

A Guide To Teaching The Quartet (for AQA A-level Teachers)



By Amia Guha for Women In Parenthesis

Contents

Part 1: Why teach ...

- Mary Midgley?
- Philippa Foot?
- Elizabeth Anscombe?
- Iris Murdoch?

Part 2: How to teach ...

- Mary Midgley?
- Philippa Foot?
- Elizabeth Anscombe?
- Iris Murdoch?

Part 1

Why Teach

Why teach Mary Midgley?

What would A-Level philosophy look like if, instead of the classic male canon of philosophers, the curriculum was headed by an all-female quartet: Phillipa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and, of course, Mary Midgley? Perhaps there would be less of Ayer and Dawkins' positivist empiricism – letting physical science answer all the questions – and a greater revival of the project of metaphysics. Maybe we would be less enamoured by Sartrean existentialism – man arising free out of nothingness – and observe that the social structure of human life invalidates the assumption that will is generated a vacuum.

There would certainly be greater sensitivity to the ways in which metaphor and myth shape our culture and knowledge systems, like the concept of beastliness. Midgley saw human interactions with the animal kingdom as framed around the mythology of “the beast within” (the irrational, emotional human soul) and the “beast without” (the ferocious animal predator). Through ethological studies, she saw animals lead a structured, co-operative life. Where now was the chaotic ‘Lawless Beast’ outside of the rational man? False imagery veiled the underlying truth: “We are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals.” Threads of moral philosophy sprang from this conclusion. Utilising Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, Midgley developed a defence of natural normativity – that man “has” certain virtues like he has teeth. We must therefore ask questions like what is natural for our species to flourish? What is the role of familial organisation in our natural community? Thus Midgley opens up inquiries into gaps in our traditional analytic philosophy: areas of territory, family, and personal space.

Midgley's insights would generate a more constructive environmental aspect to the A-Level curriculum. She saw the earth as a living biosphere, or Gaia, and the human being as an animal in its natural habitat. There is an ecocentric fibre to her work, which denounces existentialism for proceeding “as if the world only contained dead matter (things) on the one hand and fully rational educated human beings on the other.” More broadly, our atomistic view of social life causes puzzles - how we should view ourselves, what duties do we have towards something non-human, why should we be concerned about the fate of our planet? Her embracement of the metaphorical Gaia, the earth as a single self-sustaining organism, provides a holistic eco-ethic where Cartesian individualism is “bankrupt of suggestions to deal with non-human entities.”

The re-location of good in the natural faculty of the mind – Kant's practical reason, Hume's moral sentiments – has created a tension between human flourishing and the flourishing of ecosystems that humans transform for their own ends. But Midgley embraces it as a natural fact of the human condition that we exist in an interconnectedness with other species and belong to major ecosystems. Her approach is equipped to address the theoretical and moral conflicts arising from the greatest crisis of our generation.

Reading Midgley would inform conversations about Kant and Moore, alerting students to the problems arising from the idea that we may only be morally accountable for outward action. Midgley prefaces her ‘Objection to Systematic Humbug’ by asking the question, “is it quite alright to shake hands with murder in your heart?” Are mental actions not real actions, do they depend on an outward form for full realisation? To answer this, Midgley employs Murdoch's vignette of the mother-in-law who behaves “beautifully” to a daughter-in-law she believes to be beneath her son, until she “looks again” to view the girl in a more forgiving light. Murdoch underscores the moral transformation in her inner life; she is morally active even when no changes are manifested outwardly. Midgley agrees - moral work can be inner and private – going further to assert that feeling and sentiment can be “educated.” In Kantian terms, we may integrate our “inner” and “outer” moral lives.

Against the empiricist tradition that feelings somehow do not concern morality – utilitarianism’s attempt to organise consequences of outward action, Kantianism’s location of feeling and motivation outside the sphere of reason – Midgley argues that to dislocate the logic of emotions and will is to render life “not just unfamiliar, but deeply unintelligible and inhuman.” We are embodied, affective creatures. Here we see an influence from Anscombe, who advocated for an equally robust philosophy of psychology to support the project of modern moral philosophy. So the task of practical reason can be contrasted with “systematic humbug.” What we call in “common speech” reason, namely the task of organising all of our conflicting wants and interests, is the task of reconciling feeling with action. Thus we can operate as a “whole, to preserve the continuity of our being” without dismissing our emotional nature.

Midgley would certainly give us something to say about games. At A-level, we read Wittgenstein and Hare and think what the philosopher means by a “game” is something like a system of rules that have meaning because they are played. Like Hare’s infamous argument in ‘The Promising Game’, the duty of promise-keeping depends on whether one has agreed to play the ‘promising game.’ But Midgley sees games very differently. She asks first what exactly a promise-less world would look like. From Nietzsche’s account of nature’s task as “the breeding of an animal that can promise” to the existentialist’s binding commitment, promising appears “everywhere a kingpin of human culture.” Thus, it appears more consistent to equate promising to the institution of playing games in general: “the condition of having institutions.” Further, rather than a closed system as the term “game” is used in mathematics, Midgley insists upon the existence of games as continuous with the life around them. Indeed, they “spring from” and are “fit to” needs that already exist.

Think about it – you could not substitute tennis for football. Why? Well, it is not a team sport, there is no physical contact and so on. It would probably dissolve into a “more primitive ritualised contest of the kind from which football originally sprang.” Thus games are not optional or arbitrary but arise from human needs and activities. This must be admitted before the use of metaphorical games, like Wittgenstein’s language games. Where Wittgenstein fails to identify a commonality in all games aside from a series of “family resemblances,” Midgley observes an “underlying organic unity” enabling us to deploy the concept of a game, namely that it meets a human need. A chair embodies the need of supporting sitting, thus “to know what a chair is just *is* to understand that need.” Thus we can arrive at a definition of a game through the needs that it meets, and perhaps a new outlook on moral philosophy as a whole, starting with man as a “game-playing animal.”

In any case, the addition of such compelling female philosophers like Mary Midgley and the all-female philosophical school she was a part of to the A-level curriculum would be a welcome change from “the habit of viewing men’s ideas as normal and central, and women’s as an occasional optional variation.” My A-level exam texts, for example, were written by four men named John: John Stuart Mill, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Polkinghorne, and John Hick. While there is much to admire about these philosophers, we consistently overlook a wealth of comprehensive responses to our philosophical inquires. I urge young A-level philosophers to complement their exam texts with this volume and criticise dominant conceptions of human nature, animal life, and ethics with some of Midgley’s insights!

[Return to Contents](#)

Why teach Philippa Foot?

At school, we often think of moral philosophy as starting from a seminar hall, or better, Descartes' armchair, the lone rational mind in search of truth. It may come as a surprise then that Philippa Foot opened a lecture with the thought: "In moral philosophy, it is useful, I believe, to think about plants."

Why not?

It was sure to ruffle the feathers of the non-cognitivists of her age, who considered ethical evaluations not truth-apt but merely expressive. Plants then, had nothing to do with ethics, for moral judgments featured an evaluate description absent from factual descriptions about the world – an attitude, approval or disapproval, with no substantive truth conditions. Yet it seemed incredible to Foot that after the War and Holocaust, her contemporaries – Ayer, Hare, and Stevenson – could simply "roll up their sleeves" and pick up where they left off. That, after viewing footage of Nazi concentration camps, talk could continue of ethical statements as neither true nor false.¹

This is the living background to the metaethics debates at A-Level: for Foot and her peers, this put an end to non-cognitivism. They were convinced of the need to rethink ethics fundamentally, looking instead to the "reality that surrounds man" to ask what a conception of "good" really *is* outside of the needs and desires it serves to fulfil. This is the Aristotelian sense of goodness, different altogether from that of Moore and the anti-naturalism that held open the door for Ayer and Stevenson's emotivism and Hare's prescriptivism, that itself traces back to Hume's is-ought gap, the sum of which meant that when Foot stepped into the scene of moral philosophy:

It seemed that *fact*, complementary to assertion, had been distinguished from *value*, complementary to the expression of feeling, attitude or commitment to action. Propositions about matters of fact were assertible if their truth conditions were fulfilled, but moral judgments, through conditions of utterance, were essentially linked to an individual speaker's subjective state.

