

Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are up to Something. How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2022, 326pp., ISBN 978–0–19–754107–4.

From the mid-1930s until well into the 1950s, British moral philosophy was dominated by non-cognitivist theories that held that moral judgments were entirely subjective, since they did not correspond to a reality that could make them true or false, that could make them objective. This position derived from logical positivism, which maintained that the work of philosophy consisted of a logical analysis of language, and that meaningful statements were so by virtue of their empirical testing, or else of being analytical truths, i.e., those statements which truth-value can be determined by virtue of the meaning of the terms. Value judgments, such as moral judgments, could be neither empirically testable nor analytically true, so it followed that they were meaningless. A.J. Ayer's book *Language, Truth and Logic*, published in 1936, synthesized this perspective. Emotivists would later correct the conclusion that moral judgments were meaningless by arguing that they actually had an emotive meaning: they were expressions of our emotions. It was as if by saying that one judged the final solution of the Nazis during World War II to be immoral (or moral, as the case may be), one would exclaim "Hooray (or boo) for the final solution!" This implied that there was nothing objectively right or wrong about what the Nazis did in murdering millions of innocent people in concentration camps. This position entailed a sharp distinction between facts and values. Morality was not a matter of fact, but of the expression of subjective emotions—conceived in such a way that they were completely free of rational constraints. What the judgments are about is irrelevant to whether they count as moral judgments.

Much of this non-cognitivist view was also adopted by Richard M. Hare—one of the most influential moral philosophers in mid-twentieth-century Oxford—who also viewed moral judgments as lacking truth values, although he saw them as universal prescriptions that did not express propositions, but that functioned as universalizable imperatives: whoever issues a moral judgment undertakes to issue the same judgment in similar circumstances in its relevant aspects. But moral judgments were not judged by any factual cri-

teria, but by their consistency with other judgments. There are no right or wrong answers in ethics, only consistent or inconsistent ones. For Hare “we are free to form our own moral opinions in a much stronger sense than we are free to form our own opinions about what the facts are” (p. 160). There are no factual constraints on the formation of our moral judgments. Additionally, Hare argued that his prescriptivist universalism led to preference utilitarianism, i.e., that we should always seek to act in such a way as to maximize the satisfaction of people’s preferences.

However, towards the mid-1940s a group of women began to develop a powerful critique of this way of conceiving ethics. This group is the focus of Benjamin Lipscomb’s book, *The Women Are up to Something. How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics*. These four female philosophers were born between 1919 and 1920, attended Somerville College in Oxford at the same time in the late 1930s (Anscombe belonged to St. Hugh’s College, also in Oxford), they began their academic work during the years of World War II and they developed a deep friendship that would influence their philosophical work.

They were also influenced by the Scottish theologian and philosopher, and Oxford professor at the time, Donald MacKinnon, and by Ludwig Wittgenstein—who at the time was teaching at Cambridge University and for whom Anscombe became literary executor and translator. This group of women would develop a set of critical theories towards the dominant moral philosophy in Oxford at that time.

They were deeply dissatisfied with the ethical subjectivism that stemmed from non-cognitivism, and according to which our moral judgments are an expression of our subjective attitudes and nothing more. In a couple of articles from the late 1950s, Philippa Foot would strongly criticize these theories. In her texts, she criticizes the idea that moral terms have a meaning arbitrarily assigned in a subjective way; following a Wittgensteinian idea, she affirms that there are public criteria of use for our evaluative terms and that these cannot be arbitrarily assigned by the speakers. One has to pay attention to how speakers actually use the terms. She also claimed that some facts could count as evidence for the use of evaluative terms, as in the case of “rude”; there are facts that function as evidence to judge an action or someone as rude. Moreover, the term “rude” also served to criticize the sharp distinction between facts and values, and between descriptions and evaluations, held by emotivists and by Hare. “Rude” is certainly a descriptive term, for which one can collect evidence,

but it is also an inherently evaluative term: to call an action rude is to say that it is a bad action. Foot's idea could be extended to other concepts such as "courageous", "just" or "trustworthy". They are evaluative-descriptive concepts ("thick" concepts), something that the dichotomous perspective of the positivists did not allow.

