Journal Review – Incoherence Of The Moral “Ought” Essay, Research Paper

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THE INCOHERENCE OF THE MORAL ‘OUGHT’

Journal Report

The Incoherence of the Moral ‘Ought,’ a journal article by Duncan Richter, is an analysis of a paper by Elizabeth Anscombe entitled, “Modern Moral Philosophy.” In this analysis, Mr. Richter is only concerned about Anscombe’s second thesis, which states as follows:

The concepts of moral obligation and moral duty (what is morally right and morally wrong, and 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.

According to this thesis, Mr. Richter builds his thesis into five parts. Part one summarizes Elizabeth Anscombe’s research according to her second thesis. Anscombe’s objection is to limit the use of such words as ‘ought,’ ’should,’ ‘needs’ and ‘most.’ She asserts that there are two uses for such words, being either ordinary or objectionable. In the ordinary sense of the specific case, ‘ought,’ the word is indispensable. The meaning of this sense of the word is that if one ‘ought’ to do something, then without doing so, such a result will minimize happiness for a certain person. Conversely, the objectionable sense of the word is the ‘moral sense’ in which “a verdict is implied on the notion in question without support of a conceptual framework to make the notion of such a verdict coherent.” In other words, this seems to infer that implications to legality of any sort, whether it be the government or divine law, are objectionable to Anscombe and therefore should be eradicated from our terminology.

In parts two and three, Mr. Richter presents criticisms of the thesis based on Kurt Baier and Peter Winch, respectively. Kurt Baier seems to be less interesting on Mr. Richter’s list of priority to objecting Anscombe’s argument, but he does state his conclusion before proceeding to part three:

I conclude that Anscombe’s … arguments do not succeed in showing that all or most or indeed any of contemporary ethics is confused, incoherent, or vitiated because it operates with an incoherent conception of wrongness, duty and obligation.

The author turns now to Winch’s criticism. The main theme of which Mr. Richter concentrates on in part three is suggestion that “there is something unintelligible about a moral modality which lacks eternal justification” Winch claims that these specified modals possess a certain arbitrary aspect in that they do not “require external justification, but are rooted in natural, spontaneous human reactions to certain situations.”

Mr. Richter proceeds with part four by considering Paul Johnston’s rejection of Anscombe’s second thesis. Johnston asserts in from his book, Wittgenstein and Moral Philosophy, that moral judgments are absolute: “…it is the absolute use of these terms (i.e. ‘good,’ ‘right,’ ‘ought,’ etc.) that seems distinctively ethical.” His reasons for this assertion include that ethics and specific ethical judgments “…require, and perhaps can have, no justification.” He also explains that there is no ethical reason, to be morally good when looked upon by society, or to refrain from immoral acts.

Finally, in part five, Duncan Richter concludes by approaching Cora Diamond’s tribute to Modern Moral Philosophy and considers what response can be made to Baier and Winch, in light of this tribute. Diamond presents the moral question, ‘Why obey God?’ to which there must be and answer. She answers this by saying, ‘We can see what is would be, what breach of trust, what ingratitude, what kind of pride and folly, to refuse to obey.’ Duncan Richter adds, at the end, that the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are overlooked by Anscombe and therefore causes her second thesis to seem right. In addition, he asserts that the people of today need to be ready to lay aside moral philosophy as we know it permanently.

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