

Review of Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022,
Metaphysical Animals

Katharina Nieswandt

October 31, 2022

Review of

Clare Mac Cumhaill & Rachael Wiseman: *Metaphysical Animals. How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life*. Chatto & Windus, London, 2022. ISBN 9781784743284, 416 pages, GBP 25.00 (hardback).

Reviewed for

Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie, 5(2), 2022.

DOI: 10.1007/s42048-022-00135-w.

Review

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's book about the formative years of four influential female philosophers is well-researched and timely, appearing shortly after Lipscomb's (2022) on the same topic. They describe the lives of Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch from 1938 to 1956, that is, from the last pre-war term at Oxford, where all four took a BA, to the term in which Anscombe defended her famous objection to "Mr. Truman's Degree" at Oxford's general assembly. Using a wide range of sources, the authors paint a vivid picture of how the war shaped British universities and thereby the philosophical education of these four students.

This biography is admirable in more respects than I could possibly discuss here, starting with the fact that its journalistic style makes it accessible to a wide audience. It was published simultaneously in English and in German translation (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 2022b), and both versions have been widely reviewed by quality newspapers and radio stations, including *The Guardian* (Anthony, 2022), *The New York Times Book Review* (Miller, 2022) and *Deutschlandfunk Kultur* (Roedig, 2022), to name but a few. The book is accompanied by a website (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, 2022a) that offers additional materials. There hence exist ample resources for readers interested in the broader project. My review has a different focus; I examine the scholarly hypotheses of the book. Of these, I remain skeptical.

As I read them, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman seek to establish two larger claims. Lipscomb's book entails these claims, too, and they influence contemporary discussion about gender ratio in philosophy, so I think it is worth analyzing them in detail.

The first claim says that the war, in a bizarre twist of history, created a situation that was particularly conducive to female students. From 1939, men became scarce in British universities, and the few that did teach or study there were either British conscientiousness objectors or continental-European refugees. In philosophy, this radically changed the topics, the style of discussion and the pedagogy. One way

to read this book hence is as an extensive defense of a claim made by Midgley in various writings (see below), which is that the historic situation produced a cohort of significant female philosophers.

The book's second main claim is that the four discussed philosophers form an intellectual group, "the Quartet," that developed an alternative moral philosophy. This alternative rejects the positivistic reduction of moral questions to questions of meaningful versus meaningless speech and instead seeks to ground morality in metaphysics.

Despite the wealth of material analyzed, the book left me unconvinced of both claims. The problem I see with the first is that it runs together two causal hypotheses. One is what my own research group has termed the "combativeness hypothesis" of female under-representation in academic philosophy. (For an overview, see Nieswandt 2021.) This hypothesis says that the style of discussion, in classrooms and at conferences, is either off-putting to women or hostile to them or both and is hence one reason why women avoid or discontinue philosophy at university. Midgley advances the combativeness hypothesis, in a letter to *The Guardian*, according to which "those wartime classes" replaced the "particular style of philosophising that results from encouraging a lot of clever young men to compete in winning arguments" (Midgley, 2013), as well as in her autobiography, where she says that "The effect was to make it a great deal easier for a woman to be heard in discussion than it is in normal times. [...] Sheer loudness of voice has a lot to do with the difficulty, but there is also a temperamental difference about confidence" (Midgley, 2005, p. 123).

A handful of empirical studies have tested the combativeness hypothesis, with mixed findings. Our team found some support for it, as did Thompson et al. (2016, p. 8–9). If Mac Cumhaill and Waisman's book offered further evidence, even though of a more anecdotal nature, that would hence be an important result. Their evidence, however, seems to support an historically connected, but logically independent cause. The war years carried much hardship but were uniquely stimulating years to be a student at a prestigious anglophone university and unusually many of these students were female. As a con-