Doubtless, the A-level philosopher will find too when she reads *Principia Ethica* that the concept of 'goodness' arises most peculiarly from this arrangement, independent from the object it describes, as a "special kind" of non-naturalistic property.² Even grammatically, the term 'good' is ill-placed: a free-standing predicate like 'red' without reference to its everyday use.³ Really, Foot pointed out, the term 'good' ought to be paired with a complementary noun – 'good shoes,' 'good action,' 'good taste' – in order to determine whether we are in fact speaking of goodness rather than badness. To use Geach's terms, 'good' is not a predicative, but rather an "*attributive adjective*."⁴ In other words, "whether a particular F is a good F depends radically on what we substitute for F."

We can see then how the non-cognitivist's "private enterprise theory of moral criteria" runs away with itself. For if there are no "subject-independent" criteria to contest the truth of evaluations,

¹ Cf. Existential French philosophy, reacting with anguish and existentialism to the horrors of WWII.

² Moore's *Principia Ethica* is an AQA set text.

³ Foot takes the terms "attributive" and "predicative" from Peter Geach's 'Good and Evil' where he classifies 'good' in a set of attributive adjectives like 'large' and 'small,' to be contrasted with predicative adjectives like colours which act independently of what they describe. Note both Foot and Geach's Wittgensteinian influence, honouring the call to bring back words "from their metaphysical to their everyday use."

⁴ Italics added for emphasis.

the subject is free to base his beliefs, without logical error, entirely on “premises which no one else would recognise as giving evidence at all.”⁵ Thus, anything can be the subject of a pro-attitude. A “moral eccentric” may commend something as arbitrary as the “clasping of the hands as the action of a good man,” or refuse to condemn a behaviour in the face of definitive evidence on the grounds that “*this* does not count as evidence for *him*.” No background is needed to give these suppositions sense. Yet this runs counter to our experience of judgement, where reasoning, attitude, and feelings are all “logically vulnerable” to facts. We have a feel for goodness like we do for pride. It is only coherent to feel pride following an achievement, so too must there be coherent reasons for discerning goodness. For instance, we may base our judgment off observation of flourishing.

From this conclusion, it becomes possible to argue in a new way for the rationality of moral considerations. Hume’s worry, stressed to impressionable A-Level philosophers, was that we cannot leap from a description of a state of affairs to a legislating concept. But consider instead that ‘should’ simply “speaks of reasons – it’s not a kind of pushing or a word with an oomph or something for expressing [your] attitude.”⁶ This is a different ‘ought’ than the *moral* ought that we learn from Kant and the utilitarians, which arises from hypothetical imperatives along the lines of ‘If you want to... then you should...,’ and operates within our normal concepts.⁷ It is simply a description along the lines of ‘you’ve got a reason to do this.’⁸ Foot explains this through advising a young man quit smoking for his later health:

Now, probably, he will say, this chap, ‘All right, you’ve shown me that I’ve got a reason to give up smoking, but you haven’t shown me that I *should* do it.’
I’d say, “What on Earth do you think ‘should’ means?”

This is precisely why she says her old paper, ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives’ is “so wrong,” because it relies on a Humean view of reasons where, though everyone has a *reason* to cultivate the virtues, acting virtuously pivots upon the summoning of contingent motivations. So reads her stirring declaration: “we are not conscripts in the army of virtue, but volunteers.” Later, she held that practical rationality is simply to perform the actions we have reason to do.⁹ Just as speculative rationality is goodness in respect of beliefs on conclusions drawn from premises, *practical* rationality is goodness in respect of reasons for actions.

Thus the question at the core of A-level ethics, ‘Why act moral?’ can be divided into ‘Why be just? Why be benevolent?’ And if we *are* to take a few tips from plants, we can answer readily, evidencing traits in human affairs that lead to flourishing. Practicing justice strengthens people; practicing honesty sustains cooperation; practicing benevolence conditions people to happiness. What gives an action its ‘justness’ is not an emotive quality as with Ayer, nor an imperative feature as with Hare, but the fact that these traits are good for their bearer and human society: the “grounding of a moral statement is ultimately in the facts of life.”

So, where else to start but from nature, and what is natural for human beings as a species?

⁵ Note the non-cognitivist sleight of hand in the term ‘evaluation,’ more of an attitudinal approval/disapproval than to “anything one would normally mean by that term.”

⁶ Here Foot parallels Anscombe’s appraisal of the “mesmeric force” of the ‘moral ought’ in *Modern Moral Philosophy*.

⁷ Cf. Kant’s categorical imperative

⁸ Foot sees a repeated mistake in framing morality and rationality as independent ideas we must integrate: “what is your idea of rationality if you think you have to somehow reconcile morality *with it*? You haven’t got a full idea of rationality until you’ve got morality *within it*.”

⁹ So to be a “non-defective human being” is just to do what one has reason to do. When we learn practical rationality as a child – i.e. not to touch a fire – we reason “It is hot and will hurt me, *so* I won’t touch it.” It is precisely this “so” connecting the descriptive and the evaluative that constitutes practical rationality.

This is what brings Foot's ethical naturalism beyond the A-level focus on Bentham's naturalist utilitarianism and the polis-centric virtue ethics of Aristotle – natural normativity. Crucially, Foot finds it embedded in the grammar of evaluation that the exercise must at least implicitly grasp the *type* of thing it deals with. So there is a logical structure to the cluster of concepts surrounding living things: flourishing, interests, function, purpose. This means there is “no change” in the meaning of the word good “as it appears in ‘good roots’ and as it appears in ‘good dispositions of the human will.’ Thus teleological explanations breach the descriptive and the normative: goodness finds its expression not in psychological terms, but in the needs and interests of its objects. As plants require strong roots to reach water and withstand wind, we require courage to stand up for ourselves and take due risks.

Thus, virtues are an individual's exemplification of features that tend to species flourishing, and the natural relationship between individual and species allows for room for defect in unquantified propositions. Though we say, ‘Humans have thirty two teeth,’ it is perfectly coherent that not *all* do – *some* have more, *some* have less. This is a standard by which we measure defectiveness, with teeth as with virtue. So we can use a wider vocabulary like healthy, defective, strong to carry information as well as the same “practicality” as right and wrong. Proceeding from this conception of goodness, not grasped a priori as if a mathematical truth but born from ecosystem and continuous with the life around us, we can start to fix what is broken in our ethics. Where Kant's deontology sustains a Cartesian ego as self-legislator, and Bentham's utilitarianism locks a situational calculus, Foot's naturalism builds into the structure of our ethics the “interrelated” concepts of normativity, positioning both the individual in relation to his peers and the human in the same framework of rights and duties as animals and non-human life.

I look to a version of Foot's naturalism within the “mixed community” that Midgley speaks of: a re-imagination of rights beyond the polis where our duties are inextricably connected to the natural world.¹⁰ This is the ‘should’ that ‘speaks of reasons’ – that responds those who say, ‘You have given me reasons to take climate preventative measures, but you haven't shown me I *should*,’ with “what on Earth do you think ‘should’ means?” It is in some ways drawing out the logical consequences of Anscombe's ‘Modern Moral Philosophy’ to expose the strange, non-naturalistic concept of goodness embedded in our everyday ethics with no reference to its everyday use. It is, in others, simply the realisation of a philosophy that starts from plants.

[Return to Contents](#)

¹⁰ It is important to note here that though Foot was a seminal influence of neo-Aristotelian virtue theory, she was not an adherent of virtue ethics as it appears in contemporary philosophy, seeing morality as separate from virtue and favouring the Rawlsian contractarian approach.

Why teach Elizabeth Anscombe?

Author of *Intention*, the landmark work hailed “the most important treatment of action since Aristotle,”¹¹ and philosopher responsible for coining the term ‘consequentialism,’ it is striking that Elizabeth Anscombe is not mentioned at all in the AQA A-level. It would be difficult to discuss Wittgenstein – especially in English! – without her, for she (a devoted student and exception to his general dislike of female academics) was the chief translator of his life works, including *Philosophical Investigations*.¹² Still, to speak of Anscombe through her great inspirations – Aristotle, Aquinas, Wittgenstein – would be misguided, for she remained throughout her life a boldly independent thinker. She famously stood up in Oxford against US President Truman’s honorary degree, denouncing him as a murderer of thousands and opposed contraception through her philosophical-Catholic stance on intention in war and sexual ethics.

So: what might we learn differently at A-Level under Elizabeth Anscombe?

