

Metaphysical Animals: How four women brought philosophy back to life

Clare Mac Cumhaill & Rachael Wiseman. 2022. London: Chatto & Windus.

In 1926, the Countess of Bathurst complained that women had completely spoiled Oxford. She had a son there who had the humiliating experience of attending lectures given by three lady dons. She wished she had sent her sons to Cambridge “where the atmosphere is still virile” (p18).

The authors, both philosophy lecturers, shared a despair at the state of academic philosophy and boredom of listening to men talk about books by men. They say in the preface that they were looking for a story to help them keep going and to inspire their female students, many of whom were leaving the discipline. In 2013 they read a newspaper article by Mary Midgley and subsequently met and got to know her. She died aged ninety-nine in 2018 having just published *What is Philosophy for?*. The narrative of this book is based on the story Mary told them.

It is an engaging and enlivening mix of philosophy, history and biography, and a splendid introduction to the work of this quartet and the many other philosophers in their world – Forties Oxford. It opens in 1938, tracks their individual journeys through Oxford, their personal lives, lovers, and academic achievements up to the Fifties. It ends with a summary chapter about how their lives went on. It contains many enjoyable and characterful descriptions and quotes that keep the reader going through some difficult discussions about the various prevailing schools of philosophy and the arguments between them which are nonetheless instructive as the territory being fought over is clarified.

Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot and Elizabeth Anscombe, who were all born just after World War I, went up to Oxford to study philosophy shortly before Hitler invaded Austria. It was also soon after A.J. Ayer had introduced Logical Positivism to British philosophy and declared metaphysics redundant because science had, or would soon have, all the answers, and the remaining purpose of philosophy was linguistic analysis and clarity in pursuit of verifiable statements – therefore “philosophy has come to an end” (p51).

These four fledgling philosophers, while applauding an attack on verbosity, each felt the importance and pull of metaphysics and the big questions about the nature of reality, meaning, knowledge, value and the good life that had been the focus of philosophy for millennia. They began to challenge this newly dominant style of analytic linguistic philosophy and argue the case for maintaining a focus on questions that came into sharp focus in the aftermath of World War II: What is truth? What is evil? Are there objective moral certainties, lines that cannot be crossed? Ayer had declared such questions were “nonsense”.

As most of the young men disappeared off to war, suddenly there were more women at Oxford than had ever been the case. Women had only been allowed to graduate in 1920 and on arrival were reminded that they were still on probation. The young men were soon replaced by refugee men – and women – some considered academic giants in their homelands. Space also opened up for older Oxford men to return to espouse the cause of moral and ethical philosophy. Oxford was changed beyond recognition by a significant influx of ideas and languages from many countries.

Emerging from World War II, analytical philosophy was silent in the face of Nazi atrocities. It had taught that morals are subjective but, as Philippa Foot declared, horrified by the revelations about the Holocaust, we must be able to say to the Nazis “but we are right, and you are wrong” (p186).

All four argued for the need for philosophy to be relevant to the issues of the day – their day and ours too. In different ways they worked to bring philosophy ‘back to life’ to the messy everyday reality of living with others, being animals, whose nature shapes our way of going on, where creative art, especially poetry, paradox and myth, help point to the contradictions and connections that we must make sense of and which cannot be reduced to verifiable statements.

After graduating and leaving Oxford, they were called up to various jobs: Iris to the Treasury; Mary to the Ministry of Production; and Philippa to the Nuffield Social Reconstruction Survey. Elizabeth remained in academia to which they all returned eventually. As Mary told the authors, during wartime “you are sent about...restricted...in danger...you are afraid...it is dark” (p xii). Philosophy is needed in a time of chaos she said and “they worked out their thoughts while smoking cigarettes to dull the hunger” (ibid). I had read and admired several of her books including her penultimate work *Are You an Illusion?* and, especially relevant today, her book *Wickedness*, the ideas for which were seeded when contemplating the trial and testimony of Eichmann.

I had also read many of Iris Murdoch’s books but knew little about Philippa Foot apart from her fame for *Trolleyology*. I knew nothing of Elizabeth Anscombe. Getting to know more about them and the context in which they developed as philosophers and were able to question and flourish, which may not have happened but for World War II, was rewarding and enlightening. It is relevant to our work as existential therapists providing additional material in moral philosophy and ethics.

Elizabeth Anscombe met Wittgenstein when she was twenty-five and he was fifty-five. He had a fearsome reputation for causing chaos and confusion around him and had little time for his students. She faced up to him and won his admiration for her seriousness and ‘genuine puzzlement’ about philosophical questions. For her, philosophy was not a game, arguments to win or lose, or a technical problem to solve; as a devout Catholic it was about her mortal soul. They became friends and she went on to translate

his final book *Philosophical Investigations* along with her own significant academic career and raising seven children. She was known for her beautiful captivating voice, foul language and disarmingly candid responses. When asked for an example of an intrinsically pleasurable activity she said “shitting” (p215).

