

IN PRAISE OF VIRTUOUS WOMEN

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The remarkable women philosophers who are the subjects of the two books under review here¹ were contemporaries as undergraduates at Oxford, and all studied or taught at Somerville College in the days when women could only attend the (very few) women's colleges. Though none were still teaching there by the time I arrived at Somerville in 1975, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe were regular visitors to Somerville High Table during my time there as post-doc. Mary Midgley, working at a more considerable distance in Newcastle, I did not meet until years later when, then in her seventies—her children grown and having re-entered philosophical life with evangelical anti-reductionist fervour and a razor sharp mind—she was a frequent visitor to Cambridge and the scourge of Richard Dawkins, then at the height of his notoriety. (Dawkins refused eventually to take part in any panel with Midgley, so effectively did she destroy his arguments.)

What I did not fully realize until reading these two fine books is that the four were not only undergraduate contemporaries but life-long friends, all of them somewhat outside and highly critical of the mainstream of Oxford philosophy of their time, and united in their conviction that a change was needed, especially in moral philosophy.

I remember asking Mary Midgely once how Oxford University, having produced few significant women philosophers before them and few immediately afterwards, produced these four all at once. Midgley, even in her eighties, tall and stately, replied with the impeccable diction of the daughter of a rectory (pauses indicated).

‘Well, it was the War and the men were away And we were taught by Donald MacKinnon.’

Benjamin Lipscomb, Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman have obviously asked the same question: ‘what accounts for this quartet of innovative, Oxford trained,

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¹ Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up To Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), xxx + 326 pp. and Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2022), xv + 398 pp.

women philosophers?', and sought, amongst other resources, the remembrances of Mary Midgley, longest living of the four subjects who died only recently at the age of ninety-nine.

Any doubt that biography can illuminate philosophy should be dispelled by these books. Anscombe, Foot, Murdoch and Midgley, all born in 1919, had their lives doubly affected by war. The First World War had traumatized or disillusioned their parents' generation and the Second World War, during which they were first undergraduates and then working in related war service, turned their own young adult lives upside down. Theirs was a generation of letter writers and a generation that lived as single independent women during the Second World War. The constant exchange of letters between the four friends—and to various boyfriends, tutors and lovers—offers a treasure trove of documents on which the authors could draw.

It is a credit to both books that they weave the biographical and philosophical elements together so well. Lipscomb helpfully provides *A Note to American Readers* which explains the Oxford vocabulary: for instance 'college', 'Greats' and 'terms'. He underscores the gate-keeping women faced if they were to study philosophy at Oxford at all at the time. The degree in which philosophy predominantly was done was Greats, a classics degree with a modern philosophical (Descartes, Locke, Hume) component. This was the gold standard for the brightest Oxford students, and for entrance Latin and Greek were needed at a high level. All the private schools from which the male undergraduates standardly came taught these from the age of seven; the women's schools taught Latin very little and Greek not at all.

Male philosophy lecturers at Oxford, usually products of these same male boarding schools, often had never taught women and, while comfortable in most cases with a wife or mistress, did not expect or wish women to be intellectually challenging. Even in my time, the 1970s, it was understood amongst the women graduate students in philosophy that women were ill-advised to speak in Professor X's senior seminar and especially not in the assertive manner encouraged in his male students. Professor X bridled if you did so and thought you aggressive, but if you phrased your point more gently it was dismissed as light-weight.

But, as Mary Midgley said, they were studying during the war and the men were away. This made it easier for women's voices to be heard. Donald MacKinnon, who taught them (and also, much later, Rowan Williams), was a Scotsman of indisputable brilliance but in many ways himself an outsider. A wavering conscious objector (eventually, when he did volunteer prevented from joining up by his asthma), MacKinnon was an eccentric, giving supervisions while lying on the floor and subject to contorting his face into a grimace as he spoke. He was deeply Christian in Oxford philosophical circles where this was a rarity, and brought to philosophy a deep knowledge of literature, especially tragedy, which schooled his thought in the thickly textured complexity of human experience. MacKinnon thought that philosophy mattered—and moral philosophy mattered to real lives. Real lives were complex and not of the sort where ethical problems could be resolved by thought experiments about a fat man stuck in the exit of a flooding cave whose deliberate drowning might save the rest of the spelunking party.

