



ENCOUNTERS WITH BOOKS FROM OTHER DISCIPLINES

Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life

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Metaphysical Animals explores the lives of Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley (née Scrutton), Philippa Foot (née Bosanquet) and Elizabeth Anscombe. These four women, who studied at Oxford together and developed their philosophical ideas in the wake of the Second World War, each made a valuable individual contribution to philosophy and post-war cultural life. Murdoch is now better known as a novelist but also wrote philosophy and edited French existentialist work in English. Midgley was famous as a radio personality and her philosophical writing connected natural science and biology with metaphysics. Foot is perhaps now best known for the ‘trolley problem’ and was key in developing a modern approach to virtue ethics. Anscombe defies brief description: she edited and translated Ludwig Wittgenstein’s late philosophy, was a committed Catholic and anti-abortion campaigner, and regularly and infamously defied social convention. In arguing that these writers formed a distinct philosophical ‘school’, *Metaphysical Animals* offers an important contribution to both philosophy and the intellectual history of the twentieth century.

The work discussed in this book is particularly centred on metaphysics, a commitment to an objective idea of ‘good’, and how that might be applied to best live a human life. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman are seeking a wide and non-specialist audience, they do not attempt to reproduce the philosophical ideas of ‘the quartet’ in great detail. Like the other biography of this group published in 2022 (see Lipscomb 2021), *Metaphysical Animals* outlines the quartet’s ideas in the context of their lives and interactions. Both books take as their starting point that these four thinkers have been underappreciated for their intellectual significance (both books also suffer from the unfortunate editorial convention of endnotes – curious readers may refer to the books’ bibliographies for the primary philosophical work described). By framing their work in dialogue, *Metaphysical Animals* presents the ideas of four writers as an organic whole developed over many years in a way that individual studies could not. However, one side-effect of doing so is that Iris Murdoch becomes less visible by comparison with the others, perhaps because she was the first to set aside philosophical work (in favour of fiction writing).

In the eyes of Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, the work of the quartet was a response to the unprecedented acts of violence committed in the course of World War II. The historian R.G. Collingwood was one of the first to criticise A.J. (also known as Freddie) Ayer, trying, like Wittgenstein, to explain that words *only* have meaning in context and neither can nor should be reduced to pure logic (p. 53). *Metaphysical Animals* emphasises that scholars are also dependent on context: the questions we ask (and choose not to ask), and the directions we pursue in our work are shaped by time and place. For those working after World War II, there was an urgent need to grapple with the reality of atomic bombs and the emerging evidence of the Holocaust. Many of the philosophers of the mid-twentieth century had personal and immediate experience of war, which they brought home with them when

they returned to academia. For example, J.L. Austin used his intelligence background in the great exercise of gathering data on language (p. 167); whilst Richard Hare brought his experiences as a soldier and POW to bear on his categorisation of morality as imperatives (p. 185). Neither the linguistic turn in philosophy nor the positivistic turn in legal theory were unaffected by that context. In the present day, as we seek to understand the legacies of colonialism, the resurgence of populist governments in the western world and the impact of globalisation, we need to be aware of our own assumptions, biases and frameworks when we talk about law. This perhaps explains the renewed interest in historical jurisprudence (see Eldridge 2021) – Midgley and Gellner’s biological and sociological reactions to logical positivism have much in common with historical jurisprudence, which was itself partly a reaction to Bentham and John Austin’s theories – and the development of a new discipline of global legal history (see e.g. Tate *et al.* 2019; Duve 2020), as we seek to explore our own past and the narratives hitherto untold.

The philosophy the quartet developed, which described the objective wrongness of acts such as the deployment of nuclear bombs, is presented in *Metaphysical Animals* in constant contrast with the predominant academic philosophy of the twentieth century. The antagonists are, in particular, the logical positivists and Oxford ‘ordinary language’ men (especially Gilbert Ryle, Freddie Ayer, Richard Hare and J.L. Austin). Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman argue that whilst the experiences of many men returning to philosophy after World War II led them to reject metaphysics or ideas of shared morality altogether, the quartet pursued a less sceptical and less individualistic path. The latter sought to understand ethics by reference to a ‘transcendent background’ to human life – a species of metaphysics which challenged the amoral thinking otherwise popular in twentieth-century philosophy. How each individual writer did so varied: for Anscombe, it involved her Catholic faith and convictions; for Murdoch, it required analysis of existentialism and the human condition, including through the lens of fiction; for Foot, it led to a revisiting of Aristotelian virtue ethics; for Midgley, it involved investigation of animal biology and evolution. Anscombe’s work was particularly wide-ranging, and much of it did not concern ethics, or was directed at Catholic audiences who shared with her a set of certain background beliefs. However, one of Anscombe’s most famous works posited that intention matters in moral philosophy. *Metaphysical Animals* presents this idea in the context of a biographical narrative. When Anscombe opposed the award of an honorary degree to Harry S. Truman, it was because she refused to adopt a utilitarian or ‘consequentialist’ (a term she coined) view of the moral significance of his actions in authorising the use of nuclear bombs. Foot’s trolley problem can be used to illustrate such consequentialist thinking, whilst Midgley’s work on humans as animals provided exactly the kind of empirical underpinning which Anscombe believed was needed to understand and apply Aristotelian ideas of human flourishing. In exploring human nature, the quartet proposed to derive ‘oughts’ from the ‘is’ of being a human animal – a step forbidden by orthodox philosophical thinking.