To start, we might look twice at the central place of Cartesian psychology in our action theories. Anscombe argued that the notion of intention arises out of this atomistic inner self as an “interior act of mind that can be produced at will.” Here the agent is left free to conjure up and “direct his intention” to a particular foreseen consequence of his action. So runs the Truman-type defence, that the US President did foresee but not *intend* to bring about the large civilian deaths caused by the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We remain complacent to reasoning along the lines of, ‘What I *mean* to be doing is X [winning the war] and *not* Y [killing thousands of innocents].’ Underlying our frameworks here is the Sidgwickian conception of intention generating “the thesis that it does not make any difference to a man’s responsibility for something that he foresaw, that he felt no desire for it, either as an end or as a means to an end.” But with Anscombe we may see the faultiness of an ethic where “what a man actually does is the very last thing we need to consider,” and reverse the standard treatment to say instead “that it is the first.”

In fact, we might spend less time studying the subtleties between English philosophers from Sidgwick to Hare, to find them *all* guilty of assuming this defective notion of intention. Anscombe perceived that no ethical thesis since Sidgwick had challenged his idea of intended action as a “voluntary act of which we are conscious, and which we expect or intend to produce a certain effect.” This resulted in faults in their larger ethical systems, which Anscombe termed “consequentialist” for denying a “distinction between foreseen and intended consequences, as far as responsibility is concerned.”¹³ So the best known English moral philosophers hold that it is in some circumstances right to kill an innocent as a means to a desirable end, and a mistake to think otherwise.¹⁴ Anscombe finds in Sidgwick’s and consequentialist theses a subjective calculation of moral responsibility limited to the realm of expected consequences: “*you* must estimate the badness in light of the consequences *you* expect; and so it will follow that you can exculpate yourself from the *actual* consequences of the most disgraceful actions, so long as you can make out a case for not having foreseen them.” This critique, running parallel to her argument against the Truman defence,

¹¹ Davidson, Donald.

¹² *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, Notebooks 1914-1916, Zettel, Philosophical Remarks, On Certainty, Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology I.*

¹³ Note that consequentialism directly a doctrine about what makes an agent responsible for an action, not about what makes an action ‘right’ which has come about more recently. Note too that this move marks the distinction between “old-fashioned” Utilitarianism and consequentialism.

¹⁴ In contrast, Anscombe notes a strength of Hebrew-Christian ethics that certain acts are banned whatever the consequences, e.g. treachery, gratuitous suffering, idolatry. Here, the very point of the prohibition is in its strictness, “*that you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences.*”

is essential to her treatment of intention, where an agent cannot shirk responsibility for the “bad consequences” contained in the “bad actions” he performs.

Anscombe’s Catholicism runs a vital fibre to her philosophy too: her theological background, paired with her rigorous treatment of intention leads her to outright condemn not only abortion, but oral contraception.¹⁵ Holding that every sexual act is significant, Anscombe treats the question of whether one should engage in non-generative intercourse on the same level as the question of whether marriage as a whole is “open to life.”¹⁶ Under Anscombe’s notion of intention, by purposefully engaging in contraceptive intercourse, one distorts the nature of the sexual act: “the action is not left by you as the kind of act by which life is transmitted, but is purposeless rendered infertile, and so changed to another sort of act altogether.” If every sexual act was ‘purposeless’ in the sense that it ought not to beget a child, then the purpose of marriage as a whole – a legal union between two people set up to provide the optimal social framework for child rearing – is eroded too. So contraception is intrinsically non-martial, a key feature of human association: “we don’t invent marriage... any more than we invent human language. It is part of the creation of humanity.”¹⁷ Anscombe turns instead to the “positive” ideal of celibacy and chastity as a more effective lodestar than the correspondingly *negative* encouragement of abortion and contraceptives.

Admittedly, however, this argument was intended for a Catholic audience, and I believe it might find greater resonance among A-Level students in pinning down the precise functionality of intention in applied ethics.¹⁸ For instance, though abortion is not featured in AQA Applied Ethics, we may use similar reasoning for simulated killing within computer games: as contraception distorts the generating, loving nature of the martial sex act, simulated killing distorts the non-generative, cruel nature of the killing act. So where Anscombe dismisses the notion of “causal” contraceptive sex due to the centrality of relationships in human life, we may no longer diminish the significance of computer killing, due to the centrality of institutions of violence in human life. Thus students can explore the possibility that computer game killing may have *sui generis* problems, arising from the warping of intention in the ‘killing’ act itself.

Departing from the Aristotelian idea of deliberating a sufficient means to an end, Anscombe saw practical reasoning requiring knowledge of the “order of intention” that exists among events. We can describe actions we perform in many ways, some of which are intentional, others are not. When a person seeks to pump water into a house, for example, the movements of his arm up and down are ‘intentional’ but his casting a shadow is not. Thus the term ‘intentional’ references a form of a description of events that the agent knows in a distinctive first-personal way. These various ways to describe an action each bear an order to each other: the man moves his arm up and down *because* he is operating the pump *because* he wants to put water into the house and so forth. These ideas are so essential to human affairs as intention refers not only to the ‘because...’ answer to ‘why-questions,’ but is embedded within the terms in which we conceptualise human and animal behaviour, like ‘picking,’ ‘offending,’ ‘moving,’ and so forth. Even intercourse, in this way, is imbued in a new sense with ‘intention,’ and here we may see why Anscombe finds it so perplexing that one may in engage in *non-generative* intercourse without distorting the nature of the act itself.

¹⁵ This was very controversial: Jenny Teichman writes that “the intellectual climate of the late twentieth century was such that Anscombe’s views on sexual morality provoked more disagreement than her arguments about justice in war.” Michael Tanner and Bernard Williams for instance, found her reasoning “offensive and absurd,” full of “sophistry and bluntness.”

¹⁶ Foreword, *Contraception and Chastity*, Mary C Gormally.

¹⁷ It is interesting that her peer and fellow member of the Wartime Quartet, Philippa Foot, used the Thomistic Catholic doctrine of the double effect to defend abortion, where Anscombe, the devout Catholic herself, rejected the idea that one could distinguish in such a binary way between intended and merely foreseen action.

¹⁸ The article itself published by the Catholic Truth Society.

Among these philosophical knots, we might look to jettison too that seemingly inextricable concept of ‘moral ought,’ remnant of the age of God the legislator, and embark more enthusiastically upon the modern revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics. The ‘moral ought’ formulation appears upon Anscombe’s examination, a relic of the theological-legal structure of ethics stemming from divine command. In a secular or multifaith age, we can come to see in similar terms to Wittgenstein’s language games that the necessary social framework for making such talk meaningful is absent. Thus, students may, like Foot, Annas, MacIntyre and Hursthouse, look with renewed interest to the Aristotelian tradition, grasping the need for a robust philosophy of psychology to equip this project: a rigorous philosophical understanding of ‘action,’ ‘intention,’ ‘pleasure,’ ‘flourishing’ and ‘wanting,’ which Anscombe herself begins in *Intention*.¹⁹

Why stop there? Anscombe’s appraisal of modern moral philosophy leads us to confront the usefulness of ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’ as evaluative terms in our moral philosophy. We may become, like Anscombe and the Wartime Quartet, suspicious of consequentialism and ‘thin’ moral concepts and look to encapsulate our moral thought in richer language. This is a desirable feature of virtue ethics, that we may describe an act as ‘selfish’ or ‘cowardly’ instead of ‘morally wrong,’ to convey more information. It may be more precise to use ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ or ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ to provide sharper fulcrums in ethical reasoning. For example, to punish an innocent man for a crime he did not commit, even to save 10 lives, may be morally right or wrong, but is always and everywhere *unjust*. Where ‘morally right’ adds only a “mesmeric” force without the divine essence that once gave it content, ‘justice’ and ‘truth’ retain meaningful use within our social frameworks.

This was a feat for which Anscombe commended Hume: that his ‘is-ought’ contributions performed “a considerable service by showing that no content could be found in the notion of moral ‘ought.’” However, what she strongly resisted was Hume’s the idea that there was a real philosophical problem in the leap from fact to value, and the non-cognitivist stance that ethical sentences are not truth-apt. Really, the term ‘ought’ when used in everyday language games is useful, even necessary in the Aristotelian sense:

I say ping and have to say pong ... There is clearly no answer to ‘Why do I have to?’ ... But if the procedure has the role of an instrument in people’s attainment of so many of the goods of common life, the necessity that people should both actually adopt the procedure... and also go along with the procedure... this necessity is a necessity of a quite different sort: it is the necessity that Aristotle spoke of, by which something is called necessary if without it good cannot be obtained.

