

## The Women Are Up To Something – a summary of the book by Ben Lipscomb

### Ethics is a Dead End

This book is about the joint power of circumstance and character: about four people who were in the right place and time—and in the right company—to do unprecedented and transformative things. How did Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch all follow a path that was virtually unmarked? How did they stick together, different as they were? And how did they work their way toward a set of ideas sharply at odds with what nearly everyone around them thought?

For these four were doubly outsiders. Besides being women in an almost exclusively male discipline, they were advocates of an approach to ethics that was deeply out of fashion. As they began their careers, the dominant view among moral philosophers was that nothing is objectively good or bad, right or wrong, important or unimportant. Rather, all such values are projections, a thin glaze we paint onto an otherwise valueless world. On this view, there are no objective moral truths.

The prevailing thought in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Philosophy could be summarised by A J Ayers' challenge: "The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful." The reason, Ayer says, is that philosophers have not policed their language to make sure that their statements are even meaningful. And what kinds of statements are meaningful? Just two: (1) statements about the world that could be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation, and (2) statements about the logic of our language. There are statements of fact, open to verification or falsification by experience. There are statements defining words for use in statements of fact. All else is sophistry and illusion.

A dichotomy had been emerging since the early-modern period, between "fact" and "value." Again, according to this dichotomy, values are human projections onto a purposeless or "value-free" reality.

The implication for ethical discourse, Ayer concluded, is that it is meaningless. Moral judgments can show feelings of approval or disapproval. But they can't, strictly speaking, say anything. They are like cheers or boos at a sporting event. A fan who boos an opposing player shows how he feels, but he doesn't make a claim. And if someone responds, "that's false!" or "liar!" they're either joking or have misunderstood. A boo can't be false (or true). It can't be a lie. It's expressive, but lacks what philosophers call "propositional content." Though Ayer himself didn't liken ethical discourse to fan support, it quickly became a common shorthand for his theory (or anti-theory) of ethics. In January 1940, there was a discussion at the Jowett Society on "The Boo-Hurrah Theory of Moral Judgments." The more technical label for Ayer's theory, taken from a drier, duller elaboration by American philosopher Charles Stevenson, was "emotivism." Ethical language emotes, but is otherwise empty. It wasn't that no one had convictions about how to live; people always do. Nor was it that no one had any philosophical thoughts about ethics. But the dominant view was that ethics was "a subject without an object." As a philosophical topic, ethics was a dead end. There was no point discussing it, other than to explain why the discussion could go nowhere.

## Images of Evil

In 1945 the cultural impact of the first newsreels from the concentration camps was seismic. Nothing remotely like this had been shown to the British public since the aftermath of the Great War. The sources on the ground were authoritative, but: could the Nazis possibly have done this? To forestall disbelief, the British government sent a politically diverse delegation of parliamentarians to Buchenwald on April 21. Most never fully recovered from the experience. Footage from the delegation's visit was the source for all the newsreel coverage that came out at the end of April—the most powerful of which was the Pathé production, *German Atrocities*, narrated by Conservative MP Mavis Tate. The authentication provided by images of Tate and other MPs, together with the empathetic connection she and the camera operators encouraged between inmates and viewers (they are “as you and I,” Tate said with emphasis) resulted not in disbelief but in a generation-shaping experience. “Do believe me,” she said, “when I tell you that the reality was indescribably worse than these pictures.” And viewers did. Hermione, Countess of Ranfurly, saw the footage in London in mid-July, two-and-a-half months after its initial release. Her reaction is typical of many recorded in the popular press and in Mass Observation diaries at the time: “Incredibly horrible. Beyond our wildest imaginations of atrocity and evil.”

Philippa Foot said, “Nothing is ever going to be the same again.” ...**Nothing in the moral philosophy of her time was adequate to what she'd just seen. And if philosophy was to have any point, it had to be able to speak to that horror.**

At around the same time, Iris Murdoch was devouring the writings of twentieth-century French mystic Simone Weil. Her third broadcast for the Third Programme, in 1951, was a discussion of Weil's *Waiting for God*. She gravitated especially to Weil's idea that the human task is to decenter ourselves and give full and un-self-interested attention to the reality of others—to really look at them without trying to possess or control, the way one looks at a work of art when thoroughly absorbed by it. This un-selfing is what she had prayed the strength to do with regard to her friend Elizabeth Anscombe.

