



A Female School of Analytic Philosophy? Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch

By Clare MacCumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, Sept 2018

1. WOMEN IN ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY?

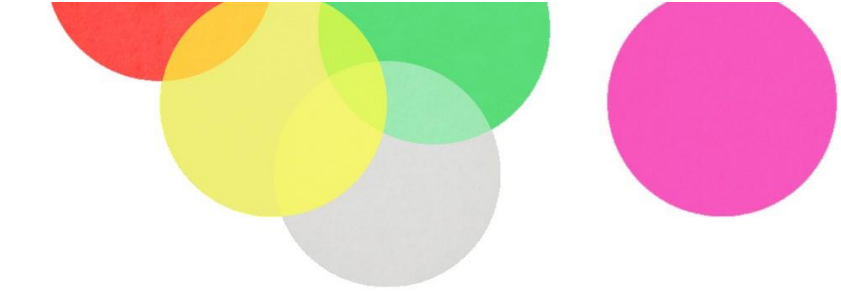
The history of Analytic Philosophy we are familiar with is a story about men. It begins with Frege, Russell, Moore. Wittgenstein appears twice, once as the author of the *Tractatus* and then again later as the author of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Between Wittgenstein's first and second appearance are Carnap and Ayer and the all-male Vienna Circle. Then come the post-second-world war Ordinary Language Philosophers – Ryle, and Austin. After that Strawson and Grice, Quine and Davidson.

The male dominance is not just in the names of the 'star' players. Michael Beaney's 2013 *Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* begins by listing the 150 most important analytic philosophers.¹ 146 of them are men. For women who wish to join in this conversation, the odds seem formidably against one.

Today we will be speaking about two of the four women who warrant an entry in Beaney's list – Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. We will be talking about them alongside two other women Iris Murdoch and Mary Midgley. We think they should also be in the top 150, but our broader aims are more ambitious than increasing the proportion of important women from 2.7% to 4%.

In speaking of these women together we aim to disrupt the standard story of men talking to men talking to men. The way we do that is by bringing these four women together into a school. When read together, the work of the *Wartime Quartet*—as we'll call them—exemplifies a philosophical method that is recognisably 'analytic' but which is quite distinct from—and highly critical of—branches of analytic philosophy that the standard, male, story foregrounds. Once this method is described and understood we think we can make sense of the work of other philosophers—including many women philosophers—as significant contributions to that tradition. We are convinced that there is contained in the work of these four an integrated metaphysics, ethics and epistemology. But—as anyone who has dipped into Anscombe, Murdoch, Foot or Midgley will

¹ Michael Beaney, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2013)



know—the work of these women resists quick summary. We won't attempt in this essay to give too much heavy philosophical content. Instead, we'll be outlining the story into which these women, and their work, can be slotted. The aim is to create a context for their philosophy and a sketch of its content. The story is an alternative history of early analytic philosophy and contains an alternative picture of the analytic philosopher.

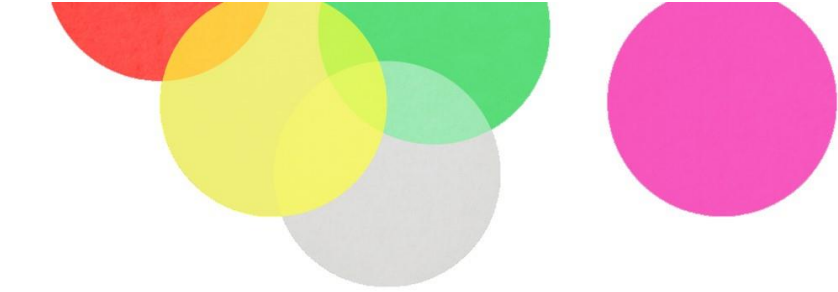
In giving this picture we want to offer up a history of our subject in which women are seen not merely as commentators but as innovators. Our hope is to use this project—this story we're constructing—not only to change the way our history looks, but to do so in a way that will make the inclusion of more women in our canon not only possible but inevitable.

Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch began at University in the late 1930s, in the middle of a philosophical revolution and on the cusp of a world war. Their philosophical response to each was markedly different to that of their male peers and it is this response, and the material conditions that generated it, that we want to outline in this essay.

2. A REVOLUTION IN PHILOSOPHY

We'll begin with what is familiar: a revolution in philosophy. At the start of the twentieth-century Frege and Wittgenstein, in different ways, made the case for thinking that the way to answer philosophical questions might be to study *language* rather than *the world*. Their idea—recognised in the coming decades as revolutionary—was that the need for elaborate metaphysics to answer to philosophical questions about the nature of, for example, *being* and *substance* and *mind*, could be eliminated if careful attention was paid to *language* and to its *logical form*. To give a crude example: rather than asking 'What is Truth?' we should ask, 'What does "truth" mean?' The claim they made—and sought to demonstrate in the *Begriffsschrift* and *Tractatus*—was that philosophical problems will simply disappear, once we are clear about the grammar of the language in which they arise.