War is one of two persistent background features in *Metaphysical Animals*. The other is the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. From the logical positivism of his early work through to the private language argument and Anscombe’s editing of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s ideas are presented as the stimulus from which twentieth century philosophy developed. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman propose that there were two equal and opposite reactions. Freddie Ayer was inspired to develop a method which sought to reduce the world to logical language propositions and symbols (p. 48). Although he disliked Ayer’s system-building, J.L. Austin also sought to adapt Wittgenstein’s method into a map for all language, ‘clear[ing] out’ the metaphysics (p. 167). Neither Ayer nor Austin believed in objective morality: to them, talking about morality was *just* talking. Ayer was particularly firm in renouncing moral claims as mere ‘expressions of preference’ akin to saying ‘boo’ or ‘hurrah’ (an approach known as ‘emotivism’; p. 50). Anscombe, Murdoch, Midgley and Foot disagreed. They argued that Ayer, Austin and their collaborators were seeking the impossible in reducing the world to symbolism with no ‘transcendent background’. There is a general sense of outcry from all four women against ordinary language philosophy (Chapter 5 is entitled ‘A Joint “No!”’). They shared and developed an intuition, using Wittgenstein’s method of analytic philosophy, that there was a meaningful way to talk about what really mattered in human life – whether in its quotidian or extraordinary guises.

Foot and Anscombe were particularly concerned to try and understand and respond to the horrors of war. They rejected claims that moral objections to actions like the use of nuclear bombs were a matter of personal preference. They argued it was important not to declare evil unintelligible, and to try to understand goodness (p. 147). Wittgenstein had tried to explain that language obtained its special importance from its role as an activity in the wider structure ('structure' was Midgley's term, Wittgenstein spoke of 'forms' of life) of human lives – that context, the quartet said, needed to be brought back into philosophy (p. 203). For Anscombe this was also a matter of religion: failing to grasp ideas like 'good' and 'evil' was a potential peril for one's immortal soul.

Reading as a legal academic, one of the most interesting parts of *Metaphysical Animals* was the description of some familiar faces in the ordinary language school. That school established a new 'BPhil' degree in 1946 designed to perfect use of innovative analytical methods (p. 175), and it was the milieu in which a young H.L.A. Hart developed. In this book, however, Oxford philosophy is presented as a group of men obsessed with 'witty' insults and toxic masculinity, with debates 'akin to hunting with a pack of hounds' (p. 51). From Ayer's 'Brethren' in the 1930s to J.L. Austin's 'Kindergarten' post-war, *Metaphysical Animals* is critical of what it describes as small groups of Oxford-educated men making philosophical declarations for the whole world based on language rules it seemed only an elite clique shared (a criticism some made at the time – p. 168). An intellectual atmosphere in which unorthodox ideas were literally shouted down with the cry of 'nonsense' (p. 173) does not seem entirely conducive to innovation, but these seminars are elsewhere described as having produced great work, and great thinkers. In Lacey's *A Life of HLA Hart* (2006), Austin's group is described as 'competitive' and Austin himself as sometimes bullying, whilst Austin is given due credit in Hart's development. Lacey also refers to Baroness Mary Warnock, notably one of few women invited to the Saturday morning sessions, describing Austin as capable of being 'exceptionally funny' (Lacey, 2006, p. 194). If the famed seminars were perceived by the quartet of metaphysical women – excluded by some combination of sex and philosophical differences (p.166) – as hostile and unfriendly, it is little surprise they reacted against the philosophy produced there. But being on the outside of that institution did not, ultimately, stop the quartet, even as Gilbert Ryle filled vacant Oxford philosophy jobs with his favourites. Excluded from Oxford's most prestigious formal setting for philosophy, they are described wondering about human life whilst living it: on trains and hearth rugs, whilst drinking wine and preparing odd fish soups, with children underfoot – philosophising as a part of, and as a way of understanding, their richly textured lives. *Metaphysical Animals* describes their ideas as developed through dialogue embedded in those lives, whilst hurriedly puzzling through notes made by Wittgenstein for Anscombe's edition of *Philosophical Investigations*, or before fires in common rooms in between teaching tutorials. The presence of the notorious Iris Murdoch also ensures some romantic entanglements complicate the women's interpersonal and intellectual relationships along the way. If Hart's claim that law is a 'social fact' is to have meaning, the 'bits of living' described throughout this book seem key to understanding what that means in a deeper way than the language games Hart himself learned from Austin.