sequence, these years produced a cohort of excellent scholars, many of whom were female. "Richard Walzer, Fritz Heinemann, Friedrich Waismann, Lorenzo Minio-Paluello and Heinz Cassirer, along with many more of Europe's finest scholars" (p. 79) suddenly were among Oxford's teachers, as Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman point out. A whole sub-chapter is dedicated to how the methods of German refugee Eduard Fraenkel, whose "learning was unmatched by any classicist living" (p. 38), transformed Oxford pedagogy. In other words, a superstar cast of researchers arrived, while the local orthodoxy left. Midgley (2005, p. 123) says: "Gilbert Ryle, Stuart Hampshire, Ayer himself—were then away at the war, [...]. So we missed their messages. But this meant that we did not have to spend our whole time in following out their debates, as the undergraduates had to who followed us after the war [...]." This causal explanation is not only better supported by the book, it also fits much better with the notable historical fact that the diagnosed phenomenon has no continental equivalent. After all, German, French, Czechoslovakian and other universities must have seen a radical drop in male student population as well, so if a change in discussion style was responsible for the higher number of female philosophers, one wonders why this phenomenon was not international.

It hence seems that the book's first main claim is true only if understood as a general pedagogical rather than a feminist point: A department of excellent but diverse scholars is likely to produce excellent intellectual offspring, and orthodoxy is stifling to philosophical excellency. Personally, I don't take this result to be a shortcoming of the book. Any philosopher who (like Midgley) worries about the current subject culture, with its pressure by journals and in PhD programs to focus on highly specialized, technical questions, will be interested in this finding.

The book's second main claim, however, does worry me. Judging both from the works of the four philosophers as from the chronology of events, I doubt that there was a quartet, not just in the strong sense of a philosophical movement, but even in the weak sense of four thinkers all influencing each other during the early stages of their aca-

demical development—as an example, consider Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling at the Tübinger Stift. Some reviewers of Lipscomb's book, such as Mason (2022), have raised the same worry.

My picture, after reading Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman and some of their sources, is that Midgley was strongly influenced by Murdoch, that it certainly is correct to characterize both as very critical of academic philosophy, and perhaps correct to characterize them as rejecting language analysis in favor of metaphysics. Neither impacted post-war moral philosophy, however; in fact, they left academia while their husbands became philosophy professors. (Midgley paused for family tasks for about two decades; Murdoch completely switched to fiction writing.)

Anscombe and Foot strike me as the opposite of this. Both became professors; they were central to the development of an influential new school of moral philosophy, neo-Aristotelianism, and they did strongly influence each other later in life—consider, e.g., their debate on double effect (Foot, 1967; Anscombe, 2005). In their writings, I see no influence of either Midgley or Murdoch. (Foot's *Natural Goodness*, e.g., cites eight works by Anscombe and none by the others.) More importantly, neither opposes but both build on the philosophical development since "the late 1920s [when] Cambridge philosophers were no longer asking 'What is Good' but "What does *good* mean?" (p. 46). The starting point of Foot's mature theory is Peter Geach's analysis that "good" is an attributive adjective (see Foot, 2001, p. 2, and Geach, 1956, respectively. Anscombe's solution as to how and why promises oblige, in fact her general analysis of obligation, consists in a theory about linguistic practices (Nieswandt, 2016). We learn the correct use of "stopping and forcing modals" (Anscombe, 1981a), i.e. expressions such as "You ought (not)," through training. The same is true of her account of "The Reality of the Past" (Anscombe, 1981b; Hlobil and Nieswandt, 2016). The biography is correct in that both opposed Ayer and, later, Hare. But this is an opposition to moral subjectivism and to the expressivist brand of linguistic analysis, rather than to that method itself. The very idea that Anscombe, who after her BA began a doctoral

dissertation under the supervision of Waismann (p. 101) and whose first book was *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (Anscombe, 1996), should have fundamentally opposed logical positivism as "a vision of human beings as 'efficient calculating machines'" (p. x, citing Donald MacKinnon), that supposedly is off-putting to women (pp. x–xi), strikes me as more than a stretch.