Anscombe taught Wittgenstein's methods and argued that modern moral philosophers should recover some of Aristotle's ideas—in particular, his concepts of virtue and vice and of a flourishing human life.

## Return to the Ancients

At Anscombe's recommendation, Foot turned particularly to the *Summa Theologica*, *Secunda Secundae* in which Aquinas creates a taxonomy of virtues and vices much more intricate and expansive than Aristotle's. Aquinas starts from the four “cardinal” virtues acknowledged by the whole Greek tradition back to Plato: practical wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation. Under each of these, though, he identifies a cluster of subordinate virtues, all related to the central, cardinal virtue in question. For example, Aquinas links leniency in punishment to moderation about food, drink, and sex. Both leniency and this more familiar sort of moderation, he thinks, involve a similar capacity to say “no” to potentially destructive impulses.

We cannot strip away recognizable human concerns altogether—brush aside the sceptical question, “what's the point?”—and still use the word “good” in an intelligible way. Several times in her article, Foot repeats a refrain: “just try.” Just try, that is, to assess people's characters and behaviour without tethering these assessments to natural human concerns—thus leaving them vulnerable to

facts. Just try to talk about ethics while leaving behind considerations of what makes human lives go well or badly—the foundations on which Aristotle and Aquinas built their whole theories. It can't be done.

Mary Midgley, writing from the margins of the discipline, was the first to present a positive proposal for the kind of moral philosophy recommended but never developed by Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch: a naturalistic moral philosophy, grounded in the character and needs of the human animal. Indeed, she was the only one who could, the only one who knew both enough biology and enough moral philosophy to relate the two fields.

### **Beast and Man**

“Human thinking,” Midgley argued, “has two movements. There is the abstracting, critical process, which has always been recognised as thinking: and there is another process of imaginative comprehension, of comparing and balancing. Hers would be a philosophy precisely of “imaginative comprehension,” drawing on multiple bodies of thought, “comparing and balancing.”

In Midgley's mature philosophy, her suggestion that the fundamental tasks both of moral theory and of human life are integrative. The task of moral theory is to understand our nature in its full complexity. It is to survey honestly the several sides of our nature, turning from none of them in disgust, but instead working out how far they permit “harmony and direction.” The task of living is to enact this harmony.

The Western tradition has often been fearful or disgusted at our animality. But given that “[w]e are not just rather like animals; we are animals,” this leaves us with a misleading and unhelpful sense of ourselves. To think about our lives is to think about our nature, and our nature is an animal nature.

Midgley quotes the following passage from Darwin's *The Descent of Man*: “it is very probable that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well-developed, or nearly as well-developed, as in man.” Our capacity to be destroyed by conflict—identical with our capacity to creatively resolve it—is what makes us moral beings. What then should we say about reason? “‘Reason’ is not the name of a character in a drama,” Midgley writes. “It is a name for organizing oneself.” Midgley's ethics is an ethics of self-integration, of thinking through how to do justice to our whole selves.

Midgley here brings back something like the distinction she developed in her earliest publications, between two movements of thought—the abstractive and the comprehending. The latter, she says, is what commands respect: not mere facility with concepts, but a person's capacity to hold disparate things together in her mind—the very capacity that guards her against disintegration.

Murdoch called the fact–value dichotomy into question. Anscombe and Foot... urged a recovery of the concepts of vice and virtue, and what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*: a flourishing life. Midgley connected this idea of human flourishing to an updated account of the animals we are.

These four friends suggested there are moral truths, grounded in the distinctive nature of our species—in facts about what human beings need if they are going to thrive. They drew on neglected ancient resources—Plato, and especially Aristotle—but also on Charles Darwin and Jane Goodall, to explain how we are less exceptional than we imagine, and more at home in the world.