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman emphasise the difference this had on the work produced by the ordinary language philosophers and the quartet. Ayer's school seemed to make the everyday 'alien and inscrutable' (p. 49) by reducing philosophy to a technique that analysed the words used, but rejected the idea of concepts behind them. The alternatives attempted to ground philosophical questions in life experiences. Foot's work was perhaps the most direct response, urging that moral concepts have meaning using a Wittgensteinian 'public language' argument – a polar opposite perspective to Ayer and Austin's analysis of words in themselves. Legal scholarship has its own version of this methodological contrast: we have tended to study law as either a discrete, rational, 'hermetically sealed' system from the 'internal point of view', or from an 'external' perspective as a part of historical and social life. The fact/value distinction has also had its impact, although the commitment to law as a science which first developed in the Victorian era has never been as influential in English law as in continental work. Any methodology has advantages and disadvantages, but ignoring either the internal or external perspective when seeking to understand law in general seems inadequate – as many legal writers now

recognise. Ayer was once accused of reducing the British empiricist tradition from naivete to absurdity (p. 52) and Austin's aversion to Ayer's system-building and generalisation in turn influenced Hart. However, the legal positivism descended from that work risks reducing law from a real social fact to unverified, and resolutely unverifiable, social assumption.

Metaphysical Animals is about four women philosophers who collaborated. The book was jointly written by two women philosophers. It is not surprising, then, that a central premise is that working together, sharing ideas, and deliberately including different perspectives is likely to produce scholarship which profitably engages with a wider set of ideas than work completed by what Midgley called 'bachelor monks' (p. 269). This may be particularly important in respect of people who have to work harder to be heard, suggesting how minorities and marginalised scholars might work to support each other. In pursuit of this more inclusive and contextualised scholarship, *Metaphysical Animals* highlights the contributions of a number of refugee scholars as well as the women of the quartet. They are not necessarily the most inspiring examples: Eduard Fraenkel, is noted for two things 1) being a notorious 'pawer' of women and 2) introducing the German-style university seminar as a mode of teaching (p. 38–41). Unfortunately for Fraenkel's reputation, the former is no accolade, and the latter was not his innovation. Seminars were indeed introduced by a refugee, but it was the Moscow exile and Chair of Historical Jurisprudence, Paul Vinogradoff, who brought history seminars to All Souls in 1903. Those seminars produced a number of volumes in the Oxford Studies in Social and Legal History series, and the same chair in jurisprudence was later occupied by H.L.A. Hart, Ronald Dworkin and the late John Gardner, among others.

It is striking, though, that almost everyone described in this book developed their research through their teaching and in dialogue with their students. Even the analytic philosophers who are described largely unfavourably worked collaboratively (with the exception of Richard Hare). When teaching on law degrees, the constraints of a professional qualification can limit the scope for teaching one's own research. However, it is possible that the recent SQE reforms (notwithstanding their other features or problems) will facilitate more syllabus flexibility to engage students in developing ideas and responses in English law schools. If this proves to be the case, *Metaphysical Animals* serves to recommend the reading group which works through a complex text together. This was demonstrably a valuable tool for thinking and learning throughout the lives of the quartet, from Fraenkel's infamous *Agamemnon* seminar to piecing together scraps of Wittgenstein for publication. It was also as a result of the inspiring example of the quartet that summer 2022 saw the founding of a new network for and about women in legal history. In the same way that *Metaphysical Animals* and the wider '(Women) in Parenthesis' project champions women philosophers, 'Selden's Sister' seek to research and highlight the contributions of women legal historians. In doing so it will provide opportunities for present-day researchers to connect and collaborate. Perhaps by following in the footsteps of great thinkers like Murdoch, Midgley, Foot and Anscombe we, too, will breathe a new life into our discipline.

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