The biographical material reported appears to confirm my impression from the philosophical works that there was no quartet. While Midgley and Murdoch took the same degree, at the same college, in the same year, sitting in the same seminars and studying together for the same exams, their overlap with Foot and Anscombe (as well as the overlap of these two with each) seems to have been limited to a few meetings during these early years. Even for the time after their degrees, the interactions reported in this biography are largely of a private nature. Evidence supposed to document an intellectual interaction often consists of dialogues or thoughts by Foot or Anscombe, where the "words are extracted and lightly adapted from her published papers" (fn. 72, see p. 341). While I concede that fictionalization can be a legitimate tool of historical scholarship, it can't serve as the main piece of evidence, and I found it worrisome that neither recorded events nor these four philosophers' writings (including their letters) can substantially back up the idea that there ever was a quartet.

None of my worries, however, should prevent you from reading this book. While their two central research hypotheses might convince or not, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman have done the profession an enormous favor by compiling and structuring this mountain of material, as well as by introducing the four philosophers to a wider public. Personally, I am grateful for the detailed understanding I got of how the politics of the forties shaped post-war British philosophy—such as Anscombe's critical stance towards pacifism. Any reader with an interest in the recent history of moral philosophy has a lot to gain from this book.

References

- Anscombe, Elizabeth (1981a). "Rules, rights and promises." In: *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*. Vol. 3. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 97–103. [1978].
- (1981b). "The reality of the past." In: *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 103–119. [1950].
- (1996). *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*. 4th ed. St. Augustine's Press. [1959].
- (2005). "Who is wronged? Philippa Foot on double effect: One point." In: *Human Life, Action and Ethics: Essays by G.E.M. Anscombe*. Ed. by Luke Gormally and Mary Geach. Exeter: Imprint Academic, pp. 249–251. [1967].
- Anthony, Andrew (2022). "Review: *Metaphysical Animals*." In: *The Guardian*. February 8.
- Foot, Philippa (1967). "The problem of abortion and the doctrine of the double effect." In: *Oxford Review* 5, pp. 5–15.
- (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geach, Peter (1956). "Good and evil." In: *Analysis* 17.2, pp. 33–42.
- Hlobil, Ulf and Katharina Nieswandt (2016). "On Anscombe's philosophical method." In: *Klēsis* 35, pp. 180–198.
- Lipscomb, Benjamin (2022). *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mac Cumhaill, Clare and Rachael Wiseman (2022a). *Mapping the Quartet*. Women in Parentheses. URL: <https://mappingthequartet.org/>.
- (2022b). *The Quartet: Wie vier Frauen die Philosophie zurück ins Leben brachten*. Trans. by Jens Hagestedt, Frank Lachmann, and Andreas Thomsen. München: C. H. Beck.
- Mason, Cathy (2022). "Review: *The Women Are Up to Something*." In: *Philosophy* 97.4, pp. 549–553.
- Midgley, Mary (2005). *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*. London; New York: Routledge.
- (2013). "Letter: The golden age of female philosophy." In: *The Guardian*. November 28.
- Miller, Laura (2022). "First, let's kill all the logical positivists." In: *The New York Times Book Review*. June 26.

- Nieswandt, Katharina (2016). "Anscombe on the sources of normativity." In: *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 51.1, pp. 141–163.
- (2021). *Gender Ratio in Philosophy: An Inferential-Statistical Model of Possible Determinants*. Blog of the Canadian Philosophical Association, November 21. URL: <https://www.acpcpa.ca/blogs/gender-ratio-in-philosophy-an-inferential-statistical-model-of-possible-determinants>.
- Roedig, Andrea (2022). "Buchkritik: The Quartet." In: *Sein und Streit*. March 20. Deutschlandfunk Kultur.
- Thompson, Morgan et al. (2016). "Why do women leave philosophy? Surveying students at the introductory level." In: *Philosophers' Imprint* 16.6, pp. 1–36.