With this methodological turn arose a new conception of philosophy—and of the philosopher. The philosopher's task was more like that of the mathematician than the empirical scientist. His aim was to reveal the formal structure of thought, a structure that was obscured by the messy ambiguities of ordinary language. He was not to make new discoveries about the nature of Reality, as previous generations of philosophers had attempted. Indeed, his new method was to be a



prophylactic against the urge to build baroque ontological systems—once everything was said clearly all that would be left was work for the empirical scientists.

Wittgenstein captured this change of method and self-conception when he wrote in the *Tractatus*:

The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. The result of philosophy is not a number of ‘philosophical propositions’, but to make propositions clear.²

In 1936, the year of Hitler’s infamous Berlin Olympics, A. J. Ayer, just 23 and fresh out of his Oxford undergraduate degree, spent a summer in Vienna. He attended meetings of the Vienna Circle, a group of scientifically-minded thinkers and radicals who had been meeting regularly since 1932—the year that Hitler became German chancellor. The political implications of Wittgenstein’s project attracted them: do away with nonsense, describe things as they are, replace rhetoric, metaphor and subjective value judgments with clear description of the empirical facts.

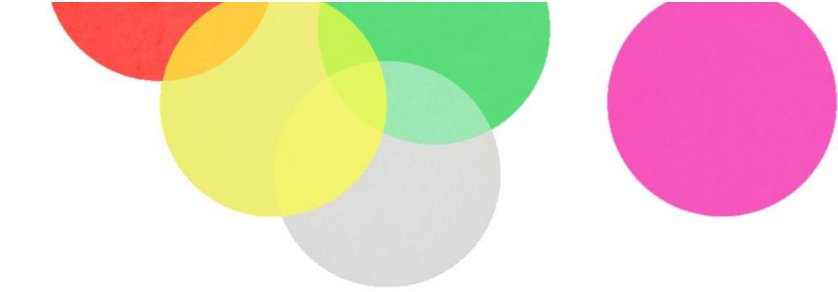
The result of his Viennese education was *Language, Truth and Logic*.³ Ayer took the dense, difficult and subtle text of the *Tractatus* and repackaged it into a manifesto that undergraduates and the general public could easily grasp. Absent the political context of the Vienna circle, the commitment to scientific rigour and clear language became a young-man’s modern manifesto: ‘Out with the old!’ Ayer’s target was not fascist rhetoric but the work of previous generations of philosophers.

Ayer’s disdain for metaphysics was uncompromising. In the face of the new method, and partly inspired by the mystical remarks at the end of the *Tractatus*, some had tried to preserve a place for metaphysics as akin to poetry: though not strictly truth evaluable, metaphysics, like poetry, sought to express some deep but ineffable vision of the human, one that had ethical and aesthetic import, and which gestured toward the limits of language and human life. Though free from factual content, this defence went, metaphysics might still play a role in our emotional and moral lives. Ayer had no truck with even this diminished role for the metaphysician:

This compensation is hardly in accordance with his deserts. The view that the metaphysician is to be reckoned among the poets appears to rest on the assumption that both talk nonsense. But this assumption is false. In the vast majority of cases the sentences which are produced by poets do have literal meaning... If the author writes nonsense, it is

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Kegan Paul, 1922), 4.112.

³ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (Penguin, 1936).



because he considers it most suitable for bringing about the effects for which his writing is designed. The metaphysician, on the other hand, does not intend to write nonsense. He lapses into it through being deceived by grammar... It is not the mark of a poet simply to make mistakes of this sort.⁴

We will come back to the comparison between metaphysics and poetry later.

Reports of *Language, Truth and Logic*'s influence on students and dons immediately following its publication give a sense of battle lines, broadly tracing a generational divide, that the book drew. Strawson and Pears, who went up to Oxford in 1937 and 1939 respectively, recall the 'cult status' that the book acquired among undergraduates. It was 'read with breathless excitement' by every undergraduate.⁵

Mary Warnock describes *Language, Truth and Logic* as 'a bombshell': 'A whole generation of undergraduates was excited to find that all they needed to do to refute some inconvenient doctrine was to say firmly and loudly "I don't understand that"'.⁶

But though the undergraduates were excited, the older dons, under whom Ayer had studied just a few years before, were far from impressed. Not surprising—Ayer's bonfire of metaphysics called for the burning of books they had written. The 68-year-old ethical intuitionist H. A. Pritchard complained to the 72-year-old Professor of Moral Philosophy H. W. B. Joseph that the book had ever found a publisher. The undergraduate Peter Strawson read the book in 'one absorbed sitting' but knew not to mention this to his tutor. David Pears and his fellow-students were less prudent and brought a copy to their discussion group. Their tutor, the 60 year-old Christian socialist A. D. Lindsay, threw it out the window.⁷

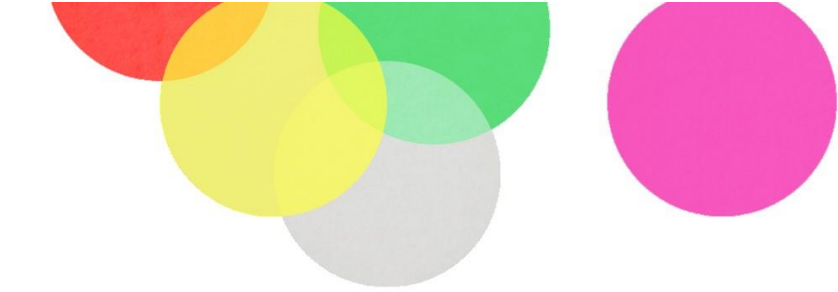
One area of philosophy in which Ayer's manifesto was having a profound effect was ethics. Human life could go on as before with statements about the fundamental nature of reality and the metaphysics of time consigned to the fire; but something would need to be said about the seemingly essential role of statements about right and wrong, good and bad. When I say 'Don't steal that money, it's immoral' it would be insane to react by saying loudly and firmly 'I don't understand! Nonsense!'