Foot was not alone in her critique of non-cognitivism. Iris Murdoch developed a very similar critique of a variant of non-cognitivism: Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, to which Murdoch devoted a book early in her career —although she would develop a severe critique of existentialism a few years later. For Sartre we are condemned to be free, that is, condemned to invent values in a world where there are none and to give meaning to our own lives. In the process of making decisions we create ourselves, we create our own identity, we give meaning to our life and, thus, we live an authentic life (that of the "existentialist hero", we could say). Like the emotivists, Sartre argues that there are no objective values, but that by deciding, we subjectively assign values to the world. Sartre also makes a sharp distinction between facts and values. But many of these theses (the absence of criteria for deciding and the inability to make decisions despite the fact that there is no guarantee of correctness, among others) were also held by British non-cognitivists such as Ayer. "By dissimilar paths the existentialists and [Ayer] have reached positions which are [...] strikingly alike", Murdoch concludes (p. 128).

Murdoch criticized the way in which existentialism and the Oxford philosophers conceived moral agency. Existentialism denies that there are objective values in the world, but recognizes the agent's power to endow things with value by the simple exercise of his will. On the one hand, it emphasizes the omnipotence of the will to create values, as well as the authenticity and purity of the motives for acting, but on the other, paradoxically, it has "an inflated and yet empty conception of the will" (Murdoch 1970, p. 76). Existentialism has no place for the "inner life" of moral agents. The meaning and moral value of our actions is restricted to publicly observable actions, not to the mental life of the moral agent. This means that existentialism cannot account for changes in moral attitudes when there are no changes in the behavior of agents. "Existentialism is not, and cannot by tinkering be made, the philosophy we need" (Murdoch 1970, p. 46). And the same was true of British moral philosophy, which also presented the same problem: it lacked an adequate moral psychology.

Foot's and Murdoch's critiques of the moral philosophy of their time would probably not have been possible had it not been for

the influence that Elizabeth Anscombe exerted on them —something explicitly recognized by both (“I learnt everything from her”, said Foot (p. 193)). Anscombe introduced them to the Wittgensteinian way of doing philosophy, but it is clear that she also influenced their moral perspectives. The theme of the lack of an adequate moral psychology and that of the dissatisfaction with the moral philosophy of her time seems to refer us directly to her groundbreaking essay “Modern Moral Philosophy”, published in 1958. Lipscomb reminds us that this is one of the most cited philosophical publications of the twentieth century (p. 164), and it is fair that this be so.

In this essay, Anscombe argued 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” (1958, p. 1). Her critique is directed at a wide variety of moral philosophers, but in particular at consequentialist philosophy (in fact, Anscombe coins the term “consequentialism” in this essay to refer to various theories, but most notably utilitarianism). Consequentialism evaluates the moral value of actions based on the consequences that these have in terms of promoting happiness, preferences or whatever the value sought to be maximized may be. But from this perspective, it is irrelevant what the motivations of the moral agent have been, if what ultimately counts are the consequences. One may have acted with bad intentions, but if the happiness of a large number of people is maximized as a consequence, then the action is morally valuable. For consequentialism, moral deliberation is reduced to a reckoning of consequences. This gives us a very impoverished picture of moral psychology.

Consequentialism may also end up justifying bad actions. It may, for instance, justify throwing atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki under the argument that the bombings would shorten the war and save more lives. But Anscombe thought that there are some things that ought not to be done, no matter what the consequences may be: to kill innocent people as a means to one’s ends is always murder. On that basis she opposed Oxford University’s awarding an honorary degree to Harry Truman in 1956. Truman was the US president who took the decision of throwing the bombs —for Anscombe he was a war criminal.

In fact, Anscombe gave such importance to the subject of philosophical psychology, and in particular of practical rationality, that she dedicated an entire book to the subject: *Intention* (1958). The book is significant because it could be said that it inaugurates an area

within contemporary philosophy: the philosophy of action, which seeks to analyze the ontology of actions, their explanation, the nature of agency, practical reasoning, intentions, among other topics. On many of these issues, Anscombe's position remains a crucial point of reference —Donald Davidson said that *Intention* is “the most important treatment of action since Aristotle”.¹ It is not a mere coincidence that this book was published in the same year as “Modern Moral Philosophy”: its theory of action sought to remedy the lack of an adequate philosophy of psychology that the article complained about. It is true that *Intention* is not a work of ethics, as Lipscomb claims (p. 168), but it is a pity that he has not developed further the theme of Anscombe's influence on that area of philosophy, because it certainly had implications for ethics, and because I understand that Lipscomb's book seeks to show the influence of the four philosophers on later developments.

