

IN MEMORIAM
Peter Geach
(1916-2013)



In memoriam

Peter Geach (1916-2013)

CRAIG IFFLAND

University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN 46556 (Estados Unidos)
cjiffland@gmail.com

Peter Geach was born on March 29, 1916. He studied Classics and Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, where, in 1938, he converted to Roman Catholicism. He married G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001) in 1941 and went on to take up academic posts at the University of Birmingham (until 1966) and the University of Leeds (until his retirement in 1981). He also served a semester as Visiting Professor at the Universidad de Navarra. Along with his wife, Geach can be credited with much of the revived philosophical interest in the work of Aristotle and Aquinas—indeed the two published a philosophical exploration of the two thinkers (along with Gottlob Frege) in *Three Philosophers: Aristotle, Aquinas, and Frege* (Blackwell, 1961). This has led some to memorialize Geach and Anscombe as the founders of the school of “Analytic Thomism”, but the truth of the matter is that the intellectual formation they received from Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) would wholly preclude either from daring to create a philosophical “school”.

Geach published widely, but some of his most influential philosophical interventions came in the form of journal articles. Among the most notable are *Subject and Predicate* (“Mind”, 1950), *Good and*

Evil (“Analysis”, 1956), *Imperative and Deontic Logic* (“Analysis”, 1958) and *Ascriptivism* (“Philosophical Review”, 1960). In addition to these shorter journal articles, Geach published numerous full-length monographs. Among those deserving special mention are *Mental Acts* (Routledge, 1957), *God and the Soul* (Routledge, 1969), and his 1973-74 Stanton Lectures *The Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1977; a Spanish translation, *Las Virtudes*, was published in 1993 by EUNSA). As has been so often noted, Geach’s philosophical prose was incredibly accessible and concise, even if taking hold of his conclusions required multiple reviews by the reader. Indeed, his works often disclosed the creative wit of their author, as anyone who has read the fictional dialogue that opens *Murder and Sodomy* (“Philosophy”, 1976) can attest. Mention should also be made of his contributions to “Anuario Filosófico”—*¿Verdad o aserción justificada* (1982) and *Amor y eternidad. La filosofía idealista de McTaggart* (1989)—each of which stand as evidence of Geach’s long-term fascination with the philosophy of J.M.E. McTaggart and his lasting contributions to the field of logic. Lesser known are his distinctive contributions to theological inquiry. For this reason, I believe it necessary to recount two of Geach’s forays into theology worthy of special attention.

In *The Moral Law and the Law of God*, Geach observed that while we can have knowledge of necessarily evil kinds of action (e.g., lying) without any knowledge of God, the Pauline principle “do no evil that good may come” is intelligible only when combined with a certain conception of God as a provident Creator. For those believers who deny the Pauline principle—while agreeing to the general objectionableness of the actions to which the principle applies—Geach’s claims offer a challenge of a different register than one would expect: if a theologian denies the principle, must she (sometimes) deny the providence of God? The theologian may say, “why should we rely on divine providence when the wicked seem to so often prosper from their wickedness?” If this is actually the routine state of things, says Geach, the prosperity of the wicked “is only a gratuitous mercy, on whose continuance the sinner has no reason to count”. Here is a way of framing the role of God’s mercy from which a moral theologian could learn a great deal.

In *Time and Eternity* (his 2001 Aquinas Medalist Address), Geach considers what it means to say that earthly inhabitants have a hope of eternal life after death. He explains that the “eternal life” hoped for by the earthly wayfarer cannot be *either* a share in God’s eternity—which is a life absent of any change—*or* that, by dying, one must necessarily enter into a state of eternal bliss or eternal torment. As Geach correctly observed, there is no promise of eternal life save for those whose life consists in the beatific vision, i.e., the blessed in heaven. And so no one is eternally damned, although this does not mean that they are set free “after a time”. In lacking “eternal life” the damned do not lack unlimited temporal existence, but a vision of God’s glory. Here is a classic example of Geach’s philosophical acumen being used to expound and illuminate a deeply theological topic.

Peter Geach died on December 21, 2013 at the age of ninety-seven. It is unfortunate that “being the husband of Elizabeth Anscombe” should so often be listed among his personal achievements. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned so that future readers of Peter Geach will understand how important it is to read Elizabeth Anscombe in order to make sense of Peter Geach (and vice-versa). The two left a body of philosophical and theological insights that has not yet been fully grasped even by enthusiastic readers such as myself. Reading the two side-by-side is necessary because, like all great and influential thinkers, the characterization of their works by the academy writ-large cannot be trusted to do justice to what they really said or thought. The philosophical world owes a great deal to Peter Geach and he will be sorely missed. I hope that by the turn of the next century, his work will be even more widely appreciated than it is today. *Requiescat in pace.*