⁴ Ibid, p. 61.

⁵ Ben Rogers, *A. J. Ayer, A Life* (Chatto and Windus, 1999), p. 124

⁶ Mary Warnock, *A Memoir: People and Places* (Duckworth, 2000).

⁷ Ben Rogers, *A. J. Ayer, A Life* (Chatto and Windus, 1999), p. 124.



Ayer gave an uncompromising analysis of ‘value-judgments’ and with it a picture of the modern moral philosopher:

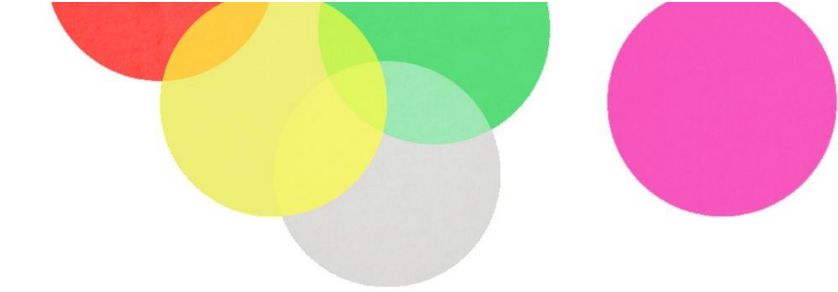
[I]n so far as statements of value are significant, they are ordinary ‘scientific’ statements; and ... in so far as they are not scientific, they are not in the literal sense significant, but are simply expressions of emotion which can be neither true or false [...] [Only] propositions relating to the definitions of ethical terms ... constitute ethical philosophy... A strictly philosophical treatise on ethics should therefore make no ethical pronouncements.⁸

An ethicist working under the influence of *Language, Truth and Logic* saw his task as the clarification and categorisation of ethical language. His job was to sort expressions that include value-terms into linguistic categories: scientific (e.g. empirical, testable, observable) or expressive. As the former categories are value-free and the latter are merely emotive, there could be no place for the defence of substantive ethical claims. An ethicist who attempted to show that the statement ‘Murder is wrong’ is *true* went wrong in two senses. First, she mistook the sentence for one that was capable of truth or falsehood. Second, she misunderstood the *role* of the ethicist—the Aristotelian question ‘How should I live?’ was to be replaced by the modern question ‘What does this mean?’

3. PHILOSOPHY INTERRUPTED? WAR & A ‘WORLD OF WOMEN’

The story up to this point has been familiar. But what gets ignored, when analytic history is told as a history of men is the following: the generational war in philosophy was interrupted by the beginning of a world war. At its outbreak, the dons of Ayer’s generation were enlisted in war work immediately, mostly in the intelligence services. Ayer, Austin and Gilbert Ryle were among them. In 1941 the age of conscription for men was lowered to nineteen and undergraduate numbers sharply declined; male students were enlisted after only one or two years study, postponing completion of their degree until after the war. The excited young revolutionaries had left. Strawson became a captain in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers and R. M. Hare and David Pears joined the Royal Artillery.

⁸ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p. 137.



But, though the men were away, University life continued. Elizabeth Anscombe came up to Oxford in 1937. Midgley and Murdoch in 1938 and Philippa Foot in 1939. Women students, in contrast, were not conscripted, and so could complete their degrees in the normal way and even—as in Anscombe’s case—go onto graduate study without the need to undertake war service. Refugee scholars from Germany and Austria arrived and took on classes vacated by English dons—it was joked that you needed to be able to speak German to get by in North Oxford.

The four women—finding themselves in a university environment that was, for the first time, predominantly female—met and became friends. They shared classes and got together in the women’s colleges to talk about Plato’s forms, Hobbes and Hume.

Reflecting on the impact of this new demographic on their classes, Midgley writes:

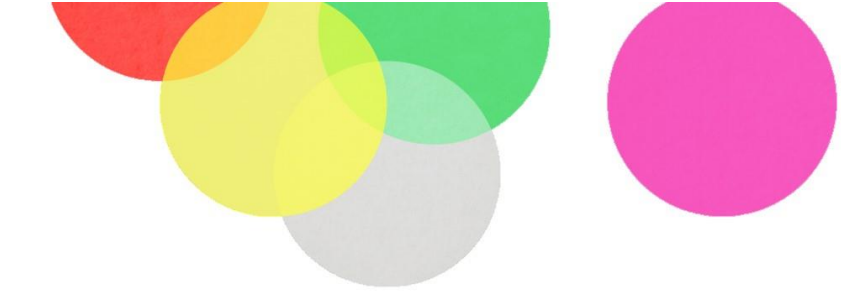
The trouble is not, of course, men as such – men have done good enough philosophy in the past – what is wrong is a particular style of philosophising that results from encouraging a lot of clever young men to compete in winning arguments ... By contrast, in those wartime classes – which were small – men (conscientious objectors etc.) were present as well as women but they weren’t keen on arguing. It is clear that we all were more interested in understanding this deeply puzzling world than in putting each other down.⁹

We are happy to talk about this observation about gender and philosophical style in the questions but it isn’t my focus in this talk.

