**Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life,** by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman. 2022. Chatto & Windus.

Review by Ellie Robson, Birkbeck, University of London.

Timely and immersive, *Metaphysical Animals* tells the unlikely story of four young women philosophers. Mary Midgley (neé Scrutton), Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot (neé Bosanquet) jointly embarked on Undergraduate degrees at Oxford University at the cusp of World War II. Set between 1936 and 1956, this book captures the early intellectual careers of these women, all of whom would go on to make distinctive contributions to academic and public philosophy.

The book adopts an intriguing multiplex of forms and purposes, combining philosophical biography, history, and argumentative prose. In the preface of the text, authors MacCumhaill and Wiseman invite readers to enjoy the book’s narrative with friends, or to ponder it as a form of philosophical argument. In a discipline prone to excessive definition, we might wonder what contribution this book can make to academic philosophy, given these multi-purposes: is it a contribution to analytic philosophy? The history of philosophy? Or public discourse?

Certainly, *Metaphysical Animals* can and will contribute to all three. Its most timely contribution is the methodology in which it approaches women in the history of philosophy. We are not faced with the familiar methodology of recording history via notable events or lineages of largely male canonical figures. This story is instead lensed through women’s lives. Personal details drawn from archival research are combined with adventurous reimaginations of past conversations. The result is an alternative understanding of how the philosophical, social, and institutional atmosphere of Wartime Britain impacted the lives of its women. Faced with ‘the familiar story of twentieth-century philosophy’, MacCumhaill and Wiseman reveal‘different threads to pick up and weave into different questions and different ways of thinking about what philosophy is’ (pp.295). Through the lens of these four heroines MacCumhaill and Wiseman offer an alternative history of a time-period we typically recall as male-dominated.

The meat of the story begins with the arrival of Murdoch and Midgley to Oxford University in 1938. Both women joined Somerville, an all-women’s college, to read *Mods and Greats.* Midgley and Murdoch became fast friends. Throughout, Murdoch is portrayed as a love-seeker, an imaginative storyteller, and the most devoted friend of the four. The daughter of politically minded parents, she was the first philosopher in Oxford to publish about the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sensible and diligent, Midgley is concerned with the nitty-gritty of real life, depicted as a seeker of hidden connections and a big-picture thinker. In later publications, Midgley reveals the many connections between philosophy and ethology through thoughtful observation of animals.

In 1939, the two Somervillians were joined by Foot, reading Philosophy, Politics and Economics. Upper-class and elegant, Foot was the granddaughter of US president Grover Cleveland and (much to her mother’s dismay) scrupulously intelligent. She was a close friend and admirer of Anscombe, the philosophical trailblazer of the four. Anscombe had entered St Hughes College in 1937. With a voice of beauty, Anscombe was an eccentric catholic convert, her mind as formidable as her tendency for trouser wearing.

Pre and post War, the halls of Oxford were filled with the buzz of philosophers famous for their disdain of mystery and metaphysics. Familiar figures – J. L. Austin, Isaiah Berlin, Richard Hare and Stuart Hampshire – were, at the time, all engaging in attempts to reduce philosophical talk into forms of linguistic analysis. The young and fervent A.J (‘Freddie’) Ayer, cut cult status amongst Undergraduates with his short and sparky book *Language, Truth and Logic*. Inspired by the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, he chastised any statement that could not be expressed by empirical science as ‘Nonsense!’. The role of science as the only valid source of knowledge was vindicated, rendering the role of the philosopher as something of a linguistical analyst, limited to determining the meaning of certain statements.

In *Metaphysical Animals,* the onset of the World War represents a sea of change at Oxford. By the time German boots hit the ground in 1939, most of Oxford’s young dons and students were conscripted to the front line, leaving those behind in a historically unique situation. Where they’d previously been the minority, making up less than a quarter of the student population, ‘youthful dons and adult male undergraduates’ were now ‘as rare as butterflies in March’ (pp.197). The remaining students, mostly women, were taught by those not fighting in the War – older dons, conscientious objectors and those deemed physically unable to fight.