The viable sense of duty and ‘ought’ is not the one preserved in the force of Kantian deontology, but that contained in plain ordinary language. The ‘moral ought’ adds “no sense to the phrase... because we are talking about human actions and the ‘moral’ goodness of an action is nothing but its goodness as a human action.” Here Anscombe echoes Wittgenstein’s call “to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”²⁰

Yet Anscombe recognised Hume’s insight as symptomatic of a wider defect compromising moral philosophy. Hume’s particular scepticism was over the transition from a description of a state of affairs to normative concepts like ‘ought’ and ‘should.’ However, Anscombe thought this concern had deeper roots: we have failed to establish the relation between levels of description of human action. She argued counter to Hume’s two-pronged fork, that

¹⁹ ‘Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives’ (Foot) and ‘Virtue Ethics’ (Annas) are both set texts.

²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, §116(b).

certain facts can be ‘brute’ relative to other facts and less brute in relation to a third set. Take Anscombe’s example of supplying potatoes, where she hopes to show an *is-owes* gap.

I carry potatoes and leave them at your door, and you pay me £5.

This description cannot be categorised into simply matters of fact (I drop off potatoes) and relations of ideas (five hundred pence make a pound). For equally you cannot jump from “is” (I carried potatoes to your door and sent you a bill) to “owes” (You owe me £5). There are *layers* of brute facts here, relative to other descriptions. ‘I carry potatoes and leave them at your door’ is brute relative to ‘I supplied you with potatoes,’ which is itself brute relative to ‘You owe me £5.’ So Anscombe sees Hume’s contribution as identifying a need to fix this *type* of relation playing out between levels of human action, a transition wider than ‘is’ to ‘ought,’ before going about action theory and moral philosophy.

Finally, we may have cause to uproot the long-founded philosophical assumption that causality must be connected with a form of necessitation. Even following Hume, where most philosophers conceded no *logically* necessary connection between causes and effect, Anscombe argues that we have ultimately failed to interrogate “the equation of causality with necessitation.” Causality is distinguished from determination: X can cause Y even if Y is not determined by X. So “causality consists in the derivativeness of an effect from its causes,” but that Y derives from X does not entail that X necessitated Y. For example, if I had only one contact with someone with a contagious illness which I then contract, I know with certainty that my contact with this person is the cause of my illness. However, this does not entail that this contact necessitated my contraction of the illness.²¹

Anscombe challenged the empiricist orthodoxy of Hume’s account and rejected the Humean view of constant conjunction. As a singularist, Anscombe held that cause can be observed in a single instance: to see a woman pick up a book is to perceive a causal process. Here we see a particular action triggers a particular effect, rather than viewing causality in terms like ‘A-type events always lead to B-type events.’ We may move this thinking back to the potato example, and the institution of supply. We cannot have an endless list of constant conjunction to recognise the institution of ‘supply.’ Would it go something like...

If I drop the potatoes you need at your door, and you pay me for them, I supply you with potatoes. If a farmer delivers the strawberries you requested from him at your door, he has supplied you with strawberries. If you are thirsty and a stranger runs to bring water to you, she has supplied you with water, and so on.

The point of “and so on” here is that it is not short for “a final list that is excluded for pragmatic or epistemic reasons rather it marks a gesture toward a standard of sameness or similarity that a normal learner will catch on to, but which cannot be articulated independently of the concept itself.”²² We draw upon conceptual relations in our shared world to connect my leaving potatoes and your paying me with ‘supplying potatoes.’ This is key to action theory too where empirical patterns, not mental representations, give intention

²¹ Though of course, Anscombe makes room for ‘necessitating causes,’ or those where it is impossible for X₁ to occur without causing Y₁ given there is nothing that prevents Y₁ from occurring: e.g. rabies is a necessitating cause of death given there is no treatment preventing death from occurring. There are also non-necessitating causes, e.g. a Geiger counter which denotes a bomb if and only if the random activity of radioactive molecules happens to trigger it. Here, causation itself is “mere hap.” Thus we need not assume that every cause necessitates its effect.

²² Wiseman, Rachael. “Anscombe on Brute Facts and Human Affairs.”

meaning. To understand ‘supply’ is precisely to understand what items or services are desirable for humans, and to learn anything at all has “of necessity a sort of incompleteness.”²³

Here we open up neglected topics in philosophical discussions of causality. It is assumed that we can give a finite list of exceptions to a generalisation – ‘Always given A, B follows’ beginning with ‘Unless’ – but this is never true. To construct a formulation in this way, we would have to undertake the impossible task of describing “the absence of circumstances in which an A would not cause a B.” For example:

Unless you did not need or request the items, or it rains and they become soggy and uneatable, or you are allergic to potatoes/strawberries, or a hungry passer-by steals them ...

But even laws of nature are not generalisations about what always happens. They are in the form ‘The freezing point of water is 0 degrees,’ not ‘Always when A occurs, B occurs, Unless...’ So in our action theory, we might go forward with an understanding of causality without necessitation, and contrast ‘constant conjunction’ approaches by framing casual connections within the singularist framework.

More broadly, Anscombe’s scholarship opens up alternate pathways for A-Level philosophy, providing a richer picture of 20th century moral philosophy, meta-ethics and causality. Her inclusion in the A-Level would cause students to query the Cartesian psychology embedded in our moral philosophy, and the notion of subjective will that can ‘direct’ intention as if it were meaningfully separate from the action itself. From here, they might appreciate better the recent revival in the Aristotelian tradition of ethics and launch seriously into a renewed philosophy of psychology as an alternative to consequentialism and its Cartesian assumptions. Further, coming to see Hume’s is-ought gap as an insight into a wider fault of action theory, and his constant conjunction as necessarily incomplete if not untrue, students could take forward Anscombe’s attempt to bridge the gap between levels of action descriptions to fix the faults in our normative philosophy. Overall, we would see in line with the Quartet’s greater mission a call to bring philosophy into the everyday and worldly, to humans and human affairs.

[Return to Contents](#)

²³ This argument seems to parallel Midgley’s argument for the institution of games as “spring[ing] from” and “fit to” human needs and activities. Meeting a human need is the “underlying organic unity” that allows us to deploy the concept of a game. This is a wider theme of the Wartime Quartet: that we must place our philosophy back into the realm of human affairs to give it meaning.

Why teach Iris Murdoch?

It is always a significant question to ask of any philosopher, at A Level or beyond, what are you afraid of?

Iris Murdoch wrote of humans as “anxiety-ridden animals,” most easily corrupted by a “smart set of concepts” to tidy our confusion. So we were first suckered into over-reliance on introspection – where else to find truth but in that trusted refuge of Self? And then, when religious dogmas and metaphysics faded out of contemporary consciousness, how hopeful it would have seemed that there could be a single, infallible system in science. But although these frameworks purport comfort, it is the task of any good philosopher to confront cautiously that very malaise that arises when an explanation is not quite right.

In this spirit and with a strong stomach, Murdoch breaks through the “self-absorbed veil” to apprehend the strangeness from which much philosophy has receded: the “volcanic otherness within the personality.” Studying Iris Murdoch would open A-Level philosophy beyond compartmentalised twentieth-century analytic ideas to her unusual intermingling of existentialist and Platonic thought in an effort to examine, as the ancients did, the nature of the moral life. Taking fact-value beyond binary to “entangled” reality and giving ethical reasoning an epistemological significance, Murdoch’s disregard for traditional boundaries would shake us of our assumptions to face the unrest beneath our current philosophical veils.

Instead of finding intellectual liberation in psychological isolation, Murdoch believed that it is only by turning our attention *away* from ourselves that we see things as they really are. Where Descartes looked within to locate the centre of reality in the thinking mind – *cogito ergo sum* – Murdoch believed that “the self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion.” To witness moral reality then “we *cease* to be in order to attend to the existence of something else.”²⁴ We must undergo what Murdoch terms “unselfing,” shirking the “fat relentless ego,” to have an unclouded view of the Real which is also the Good. She inverts the standard framing from ‘I think therefore I am’ to ‘I *see* therefore I am *not*.’²⁵ Developing this, we can see the radical consequences of a philosophy where the ego, which plays so vital a role in contemporary ethics, actually disappears when engaging with moral reality.

Of course, it is part of the nature of a classroom to attend to the reality of ‘other,’ and to see the world more justly accordingly. Integrating Murdoch at A-Level, we would see how the British ethical tradition has inherited a systematic failure to recognise the psychological complexity of engaging with ‘other’ in moral situations. Sidgwick remarks that the field made a leap beyond the ancients by separating the rational principle of self-interest and general public welfare: what is good for the agent individually is not the same as ‘good for all’ understood impersonally. In this way, Murdoch’s separation between self and other in *other*-focused virtue is both un-Platonic and un-Aristotelian. But Sidgwick, like Mill and Hume, focuses exclusively on self-interest and fails to make Murdoch’s conceptual leap in connecting the moral with the phenomenological to arrive at the obstacle of fantasy.

