

## **‘From Post-War Moral Philosophy to Twenty-First Century Ethics’**

LESLEY BROWN BIRTHDAY LECTURE, GIVEN AT SOMERVILLE COLLEGE, 2ND NOVEMBER 2024

I’m delighted to see so many of you here, representing all of the seven different combinations with philosophy that were available. I had a wonderful forty-plus years teaching you keen young people a variety of subjects in philosophy. My own research area (in ancient philosophy, especially late Plato) is a bit niche so I’m going to talk about something different today. I taught lots of ancient philosophy papers and some modern ones, especially Moral Philosophy/ Ethics in latter years.

I’m specially honoured that some very eminent philosophers in the audience. I hope you’ll forgive me if my talk is low-key philosophy and partly anecdotal.

Our symposium’s title: From Post-war moral philosophy to twenty-first century Ethics brings me to the question: is there a difference between Moral Philosophy and Ethics?

A recent book (Irwin *‘Ethics through History’* (2020)) presumes not. It starts ‘This book is about the history of ethics, in the sense in which ‘ethics’ is equivalent to moral philosophy.’ In other words, excluding its sense as in ‘Business Ethics’. But even if Ethics isn’t different from Moral Philosophy, the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ have different connotations. Or so think many. For Bernard Williams, the term ‘moral’ carries connotations of duty and obligation, while ethical considerations range more widely. We’ll see shortly that in a famous paper Anscombe also raised profound questions about the term ‘moral’, as in moral obligation, moral duty. Aristotle has no word corresponding to our ‘moral’, she insisted.

There’s not really a difference, but a change of emphasis. Calling the subject Ethics encourages a wider view: dispositions, character, are more easily included under the rubric of the ‘ethical’; the continuity with more practical ethics is emphasized; and of course with the famous works of Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Those of you who took philosophy subjects before the mid 90’s will have taken a paper called ‘Moral and Political Philosophy’. After a syllabus reform, political philosophy was hived off to a paper of its own, and the remainder was renamed ‘Ethics’. A key proponent of the change was none other than Bernard Williams, who had recently become White’s Professor of Moral Philosophy (sic). We also included on the post 1990’s syllabus some important historical writings: Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche; all in all a big improvement.

I’m going to be talking about GEM Anscombe and Philippa Foot, two important philosophers who played a big part in philosophical discussions from the end of the war onwards. They were both attached to Somerville, both close friends and discussants for the twenty plus years they worked and taught at Somerville. In 1969 each of them moved on, Anscombe to a chair in Cambridge, Foot to teach in the US, where she eventually held a named chair at UCLA.



*G.E.M. Anscombe (1919-2001)*



*Philippa Foot (1920-2010)*

Mrs Foot had read PPE at Somerville. Starting in the late forties she had gruelling teaching responsibilities at Somerville throughout the fifties and sixties, as well as making her mark on the moral philosophy scene. Anscombe (who had studied Greats at St Hugh's) initially held research posts here, and her position was for a while rather precarious, as we'll see later. She did some teaching, but it was more sporadic, and she had major research grants to carry on her work translating Wittgenstein. Miss Anscombe eventually had seven children; she was married to Peter Geach, another philosopher, both of them converts to Roman Catholicism. I was fortunate to be taught by both these giants, as I read Greats here (Classics with large dose of philosophy) as an undergraduate here 1963-7. Tutorials with Foot were in College; with Anscombe they were in the family home in St John Street, where occasionally the youngest child, Tamsin, would burst into our discussions. For half a term I also studied Aristotle's logic with Peter Geach, on Saturday mornings.