MacCumhaill and Wiseman describe the formation, during this time, of what Midgley might have called a ‘mixed community’ of philosophical voices. Diversity in age, ethnicity, and experience prevailed. Conversations about metaphysics and the nature of reality re-emerged in tutorials. The young Scottish pacifist, Donald MacKinnon, had an eccentric teaching style and a keen interest in Ayer’s chastised topics (idealism, theology, ethics). He stamped a life-long influence on all four women. Midgley credits him with her very continuation in the discipline and Murdoch describes him as a ‘jewel’, inspiring ‘a pure devotion’ (pp.89).

Philosophically, MacCumhaill and Wiseman argue that these four women were concretely united by something negative: a joint rejection of the positivist, non-cognitivist ‘weed-killer’ sprouted by Ayer. The extent to which they share a positive outlook is not overstated. Intentionally elusive, throughout the book the authors weave strands of a shared commitment to placing ethics back into human life. Ethics, argue all four women, is naturally embodied in a kind of animal, situated in the context of the myths, mysteries and messy realities that make up the background of our life form. In their own way, all four endorsed a view of humans as ‘language-using, question-asking, picture-making’ *metaphysical animals* (pp.295).

Though MacCumhaill and Wiseman argue that women’s voices were allowed to flourish during War years, albeit in parenthesis, they are also sensitive to the minority status of their heroines. Their historical methodology avoids various pitfalls, theorised in the literature, specific to the revival of past women philosophers. While historians of philosophy considering the position of twentieth-century women do not face the same challenges as scholars of Ancient and Early Modern women philosophers (we do not, for instance, suffer from lack of physical sources or explicit exclusion from the discipline) women of the recent past challenge us in different ways. A particular challenge is in unearthing the social, political, and institutional factors that converged on the repressing, hindering, or dissuading of women’s influence during this period.

One potential challenge pointed to by Sarah Hutton is what she calls a ‘new amnesia’ wherein once we revive past women philosophers, we forget the barriers they originally faced (Hutton, 2019). Given the temporal closeness of women philosophers of the recent past, this amnesia may be even more treacherous. There is a risk of assimilating the conditions under which recently past women philosophised with our own, of assuming that their barriers are the same as our own.

A plurality of methods ventured by MacCumhaill and Wiseman ensures avoidance of a ‘new amnesia’. Historical context is unearthed exposing barriers to success and patterns of prejudice present at the time, without explicit labels of ‘bias’ or ‘misogyny’. We learn, for example, of Midgley and Murdoch’s feelings of inadequacy in Greek and Latin in comparison with male colleagues. This evidences a systemic institutional form of gatekeeping which may have excluded women from being considered ‘good’ philosophers.

Hutton also warns historians of the temptations of ‘coat-tailing’, wherein women philosophers are placed into standard narratives which originally excluded them, due to some perceived relation to a ‘major’ (male) thinker (Hutton, 2019). Again, MacCumhaill and Wiseman side-step this. Male characters arise as intellectual influences, philosophical opponents, and romantic interests, but their roles are filtered through the experiences of women. In this way, the narrative is not tokenistic of one or two women riding on coattails, but a world of women, rubbing shoulders and sharing in the mixed community of Oxford Philosophy.

*Metaphysical Animals* is subtle and radical in its revival of women’s voices. But it should come with a word of warning. This book needs the attention the authors devoted to it. There is a temptation to reduce the differences between these women and underappreciate the subtleties of their philosophies. These philosophers were not essentially saying the same thing, each demand related but distinct focus.

When I first imagined my doctoral project dedicated solely to Midgley studies, I recall a particular (male) professor asking: ‘Why are you doing that? Midgley is not a proper philosopher’. This is exactly the book I needed to combat such a claim; a book I would have devoured during my graduate studies. *Metaphysical Animals* represents an exciting indicator of a changing field: a door ajar for women philosophers (though it is a door that remains heavy). To welcome this book onto university reading lists, reading groups and into public philosophy is to welcome women into philosophy. It is a sure signal to the field that we need to explore new methodologies and diversify away from the male lineage that currently constitutes the canon in the history of philosophy.

Hutton, Sarah. 2019. ‘Women, Philosophy and the History of Philosophy’. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 27 (4).