

the world's creation or about human salvation without knowing about the divine Persons.

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THE WOMEN ARE UP TO SOMETHING: HOW ELIZABETH ANSCOMBE, PHILIPPA FOOT, MARY MIDGLEY, AND IRIS MURDOCH REVOLUTIONIZED ETHICS, by Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, pp. 326, £18.97, hbk*

Benjamin Lipscomb's intellectual biography gives readers a vivid account of the interconnected lives and careers of Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001), Philippa Foot (1920-2010), Mary Midgley (1919-2018), and Iris Murdoch (1919-1999). In some ways, which Lipscomb acknowledges, these four thinkers could not be more different. And yet it was more than their tie to Somerville College, Oxford, that connected them. Rather, it was primarily their shared rejection of a particular worldview (which Lipscomb calls 'the Dawkins sublime', after the British biologist, Richard Dawkins) and their respective attempts to offer something in its place.

The Dawkins sublime, according to which the universe is inert and valueless, has 16th, 17th, and 18th century roots familiar to students of British and European philosophy. The idea that the universe is valueless gets its most famous articulations in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* and, more recently, in A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. As Lipscomb explains in his first chapter, philosophers who share Hume's and Ayer's view of a valueless universe draw what is known as the fact-value distinction, according to which facts are empirical and, therefore, can be discovered and investigated by reason and science whereas values are merely the expression of the affective states of people who sincerely make value judgments. In the first half of the 20th century, Richard Hare was the most influential Oxford philosopher to embrace and defend the fact-value distinction, but he also defended a universal, duty-based ethic wherein each person chooses their own moral principles—an attempt to retain ethics in a world devoid of values. Hare's prescriptivism, as he called it, and the distinction between facts and values that it presumed, struck Anscombe, Foot, Midgley, and Murdoch as seriously false.

Before presenting their criticisms of the fact-value distinction and of the respective solutions each philosopher proposed, Lipscomb offers some scene-setting chapters. These chapters prove helpful, especially for a general audience, but professional philosophers can learn from them,

too. After the first chapter Lipscomb moves on to describe the climate at Oxford leading up to World War II. It is in these second and third chapters that readers first meet the four protagonists as they arrive at, and settle into, Somerville College. In this context Lipscomb provides an enlightening and humane portrait of Donald MacKinnon, a philosopher-theologian and Fellow of Keble who gave tutorials to students of Somerville and had the most influence on Philippa Bosanquet, Mary Scrutton, and Iris Murdoch (at this stage in the story Lipscomb uses the birth surnames of Foot and Midgley rather than the ones they took when they married; Anscombe, whom MacKinnon did not really influence and who was by far the most religiously conservative of the group, never took her husband's name).

When writing about their early days at Somerville and of the ways in which their various relationships subsequently evolved (or, in some cases, dissolved), Lipscomb presents each thinker as a three-dimensional character. Drawing on their journals, archival materials, and various interviews (including with Midgley herself), Lipscomb presents complex portraits of the friends that make each person come to life. That he manages to do this without resorting to gossip is one of the admirable features of the book. We learn that each philosopher had distinct friendships with the other three, friendships that reflected each thinker's personalities. Lipscomb presents Anscombe as the one in the group who was most on the outside, though Anscombe and Foot were close, particularly during their time together teaching at Somerville. Foot seems the common denominator between Midgley and Murdoch, at least when they were all students (the three were close friends during that time). Foot and Anscombe were the two philosophers who most conformed to the way in which Oxford philosophy was done in those days, which helps explain their relationship. Murdoch and Midgley developed and maintained their own friendship, and each went on to have careers that were less traditionally academic, though Lipscomb goes to great pains to make clear that Midgley and Murdoch were no less philosophers than Anscombe and Foot.

Most of the book (chapters 5 through 8) presents detailed individual portraits of the protagonists, with each philosopher getting her own chapter. In these chapters Lipscomb presents a good portion of the substance of their respective philosophical work, and, for the philosopher and non-philosopher alike, there is much to learn. For example, Lipscomb draws attention to the insightful and then-novel connection Murdoch made between the prescriptivism of Hare and the existentialist ethic of Jean Paul Sartre, with Murdoch arguing that each man's moral philosophy springs from the same picture of a valueless world. Lipscomb does an admirable job of explaining how Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is in many ways a culmination of a critique she developed in a handful of papers from the 1950s, papers such as 'Mr. Truman's Degree' and 'Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth'. He recounts Foot's engagement with and critique of Hare's prescriptivism (they co-taught a seminar) and the evolution of her own views, which culminated in Foot's monograph,

Natural Goodness (OUP, 2001). And Lipscomb reminds readers that Midgley never stopped doing philosophy, even during the years when she stopped teaching in order to raise her children. Most interesting to me is Lipscomb's account of how Midgley's work anticipates Foot's account of natural goodness by over twenty years. Perhaps Foot would have arrived at her mature view sooner had she read the work of her friend.

Some readers of this review may be wondering how it is that I have not yet drawn attention to the fact that each of these philosophers were women, at Oxford, at a time when women were generally excluded from academic philosophy. I have avoided explicitly making the issue front and centre because I think each of the four philosophers would have preferred that their gender not be made their primary distinguishing feature. This is not to say that they were insensitive to the sexism they faced throughout their careers; Lipscomb does a good job throughout the book of drawing attention to those obstacles. It is just that all the evidence he draws on indicates that they would have insisted their work be front-and-centre, which Lipscomb accomplishes without ignoring the elephant in the room.

If I had to make a criticism of Lipscomb's book it is that he may overstate the influence these four thinkers have had on contemporary ethical theory. Yes, Hare's prescriptivism has largely faded into the background, but the fact-value distinction remains part of orthodoxy for many philosophers, and the subjectivism that the distinction entails lives on in the influential work of people such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. Additionally, the work of Murdoch and Midgley has never been mainstream; although Foot's discussion of the trolley problem is well known (even outside of philosophy), *Natural Goodness* (which is over twenty years old) did not make the splash that it should have; and even though, as Lipscomb notes, Elizabeth Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' is one of the most cited papers of the 20th century, it is hard to argue that it has had a significant impact: as if in defiance of the three theses for which she argues in that paper, philosophers continued to write moral philosophy without the adequate moral psychology she argued they needed; the concept of moral obligation has only become more widespread; and consequentialist moral theories remain influential. I think, however, that these observations are less a criticism of Lipscomb's fine book than they are a lamentation of the way in which the distinguished work of these philosophers still does not have the widespread influence it deserves.

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