I discuss the third of Anscombe’s theses from “Modern Moral Philosophy,” namely that post-Sidgwickian consequentialism makes the worst action acceptable. I scrutinize her comprehension of “consequentialism,” her reconstruction of Sidgwick’s view of intention, her defence of casuistry, her reformulation of the double-effect doctrine, and her view of morality as based on Divine commands. I argue that her characterization of consequentialism suffers from lack of understanding of the history of utilitarianism and its self-transformation through the Intuitionism-Utilitarianism controversy; that she uncritically accepted an impoverished image of Kantian ethics and intuitionism, which was, ironically, an unaware bequest from her consequentialist opponents; that her action theory, yet, is a decisive contribution that may prove useful in formulating answers to questions that have been left open in both utilitarian and Kantian or intuitionist theories; that, to make the best of her action theory, it is as well to drop her divine law view of ethics, which is incompatible with the former; and that the rather obscure traditional theological doctrine of absolute prohibitions is unnecessary to her project that could fare well with the more sober distinction between perfect and imperfect duties.

I. Anscombe’s third thesis

As Roger Crisp recently noted, albeit “Modern Moral Philosophy” as a whole has been widely discussed, its third thesis, that post-Sidgwickian consequentialism makes the most disgraceful action morally right, has not received much serious consideration. The questions I will ask in connection with the third thesis are: (i) What is properly ‘modern moral philosophy’? (ii) What is wrong with it? (iii) What is properly ‘consequentialism’?; (iv) Why is it post-Sidgwickian?; (v) Who precisely claimed that the most disgraceful action may be the morally right action?; and (vi) Is Anscombe justified in contending that
consequentialism is incompatible with one noteworthy feature of the Hebrew-Christian ethic?

The answers I will give are: Anscombe’s characterization of consequentialism is far from univocal; her ascription of this doctrine to Sidgwick is inaccurate; the claim of its ubiquity in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century British philosophy needs to be qualified; the role ascribed to absolute prohibitions in the Hebrew and Christian moral traditions is questionable; the opposition she draws between a religious tradition and a philosophical school is illegitimate, or at least uncritically carried out; and the doctrine of absolute prohibitions is incompatible with her own action theory.2

II. Mr. Truman’s fountain pen and intention

In 1956, at the beginning of her career, Anscombe published a pamphlet challenging the decision to award an honorary degree to Harry Truman, the US President who had decided use of the atom bomb against Japan. The pamphlet rescues the sixteenth century just war doctrine, and in more detail the *jus in bello*, that is, the theory of just warfare. Such a return to casuistry sounded as a shocking novelty in 1956, at a time when, in the Anglo-Saxon world, rational argument in ethics was generally assumed to be confined to metaethics. In the conclusions she suggested that the kind of moral philosophy taught at Oxford was such as to make academics and their pupils colour-blind to the morally relevant characteristics of action, to the point of thinking that Truman had stained his hands not with blood but at most with ink and what he had done was not *killing* women and children but just *putting his signature* on a sheet.

The short book *Intention*, published one year after *Mr. Truman’s Degree*, provided a sustained discussion of the reasons why what Truman had done could not be described as “sprinkling ink over paper” but rather as “killing innocents.” The action theory developed here started with a few ideas from Wittgenstein and developed them into an attempt to dismantle the Cartesian view of the mind-body relationship while reconstructing an account of human action as something different from a series of events in the physical world bearing a mysterious causal relationship with another series of events located in the mind. Thus, what Truman had done could be described in a number of different ways, ranging from “depositing a few drops of ink on a sheet” to “affixing a signature to a document,” reaching “killing two hundred thousand innocent victims,” but only some of these descriptions were relevant ones, while others