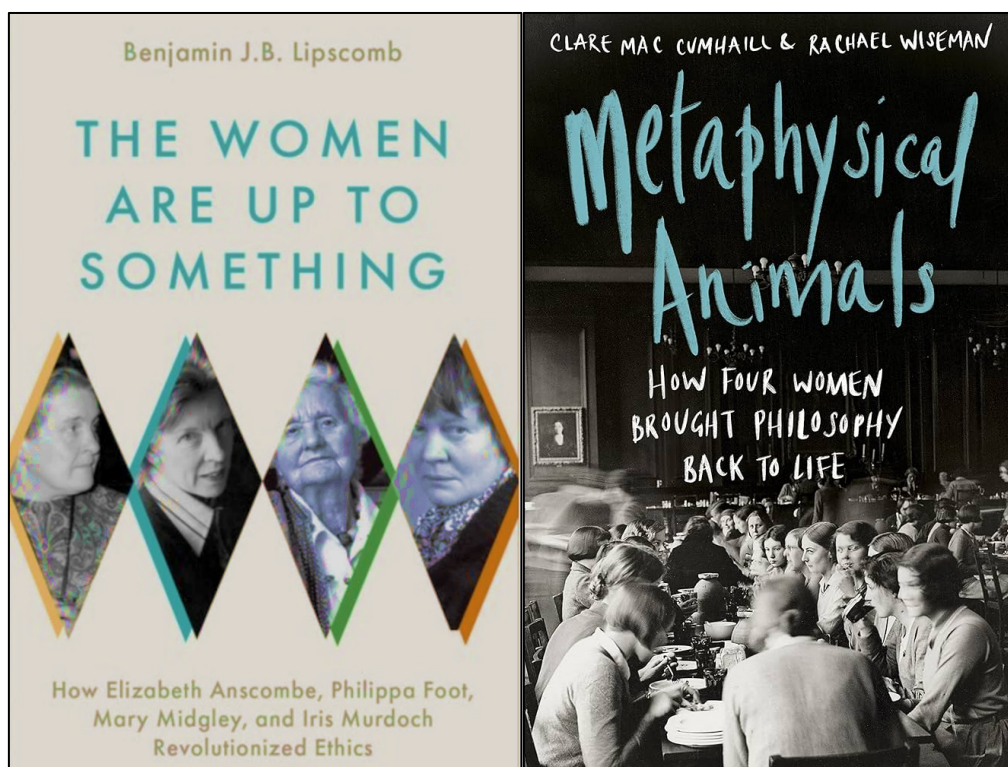
### **Post-war Moral Philosophy, and swimming against the tide.**

The hottest topic in moral philosophy in the West from the 30s – 70s was moral language and the meaning of moral judgements. Are they like other statements in being 'truth-apt', that is, such that they can be true or false? The dominant philosophers said No, moral judgements not like that. They insisted on the so-called fact-value distinction. A.J. Ayer in *Language Truth and Logic* had argued that they are expressions of emotion. That crude view was refined by R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (1952) who argued that moral judgements are disguised prescriptions (commands) to oneself and others. Ayer's view, labelled 'emotivism' by Stevenson, got the nickname the Boo-Hurrah theory of moral judgement. Hare's version, so-called universal prescriptivism, was much more sophisticated, and gained the ascendancy in the 50's. All such views denied there was such a thing as moral

reality, and insisted on our freedom to make moral judgements unconstrained by any ‘moral facts’.

Foot and Anscombe, together with others such as Peter Geach, were swimming against the tide, determined to puncture this prevailing orthodoxy about moral language, and with it about moral philosophy.

The story has been explored and told in two recent books, published within a year of each other, both inspired by Mary Midgley’s recollections.



*The Women are up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics* by Benjamin Lipscomb (2022)

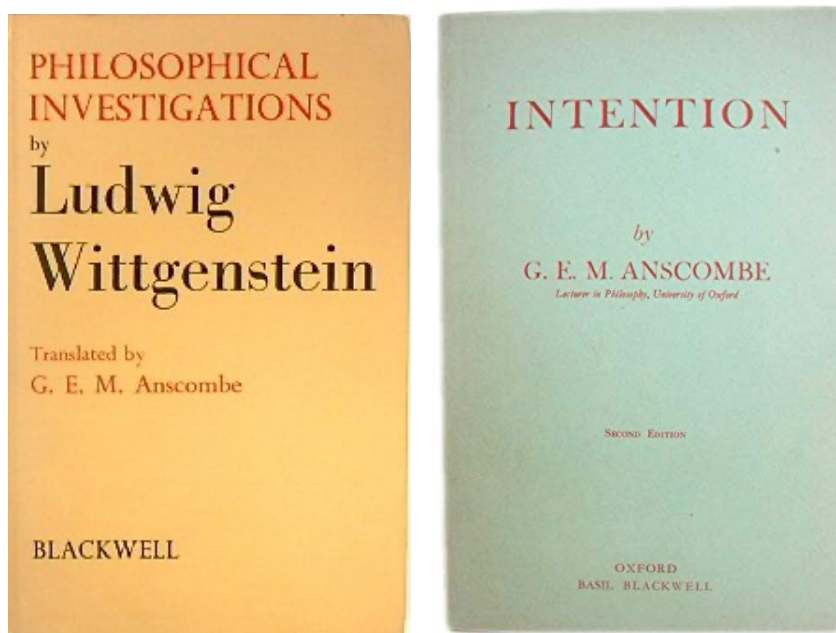
*Metaphysical Animals: How four women brought philosophy back to life*, by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman (also 2022)

Both books are great reads. Both follow Midgley in constructing a narrative by which these four women, friends as undergraduates late in the war, and as aspiring philosophers after it, had seminal discussions in which they thrashed out the beginnings of a common project of debunking the prevailing moral philosophy in Oxford, with its denial of moral realism and its insistence on emotive or prescriptive analyses of moral language. That the four had seminal discussions is clearly true, and Foot often acknowledged especially ‘early discussions with Elizabeth Anscombe’. It’s not the place here to critique the claim of a common project, (which is certainly misleading), my focus is on the rather different but related contributions of Anscombe and Foot.

