The Women Are up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics

By Benjamin Lipscomb

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A glance at the average university philosophy curriculum might suggest that philosophers are an almost entirely male species, usually middle-aged or older, and quite probably bearded. Mary Midgley notes that, in addition to these, a surprising proportion of eminent philosophers have also been unmarried and without dependants: she lists Plato, Plotinus, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant, not even mentioning the many monks and friars in the canon (p. 214). These figures entrench a common stereotype of the philosopher: as a dependant-less, male genius. (It’s hard to imagine the *Meditations* being written with a child on Descartes’ knee.) *The Women Are up to Something* challenges this common conception of philosophy (and of genius) by presenting vivid stories of four women and friends – Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch – who, despite their gender, dependants, and anxieties about their cleverness, end the book well on their way to becoming towering figures in philosophy, public academia and the literary world.

In a discipline that is still male dominated, it may seem surprising to find an entire group of women who were so remarkably successful. And it can seem all the more so at a point when women’s position in the university system was explicitly precarious: women, the Somerville undergraduates are ominously warned, are ‘still on probation’ (p. 31), so they’d better behave well. Perhaps depressingly, Lipscomb suggests their success seems to have been to a great extent down to the fact that at a certain critical juncture there were simply no men around. All four women were studying as undergraduates during the second World War, and their seminars and lecture halls were therefore emptied of young and healthy men. The absence of the men brought an end to the previously prevailing atmosphere of combative cleverness as well as an end to discussions of the prevailing philosophical fashions (logical positivism, the distinction between fact and value, emotivism and so on). The women thus had a chance to speak and be heard, as well as a chance to engage with a kind of metaphysical theorising that sought to speak to what they regarded as important questions in life: about religion, morality, art and so on.

In part, however, it was no coincidence that the entire group was so successful. The women are not depicted as ivory tower geniuses who make philosophical progress in isolation. Rather, they are pictured as good friends whose friendship is distinctively philosophical, and whose philosophical views are worked out in close continual conversation with one another. The book describes endless discussions in cafes, common rooms and homes in which the women together think through the issues that perplex them, and these discussions find a way into their later work. This way of doing philosophy deeply influenced the contours of their thought.

Each of the women was ultimately extraordinarily successful. Still, Lipscomb suggests that all of them occupied an unstable position as both an insider and outside within academic philosophy, and all seem to have been anxious about their place within it. Anscombe, for example, is pictured as being somewhat socially isolated, and as continually doubting the worth of her ideas. Her public debate with CS Lewis seemed to her hearers to have been a resounding success, for example, but she turned down later invitations to participate in public philosophy discussions, saying that she doubted her ability to do so (pp. 154-5). Murdoch’s peripheral position was reinforced by her engagement with thinkers considered outside the canon (existentialists, religious thinkers and so on), and she had continual doubts about her status as a philosopher. Neither Murdoch nor Anscombe was invited to Austin’s popular Saturday morning seminars (p. 143). Midgley’s outsider status was partly a result of taking a couple of decades away from philosophy to raise her children. But it was also partly imposed upon her by the narrow dominant vision of ‘philosophy’ which emphatically excluded her. Foot was seemingly the most at home within the university system, but even she faced challenges, and ultimately attributed her successes to Anscombe: “I learnt everything from her” (p. 193).

This peripheral status that the women had, despite their successes, had much to do with gender. Lipscomb’s discussions of the way this impacted them nicely links it to wider social trends and reflects on the subtler ways in which philosophy, and academia generally, can exclude. Their peripheral status also had to do with the more expansive conceptions of philosophy that (some of) the women sought: conceptions of philosophy that could speak to us as embodied, political and artistic beings, as well as users of ordinary language. As Murdoch would put it, the dominant way of doing philosophy was one in which people “play cricket, cook cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood or go to the circus”, but left out “the world in which they commit sins, fall in love, say prayers, or join the Communist Party” (p. 144). The latter is clearly just as important in her work and novels, especially the emphasis on love and quasi-religious concepts such as sin and prayer. Midgley’s work, on the other hand, focuses more on our lives as *embodied* beings, human animals.

