Benjamin J.B. Liscomb. *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley, and Iris Murdoch Revolutionized Ethics*. Oxford University Press 2021. 360 pp. $27.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780197541074).

This a meticulously researched review of a crucial period in the development of philosophy in the UK. Lipscomb describes in careful detail the lives and development of four outstanding and courageous women philosophers and writers in or connected with Oxford before, during, and after the second World War, whose intellectual independence transformed moral philosophy – and perhaps our lives as well. It casts crucial light on the dynamics of philosophical enquiry in Oxford during this period.

The title originates in the campaign waged by the four women to contest an honorary doctorate for President Harry Truman because of his record in bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki – (the establishment hastily mobilized to defeat their opposition with the message: 'the women are up to something.')

The context is a mostly male Oxford philosophy community, heavily dominated by systematic philosophy: for instance, Lipscomb describes the process by which A.J. Ayer, hugely popular and successful at that time, 'sundered fact and value' and maintained that 'values are human projections onto a purposeless or value-free reality.' This view was incompatible with the political idealism and urgent quest of the four women for a moral direction and their search for a way of making everyday decisions about right and wrong – such as opposing an honorary degree for someone who directed mass murder.

The background of the second World War gives moral philosophy a particularly urgent relevance. For example, the story of Hare's 'Essay in Monism,' written in WWII concentration camps in Southeast Asia, with its all-encompassing image of the human place in the world, shows the conflicting world views with which this generation was struggling (the text was abandoned and never published). Hare finds a temporary philosophical resting place in the middle of this maelstrom: 'It is thus that the partial Rhythm of the Person finds its rest in the perfect Rhythm of the Whole' He was much respected for his unwavering commitment to the need to 'make one's own decisions of principle and live them out' (97).

Lipscomb writes in absorbing detail of the mutual support and discussions of Anscombe, Foot and Murdoch when they were together in Oxford in the post-war period, when they were trying to come to terms with the moral reality of the conflict (a reality from which, perhaps, we are insulated by the passage of time). Their discussion hinged on the philosophical theoretical disagreement with Hare about his metaphysical position that nothing the Nazis did was objectively wrong.

The transatlantic perspective of Lipscombe's account and his careful explanation of the language and structure of Oxford University for American readers are very helpful for those who are outsiders to this world. He helps to situate the arguments in a wider context – something very fitting and necessary for discussions of such universal human importance.

From the viewpoint of continental philosophy and 'lived experience,' it is very relevant to

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have the detailed personal background of the four women and their relationships to each other and the world of academic philosophy. The book's detailed insights into their lives and development as thinkers and players on the philosophical stage is staggering, and beautifully portrayed. Lipscombe offers heartfelt thanks to countless personal and academic contacts of the four women who helped him access this context. The result is an emotional depth and richness of everyday detail underlying the narrative which casts an indispensable light on the development of our present philosophical world.

He follows the life-journey of each of the four and their interactions and collaborations in enormous detail in ways that are instructive and often entertaining. He devotes a chapter to each of the women's personal, professional, and ethical development, giving much affectionate detail, showing their mutual support and (sometimes) their disagreements.

He follows the story through Murdoch's immediate encounter with Sartre in post-war Brussels in 1945 and her notes from that meeting: 'We can't not choose. We must create values.' He notes her lack of confidence as a philosopher, as compared with the other three women, but also her gradual move toward a philosophy of ethics in the late 1940s. She was prevented from taking up an academic philosophy appointment in the US because of her onetime membership in the communist party. He describes the many battles she fought both over relationships and over the development of an ethics which pays full attention to the reality of others, culminating in her decision that she was not a philosopher. She left Oxford in 1963 to concentrate on novel-writing. Gilbert Ryle's model of philosophy as linguistic analysis had won the day and come to dominate in Oxford.

Anscombe, however, did have the will to fight the battle. She hated phenomenalism, as represented by Ayer, but felt trapped by it. She became passionately devoted to Wittgenstein as a way out of this and worked with him from the early 1940s. This is presented as a conversion experience; she was almost silenced by her reverence for him. She was hostile to J.L. Austin because of his opposition to Wittgenstein. Austin was withering and dismissive about questions of free will or faith. Murdoch wrote about him as excluding faith and ethical commitment. But for Anscombe, 'tribalism was antithetical to truth-seeking' (144), and she was committed to maintaining a critical angle.

Anscombe's criticism of Austin, who was adulated in Oxford, further increased her alienation from many of her colleagues. She also got into confrontations with other philosophers such as C.S. Lewis and his attack on 'naturalism.' In the chapter vividly entitled 'Elizabeth Anscombe versus the world,' Lipscomb describes in vivid detail her eccentric lifestyle: her dress, family arrangements, and social interactions, and her concentration of energy on 'what matters'—that is, philosophical issues, rather than social and domestic norms. The reader also gets an insight into how this eccentricity feeds into a philosophical independence which was as indispensable in that context as it is for those of us who inherit her philosophical world. Anscombe inhabited a Catholic, minority world, opposed to birth control and abortion. This was at odds with conventional Oxford morality, which she maintained relied on undefined 'principles' (168). She was ostracized by many in Oxford, and reviled, for instance, by Isaiah Berlin on the BBC. Anscombe gave a talk

on the BBC – 'Oxford Moral Philosophy: does it corrupt the youth?' in 1957, implying that the typical Oxford moral philosopher was a conformist, a 'child of his time.' The confrontation culminated in Hare framing Anscombe in correspondence with the BBC as unhinged!

Philippa Foot apprenticed herself to Anscombe, but came from a very different background, Huguenot and relentlessly upper-class. She had ongoing health problems which rendered her disabled. Anscombe freed Foot to 'think out loud' and concentrate on ethics. Her journey through moral philosophy, through discussions with Anscombe particularly in relation to Wittgenstein, laid the foundations for her passionate commitment to Oxfam in its earliest days, and to associated moral projects. The story of her journey through many personal crises culminates in her distinctive contribution to moral philosophy, likening moral philosophers to citizens of a besieged city who stood together irrespective of the consequences – but prospered by doing so.

Midgley 'escaped' from childcare by writing a novel (not published) and engaging in moral projects such as anti-racism and anti-war demonstrations. She became fascinated with animal behaviour (including the human animal). She was billed on the BBC in 1956 as a philosopher, but gradually became more interested in the connections between the human and natural worlds. Although she was of broadly the same age as the other three women, her philosophical work came a generation later. Like Aristotle, she approaches human ethics through the study of animals. She was multidisciplinary before her time, and was very clear that this meant that philosophical matters 'must necessarily be discussed in plain language.' But it was this integrative and multi-disciplinary aspect of her work which made it important.

Midgley is less prominent in Lipscombe's account, since she is more distant from the intimate friendships in Oxford which he documents with such care and affection. But it is clear from his treatment of her toward the end of the book that her multidisciplinary contribution to the ethical debate, which the four women did so much to develop and bring up to date, was perhaps the most relevant of all. Certainly, from the perspective of 2022 and the urgent ethical problems which we face, her contribution seems absolutely crucial.

Gradually, all four women committed more and more to their ethical visions such as working with the Quakers and Oxfam. Their story is crucial to understanding our present world of ethics and philosophy, and we are heavily in debt to Lipscomb for the outside perspective which he brings to this account, as well as for the meticulous attention to personal, domestic, and intellectual detail which makes it a living and superbly relevant narrative.

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