This is Murdoch’s insight: overcoming fantasy (the proliferation of self-absorbed images) allows us to, in an idiosyncratic extension of Plato’s sunlight metaphor, re-imagine the virtues as

²⁴ Italics added.

²⁵ This is crude for it is only the ‘ego’ and ‘brooding self’ which disappears, rather than the more grammatically difficult question of the first-person ‘I.’

perceptual capacities. Thus moral sensibility is placed within the context of sensory perception and attention, bridging ethics and epistemology. To engage with moral reality, the agent must attend to the distinctness of another individual, seeing their moral significance *per se*. This is difficult because “one’s love for the other person is inextricably bound up with the importance of that person to one’s own life.”²⁶ Thus the challenge is to see “the other in herself - distinct and separate from oneself.”²⁷ Thus motivations for Murdochian virtue diverge from other ethicists’ for focusing on clear vision and moral character, not as justifications of why humans choose certain actions in particular circumstances.

So students may see the prevailing picture of man in a new light, as a “detached observer” and the history of philosophy as an attempt to “isolate individuals progressively” first from God, then society, and then the rest of nature.²⁸ Murdoch traces the “elimination” of metaphysics from Descartes, Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer to Kant, Nietzsche and Derrida towards a reductive individualism that forgets the genuine oppressions from which philosophy once retreated. The chimera left compiles the most dramatic features from each doctrine without thoughtful reconciliation of parts.

The very powerful image with which we are here presented... is behaviourist in its connection of the meaning and being of action with the publicly observable, it is existentialist in its elimination of the substantial self and its emphasis on the solitary omnipotent will, and it is utilitarian in its assumption that morality is and can only be concerned with public acts.

So although we read Sartre at A-Level with typically British disapproval – stirring literature exalting the unguided trajectory of a single subjective will – we may find in our own philosophy a similar assumption. Sartre’s “lonely gratuitous chooser” is not altogether distant from the image of man created by Kantian liberalism and Wittgensteinian logic: an “alien and implausible” figure possessing an omnipotent will manifesting public action. This is the man who found certainty in self and virtue in self-extension.

We need not be philosophers to be familiar with this image. Murdoch reminds us “he is the hero of every contemporary novel... free, independent, lonely, powerful, rational, responsible, brave.” The “offspring of the age of science,” he aims not towards ‘truthful’ moral assertions, but through his will “supervene[s]” moral properties onto a neutral state of affairs to *prescribe* action. Here is “Luciferian” private will Murdoch finds distorting our moral philosophy.

The idea that ‘good’ is a function of the will stunned philosophy with its attractiveness, since it solved so many problems at one blow: metaphysical entities were removed, and moral judgements were seen to be, not weird statements, but something much more comprehensible, such as persuasions or commands or rules.

Goodness as ‘willed’ took on a quasi-existential feature of self-projection: judgements no longer “matched the world.” Against the tide of her time however, Murdoch held that values were neither expressed in the non-cognitivist “Newspeak” nor in the teleological sense of Foot that makes ‘goodness’ the “most general adjective of commendation.” She found this impoverished moral language to lack the “genuine mysteriousness” in the concept of

²⁶ Lawrence Blum, ‘Iris Murdoch’ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Explored further in Mary Midgley’s introduction to *The Sovereignty of Good*.

goodness, lacking the ability to capture moral transformation and shifts. The moral vision may be more delicately – and accurately – portrayed through imagery and metaphor, a device 20th century British philosophers for the most part dismissed as meaningless for being neither true nor false. Murdoch describes a change in the quality of her consciousness when she is temporarily moved by the beauty of a bird:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.

This Gestalt shift, induced by the experience of beauty, recaptures Plato's ineffable Good: the highest Form that lends intelligibility to all others. Likewise, Murdoch views moral perception as a journey toward an elusive, transcendent Goodness. In the existentialist-behaviourist conception terms like courage, generosity, kindness are simply a conjunction of fact and an evaluation conferred by the speaker. But for Murdoch as with Plato, the two dimensions are "entangled" features. This is a step beyond A-Level moral realism or objectivism: that there is a "fabric of ethical being" and reality is irreducibly evaluative.

With God gone, we may grow suspicious too of the revered 'freedom of will,' reducing the fundamental subject matter of ethics to action and principles for action. Murdoch sees ethicists like Hare reducing moral life to public events. He writes: "If we were to ask of a person 'What are his moral principles?' the way in which we could be most sure of a true answer would be by studying what he *did*." But this utilitarian framing dismisses the fecundity of inner life to be mere shadows flaring up in moments of deliberation and choice. And though these doctrines remain outward facing, they nevertheless fail to assume any connection between agent and environment, centring a rational human will upon dead objects. This should alarm us even more as climate perils become increasingly critical. By locating the Good outside of the individual human reality, Murdoch's unselfing ethic is naturally more ecocentric. Here we can see the fault lines in our philosophy tracing back to the certainty of discrete consciousness, to Descartes and the subsequent consequentialism.²⁹

So Murdoch's emphasis on perceptual capacity takes on greater moral significance to establish the value of the inner life in and of itself. In her famous M and D vignette, a mother-in-law who once looked disapprovingly on her son's bride "looks again" to find the once silly, vulgar girl now delightfully youthful. All the while, she behaves the same outwardly, but through "just attention" undergoes inner "moral work." Thus, in contrast to Hare, Murdoch calls attention to the activity of inner life even without public manifestations. Diversifying the account of moral experience, Murdoch insisted upon the existence of a substantial self that constraints will along the lines of attitudes, attachments, beliefs and "modes of attention."³⁰ Crucially M's reflective imagination is what makes her free – not the "wild leap" of the will found in the categorical imperative or Sartrean subjectivity.

²⁹ I intend 'consequentialism' in the Anscombean sense of being only concerned with outward action.

³⁰ She suggests the best example to date has been Freudian ideas of the "psyche as an egocentric system of quasi mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous and hard for the subject to understand or control," but this remains a hole in moral philosophy.

Like Anscombe, Murdoch advocates for philosophical psychology to equip the moral project, but she takes a step beyond Anscombe to connect phenomenological and moral reality. Murdoch borrows from Plato the idea that moral vision can be clouded, not by shadows in a cave but by our own egoistic veil. Re-animating Plato through the reality of the Good, we can see the moral life as a “pilgrimage from appearance to reality,” and re-frame the moral effort as a struggle against natural egoism. Early sentimentalist philosophers, like Shaftesbury and Hume, were focused on the meta-cognitive reflection allowing humans to be self-regulating: to see moral ugliness and be moved to change. Similarly, Murdoch sees a feedback loop between self and attention to other, but places love not rationality as “the last and secret name of all the virtues.”³¹

Moving us beyond the veil of 20th century analytic frameworks, Iris Murdoch’s inclusion in the philosophy A-Level would increase the range of intellectual touchstones from existentialism to the Wartime Quartet to Plato. Her unusual version of Platonic moral realism would intersect ethics and epistemology in the moral problem of knowing objects distinct from the self. Without relying on introspection, we could build the psychology of attention into our moral philosophy, displacing the sole projecting will with a Murdochian “love” that revives the Platonic sunlight metaphor: “to love, that is to see.” Less reverent to the “detached observer,” we may poke at the shyness of moral philosophy to explore the rich and varied landscape of inner life. I’m inclined to believe that this failing led her to find intellectual freedom in the novel: a mode rewarding the fact “that life is fuller, stranger, and more dramatic than philosophers allow.”³² But as we in our A-level philosophy confront the strangest part of all – ‘other’ and that haze outside of Self) – we can muster some of Murdoch’s boldness to find moral reality not in *cogito* but *cogitamus*. This is after all the most basic assumption of classroom life.

[Return to Contents](#)

³¹ Note that Murdoch did not intend literary ideas from her novels like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* to be connected to her philosophy, though there are some clear connections.

³² John Sturrock, ‘Reading Iris Murdoch,’ JSTOR

Part 2

How to....

How to teach Midgley in the AQA A-Level

3.2 Moral Philosophy

3.2.1 Aristotelian Virtue ethics

‘Concept of Beastliness’ pp. 113-118

Blending the Aristotelian account – the ‘good’ for human beings, eudaimonia, and asking whether virtue ethics gives us sufficiently clear guidance to act – with Midgley’s defence of natural normativity to generate a virtue account compatible with an eco-ethic.