The relative absence of conscription-age men changed not just the climate but also the content of the philosophical education that Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch received. Their classes were designed and delivered by men too old for conscription, whose ideas and methods were already ‘out of date’. They read G. E. Moore and Braithwaite rather than A. J. Ayer; they learnt the art of philosophical argument from Collingwood rather than Ryle. Under the guidance of the theologian and classicist Donald MacKinnon (a pacifist), in classes led by refugee scholars and conscientious objectors, they studied Plato and Aristotle and, as Midgley puts it, ‘various slightly moth-eaten traditions, all of which equally [came] under attack from [*Language, Truth, and Logic*]’.¹⁰ This included, Kant, Bradley, Braithwaite and H. H. Price.

⁹ Mary Midgley, ‘The Golden Age of Female Philosophy’, *Letter to the Guardian*, 28 Nov 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/28/golden-age-female-philosophy-mary-midgley>. See also her *Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (Routledge, 2005), pp. 123-5.

¹⁰ Midgley, *Owl of Minerva*, p. 117.



12. The philosophical education that these women were given was out of fashion and they knew it. They could not be blind to influence of *Language, Truth and Logic* nor to the newly weaponised ‘I don’t understand’. This outmodedness was especially evident in their ethical education. They knew that modern moral philosophers held their job to be limited to the clarification of the language of morals, and would view an ethicist who made ‘ethical pronouncements’ as stepping out of line. But absent the advocates of the modern, their lessons in Plato and Aristotle—and Anscombe’s growing knowledge of Aquinas—led them to view the new as shallow and somewhat absurd. In the context of a world war, the global rise of fascism and communism, and shifting social opinions about religion, sex and welfare, these women recognised the *difficulty* in making moral judgments, but refused to stop doing so.

This is reflected in this story from Midgley’s memoir.

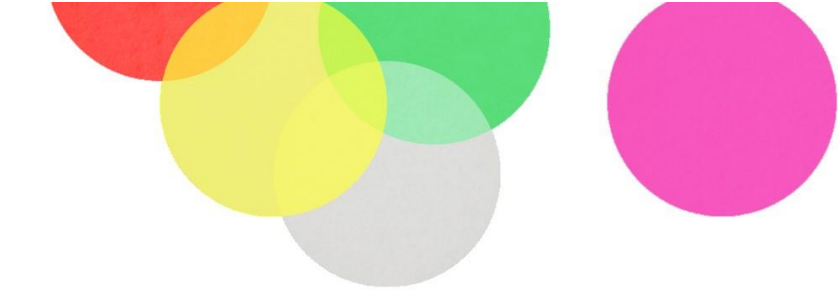
[O]ur tutor Isabel Henderson wanted to celebrate [mine and Iris’s] Firsts properly. As a special treat she arranged a dinner party for us with two highly distinguished contemporary sages - the historian, A. L. Rowse, and the Cambridge musicologist, J. B. Trend. We duly dressed up and through a long evening we listened attentively to their distinguished contemporary opinions.

Bright moonlight flooded down St.Giles as the two of us eventually stumbled home to Somerville. ‘So finally’, I asked, ‘what about it? Did we learn something new this evening?’ ‘Oh yes, I think so,’ declared Iris gazing up at the enormous moon. ‘I do think so ... *Trend is a good man and Rowse is a bad man.*’ At which exact, but grotesquely unfashionable, judgment we both fell about laughing so helplessly that the rare passers-by looked round in alarm and all the cats ran away.¹¹

4. A JOINT ‘NO!’

After graduating, Foot, Murdoch and Midgley spent a brief spell in London doing war work. Murdoch and Foot shared a flat, a pair of shoes, a lover and an armchair donated to them by Mary Midgley. Anscombe went to Cambridge to meet and learn from Wittgenstein—who by then had moved on from the *Tractatus* and was producing new work—on which more shortly. Murdoch would later join her for a year in 1947. Though somewhat dispersed the women found chances to

¹¹ Midgley, *Owl of Minerva*, p. 126



meet to discuss philosophy. In a diary entry from 1948, Murdoch describes one of these sessions as philosophy in a ‘world of women’: ‘I reflected, talking with Mary, Pip and Elizabeth, how much I love them’.¹²

In the Autumn of 1948, all four returned to Oxford. They were living near Park town, a Victorian crescent where Philippa Foot—by then married to Michael Foot (the lover she had shared with Murdoch)—had a flat. Murdoch lived with the Foots; Midgley had an attic apartment on the crescent and Anscombe was across the street with Peter Geach. The women could now meet regularly, in Foot’s living room, to talk philosophy. Many of those conversations focussed on the question: what was to be done about Oxford moral philosophy?