I won’t be talking about either of the other two women featured, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch (lifelong friend of Foot) or the philosopher Mary Midgley.

It's a great pity that neither book made room to include Mary Warnock, who made important contributions to moral philosophy and who led several important public inquiries of lasting importance, notably into In vitro fertilization. (She was a few years younger than the four.) Some of you here, I know, were lucky enough to be taught by her when she took up a year's post teaching Somerville students, as I had a year's leave in 1978.

G.E.M. Anscombe: best known for her work in the philosophy of action, seminal book *Intention*, a slim monograph 1957. You could say it kick-started the philosophy of action. Also for her translations of Wittgenstein, most famously his *Philosophical Investigations*. She was by no means primarily a moral philosopher but she made some seminal contributions.



January 1958 the journal *Philosophy* 'Modern Moral Philosophy' by G.E.M. Anscombe. Starts by announcing three theses.

**The first** is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. **The second** is that the concepts of obligation, and duty— moral obligation and moral duty, that is to say—and of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My **third** thesis is that the differences between the well known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

The first two were puzzling and provocative. How can we lay aside moral philosophy, how can we jettison 'moral ought' 'moral obligation' etc.? Even more puzzling was the reason she gave: these terms, in a post Christian era invoke a law conception of ethics, with its idea of divine law. ' "ought" has no reasonable sense outside a law conception of ethics, but they (i.e. later philosophers, including contemporary ones) have given up such a conception.' (P8)



But hang on: Anscombe herself, as was well known, was a devout Roman Catholic; *she* hadn't given up the idea of divine law. So how should we understand her reasoning? Controversy on the matter rages to this day.

Anscombe's third thesis was also dynamite, but productive dynamite. There's one thing all these eminent and disparate thinkers hold (she claimed), and in that they are all wrong. They are all **consequentialists**. Anscombe here introduced the term 'consequentialist' – which became a very important label for a family of views, still hotly debated. It includes but is not confined to **Utilitarian** positions. Anscombe lambasted proponents of consequentialist views, and famously argued that if someone entertained a certain sort of moral thinking 'I do not wish to argue with him, he shows a corrupt mind'.

# PHILOSOPHY

## THE JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY

VOL. XXXIII. No. 124

JANUARY 1958

### MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

G. E. M. ANSCOMBE

I WILL begin by stating three theses which I present in this paper. The first is that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking. The second is that the concepts of obligation, and duty—*moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say—and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of "ought," ought to be jettisoned if this is psychologically possible; because they are survivals, or derivatives from survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it. My third thesis is that the differences between the well-known English writers on moral philosophy from Sidgwick to the present day are of little importance.

I want to highlight a few sentences midway through

But meanwhile—is it not clear that there are several concepts that need investigating even as part of the philosophy of psychology and—as I should recommend—banishing ethics totally from our minds? Namely, to begin with, action, intention, pleasure, wanting. ... Eventually it might be possible to advance to considering the concept "virtue"; with which, I suppose, we should be beginning some sort of a study of ethics.

(G.E.M.Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy' p15)

You'll see later why I highlighted that quote.

Now to **Philippa Foot**. Her justified fame as a moral philosopher, comes from four strands. Three of them can be found in her collection of essays *Virtues and Vices* (1978, dedicated to Iris Murdoch). The fourth is her monograph of 2001, *Natural Goodness*.

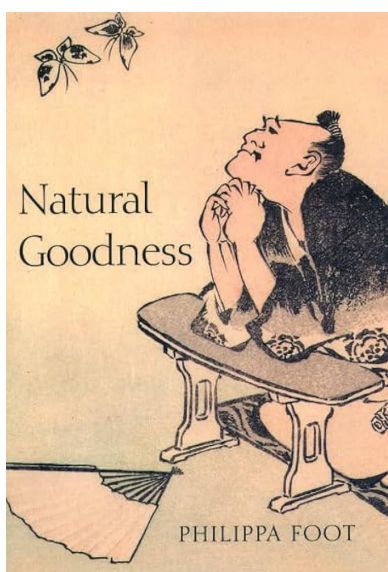
1. The trolley problem, whose genesis is in Foot's 1969 article 'The problem of abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect'.