‘Animals and Why They Matter,’ pp. 112-124

Exploring the ‘mixed community’ as an alternative to the Aristotelian polis, questioning if the highest form of community must be a political body, or if we may synthesize animal, environmental and human ethics in a naturalistic virtue ethic.

3.2.3. Meta-ethics

‘Objection to Systematic Humbug,’ pp. 147-169

Integrating the concepts of ‘reason’ and ‘emotion/attitudes’ in moral philosophy to regard the myth that emotions are outside of the sphere of reason as generating a wholly alien view of human life. Contrasting rationality with ‘systematic humbug,’ Midgley sees feeling and thought as ‘conceptually’ connected as aspects of conduct.

‘Is ‘moral’ a dirty word?’ pp. 206-223

To carefully examine the use of the word ‘moral’ and its derivatives (and to some extent those of ‘ethical’ too) to see how they show signs of ‘strain’ as we stretch them to stretch to fill holes in our thinking.

3.2.3 Moral realism

Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, Chapter 5 ‘A Joint “No!”

Looking at the Quartet’s response to the logical positivist orthodoxy of the day: viewing A. J. Ayer’s verification principle against the Quartet’s revival of metaphysics, and Hume’s is-ought gap with their attempt to reconnect fact and value.

‘The Game Game,’ pp. 231-240

Emphasising the idea of ‘goodness’ as both natural and culturally formed, reflecting our needs as social animals. Thought and choice cannot be considered in a vacuum, rather seen as springing from activities of the human life: sex, playing games, laughing, promising, and so forth.

‘Human Needs and Human Ideals,’ pp. 89-94

G.E. Moore divided ethics into two questions: what does goodness mean, and what things are good? But Midgley saw ethics as living in the chasm between these two questions, dealing with conflicts between ‘admitted goods (or evils).’ She calls for, a ‘priority system of goods,’ arrived at by a naturalistic assessment of the system of needs which they satisfy: human nature.

3.3 Metaphysics of God

3.3.1 The concept and nature of ‘God’

‘Dover Beach: Understanding the Pains of Bereavement,’ pp. 209-230

Exploring God as a conceptual underpinning to traditional philosophy and drawing out the consequences of his absence to see an empty life without connection to a dead world. Midgley urges us to shed the Cartesian dualism fuelling the split between ourselves and natural world, and to embrace our position as animals beginning with the classical imagery of the Earth as Gaia, Greek goddess of all life.

3.3.2 The Problem of Evil

***Wickedness*, pp. 1-16**

Conceiving of evil as a negative, a failure to live as we are capable. The Problem of Evil put in terms of ‘natural’ unavoidable evil and ‘moral’ deliberate human evil fails to see the importance of a range of natural motives – concern for power, aggression, territorial defence. These motives often contribute to flourishing. We need not approve of all things capable of desire, but we face a task of corresponding these goods with needs of conscious beings. Thus, we require a full analysis of the complexities of human motivation to create a priority system among these needs.

3.4 Metaphysics of Mind

3.4.2 Dualist theories

‘Souls, Minds, Bodies & Planets,’ *Philosophy Now*

Proposing a Platonic conception of the soul as an emotionally conflicted ‘committee system’ against the unified, abstract Cartesian soul. As part of the age-old attempt to sever Reason from Feeling, and establish Reason as the “dominant partner, seventeenth century philosophy ‘flatten[ed] out’ notions of mind and body to ‘look parallel.’ After Ryle’s *Concept of Mind*, we could keep the machine, and jettison the mental ghost, but twentieth century philosophers could not grasp the world as machines without users. Cue the ‘hard problem of consciousness.’ Midgley suggests that through a Platonic ‘committee system’ we can see the Self as deliberating conflicting considerations in an inner life profoundly influenced by the outer world.

3.4.3 Physicalist theories

‘*What Is Philosophy For?*’ pp. 152-208

Considering the difficulty of the ‘hard problem of consciousness’ as a problem with its materialistic terms. Midgley saw this set up as futile, leaving us to reconcile how a ‘lump of meat’ can generate subjective awareness. Rather, once we take a ‘philosophical look’ we can see reductive physicalism as only one way of explaining the world, and subjective awareness another. Here, Midgley emphasizes the role of philosophy to stand from different positions to fully understand a problem.

[Return to Contents](#)

How to teach Foot in the AQA A-Level

3. 2 Moral Philosophy

3.2.1 Normative Ethical theories

‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,’ pp. 305-16³³

Students should examine the extent to which ethical statements find expression in a Kantian-type categorical imperative or through Foot-type hypothetical imperatives (‘If... then..’).

Prying like Foot at the distinction between “should” (used in Kant’s hypothetical imperatives) and “ought” (used in Kant’s categorical imperatives), they may tease out again the “special dignity and necessity” that philosophers have endowed in the moral “ought.” This, they may recognise, is the general charge levelled the Wartime Quartet against both the consequentialists and deontologists, to rely on the mesmeric force of “ought” to give statements so-called normative “oomph.”

Students may follow Foot’s comparison of morality to the institution of etiquette to illumine the strength of the claim that “the normative character of moral judgment does not guarantee its reason-giving force,” and draw out the consequences of the conclusion that “the grounding of a moral statement is ultimately in the facts of life.”

Natural Goodness

Students can contrast the esoteric judgements of the consequentialists, reached in particular unconnected circumstances, with the virtue ethicists’ interest in their underlying traits. Comparing the ‘thin’ versus ‘thick’ evaluative language, students can consider the impact of naturally normative vocabulary – healthy/unhealthy, excellent/defective, strong/weak – which carry information as well as the same “practicality” that good/bad do.

Thus students can arrive at their study of virtue ethics with an understanding of Foot’s “natural goodness” that finds its meaning in the fulfilment of a species-specific function that tends towards flourishing. Students may then consider the context of the polis as generating the features of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in comparison to Foot, who begins not by thinking of human association, but of plants. How might this change the nature of our duties and obligations to natural world?

3.2.2 Applied Ethics

‘Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect,’ pp. 1-5.

Trolley Problem

A-level philosophers will probably recognise the infamous Trolley Problem, where Foot pins down a distinction between positive and negative duties to explain our different verdicts in cases where numbers remain the same.

³³ Note that this is already a set text.

Her finding is that we owe more to others in the form of non-interference than aid. Put simply, although we may not be morally required to heroically cast ourselves into a rip tide to save a drowning man, we are required not to give him a shove in the first place.

Consider the two formulations of the runaway trolley and the bystander.

Problem #1: Runaway Trolley

A trolley is hurtling ahead on a track that splits in two: working on the first is a single worker, and on the second, five workers. Which will you, the controller, send the trolley down?

- A. The first track, letting five die
- B. The second track, letting one die

Problem #2: Bystander

From a bridge, you see a trolley is hurtling ahead on a track towards five workers straight ahead. Next to you is a fat man who if could stop the trolley if you pushed him over. What will you do?

- A. Push the fat man, killing one and saving five
- B. Do nothing, letting five die

Students will probably find that in the ‘Runaway Trolley’ problem, faced with letting either one or five people die, they opt to minimise loss. *Ceteris paribus*, it is a numbers game. However in the ‘Bystander’ problem, our judgment is less clear. Hardcore utilitarian aside, most of us feel as though pushing the bystander violates a duty that overrides the consequentialist fixation on numbers.

Students should consider the idea that we owe the one bystander more in our duty not to harm him than we owe to all five in terms of aid. This distinction between action and inaction, or ‘doing’ and ‘allowing’ will lay the groundwork for Foot’s more expansive doctrine of the double effect.

Doctrine of the Double Effect

The Doctrine of the Double Effect is relevant anywhere there is a “general question of what we may or may not do where the interests of human beings’ conflict,” and students may extend this to where the interests of humans and non-human entities conflict in the ‘eating animals’ section.³⁴ The DDE holds that it is sometimes permissible to bring about through our action a foreseen but undesired effect that it would otherwise be impermissible to aim at, either as a means or an end. It is exercised in this article to bolster the abortion defence but consider Alastair Norcross’s application to the meat industry.