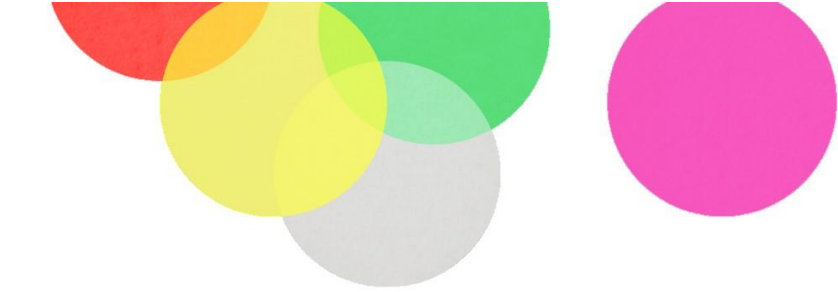
By the time the women were back in situ, so of course were the men, and they were meeting too. Ayer had returned and was enjoying celebratory status as the whirlwind around his youthful manifesto picked up speed. Ryle, a commander in the war had set up the BPhil. Austin had been in the intelligence services and was newly attuned to code-breaking possibilities that linguistic analysis afforded. While the women met in Park Town, hand-picked dons gathered at Austin’s rooms on Saturday mornings to decipher the intricacies of everyday speech.

This focus on ‘ordinary language’ made post-war linguistic analysis less austere than Ayer’s pre-war offering. Oxford philosophers continued to think that philosophy was an activity and not a theory, but saw their activity as closer to that of an ethnographer than a mathematician. The Oxford linguistic philosopher set out to study the *use* of language in ordinary speech and to make a faithful record of that use. His tools were, as Austin put it, the dictionary and the law. This offered up new avenues of enquiry for the moral philosopher, but did not change the nature of his task: clarification and categorisation of ethical language. For example, a moral philosopher interested in blame and responsibility would need to pay careful heed to when the word ‘accident’ is preferred—in ordinary language—to the word ‘mistake’:

You have a donkey, so have I, and they graze in the same field. The day comes when I conceive a dislike for mine. I go to shoot it, draw a bead on it, fire: the brute falls in its tracks. I inspect the victim, and find to my horror that it is *your* donkey. I appear on your doorstep with the remains and say – what? “I say, old sport, I’m awfully sorry, &c., I’ve shot your donkey *by accident*”? Or “*by mistake*”? Then again, I go to shoot my donkey as before, draw a bead on it, fire – but as I do so, the beasts move, and to my horror yours falls. Again the scene on the doorstep – what do I say? “By mistake”? Or “by accident”?¹³

¹² From Murdoch’s journal: 12 June 1948. Quoted in Justin Broackes (ed.), *Iris Murdoch: Philosopher* (Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.

¹³ J. L. Austin, ‘A Plea for Excuses’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1956-7.



No comment is to be made on the most obvious ethical dimension of this case: shooting a donkey on a whim. Rather, attention is focussed on the linguistic data: ‘mistake’ or ‘accident’. It was now by reference to ‘ordinary language’ that ethical pronouncements by moral philosophers would be revealed to be as nonsensical as poetry. [Though one might wonder just how ‘ordinary’ Austin’s Edwardian discourse—or the absurd scene in which it is homed—really is!]

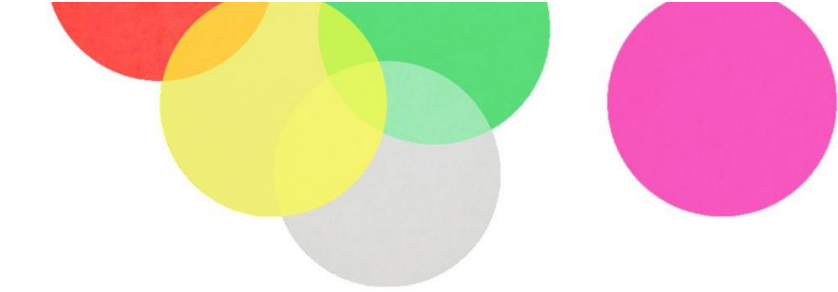
15. Richard Hare was one of those in attendance at Austin’s Saturday morning gatherings. He had been taken prisoner in Singapore in 1942 by the Japanese and during those years of imprisonment, he had begun to fashion a moral philosophy that could serve a man alone in a scene from which the ordinary standards of decency and humanity had been banished. This nascent philosophy took form under the influence of Austin’s gatherings.

Hare’s *Language of Morals* emphasised the prescriptive, rather than the emotive, aspect of moral statements.¹⁴ Note the title—in line with Ayer’s vision, this book will speak only of the *language* of morals, and not moral life as such. Hare noted that value judgments normally carry an implicit prescription—*do* or *don’t do* such-and-such. For instance, if I tell you ‘Riding a bike is good’ I thereby encourage *you* to cycle, should you have the chance. Where the moral judgments differ from other evaluative talk is in their universalizability. If I say ‘Riding a bike is *morally* good’ I imply that *everyone* should *always* cycle should he have the chance.

For Hare, in line with Ayer, commitment to this universal claim is not underpinned by a belief in a moral law or moral facts; rather it is a *formal* feature of a moral prescription as such. Moral education involves learning the universal principles of conduct on which one’s society broadly agrees, but ultimately it is up to each of us to choose the prescriptions by which we will live.