This was far from the dominant trend in Oxford philosophy in the immediate pre-war period and subsequently. The man of the moment was the brilliant, and some said 'dangerous' young A.J. Ayer. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman set the scene:

In 1933, at a public philosophy meeting, an unknown youth with slick black hair, and a brightly coloured shirt, stood up in a sea of grey haired dons. ... 'You are all', he proclaimed, 'facing an early extinction.... The armies of Cambridge and Vienna are already upon you!' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 44)

This was the twenty-six-year-old Ayer, bristling with confidence and the ideas of Logical Positivism after his time studying with the Vienna Circle and the (early) Wittgenstein in Cambridge. His *Language, Truth and Logic* set out narrow criteria by which a claim could be meaningful. Only claims verifiable by the methods of science qualified. Meaningless were the claims of metaphysics, religion, aesthetics and ethics. Whatever cannot be verified by observation is 'nonsense', which may have an affective influence but nothing more. What was left of philosophy was technique.

David Hume had already in the eighteenth century used the empiricist method to claim that one cannot draw statements of value from statements of fact. Ayer took things further. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman have it, 'by mixing the methods of the Vienna circle with the British empiricist tradition, Ayer had created a deadly potion: Mary (Midgley) described it as "pure weedkiller"' and amongst the weeds was moral philosophy, if not dead then struggling (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 50).

War interrupted everything. Oxford was denuded of men—students and lecturers alike called up into the forces, intelligence work, and administrative duties. Women, too, were conscripted to supporting duties as were, when they finished their degrees in 1941, Philippa Foot (then Bosanquet), Iris Murdoch and Mary Midgley (then Scrutton). Elizabeth Anscombe, already married, remained in Oxford, beginning a doctorate and teaching philosophy.

In her autobiographical work, *The Owl of Minerva*, Mary Midgley spells out what it meant 'to be at war'.

You are not doing what you would normally be doing, you are not where you would normally be: you are sent about, redirected, restricted. Your family and friends have been moved about too; or killed or injured or are in danger. It is hard to find out what is happening; the newspapers are not reliable, the radio is propaganda, the letters are censored. Food is scarce, petrol is rationed, travel is restricted. The future is uncertain. You are afraid. It is dark.

(Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, xii)

Murdoch, working for the Treasury, took an attic loft above empty stables in London and spent her first few weeks sewing 'miles' of blackout curtains. Foot when she moved in with Murdoch was told that, since there were too few blankets, after 'lights out' you just had to take down one of the blackout curtains and use that for warmth, along with coat and dressing gown. They were surrounded by bomb-shattered buildings. Iris and Philippa had three pairs of shoes between them which, by the end of the war, had dwindled to two. Still philosophy continued, as did a lively social life. As a youthful Communist, Iris did a little pilfering of documents to share with the Soviets. There seemed to be no serious repercussions apart from being forbidden ever to enter the United States. They read books and shared stories. They compared lists of men who had proposed to them. 'Philippa went first: her list was respectable but short. Iris's, once started, seemed like it would never end: "It would be quicker", Philippa said crossly to Iris, if she listed "the one who hadn't asked her rather than those who had"' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 117).

Philippa had never had to look after herself. While the other three grew up in comfortable homes, Philippa came from a truly grand background. The grand-daughter of the American President Grover Cleveland, she grew up in a sixteen-bedroom country house with many servants, horseback riding and so on. As a young woman Philippa shocked her mother by going into the kitchen to make herself a sandwich. This social advantage was, however, an educational disadvantage. Philippa received almost no schooling—she wasn't sent to school, nor was she home-schooled but, after the pattern of the English upper-classes in those days, educated by a series of nannies. It was only when one of these, herself a graduate, realized Philippa was bright that she was encouraged to go to a crammer and on to the university. When she got her place at Oxford her mother was consoled, 'Never mind dear: she doesn't look clever!' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 62).

But Philippa was clever and, having acquired Latin at her crammer, but not Greek, she opted for the new degree of Philosophy, Politics and Economics. This background in economics got her a war posting at the Royal Institute of International Affairs where she was exposed to post-war planning, refugees, and the possibility of thirty million displaced people.

Iris continued to be devoted to their Oxford tutor, Donald MacKinnon, as were all four, but such was Iris's infatuation that MacKinnon's wife, Lois, eventually forbade Donald from meeting her. Murdoch was famous for falling passionately, intensely in love (with both women and men). Elizabeth Anscombe, by contrast, had married the first man who proposed to her—Peter Geach—a fellow convert to Catholicism and a philosopher. They met just three months after she was received into the Catholic Church in Oxford on Easter Sunday, 1938 and married when she graduated in 1941. Peter, a conscientious objector, was deployed during the war as a lumberjack.

