obligations to a club (from which one can – and, in some cases, should – resign) and one's obligations to a government which exercises legitimate civil authority (from which one neither can nor should resign).

57. It is safe to say that many of the misunderstandings to which Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' has been subjected are due to her readers drawing on their independent knowledge of her religious convictions and her explicitly apologetic religious writings. Readers therefore assume that they already know roughly what she *must* be saying in this article, too. In short, they fail to appreciate the extent to which the article undertakes a tactical (as it were, nonpartisan) intervention in the discourse of modern moral philosophy.

Not only does Anscombe not urge a divine law conception on her reader, she urges an alternative (Aristotelian) view – no doubt, in part, because she is confident that the majority of her readers (as she says) 'are not going to maintain such a [divine law] conception and you can do ethics without it' (p. 32).

58. It further escapes Beardsmore that her aim in exploring these differences is to bring out how a particular logical feature attributed to 'moral ought' (possessing overriding prescriptive force) is internally related to other features of a law conception of ethics.

59. Beardsmore's way of reconstructing Anscombe's concern would sort both the Stoic (who she thinks does have a law conception of ethics) and the Protestant (who she thinks doesn't) incorrectly for her purposes.

60. Beardsmore introduces his way of understanding 'absolute obligation' as an improvement over what he takes to be Anscombe's. He writes:

[I]n so far as it is implied that the mere existence of an alternative way of life is sufficient to rob obligations of their absolute character, then the conclusion should be drawn that, even for the devout religious believer, God's commands do not possess the status of absolute obligations. For there is certainly an alternative to religious belief, namely atheism ... [But the] absolute nature of God's commands for the religious believer stems not from a denial of the possibility of atheism. It stems rather from the recognition that such a way of life is not for that person a possibility.

This passage is concerned to contrast two ways of understanding the idea of an 'absolute obligation' (neither of which have anything to do with the logical features of a law conception of ethics to which Anscombe wished to direct attention). The misunderstandings discussed in note 56 lead Beardsmore to assume that Anscombe must be after the first of these. It is for this reason that he concludes that – if she chooses the second horn of the dilemma he outlines – her position will turn out to be 'merely a variant of the line of reasoning which has already been detected in the writings of Nielsen and Kolakowski'. Beardsmore's reason for proposing an alternative way of understanding 'absolute obligation' is in part, I take it, to avoid having his criticisms of Anscombe commit him to the view that all religious believers are as confused as he takes her to be.

61. What Beardsmore proposes isn't a distinctive feature of any conception of ethics. In Beardsmore's watered-down sense of what it is for something to be 'absolutely obligatory', even someone with an Aristotelian conception of what one 'ought' to do (such as the one that Anscombe urges on us) can acknowledge that it is 'absolutely obligatory' for a virtuous person not to act unjustly.

62. G. E. M. Anscombe, 'The Reality of the Past', in *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind: Collected Papers*, Vol. III (Minneapolis, MIN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 113.

63. Ibid., pp. 113–4.

64. These characterisations of the cases participate in the very confusions which they ultimately seek to illuminate. They are thus transitional ways of speaking that are, in the end, to be thrown away along with the confusions to which they are directed. Anscombe's method here resembles that of Kierkegaard. As Kierkegaard puts the point when explaining his own method: 'One does not begin *directly* with the matter that one wants to communicate, but begins by accepting the other man's illusion as good money' (*The Point of View for my Work as an Author*, p. 40).

65. Anscombe, 'The Reality of the Past', pp. 114–5.

66. This is why it is important to her argument in 'Modern Moral Philosophy' to begin with those modern moral philosophers who find it difficult to uncover *any content at all* in talk of what one 'morally ought' to do and yet wish to retain the term as one which expresses a prescriptive force. They serve as part of her evidence that at least some of us have logically incoherent desires with respect to this particular form of words.

67. Anscombe, 'The Reality of the Past', p. 115.

68. Anscombe, 'Modern Moral Philosophy', p. 41.

69. Ibid., p. 38.

70. The example and accompanying discussion quoted above from 'The Reality of the Past' is accompanied by the following footnote:

In this example I have repeated some remarks made by Dr. Wittgenstein in discussion. Everywhere in this paper I have imitated his ideas and methods of discussion ... [I]ts value depends ... on my capacity to understand and use Dr. Wittgenstein's work (p. 114n).

71. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), §18, p. 27. Anscombe in this passage is quoting §500 of her own translation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953):

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

The preceding section (§499) begins as follows:

To say 'This combination of words makes no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary it may be for various kinds of reason.

This raises the question: what are Wittgenstein's reasons for proposing that we exclude particular combinations of words from the language? In the *Philosophical Grammar* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), we find this:

How strange that one should be able to say that such and such a state of affairs is inconceivable! If we regard a thought as an accompaniment going with an expression, the words in the statement that specify the inconceivable state of affairs must be unaccompanied. So what sort of sense is it to have? Unless it says these words are senseless. But it isn't as it were their sense that is senseless; they are to be excluded from our language as if they

were some arbitrary noise, and the reason for their *explicit* exclusion can only be that *we are tempted* to confuse them with a proposition of our language (p. 130; I have amended the translation).
I take it that Anscombe's reasons for proposing that we explicitly exclude an expression from the language are the same as Wittgenstein's – not because it is as it were the sense of the expression which is senseless, but because '*we are tempted* to confuse' sentences in which it figures senselessly with meaningful propositions of our language.
Anscombe takes Wittgenstein's repudiation of the idea that certain propositions could express an inconceivable state of affairs (a senseless sense) to be a distinctive feature of his *later* thought. She takes early Wittgenstein to have endorsed the idea that certain (pseudo-) propositions have an inexpressible (because nonsensical) sense:

> [A]n important part is played in the *Tractatus*, by the things which, though they cannot be 'said', are yet 'shown' or 'displayed'. That is to say: it would be right to call them 'true' if, *per impossibile*, they could be said; in fact they cannot be called true, since they cannot be said, that 'can be shown', or 'are exhibited', in the propositions saying the various things that can be said (*An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 162).

I take issue with this way of aligning Wittgenstein's early and later thought in 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought' (*Philosophical Topics*, vol. 20, no. 1).
72. *Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon* (London: Routledge, 1905), p. 45.
73. I include the hedge 'in the first instance' in order to avoid overstating the differences between their respective analyses. The emphasis in each falls in a different place; but the feature each of them harps on is present, in some way, in the analyses offered by the other two.
74. Without the qualifying phrase ('in the first instance') this would once again be an overstatement of their differences. For Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, our existential confusions are tied to conceptual ones. (Hence, for example, Kierkegaard's abiding concern with what he calls 'dialectical' or 'logical' problems – problems which arise from a failure to command a clear view of the categories.) For Anscombe, bad moral philosophy does not only corrupt how we think. (Hence, for example, for Anscombe bad moral philosophy – by encouraging us to leave open to question what would otherwise not be left open to question – leads us to tolerate and perhaps commit evil. Hence also, in particular, the connection between the thesis of the focal passage and the third thesis of her article as developed in the closing paragraphs: namely, the manner in which modern moral philosophy encourages one to take as open to question 'whether such a procedure as the judicial punishment of the innocent may not in some circumstances be the "right" one to adopt' (p. 42).)

Part VII
Voices in Dicussion