Hare’s book was not quite the bombshell that Ayer’s book had been, but his ideas were nevertheless a great hit with both philosophers and the broader public. Some worries were raised that Hare’s philosophy ‘corrupted the youth’ by teaching them that morality is not a system of God-given laws but a set of personal principles, but these worries were allayed by the extreme conventionality of Hare’s outlook. What he had concocted was moral philosophy without ethical pronouncements which nevertheless recommended a particular set of moral norms: those that matched the dominant conventions of one’s time. In spirit with the liberalism that underlies his focus on *personal choice*, he had done so while evincing a very English respect for different cultural

¹⁴ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford University Press, 1952).



norms and for the codes of practice of other reasonable individuals. The result: the seeming impossible. A moral philosophy that stuck to Ayer's injunction on ethical pronouncements while endorsing the moral outlook of atheistic liberalism. Anscombe remarked that his philosophy flattered—by reflecting back—‘middle-class thinking’.¹⁵

16. But while Hare was developing his moral philosophy in Austin's Saturday gatherings, the women were hot on his heels! In their Park Town meetings they were looking to undermine not just the particulars of his view but the whole project of devising a moral philosophy that was cut free from the facts and which eschewed ethical pronouncements. Here is Mary, speaking last year:

[W]hat, for me, makes the unanimity-story still important is a persisting memory of the four of us sitting in Philippa's front room and doing our collective best to answer the orthodoxies of the day, which we all saw as disastrous. As with many philosophical schools, the starting-point was a joint ‘NO!’ No (that is) at once to divorcing Facts from Values, and—after a bit more preparation—also No to splitting mind off from matter. From this, a lot of metaphysical consequences would follow.¹⁶

The need to be able to make ethical pronouncements—to say, truly, that Hitler is a bad man, that torture is unjust, that murder is prohibited—seemed to these women, pressing. A moral philosophy that was based on the idea that any ethical pronouncement was illicit seemed to them to be utterly unacceptable in the context of the world-historical events to which they were witness.

In 1956 this failure of language and ethics would be the focus of Anscombe's ‘Mr Truman's Degree’, in which she accused the fellows of Oxford of having lost the concept of murder—it was no longer possible for them, she thought, to recognise a fundamental ethical truth: murder is one of the worst sorts of human acts and it is always prohibited.¹⁷

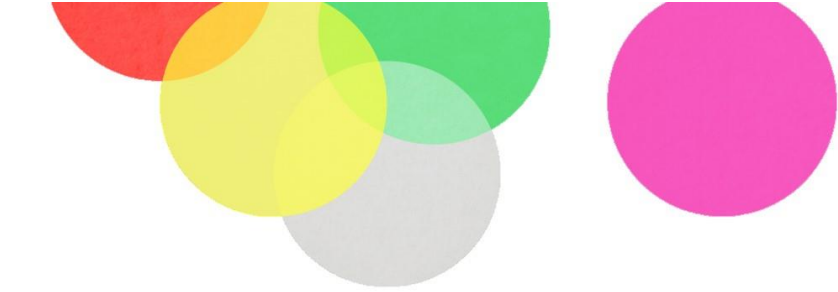
18. Writing in the 1990s, Foot gives voice to the worries that gripped them then:

What [the ‘Oxford moral philosophers’] tried to do was construe the conditions of use of sentences like “it is morally wrong to kill innocent people” in terms of a speaker's feelings or attitudes, or of his or her commitment to acting in a certain way. And this meant that,

¹⁵ G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Does Oxford Moral Philosophy Corrupt the Youth?’ in *The Listener*, Thursday, February 14, 1957; p. 249; Issue 1455.

¹⁶ Mary Midgley, ‘Then and Now’ < <http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/then-and-now/>>

¹⁷ G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘Mr Truman's Degree’ (pamphlet published by Author, Oxford, 1958). Published in her *Ethics, Religion and Politics*. (Blackwell, 1981), pp. 62-71.

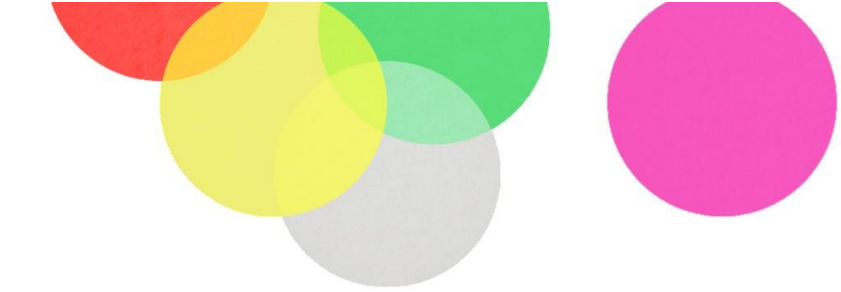


according to these theories, there is a gap between the facts, or grounds, for a moral judgement and that judgement itself. For whatever reasons might be given for a moral judgement, people might without error refuse to assent to it, not finding the relevant feelings or attitudes in themselves. And this is what I thought was wrong. For, fundamentally, there is no way, if one takes this line, that one could imagine one- self saying to a Nazi, “but we are *right*, and you are *wrong*” with there being any substance to the statement. Faced with the Nazis, who felt they had been justified in doing what they did, there could simply be a stand-off. And I thought: “Morality just cannot be subjective in the way that different attitudes, like some aesthetic ones, or likes and dislikes, are subjective.” The separation of descriptions from attitudes, or facts from values, that characterized the current moral philosophy had to be bad philosophy.¹⁸