Take Fred, an avid chocolate lover, who keeps puppies locked in his basement in cramped cages enduring torture in order for them to produce a certain chemical that will enhance his taste of chocolate. We are disgusted by him – he imposes callous suffering on these animals just to better his gustatory experience. Yet, billions of animals suffer every year for

³⁴ Neither abortion nor euthanasia appear on the AQA Applied Ethics section, in favour of the following issues: stealing, simulated killing (within computer games, plays, films etc), eating animals, and telling lies.

the same end and we we generally do not have the same horrified reaction to the meat industry, which arguably operates this set-up on mass scale.

So what is the difference, and how can the DDE explain our instincts?

Norcross suggests that “the suffering of the puppies is a necessary means to the production of gustatory pleasure, whereas the suffering of animals on factory farms is simply a by-product of the conditions dictated by economic considerations. Therefore, it might be argued that the suffering of the puppies is *intended as a means* to Fred’s pleasure, whereas the suffering of factory raised animals is merely *foreseen* as a side-effect of a system that is a means to the gustatory pleasure of millions.” This is how the DDE is used in play – we can justify certain ‘foreseen’ consequences as unintended ‘side effects’ through a conception of oblique rather than direct intention.

To elevate this discussion, it would be interesting for students to use Anscombe’s notion of intention to query the idea that someone can foresee something as a result of their action, but not ‘intend’ it. To Anscombe, intention is not “directed” as if on a whim but built into the logical structure of an action. In this way, it makes little sense to justify the suffering and mass murder of animals as a side effect to the functioning of an institution – the action of eating meat necessarily contains within it the murder of an animal. Thus it seems we cannot hand off responsibility for ‘killing’ to factories or economic systems. Are we simply a squeamish Fred?

Students may use the DDE to assess the permissibility of stealing, simulated killing and telling lies as well.

3.2.3 Meta-ethics

Philosophy Now Interview

Consider Foot’s practical rationality as a possible avenue to fix Hume’s is-ought gap, as shown through the issue of climate inaction.

A-level students will have observed the confusion in our philosophy since Hume, whereby a superlative will is summoned to get from a state of affairs to a normative ‘ought.’ Foot herself in her early work, ‘Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,’ held that action pivots on contingent motivations, a desire that imbues reasons with a normative, willing force, but later came to the idea that ‘ought’ simply operates within our normal concepts. In her words, ‘should “speaks of reasons.”’

Students can apply this to climate inaction. When people ask, ‘Why take care of the planet?’ The answer, ‘If you don’t, the next generations will suffer’ might be answered with ‘You have given me a reason, but I don’t care, so I will continue to act selfishly. You haven’t shown me I *should* do it.’ But this reasoning relies on a concept of ‘should’ as separate from the reasons itself. Consider instead the idea that hypothetical imperatives necessarily provide agents with both reason and motivation for action.

From here, students can grasp how Foot’s conception of practical rationality – goodness in respect of reasons for actions – is a fundamentally less egoist and anthropocentric framework for action, pivoting not on contingent human motivations generated from isolated psychological states, but of the interconnected facts of both human and non-human life.

‘Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?’ pp. 189-208.

In their study of the twentieth century debate between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in ethical language, students can assess Hume’s fork and Ayer’s verification principle alongside Foot’s naturalism to see if the ‘evaluative’ feature of a moral proposition can coherently be conceived as distinct from the ‘descriptive.’

They can consider the impact of the idea that the normative force of a moral statement – i.e. ‘Human beings should tell the truth’ – is derived from a conception of ‘goodness’ that stands in relation to the object it describes. For instance, that humans are social animals relying upon the institution of promising to make contracts and uphold duties.

Looking instead to the “reality that surrounds man” to find a conception of goodness complementary to our needs and desires as a species, students can contest the post-Hume philosophical schism between fact and value that underpins the logical positivist claim that moral statements are not truth-apt but merely conjectures tied to “an individual speaker’s subjective state.”

To grasp the integral role of language in metaethics, students can look at the cluster of concepts in natural normativity – function, wellbeing, flourishing – as terms more robust than the ‘emotive’ quality of Ayer or ‘imperative’ feature of Hare. This will allow them to examine the validity of Foot’s claim that linguistic philosophy fails in attempting to explain the whole function of moral evaluation in terms of a special use of language separate from its everyday use.

[Return to Contents](#)

How to teach Anscombe in the AQA A-Level

3. 1 Epistemology

3.1.1 What is knowledge?

Intention

When distinguishing between various forms of knowledge – the syllabus notes acquaintance, ability, propositional – students can explore Anscombe’s ‘practical knowledge,’ or knowledge of the ‘means-end’ order of our own intentional action.

There are various ways we can describe our actions, and these bear order to each other. I move my legs *because* I want to move *because* I want to get somewhere; this chain of reasons is the order of my intentional action, an order that I, the first-person agent, seem to have special insight over.

Students can explore the nature of ‘practical knowledge,’ both a certain kind of knowledge of my *own* intentional action that I do not have of other’s and a distinction between what I know I do voluntarily (intentionally) and involuntarily (unintentionally) – walking in the sun versus casting a shadow. Anscombe develops the latter notion as ‘non-observational knowledge,’ that we can know without observation both that we are engaged in an action and its cause without a mediating sensory event.

These are important considerations not just in epistemology, but in ethics and moral philosophy as well. A grasp of practical knowledge, grasping the layers of our intention as it relates to descriptions of levels of human action, will be essential before practical reasoning in 3.2.1 Aristotelian Virtue Ethics.

‘On promising and its justice,’ pp. 63-67.

To test the tripartite view of propositional knowledge, students may examine the paradox of knowledge and belief by looking at the nature of promising.

To make a genuine promise, the agent must know he is making a promise. But then what *is* promising? The explanation itself seems to recycle an unexplained term. To have genuine knowledge, the agent must know that he has knowledge. But then what *is* knowledge? Anscombe uses an example of a bottle: if a bottle is only a certain type if it has a picture of itself on it, that picture would have to have another picture and so forth. Likewise, must the agent’s promise entail an infinite series of thoughts?

Anscombe assures us that this “need not trouble us if we say that to think something is also to think that you think it.” In parallel, students may explore the consequences of the conclusion, ‘*to know something is also to know that you know it.*’

‘Hume and Julius Caesar,’ pp. 1-7.

To complement Hume’s appraisal of the role of testimony in the set text ‘An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,’ students may look at the way Anscombe and Hume diverge in answering the question: how do we know Caesar was a real man who died on the Ides of March?

Hume argues that humans infer an original event through a series of testimonies “till we arrive at... eye witnesses and spectators.” But Anscombe finds this incredible, such reasoning “is not

to infer effects from causes, but rather causes from effects.” In other words, we do not believe Caesar existed because we believe in the successive positive evidence, we believe in the evidence because of our belief in his identity and existence. We directly trust what we are taught.

So contrary to Wittgenstein who wrote that “finding something written, from which it emerges that no such man ever lived” would throw up our belief in Caesar, Anscombe insists we must still ask a question that she commends Wittgenstein for asking much later in *On Certainty*: “What would get judged by what here?”

The greater lesson here will be found through Anscombe’s rejection of epistemological coherentism: “a general epistemological reason for doubting one (source of information) will be reason for doubting all, and then none of them would have anything to test it.”

Extension: What is it to Believe Someone?’ pp. 7-9.

Examining the inquiry: what is it for a person rather than a proposition to be the object of belief? Anscombe wrote: “it is an insult, and it may be an injury not to be believed.” Now, in the midst of contemporary debate surrounding silencing and epistemic injustice, students can examine the implications of recognising failure to acknowledge the truth of a person’s testimony as a legitimate ‘harm.’

3.1.2 Perception as a source of knowledge

‘Intentionality of Sensation: A Grammatical Feature’ pp. 1-20.

Students may follow Anscombe in undertaking a grammatical investigation of philosophy of perception, looking at the structure of ‘sensation’ as a concept in a complex language game. This procedure, in contrast to the ontological approaches dominating the contemporary debate, allows us to see the ‘intentional object’ as a grammatical feature not a classificatory category. Here Anscombe’s treatment of intention in action theory translates to the notion of the ‘distinct intentionality of sensation’ in philosophy of perception.

3.1.3 Reason as a source of knowledge

‘The First Person,’ pp. 21–36.

It may be interesting to explore ‘responses to Descartes’ cogito’ outside of the empiricists in Anscombe’s investigation of ‘I’ and first person.