The other important thesis of “Modern Moral Philosophy” is that we must abandon the concept of moral obligation and return to a virtue-based ethics. The proposal brought back to the ethical discussion the moral theories of Antiquity —particularly Aristotelian ethics— focused not on determining the rightness of actions and what the moral obligations of agents are, but on the moral development of the agents. Virtues are character traits that help the moral agent to flourish. Her work had the effect of multiplying and enriching the field of study of moral philosophy, hitherto centered on the concept of moral obligation, and focusing it on the diversity of the vocabulary of virtues. We can borrow Murdoch's words and apply them to the effect that virtue ethics had on moral philosophy: “The area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world” (1970, p. 97).

Although Anscombe would not later develop this type of virtue ethics, she planted the seeds of what would constitute one of the most important turns in the moral philosophy of the twentieth century. Those who did pursue the idea were her friends, Foot and Murdoch —although none of them used the term “virtue ethics”, and Foot reportedly disliked it (p. 270). She didn't like it if the idea behind these terms was to base ethics on the virtues. The foundation of

¹ On the cover of the Harvard University Press edition of *Intention* (2000, Cambridge, Mass.).

ethics, if there was one, must lie elsewhere (in human needs, in moral properties. . .) but not in the virtues.

The virtue ethics inspired by Anscombe's work led in its turn to a further development of the discussion in moral psychology: talking about virtues meant talking about the character traits, motivations, and emotions of moral agents. After a long neglect by philosophers, this new focus on moral philosophy helped to revive interest in these topics. Work in the philosophy of emotions, for example, flourished after it had been forgotten by philosophy since the eighteenth century. One of the attendees of Anscombe's Wittgenstein seminars, Anthony Kenny, explicitly acknowledged her influence in his pioneering book on emotions, *Action, Emotion, and Will*, published in 1963, that is, a few years after *Intention*. Few texts like Anscombe's have been as fruitful in giving rise to so many and diverse discussions and areas in philosophy. Again, I think it would have been useful to show these kinds of developments if the idea of the book was to show how these four philosophers had started a revolution. Revolutions need followers and it is good to see some of them every so often in order to have an idea of the depth of the change.

Work in moral psychology also went hand in hand with work in moral epistemology: if the moral good is not a function of the will, then it is the object of perception and knowledge —something explicitly denied by non-cognitivists. That is at least the way Murdoch would put it, who embraces a radical form of moral realism holding something like a Platonic idea of the good, for which she also presents a different kind of moral agent than existentialism or British non-cognitivism. Murdoch's moral agent has a complex moral psychology and is capable of responding not so much to the authority of her own absolutely free will, but rather this agent is aware of the richness and complexity that everyday situations present, that is, she is capable of responding to the authority of an external world that is gradually revealing itself. This is possible through a progressive education in the virtues, which allows us to perceive the authority of truths and moral properties. "The authority of morals is the authority of truth, that is of reality" (1970, p. 90). It seems to me a limitation of Lipscomb's book that he does not develop more extensively the topics of *The Sovereignty of Good*; that he does not develop, for example, Murdoch pioneering ideas about moral realism —a theory that Foot would also subscribe to. Ultimately, this book powerfully influenced the kind of neo-intuitionism and moral realism developed by philosophers such as John McDowell, Mark Platts, Hilary Putnam, and others.