2. Two articles from 1958, and 1959, 'Moral beliefs' and 'Moral Arguments'. In these Foot delivered knock-out blows to prescriptivism, the influential thesis of R.M. Hare and his followers. Against 'universal prescriptivism', where form and not content determined whether something is a moral principle, she wrote: 'If people happened to insist that no one should run round trees left handed, or look at hedgehogs in the light of the moon, this might count as a basic moral principle about which nothing more need be said'.

Elegant, witty, gently critical, Foot's 1958 attack on the prevailing moral philosophy was far more intelligible, and initially far more effective than that of Anscombe.

3. Specially written for the 1978 collection, an article giving the book its title, *Virtues and Vices*

4. *Natural Goodness*, a monograph published in 2001. In it Foot sketches a defence of an objectivist and naturalist account of the goodness of human beings, their character traits and actions, by focusing on the life-form of a human being, as a special kind of animal. Foot writes unashamedly that she is 'likening the basis of moral evaluation [i.e. of persons and their actions] to that of the evaluation of behaviour in [non-human] animals, *all the while admitting that human communication and reasoning change the scene.* (*Natural Goodness* p16). Since wolves hunt in packs, it will surely not be denied that there is something wrong with a free riding wolf that feeds [i.e. eats what the pack kills] but does not take part in the hunt (*Natural Goodness* p16).



Just so, there's something objectively wrong with a human being who does not cooperate with others.

A quote from the blurb on back cover, by Roger Crisp:

One of the most fascinating ideas in ancient philosophy—that there is a close relation between human happiness and virtue—has been largely neglected in modern philosophy. In this highly significant book, Philippa Foot revives that idea, rooting it in an understanding of human goodness as depending on the nature of our species.'

To some degree, then Foot is fulfilling the hope Anscombe expressed in MMP, of 'using the concept of virtue as the beginning of some sort of study of ethics.

From Foot's Preface to the monograph: 'It will be obvious that I owe most to the work of Elizabeth Anscombe and to early discussions with her.'

**Now for a few reminiscences.** I had the great good fortune to be taught by both. I must confess, Moral Philosophy with Foot in 1966 rather disappointing. No doubt the fault was largely mine. But I think she had become tired of the topics she thought we would be examined on (What is the meaning of 'good'? Can you derive an 'ought' from an 'is', and so on), and yet conscientiously still put us through studying them.

Anscombe's approach was quite different. She was hugely inspiring as a tutor, though quite unconventional. She taught only what she was currently interested in, and set extremely challenging reading. The tutorials were exhilarating. But didn't cover the syllabus! We had to appeal to friends in other colleges for that.

I got to know Foot a little better in later years. I knew about, and greatly admired her work for Hungarian refugees and for Oxfam, and her extreme kindness to Iris Murdoch while in the grip of dementia.

Foot often told me how much she owed to Anscombe, and how fortunate and far-sighted it was that Somerville had been so accommodating to Anscombe over the years. But what I didn't know, until reading it in the books mentioned above, was how pivotal Foot herself had been in that long association with Somerville. So I end by showing you some extracts from a letter Foot wrote to the then Principal, Dame Janet Vaughan, urging her to ensure that Somerville find a way to keep Elizabeth employed, since her funding was coming to an end and her future was very uncertain.

*[continues overleaf]*

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Now Somerville is obviously the place for her; the place where she would be happiest and where she would have good people to teach. Anyway there is nowhere else where she could go - Oxford, and Oxford needs her very badly.

This seems to lead to only one conclusion; either we manage to split the job or else I have to resign. But I don't want to resign; I've never wanted to resign less than at the moment when I think I've got on to a fruitful line in moral philosophy.

**Letter from Philippa Foot to Dame Janet Vaughan, November 1957, pleading to keep Anscombe at Somerville.**

'You probably know what I think about Elizabeth. To my mind she is probably the best all round philosopher (although not the best logician) in the University at the present time. I doubt there is anyone better in the country - not counting Russell and G.E. Moore who are no longer working. There has never been a woman who could do philosophy as she can.'

entirely private at the moment as the question of how to present any plan that we make may be rather urgent.

You probably know what I think about Elizabeth. To my mind she is probably the best all round philosopher (although not the best logician) in the country at the present time. I doubt if there is anyone better in the country - not counting Russell and G.E. Moore who are no longer working. There has never been a woman who could do philosophy as she can. To compare e.g. such scribbling with her would simply be comic.

'Now, Somerville is obviously the place for her; the place where she would be happiest and where she would have good people to teach. Anyway there is nowhere else where she could go in Oxford and Oxford needs her very badly.'

'This seems to lead to only one conclusion; either we manage to split the job or else I have to resign. But I don't want to resign; I've never wanted to resign less than at the moment when I think I've got on to a fruitful line in moral philosophy.'