The women resisted the influence of Austin—not least because he refused to invite them to his Saturday morning gatherings. Instead, Anscombe’s contact with Wittgenstein suggested to them a different direction in which to take linguistic philosophy. His influence on the *Quartet*, mediated by Anscombe and Murdoch, gave these women the resources to begin their counter-revolution: ‘NO!’ to the Fact / Value distinction and ‘No’ to divorcing mind from matter. In putting Wittgenstein’s method to work in ethics they would transform it from a tool for dismantling philosophical muddles into a means of addressing the Aristotelian question ‘How should I live?’.

In thumbnail sketch, the Wittgenstein that influenced Ayer and the Vienna circle views language as an abstract symbolism in which we can *picture* empirical facts. The role of language is to describe the world, and it is the isomorphic structure of thought and reality that makes this picturing possible. What Wittgenstein had come to realise by the 1930s was that language was not an abstract symbolism: for creatures like us, language is a tool. The structure of language is not a reflection of the structure of a brutally given world of facts, but is rather shaped by and shapes the lives and actions of people. This organic conception of language means that the task of studying the meaning of words requires one to attend to more than propositions; one must take as one’s object *human life*. As such, Wittgenstein replaces his austere enquiry into the ‘general form of the proposition’—an enquiry into the necessary structure of anything that could represent the facts— with an enquiry into the general form of *human life*. This latter enquiry is an enquiry into the structures that give our lives together intelligibility and into which our language is interwoven.

¹⁸ Philippa Foot, ‘The Grammar of Goodness’, an interview with Philippa Foot, 2003, *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* XI.



Hare's moral philosophy—with which the Quartet became somewhat obsessed—had two pillars, both of which they now had the tools to attack. First, Hare had inherited Ayer's injunction to divorce facts from value. Our women knew that a combination of Wittgenstein's method and the 'moth-eaten traditions' that they had assimilated at Oxford, would give them the resources to show that a true description of the world would be one that included normative concepts. Second, Hare belonged to Austin's school of ordinary language philosophers. Anscombe and Murdoch—and through their teachings, later, Foot and Midgley—saw that Wittgenstein's conception of linguistic use would take them far beyond calculus, the dictionary and the law. It would take them to a study of the patterns and norms by which human life is lived. Wittgenstein applies his method piecemeal, to language-games containing words or concepts that get philosophers in a muddle—meaning, intend, rule, sensation. These four women attempt something much more ambitious: to describe the form of human life as such, and through doing so, to illuminate the structure and contours of a *good human life*.

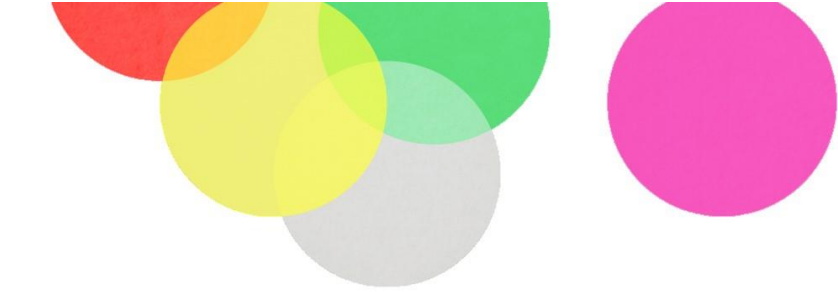
Their study would be testimony to Wittgenstein's remark: 'Not *empiricism* and *yet realism* in philosophy, that is the *hardest thing*'.¹⁹ And to remain realistic they turn again and again to the human scene, to the human animal, to human society, to the way we live with each other, to what we, human animals, are and need.

3. PICTURING THE HUMAN, PICTURING THE PHILOSOPHER

To get a sense of the ethics that emerges out of a commitment to this sort of realism, we can look to an unpublished paper of Anscombe's, called 'Twenty False Opinions Common Among Anglo-American Philosophers'. Among them are the following six:

1. We aren't mere members of a biological species but *selves*. The nature of the self is an important philosophical topic
2. There is no such thing as a natural kind with an essence which is human nature.
3. Ethics is formally independent of facts of human life, for example, human physiology.
4. Ethics is 'autonomous' and is to be derived, if from anything, from rationality. Ethical considerations will be the same for any rational being
5. Imaginary cases, which are not physical possibilities for human beings, are of value in considering ethics

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (MIT, 1978), p. 325. For discussion see Cora Diamond, 'Realism and the Realistic Spirit' in her *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (MIT, 1991).