As his book's subtitle indicates, Lipscomb sees the four women as revolutionizing ethics. He begins the book with Philippa Foot in 1945, returned to Oxford and the study of philosophy, viewing newsreels from the concentration camps. No such imagery had been seen during the war, and while the public knew there were camps, their full horrors had not been shown to them. Nothing, she thought, will ever be the same. All four found the moral philosophy they had been taught at Oxford unable to speak into the horror of the war. To Foot it appeared that 'Freddie Ayer's pre-war assault on metaphysics and ethics had left moral philosophy speechless in the face of this new reality. Expressions of personal disapproval or subjective emotion fell grossly short from what was needed ... if morality was subjective in the way Ayer suggested, there was no way ... one could imagine oneself saying to a Nazi, "But we are right, and you are wrong", with there being any substance to the statement' (cit. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 144). Lipscomb puts it in this way: 'On this picture, nothing counts as getting an evaluation right, because there's nothing for evaluations to get right. On this picture facts can never be values' (Lipscomb, 9).

Lipscomb provides a vivid historical sketch of the development of this toxic 'picture' which remains, more or less, the default metaphysics of modernity. He prefaces his first chapter, *Facts and Values*, with a quote from Richard Dawkins:

They say to me, how can you bear to be alive if everything is so cold and empty and pointless? Well, at an academic level I think it is—but that doesn't mean you have to live your life like that.

Richard Dawkins in The Guardian, October 3, 1998

This, Lipscomb suggests, is ‘a crystalline expression of the picture Foot needed to escape’ (Lipscomb, 17). It is a picture still with us whose power, as a picture, (here Charles Taylor is cited) is that ‘it includes that idea that it is not a picture, that people who think in terms of this picture have foresworn all pictures and are simply confronting reality as it is. I call this conceit “the Dawkins sublime”’ (Lipscomb, 17).

In the ‘Dawkins sublime’ a vision of the world as empty void, billiard balls in meaningless interaction, marries an aesthetic of the sublime where the world is ‘cold, pitiless, bereft’ (Lipscomb, 19). The only response of the philosopher is bravery and self-mastery.

After the war Iris Murdoch asked to be sent abroad by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. In Brussels she heard Jean-Paul Sartre lecture on existentialism. Initially exhilarating to Iris, she came to believe Sartre’s message that each ‘individual creates value through his choices and actions, through his own will’ simply a variant of the unsatisfactory philosophy of A.J. Ayer (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 150). More fruitful to her later work was her discovery of the writings of Simone Weil.

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman’s book is the longer of the two, and with more biographical detail, and will be fascinating reading for those who know Oxford and Oxford philosophy, but Lipscomb’s is a wonderful dive into what the four did for ethics. Both books are agile in sketching the extent to which the four were united in believing that something was deeply wrong with the ethics, and indeed with the picture of human being, they had been offered at Oxford. But to sense, even in one’s bones, that something is inadequate is far from knowing how to get beyond it.

In this Elizabeth Anscombe, though not generally regarded as a moral philosopher, played a distinctive role. Self-converted to Catholicism in her teenage years, she had immersed herself in the writings of Aquinas and was intensely interested in philosophy. Her ‘religious faith made her serious’ and informed all her philosophical interests: the problem of knowledge of the external world was a problem of faith, the problem of causation was a problem of God as first cause.

Anscombe was awarded a research post at Newnham College, Cambridge in 1942, and arrived pregnant with her first child. Still a doctoral student at Oxford, and dependent financially on teaching there, she began a period of shuttling between the two universities and considerable hardship. But in Cambridge she was to meet Wittgenstein whose work was decisive for her—her major legacy the editing of his *Philosophical Investigations*.

On returning to Cambridge after the war, during which he had worked in London as a hospital porter, Wittgenstein distanced himself from his early ‘Vienna Circle’ philosophy and became puzzled by ordinary language, seeing this not as a set of logical relations, but embedded in forms of life. We need to understand meaning in terms of overlapping patterns and practices that make up our lives as we give orders, measure, draw, sing, play-act. ‘Elizabeth began to see a new way to describe the soul of a human. Not an efficient calculating machine, but a social, creative, curious, spiritual animal’ (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 127). All this was in tension with the still Ayer-driven philosophy at Oxford but congenial to their former tutor Donald MacKinnon’s, insistence that human beings were ‘metaphysical animals’.