Where does Mary Midgley fit into this whole picture? At first glance it might seem like a mere coincidence that she was born in the same year as Anscombe and Murdoch, that she attended Somerville, and that she was also an ethicist, but Lipscomb's book argues that this is not the case, that there was a more substantial connection to the other three women. Although Midgley developed most of her philosophy some twenty years after her friends —since she took this time away from academia to raise her children— it is more than coincidental that much of her work sought to develop a naturalistic approach to ethics, which is present in different ways in the work of the four friends (particularly in Foot's last book, *Natural Goodness*). Midgley's naturalism consisted in claiming that human beings are more similar to animals than many philosophers and social scientists have wanted to admit. This obviously implies taking distance from approaches such as existentialism, which completely denied the idea of human nature, but Midgley also strongly criticized reductionist or scientific approaches such as behaviorism or sociobiology, which seek to reduce the complexity of human behavior to only one way of understanding it —and Murdoch would also agree on this. Midgley was more in favor of a middle approach, one that recognized our human nature, but used the methods of ethology and comparative psychology to study human moral behavior.

The contributions to the moral philosophy of the four philosophers were many and it is difficult for a single book to account for all their richness. In fact, it focuses particularly on the period in which the four of them became friends and began to develop their philosophical theories, which leaves out much of their later philosophy. Still, the author does an excellent job at narrating how the lives of this quartet of friends unfolded at a particularly interesting time in the history of British philosophy, and presenting complex philosophical ideas in an engaging way. The book is a mixture of biography and philosophy. Sometimes one misses some elements of the historical context in which their "ethical revolution" took place. For example, if emotivism was finally discarded it was, among other things, due to criticism of the central ideas of logical positivism on which it rested, which emerged from the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Austin and Quine. On the other hand, although the theories of these four philosophers were innovative, in a certain sense they rescued elements of the intuitionist (cognitivist) tradition that was present in British philosophy from the eighteenth century to the 1930s with philosophers such as Prichard, Moore or Ross. If it was indeed a revolution, it did not start from scratch. In fact,

others participated as well, since dissatisfaction with prevailing moral philosophy was already in the academic environment of the 1950s. For instance, Stephen Toulmin also made some important criticisms of the emotivists's subjectivism in his book *An Examination of the Place of Reason in Ethics* (1950).

The title of the book, *The Women Are up to Something*, as well as its reference to a revolution in ethics, make us think that the four philosophers shared some common philosophical project to change the course of ethics. Although certain common concerns and dissatisfactions can be identified, it is difficult to find theses that the four of them shared so that we can talk about a common philosophical project. As we have seen, there are coincidences and influences between some of them, for example, their rejection of moral non-cognitivism and its subjectivist implications, their complaint about the lack of an adequate moral psychology of the dominant theories in ethics, their argument in favor of a return to the discourse of the virtues, an inclination towards a certain type of moral naturalism, among others. But it is also true that there are many differences as for claiming that they constituted a school or that they had a common philosophical project. Murdoch's Platonic realism was certainly not shared by Anscombe nor Foot; many of Anscombe's ideas had a Catholic motivation that none of the others shared; Foot was suspicious of Midgley's biologically-based naturalism, and so on.

Perhaps, as other reviewers have previously pointed out,² what really brought them together was friendship. There are few books on friendships between philosophers and Lipscomb's book not only shows the friendship between four great female philosophers, but also how they developed their philosophical thought in a collaborative and dialogic way, precisely thanks to their friendship. They were united by their passion for philosophy and in different ways they all recognized that their friendship with the others had been important in their philosophical development. This contrasts with the typically masculine way of developing philosophy not as a collaboration and dialogue, but as a competition in which each one wants to end up imposing the argument that stands as the last word —particularly true in analytical philosophy.

On the other hand, if Lipscomb is right, it is unfortunate that they have only been able to excel in a male-dominated academic world because most male philosophers were absent from Oxford fighting on the front lines or doing war-related work. Midgley agreed that

² Frey 2022.

she had only been able to find her philosophical voice because there were so few men at Oxford when she began studying philosophy; and she apparently suspected the same about her friends Foot and Murdoch (p. 271). However, that does not seem to be the case with Anscombe, a woman with a strong personality and whose genius manifested itself from a very young age in a world dominated by men—albeit sometimes with the help of men like Wittgenstein. Whatever the case may have been, the book is a wake-up call to become more aware that the history of philosophy should no longer be the history of the theories of a bunch of men, but of the different voices and ways of doing philosophy that women can have. It should also be a wake-up call to open more spaces in academia in which these voices and ways of doing philosophy are heard more. Philosophy wins and we all win when that happens.

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