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**Title:**

**Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Review of Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, *The Women Are Up to Something: How Elizabeth Anscombe, Philppa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch Revolutionised Ethics* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2022).**

**Review:**

This is a book about four friends—female intellectuals—who 'shone a new, old light on the human landscape' (238). The 'new, old light' was a reversion to philosophical ideas of old, such as those of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, in the face of a modern and seemingly forward-thinking philosophical agenda. In essence, this is a story about the reinsertion of feeling into a mid-twentieth century academic discipline that had grown to favour the cold and impersonal—the factual and verifiable. The author, Benjamin J.B. Lipscomb, argues that his four protagonists revolutionised ethics because they rescued it from subjectivity and irrelevance (238).

The women in question were diverse. One of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001), was a Roman Catholic convert and unconventional mother of seven who did not shy away from controversy (for example, publicly protesting Oxford University bestowing an honorary doctorate on Harry Truman). Philippa (Bosanquet) Foot (1920-2010), granddaughter of US President Grover Cleveland, spent a lifetime trying to escape her privileged upbringing and is perhaps best known for inventing the Trolley Problem (why might it be permissible to steer a tram away from killing five people to just kill one when it is not acceptable to kill one healthy human to use their organs to save five people who might otherwise die?). Mary (Scrutton) Midgley (1919-2018), who attracted notoriety for brutally condemning Richard Dawkins' world bestselling book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), only produced the first of her eighteen books when she was almost 60 years old, after raising her children. Finally, the philosopher Iris Murdoch (1919–1999), renowned for her radical politics and a series of messy love affairs, who also wrote twenty-six novels.

The readers of this journal will doubtless be most interested in where and how emotions appear in this book. As a history of Oxford from the late 1930s, Lipscomb's study positions the emotional and intellectual doubt and despair elicited by the global wars as the factors motivating his protagonists' determination to construct a practical philosophy that would help and direct a wounded society. As a collective biographical study, emotions colour rich descriptions of personal relationships. Murdoch experiences 'agonies of self-recrimination' after stealing away Foot's partner (an 'emotional fascist') (112). Foot experienced compounded feelings of loss and grief when her husband abandoned her because of her inability to have a child. When Anscombe and her seven children were facing poverty, Foot demanded under threat of resignation that her job and pay be halved with her friend (this happened only months before her husband's unexpected and devastating walk out). A shared sense of alienation felt by women in an overwhelmingly men's profession mixes with solidarity, love, loss and grief to create an emotionally intricate environment.

The book's most enduring insights into emotions are contained in its plotting of the women's philosophical trajectories. In rich detail, using autobiographical and philosophical writings, as well as oral interviews, Lipscombe reveals how the four philosophers variously advocated lines of thinking which served to: dismantle the constructed binary between passion/emotion and reason; advocate for the necessity of emotion to human life (for example, courage is needed because human beings sometimes encounter danger and cowardice is problematic because it prevent us from standing up for ourselves and our loved ones); and, confront Western feelings of fear and disgust evoked by acknowledgement of our animalism—our shared passions and reasons.

Moreover, of utmost importance in a world grappling with the legacies of the war and the horrors of its concentration camps, Lipscomb details how the four thinkers worked to create a moral philosophy which championed the existence of objective values. Oxford (male) colleagues like A.J. Ayer (1910–1989) and R.M. Hare (1919-2002) were drawn to theories—such as American Charles Stevenson's (1908-1979) emotivism which posited that ethical language was expressive but void of what philosophers call 'propositional content' (90-1) or others who propounded that values were simply subjective human projections onto a reality that was value-free—to create an intellectual sphere characterised by gloom and anguish. Having previously contributed to a radio broadcast 'L'Angoisse, snobisme moderne' ['Anguish: modern snobbery'], Murdoch tore down what she said were elite pretensions. The 'gloom' and 'anguish'—provoked by '"the free and lonely self" adrift in a world without "objective values"' (128)—were '"superficial"' and concealed '"elation"'. Drawing on Edmund Burke's (1730–1797) thinking about 'the sublime', she argued that this melancholic pondering and theorising could elicit rewarding feelings; feelings of thrill or pleasure perhaps. As Lipscomb writes it, while her (male) peers were indulging in self-gratifying theorising about a lack of objective truths, she, Anscombe, Foot and Midgley were formulating a philosophy that would guide their traumatised generation: What the Nazis did was unequivocally wrong, not subjectively so.

There are aspects of the book that could be amended. As a feminist reader, the title was off-putting, coming across as inappropriately condescending in a serious study of four pioneering female intellectuals. In the early chapters, the tone and framing were somewhat paternalistic. For example, the philosophers were positioned as biological and intellectual 'daughters' which, while facilitating an exploration of the impact of their parents (mostly fathers) and (male) philosophical precedents on their emerging thinking, was distracting. This dissipated when the author turned to the task of revealing their agency in shaping the development of thoughts, theories and lives around them. Moreover, while not hagiographic, Lipscomb's account of the development of twentieth-century philosophy allows little room for dissent: The four friends 'let us see ourselves differently, and *better'* (238) (my emphasis).

Lipscombe writes specifically of Midgley that her ethics was an integration of insights drawn, for example, from philosophy, psychology, and biology. Just as the author unfolds Midgley's integrative approach to ethics, he likewise unfolds an integrative story of the lives, works and philosophical trajectories of his four subjects. What results is a captivating study of a group of female philosophers who, while confronting the patriarchal and elitist cultures of their professional spaces, were to effect major shifts in Anglophone moral philosophy.

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa
University of Wollongong, Australia
sharoncd@uow.edu.au