Anscombe approves of Descartes’ use of ‘I’ in the *Meditations*, that he cannot doubt ‘I exist’ but can on the same grounds doubt ‘I have a body’ and ‘I am Descartes.’ Here we see the almost paradoxical function of ‘I’: Descartes can establish the non-identity of himself with ‘Descartes.’ This seems equivalent to ‘Descartes is not Descartes,’ but it is not. ‘I’ refers to nothing short of Cartesian ego, though we are ourselves human beings. So there is a distinct sense in which we use ‘I’ which Anscombe is led to eventually classify as *non*-referential, as there is no referent for ‘I.’

More broadly, however, Anscombe and the Wartime Quartet criticise the Cartesian atomistic self for fuelling a disconnect between mental and worldly and generating a detached philosophy of rationality. In ‘The First Person,’ Anscombe puts forward an alternative to what she calls “the Cartesian conception of consciousness.” Students can also examine the case that our Cartesian philosophy of psychology lays the grounds for a misunderstanding of intentional action.

3. 2 Moral Philosophy

3.2.2 Normative ethical theories

‘Modern Moral Philosophy pp. 1-19.

For context to the contemporary field of moral philosophy and to be able to evaluate between utilitarianism, Kantian deontological ethics, and Aristotelian virtue ethics, students should advance through Anscombe’s three theses in ‘Modern Moral Philosophy.’

Here students would learn about the urgent need for a robust philosophy of psychology to equip the project of modern moral philosophy: an understanding of ‘action,’ ‘intention,’ ‘pleasure,’ and ‘wanting.’ They would also learn to question the concepts of ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’ and whether it is proper at all to continue to use a sense of ‘moral ought’ or if this theological-legal structure of ethics ought to be dispensed in an age where the necessary social framework for making such talk meaningful is absent.

Students would encounter the first use of the term ‘consequentialism’ to the dominant form of philosophising of the well-known English writers from Sidgwick (1900) to the “present” (1958), which denies a distinction in responsibility between foreseen and intended consequences of our actions. Students can see here how she lays the groundworks for the modern project of virtue ethics, taken up by many including her peer Philippa Foot and philosopher Julia Annas, whose works on virtue ethics are both set texts.

3.2.3 Applied ethics

‘Contraception and Chastity,’ Ch. 1-3.

Though it is curious why abortion and war – Anscombe’s most outspoken topics in applied ethics – do not appear on the AQA Applied Issues section, students can make a parallel with the ethics of ‘simulated killing within computer games’ to Anscombe’s consideration of contraception. Here, intentional action will be key.

Anscombe’s argument that contraception distorts the life-generating; loving nature of the marital sex act may be paralleled accordingly. Simulated killing distorts the destructive, cruel nature of the killing act, so as there is no such thing as an insignificant sexual act due to the centrality of marriage as a natural human institution, there can be no such thing as insignificant computer killing, due to the centrality of *violence* as an equally natural human institution.

Note: this is only one potential line of reasoning. The key here is to see how Anscombe’s treatment of intention illumines thinking on practical ethics.

3.2.4 Meta-ethics

‘On Brute Facts,’ pp. 69-72.

Challenging Hume’s fork through considering the truth of the statement, ‘X owes the grocer £5 for potatoes.’ Anscombe argues that there are levels of description of human action beyond relations of ideas (100p makes a pound) and matters of fact (buyer asked for potatoes, grocer gave them to him and charged him for them). There are several relations of brute facts here. Put simply, ‘I dropped off the potatoes’ is brute to ‘I supplied you with potatoes’ is brute to ‘You owe me £5.’

Here students can explore Anscombe's idea that Hume's insight was symptomatic of a larger failure of action theory to bridge not just from non-normative to normative, but between levels of descriptions of actions.

'Modern Moral Philosophy,' pp. 15-19

To take forward discussion around Mackie's error theory, students may consider Anscombe's critique of using 'moral ought,' now merely a mesmeric force without the meaningful social framework to imbue it with meaning. Where Mackie's error theory argues that ordinary moral claims are untrue, Anscombe argued that the term 'morally wrong' "both goes beyond the mere factual description 'unjust' *and* seems to have no discernible content except a certain [psychologically] compelling force."

Students can also explore the idea of 'thick' versus 'thin' evaluative terms, with a look to virtue ethics. Here 'thick' terms like 'selfish' or 'greedy' convey both description and evaluation, more information than simply 'wrong.' Students may also consider the benefits of using '(un)just' and '(un)true' instead of 'morally right/wrong' to ground our assessment of ethical statements in evaluations where there is more universal governing of the concept as a whole.

3.3 Metaphysics of God

3.3.2 Arguments relating to the existence of God

Causality and Determinism, pp. 1-16.

Anscombe saw First Cause arguments as proceeding from an assumption of their own conclusion, offering only a preliminary proof of the principle of causality along the lines of 'any event that occurs must have a cause.' The syllabus lists Hume's objection to the causal principle as a critique of this argument, but Anscombe bears a further criticism, challenging the idea that causal connections are necessary connections.

Anscombe distinguished between causation and determination (nothing is caused until it occurs while an event can be predetermined) and argued that effects are not dependent on specific causes (two different causes can cause the same effect). She also rejected Hume's characterisation of the causal relation as constant conjunction and held instead that we can observe causation in a single instance. Students may develop this line of reasoning in terms of the First Cause argument, as well as explore its implications for probabilistic accounts of causation.

3.4 Metaphysics of Mind

3.4.3 Physicalist theories

First Person, pp. 21-36.

Under Anscombe, students may target the Cartesian idea of self and the view of the 'inner' that presupposes the mind knows its own substance. Anscombe rejects the assumption of a transparency of the mental to itself and blames Cartesian psychology for the detachment of the 'inner' and 'outer.' Students can look at how this has led to faulty dualistic theories between mind and body, where desires and intentions animate bodily movements to give them the quality of action.

[Return to Contents](#)

How to teach Murdoch in the AQA A-Level

3.1 Epistemology

3.1.2 Perception as a source of knowledge

The Sovereignty of Good: ‘The Idea of Perfection’ pp. 1-45

Examining the intersection of epistemic and moral processes in the psychology of perceiving mind-independent objects through “unselfing.” Understanding the phenomenology of perception, students will have better grasp of how the quality of attention shapes moral character, and how the role of consciousness in Murdoch’s conception goes beyond data collection to take an active role in ascertaining moral reality.

3.1.3 Reason as a source of knowledge

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: ‘Descartes and Kant,’ pp. 431-461, ‘Comic and Tragic’ 90-147

Comparing ‘I think therefore I am,’ to a framing of Murdoch’s unselfing ‘I see therefore I am not,’ students can examine the ‘self’ as a place of illusion or Archimedean certainty. Looking beyond Descartes’ cogito, students can develop the consequences of a moral philosophy which begins from distinct individual realities, not the solitary thinking mind.

3.2 Moral Philosophy

3.2.1 Normative ethical theories

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: ‘Morality and Religion,’ pp. 481-492

Witnessing the neglect of significant aspects of human life like love, attention and moral vision in the consequentialism of contemporary ethics, students can revive the activity of the inner self in moral analysis as a viable alternative to the existentialist-behaviouristic model privileging the will.

The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts, pp. 75-103

Developing virtue ethics through deep engagement in the human psyche and its relationship with the good to pair virtue with attentive vision: “to love that is to see.” Students can examine how this diverges from Aristotelian polis-centric model with an ‘other-focused’ conception of virtue beyond the good for all principle understood impersonally.

3.2.3 Moral Realism

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals: ‘Fact and Value,’ pp. 25-57

Challenging the twentieth century divide between fact and value, students can return to the Platonic idea of irreducibly evaluative reality to recognise the value-laden nature of perception. Here students can see the ability of vision to witness objective reality and cultivate moral character as opposed to a moral relativism that severs ethics from reality.

3.3 Metaphysics of God

3.3.1 The concept and nature of ‘God.’

The Sovereignty of Good: On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’ pp. 45-75

Drawing out the consequences of God’s abandonment, students can see how Murdoch’s unusual Platonism channels the Good it through the conceptual hole left by Judaeo-Christian God: “a single perfect transcendent non-representable and necessarily real object of attention.” So students can see Murdoch’s call to let go of our fantasies as a quasi-agapeic form of love: “grace, a supernatural assistance to the human endeavour which overcomes empirical limitations of personality.”

3.3.3 Religious language

‘Morality and Religion,’ pp. 481-492

Criticising non-cognitivism for reducing moral statements to prescriptions or emotive assertions of approval or disapproval, students can see how this so-called “Newspeak” fails to recognise the phenomenological significance of moral reality, expressing mere preference or emotion, without the ability to describe shifts and transformations in moral vision.

[Return to Contents](#)