*The Women Are up to Something* suggests that the joint legacy of this group is that certain views once not taken seriously are now ‘on the official agenda’ (p. 191) and have ‘a hearing’ (p. 268). To some extent, this seems right: all four would now be considered suitable figures to read or write about within philosophy, moral realism is now a mainstream position, and virtue ethics has become increasingly popular within the last few decades (a tradition many have read them as standing within). What is less clear, however, is that the four really had a *substantive* unified agenda in the first place. Lipscomb suggests the following summary of ‘their’ legacy:

Murdoch called the fact–value dichotomy into question. Anscombe and Foot undercut Hare’s theory and urged a recovery of the concepts of vice and virtue, and what Aristotle called eudaimonia: a flourishing life. Midgley connected this idea of human flourishing to an updated account of the animals we are. (p. 238)

This summary does point to a number of ways in which their work is interconnected. Most importantly, all opposed the idea that there is a deep divide between fact and value, and this conviction deeply shaped their ethical visions as well as their underlying pictures of the human person. Lipscomb makes much of this shared commitment and begins the book with an engaging history of this dichotomy, suggesting ways in which it continues to shape (or perhaps distort) our thinking both within and outside academia. However, it is not clear that the connections between their work go much deeper than this. Foot’s late work is perhaps most accurately situated by this summary, but it is not obvious that it really does justice to the distinctive contributions of the others, or even to the full breadth of Foot’s own writing.

For a start, though ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ is typically read as a call for a virtue ethic, Anscombe herself did not contribute any further to that tradition, and her longstanding interest in the wrong of murder does not fit particularly neatly with this summary (it perhaps seems more naturally suited to a deontological ethic). Moreover, this summary of her contribution ignores some of the most unique and influential aspects of her thought: the entirety of *Intention* and her engagement with Wittgenstein, for example. Understanding Midgley’s work as continuous with and a development of Foot’s virtue ethics may also diminish the uniqueness of her projects, as well as the depth of her engagement with other disciplines. If Lipscomb’s summary of her contribution were accurate, it would be unclear why she bothered to learn much about the biology of *other* creatures, for example.

To my eyes, however, the summary is most misleading when it comes to Murdoch. Murdoch certainly did call the fact-value dichotomy into question. But Foot and Anscombe both did this too, so it seems a bit contrived to see it as her distinctive contribution. What’s more, her rejection of the fact-value dichotomy is just one small part of an overall picture of ethics that looks very different from that offered by the others. Murdoch, unlike Foot and Anscombe, takes her cue from Plato rather than Aristotle, and the supreme place in her ethical system is occupied by ‘the Good’. This makes the following kind of statement sound very odd:

Midgley, writing from the margins of the discipline, was the first to present a positive proposal for the kind of moral philosophy recommended but never developed by Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch: a naturalistic moral philosophy, grounded in the character and needs of the human animal. (206)

Was Murdoch recommending a *naturalistic* moral philosophy? It’s not at all obvious that she was. Certainly, she is clear that a *metaphysical* supernatural being such as God need not be invoked in ethics. But she does think that something very similar is needed: the Good. She insists on the reality of the Good and draws numerous parallels between the concepts of God and Good. She is interested in the *transcendent* reality of the Good and provides an adapted ‘ontological argument’ for its existence (Murdoch, 2014, 60-62). This all seems hard to square with the claim that she recommends a naturalistic moral philosophy, or one that is ultimately grounded in the needs of the human animal (a concept she rarely mentions). In the attempt to unify the women’s contributions, Lipscomb seems to have somewhat ignored or side-lined what is most interesting and distinctive about them as individual thinkers.

Despite my doubts about Lipscomb’s claims as to what philosophically unifies these women, however, it makes for an engaging read, as well as offering insights into their intellectual development and into a distinctive philosophical milieu. The book is filled with lively and entertaining anecdotes, as well as thoughtful descriptions of their personal triumphs and losses. Anscombe is the most vibrant figure here: her fervent desire for the truth and utter contempt for usual social norms are a potent combination. The book serves as intellectual biography, biography and as a general reflection on why philosophy matters. It would thus be an excellent introduction to these thinkers for those without a prior interest in philosophy, as well as a fascinating read for those already engaged in the discipline.[[1]](#endnote-1)

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**References**

Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014)

1. This review was written with Leverhulme early career fellowship. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)