Anscombe brought Wittgenstein’s ideas about philosophy to her friends and argued for his affinities with Aristotle. While Wittgenstein boasted not to have read Aristotle, the four of them had. Anscombe explained the similarities she saw between Wittgenstein’s interest in human life and Aristotle’s philosophy. In this mix

was Aquinas, for Anscombe a better way to reframe Aristotelian ethics than Aristotle himself. Anscombe had read Aquinas from an early age but, according to her daughter, Mary Geach Gormally, took to absorbing and reframing Aquinas's insights rather than direct citation because, she concluded, 'referencing Aquinas made people "silly"'. Some Catholics were uncritically deferential to Aquinas ... (and some) ... non-Catholics on the other hand, ... were ignorantly dismissive of Aquinas, so allergic to theology in general or Catholicism in particular that they were incapable of consciously learning from a medieval Catholic theologian' (Lipscomb, citing Gormally 186).

It was Aquinas's thought on just war that lay behind Anscombe's controversial public stand and the one from which Lipscomb draws his book's title—*The Women Are Up To Something*. In 1956 President Truman was nominated by Oxford University for an honorary degree. Anscombe was appalled. Not a pacifist, she was wholly opposed to the intentional killing of civilians. That, she believed, is murder. 'Truman had authorized the incineration of two cities. These weren't raids on military targets with incidental civilian casualties. These were attempts to terrorize the Japanese into surrender by targeting civilians' (Lipscomb, 156). The University authorities heard in advance that 'the women are up to something' and made sure enough academics were at Convocation to counter any embarrassing outcome, but Elizabeth's lonely protest got wide press coverage.

With Aristotle, mediated by Aquinas and the Wittgensteinian emphasis on forms of life, came new possibilities of thought—the possibility perhaps of a new ethics. Just as one can say, for any living thing, there really are 'ills' and 'goods'—so it is good for a tomato plant to be in the sun and bad for a tomato plant to be in an unlit basement—we must be able to say something of what makes for human flourishing.

In post-war Oxford, Richard Hare became a brilliant young philosophy teacher. Hare had experienced firsthand a brutal war, been a prisoner of war of the Japanese and was on the terrible deadly labour march up the River Kwai. Returning to philosophy, he accepted Ayer's basic picture of a value-free world (Lipscomb's *Dawkins sublime*), but not Ayer's view that moral claims were just expressions of emotion. Hare was committed to the still rather Cinderella topic of ethics, and wanted to provide a means by which moral questions could be answered rationally. But, according to Iris Murdoch, he was equally committed to the elimination of metaphysics from ethics. Mary Midgley said that she and her friends began at this time 'knitting together the great cleavage in reality that Ayer celebrated and Hare accepted—bringing fact and value back together. From this, she said, "a lot of metaphysics would follow"' (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 186). It would be Foot's life-long project to answer Hare and overcome the fact/value dichotomy.

Variouly the four all engaged in 'bringing philosophy back to life', the subtitle of Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's *Metaphysical Animals*. There were many components—challenging the fact-value dichotomy, the recovery of the concepts of vice and virtue and, via Aquinas, of Aristotle's *eudaimonia* (human flourishing), Wittgenstein's grounding of philosophy in 'forms of life' and Iris Murdoch giving up formal philosophy in favour of writing novels, whose characters displayed life's moral entanglements.

Of great interest here, and perhaps still neglected, is Mary Midgley who, in 1950, married a fellow philosopher, moved to Newcastle and stepped away from professional philosophy. With bits of writing, broadcasting and teaching, she devoted herself to raising a family, but that, too, was philosophical. She read all the books she could on the

flowering discipline of animal behaviour because, she reasoned, she was after all raising young animals. The first of her sixteen books was published in 1978. Midgley connected Aristotelian ideas of human flourishing 'to an updated account of what animals we are' (Lipscomb, 238).

Readers of this journal may wonder why, of the four, only Elizabeth Anscombe was overtly religious. She wrote to Foot in the early 1960s to ask why she was an atheist, to which Philippa replied that her thoughts on the matter were conventional, 'how queer it is, all this theology, and what a strain' (Lipscomb, 193). Mary Midgley in later life 'likened Christianity to an engine she couldn't start' (Lipscomb, 55). Iris Murdoch, especially when smitten with MacKinnon, did convert but it was not a lasting state. She remained someone, so Foot thought, with a spiritual life. A.N. Wilson thought that Murdoch's inability to ground her neo-platonic outlook without belief in God drove her mad. Foot remained puzzled throughout her life as to how 'the good' can be spoken of in a secular age, and indeed we might think the question of how to speak of 'the Good' without God remains. Nonetheless, it is to the credit of these four women that, in bringing philosophy 'back to life', they brought us nearer to the thought world in which human flourishing, as life ordered to the Good, makes philosophical sense.