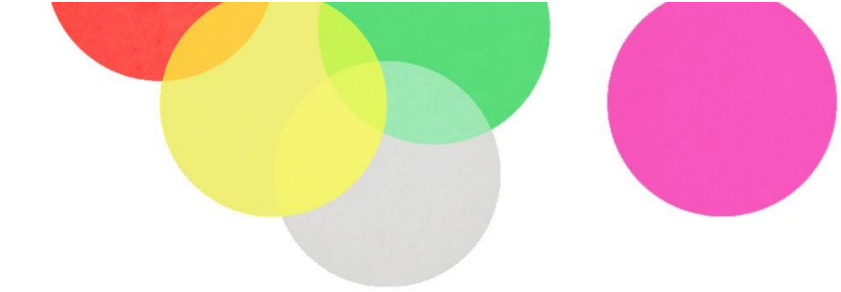
6. The study of virtues and vices is not part of ethics.²⁰

For the women of the *Quartet*, the ethics of Ayer and Hare—and indeed much contemporary moral philosophy—is ‘unreal’ in ways that connect to the six theses. It is formally independent of the facts of human life, for example human physiology. It is autonomous and derived only from rationality in ways that obscure and occlude the form of life of human animals. It holds on to the consoling assumption that on whole human animals are rational agents who will act in ways that are not monstrous or systematically harmful to others but are grounded in motives and intentions that are transparent to them and a product of reason. It deflects attention away from careful consideration of real human situations through the use of examples which are either trivial or fantastical (not possibilities for actual human beings). In contrast, the stance of these women is realistic: ethics is formally dependent on facts of human life, facts that can be excavated through careful study of the human animal; ethics is not an autonomous sphere but is connected to human nature, and in particular to what humans need to flourish; the reality of human evil, error and fantasy is recognised, but also the possibilities for moral work; it depicts real or imagined cases of the human moral predicament, often in domestic and everyday situations. This sort of commitment to ‘reality’ recognises the extreme difficulty of sustaining a realistic attitude in philosophy. Part of this difficulty is simply a reflection of the complexity of human beings, human life, and human language—a complexity that our concepts reflect—but another part is an ethical, rather than an intellectual, difficulty.

This is, as we said at the start, just the smallest first sketch of the philosophy of the school. In a longer—book-length—treatment, the differences in the way that the women undertake this project would need to come out, and much more detail would be filled in about the connection between the method and the ethics. This school—if that’s what it is—has suffered from 60-years of scholarly neglect. In that time many thousands of papers and dozens of books have been published on the philosophy that emerged out of Austin’s Saturday morning gatherings. We hope that there will be plenty of work now to come on the philosophy that emerged out of these contemporaneous meetings Philippa Foot’s living room.

21. We want to end by throwing in one final idea connected to this thought that the difficulty of philosophy, as the *Quartet* see it, is as much an ethical as an intellectual difficulty. For us this is one of our most exciting discoveries in relation to the school. The idea starts from a line in Murdoch’s

²⁰ Anscombe, ‘Twenty Opinions Common among Modern Anglo-American Philosophers’ in Mary Geach and Luke Gormally (eds), *Faith in a Hard Ground: Essays on Religion, Philosophy and Ethics by G. E. M. Anscombe* (Imprint Academia, 2008).



essay ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’—a paper the roots of which are in those living-room discussions: ‘man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture’.²¹ If this is right, then the descriptions we, philosophers, give of the human are also pictures that we, humans, might come to resemble. This means that the task of producing philosophical descriptions is not governed only by the norms of truth and accuracy. The pictures we give may come not only to represent, but also to create, our reality. To take an example worked through by Midgley, in describing man in opposition to beast, we constrain possibilities for theorizing and acting in relation both to each other and to animals.²² In picturing this relation differently, in thinking of ourselves instead as a kind of beast—a human kind—we open up a different ethical vista. We might now recognize each other as creatures of passion, instinct and habit (as much as creatures of reason) and—as Cora Diamond has put it—also come to *see* animals as our fellows.²³

Murdoch says: ‘Historical change is (in part and fundamentally) change in imagery’ (47); we think all these women can be read as rejecting the ‘change in imagery’ that came with the revolution in philosophy, and the image of what the activity of philosophy is—and so what the philosopher is—and as attempting jointly to articulate an alternative image, which centers on the everyday ethical thinking that belongs to the life of a human animal, lived among other such animals.²⁴

With this image, the women show why Ayer was wrong in thinking that the connection between poets and philosophers is that both speak nonsense. He was right to think that both poet and philosopher, when they offer up visions of the human, may not be reporting empirically observed facts. But wrong to suppose that this stripped their words of sense. The concern of the philosopher is not simply to describe the world as they find it, but to depict the world as it could or should be. It is in this way—by combining the vision of the poets with the doggedness of the lawyer, as Midgley puts it—that Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch set about answering the question ‘How should we live?’²⁵

²¹ Iris Murdoch, ‘Metaphysics and Ethics’, in D. F. Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics* (Macmillan, 1957), p. 75

²² Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Harvester, 1979).

²³ Cora Diamond, ‘Eating Meat and Eating People’, *Philosophy*, Vol. 53, No. 206 (Oct., 1978), pp. 465-479.

²⁴ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Chatto and Windus, 1992), p. 47.

²⁵ Mary Midgley, ‘Philosophical Plumbing’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 33 (1992), pp. 139-151.