Elizabeth, along with Philippa, is credited with reviving Aristotelian virtue ethics and left many important papers still cited in ethics. In 1956, she challenged the Oxford dons’ proposal to award an honorary degree to Truman. She considered him a murderer for taking the ultimate decision to bomb Japan (and so end World War II). She did not succeed. She continued at Somerville until 1970 when she took Wittgenstein’s former Chair at Cambridge.

In 1949, Mary began a series of radio broadcasts, book reviews and talks, well received for her “pithy and engaging style” (p246). However, one broadcast was refused when she had planned to say philosophy was dominated by “men who lived semi-monastic lives that excluded one half of the adult species and all of the species’ young” (p269) and how different the Western tradition might have been if written by people like herself who lived in mixed communities, had been pregnant and had raised children. This was refused by her female editor for its intrusion of trivialities into intellectual life.

An important and major theme in Mary’s work was to stress that we are not like animals, but that we are animals, metaphysical animals who dwell in past, present, and future, who wonder about the world and our place in it. We also use language and ask questions: What do we really know? What is that? Why should I do what is right? Small children are unmistakably animals and human beings. Her first book *Beast and Man* and later works like *Animals and Why They Matter* are “the kernel from which much of contemporary and animal and environmental ethics grows” (p298).

All four women arrived at Oxford needing tuition in Latin and Greek to catch up with their male peers. Unlike the others, Philippa came from a rarefied social milieu where she received almost no education and only that suited to the marriage market where any whiff of bookishness was a disaster and suitable topics were ghosts and the royal family. She described her upbringing as “dementing” (p61). Consequently, she was limited to a degree in PPE whereas the others read Mods and Greats. She forever felt intellectually inferior and described herself as “quite intuitive, but not very clever” (p62) despite achieving a First along with her friends.

Oxfam (Oxford Famine Relief) was created in 1942 and Phillippa volunteered, sorting donated clothes and helping pack the Quaker transport vans. She continued her involvement and eventually became a trustee. These women blazed a trail not only for their contributions to philosophy but also their practical involvement in their beliefs.

Later in her career Phillippa shifted focus from the metaphysics of morals to applied ethics. She was credited with jointly inventing the Trolley Problem,

a thought experiment along the lines of “Would you sacrifice one to save five”? She is recognised today as “one of the most significant analytic philosophers of the 20th Century” (p296). *Natural Goodness* is considered her masterpiece, a moral vision grown from the seeds planted in the Forties.

Early in her career, Iris was a highly regarded academic and eyebrows were raised when she began writing her novels. She wrote not just great stories but also a sort of philosophy in action where individual lives are observed through an existential lens of recognisable themes including responsibility, chance, agency, resentment. A good example is her novel *An Accidental Man*.

After World War II she travelled round Europe and was widely read in the ‘new existential philosophy’ set including Sartre, Marcel (whom she met), Buber and Kierkegaard, among others. She gave talks on Sartre and wrote ‘Romantic Rationalist’ an exploration and critique of his philosophy which, fashioned in World War II during Occupation, she saw as a response to the loss of background to our moral and political thinking. She developed a different account of moral freedom, arguing it is not the ability to choose your own moral principles but “to look steadily at reality and to see things justly. To see what matters, what things are important and good” (p238).

The moral and ethical questions these women pursued have become more urgent and pressing in many areas of our lives: medical advancements; when to give or withhold treatment; how to programme self-driving cars (a modern version of the Trolley problem); and, of course, crucial questions of truth and morality in a time of social media and war. Working on this review during Putin’s invasion of Ukraine poignantly highlighted the relevance of the issues they were concerned with to our own times. When this is printed in July, things may have moved on, hostilities ended or exploded into greater conflagration. But now as then the world will be changed and things will look different, as happened for this quartet of brilliant English female philosophers.

Diana Pringle

Being Born: Birth and philosophy

Alison Stone. 2019. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Our death will undoubtedly be the most significant event in our lives. It forms the end point of our existence and determines us as finite beings. Much of existential philosophy has been dominated by the idea that our mortality shapes the way in which we exist and create meaning in the world. Death, or rather the knowledge that we are bound in time, creates anxiety but also guilt, it impacts our sense of authenticity and inauthenticity, and it also influences our choices, feelings of responsibility and sense of freedom.

Mortality is inescapable, it pervades our lives. Whilst mortality, and the