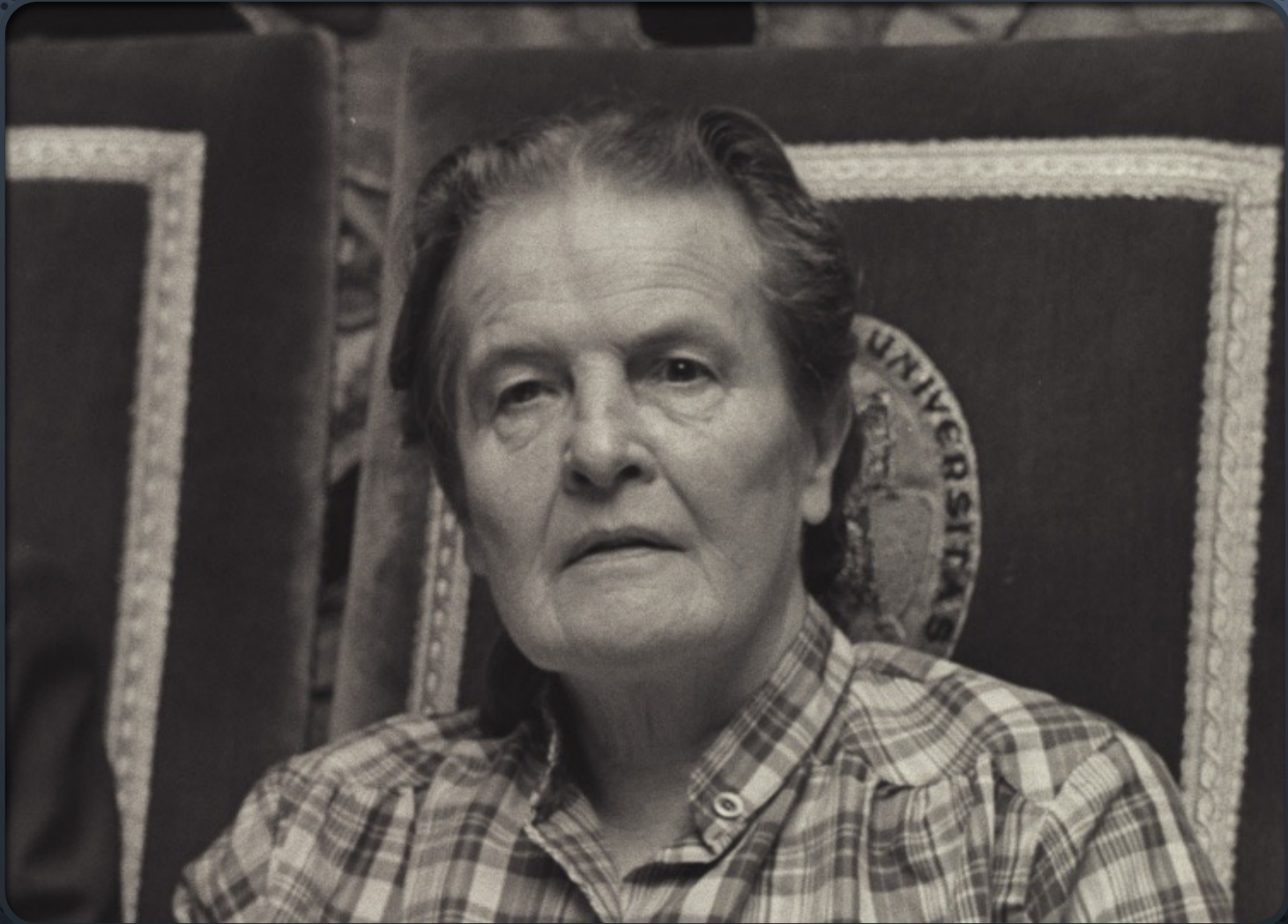# GERTRUDE ELIZABETH MARGARET ANSCOMBE

Born Limerick, Ireland, 18 March 1919

Entered Oxford as a student at St. Hugh's college in 1938

Began studying Catholicism immediately, converted shortly thereafter

Moved to Cambridge in 1942, where she met Ludwig Wittgenstein

Moved back to Oxford in 1946

Moved back to Cambridge in 1970, where she retired, holding the same Chair that Wittgenstein held

Died 5 January 2001

"MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY"

MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY[1]

G. E. M. ANSCOMBE

I WILL begin by stating three theses which I present in this paper. The first is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My third thesis is that the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

Our focus today—theses two and three:

1. Moral philosophers ought to stop talking about "the moral sense of 'ought'"

2. Most English-language moral philosophy since the 1870s is basically the same

    Anscombe coined a term for what unites them: *consequentialism*

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MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY¹
G. E. M. ANSCOMBE

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Thesis 2: On the moral sense of 'ought'

THE MEANING OF 'OUGHT'

Beyond Descriptivism and Expressivism in Metaethics

MATTHEW CHRISMAN

'Ought' is a modal verb that we use in a variety of different ways, which Chrisman calls "flavors" of 'ought'

- Epistemic – states an expectation of something to happen: "The package ought to arrive tomorrow"

- Teleological – describes something as good/essential for some completable goal: "You ought to use Genovese basil if you want to make an authentic pesto"

- Prudential – describes something as a good/essential for producing a good ongoing state: "You ought to quit smoking"

- Moral - describes something as morally good/essential: "You ought to tell the truth and help those in need"

Thesis 2: On the moral sense of 'ought'

'Moral ought' - describes something as morally good/essential: "You ought to tell the truth and help those in need"

- This is obviously a circular definition – can we improve on it?

- Anscombe: what 'moral ought' intends to convey is the idea of an *obligation*: if we morally ought to do something, then we are obliged to do it

- Moreover, this sort of obligation is distinctive – it is different from, e.g., legal obligations or contractual obligations

- So, what is the source of these special obligations?

Thesis 2: On the moral sense of 'ought'

General claim: obligations are generated either by agreements or commands

- Codes and systems of morality present moral obligations, not as the product of agreements, but as rules and laws
  - Even social contract theories have to answer the question, "Why keep our promises?", and these inevitably turn into a story about following some kind of law
- So: where do these special laws come from, that bind people in this special way that can be at odds with a state's laws or the terms of a contract?
- If you are a member of an Abrahamic religion, the answer is easy: God
- But, what if you're an atheist?
- Anscombe: for atheists, who recognize no divine lawgiver, saying someone 'morally ought' to do something is empty, meaningless

Thesis 2: On the moral sense of 'ought'

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* craftsman or logician)—that what is needed for *this*, is required by divine law. 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 as 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.

It is as if the notion "criminal" were to remain when criminal law and criminal courts had been abolished and forgotten. A Hume discovering this situation might conclude that there was a special sentiment, expressed by "criminal," which alone gave the word its sense. So Hume discovered the situation in which the notion "obligation" survived, and the notion "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 Protestants at the time of the Reformation.[1] 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.