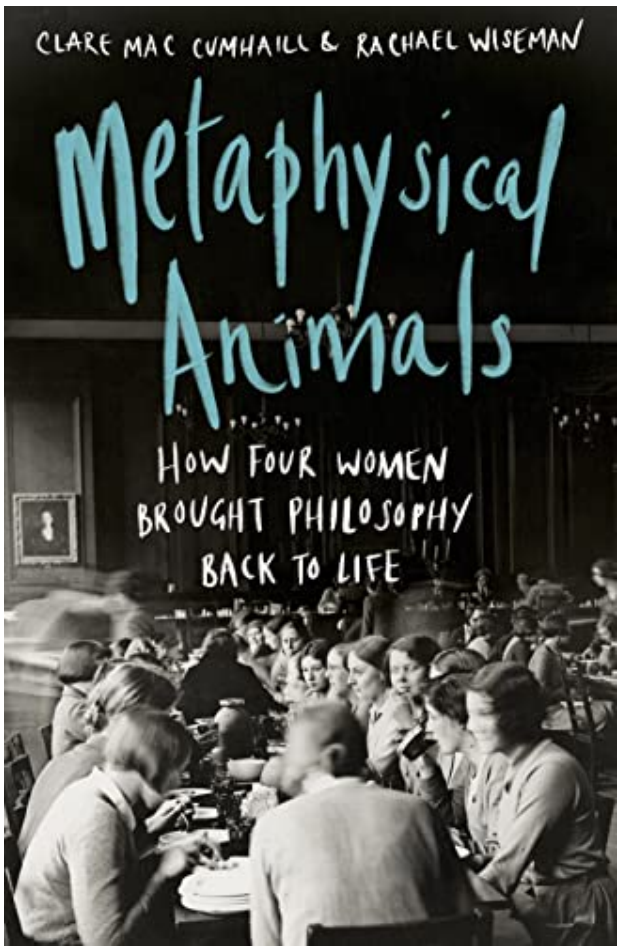
What Sort of Animal is a Human Being?

by Peter Dreyer (September 2022)

> *So, one way or another, the policy of splitting everything into mind and matter turned out badly. Once that division was made, however, people were bound to try to deal with it by dropping one of the two terms. And that … was bound to make things worse.* —Mary Midgley, *Are You an Illusion?*

In July 1945, British voters rejected Winston Churchill Conservative Party in a landslide and elected a Labour Party government under Clement Attlee. The national mood was optimistic. Oxbridge students who had survived the war voted Labour (mostly) and returned eagerly to their studies. Most of them were men, of course. Cambridge did not even award degrees to women until 1948. But among them at Oxford were the four women, friends in their mid-twenties in the immediate postwar years, who are the subjects of this book: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot (née Bosanquet, an English granddaughter of US president Grover Cleveland), Mary Midgley (née Scruton), and Iris Murdoch.



Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life, by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman. New York: Doubleday, 2022.

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's contention is that these four women rescued philosophy from the materialist straightjacket of logical positivism, hyped in the United Kingdom by the irrepressible Freddie (A. J.) Ayer (from 1970 on, Sir Alfred). Drawing on the ideas of Moritz Schlick's so-called Vienna Circle of philosophers, Ayer reduced philosophy to a technique, "in a way that made the everyday world alien and inscrutable." Logical positivism held that "since talk of right and wrong, good and bad, justice and virtue cannot be translated into the language of the empirical sciences, this talk is nonsense. There is nothing deep, transcendent, or valuable to be discovered … so-called moral 'judgements' are merely expressions of personal preference, little more than

cries of emotion, like cheering or booing."

"What comes next? a friend asked after Ayer's book *Language, Truth and Logic* came out in 1936. "There is no next," Freddie said. "Philosophy has come to an end. Finished."

***

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman credit Anscombe and Foot with no less than "the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics in the twentieth century." Murdoch is, of course, one of the world's most readable novelists, also recognized as a moral philosopher. Midgley, a philosopher turned media personality in middle age, embraced the issues of animals' consciousness and rights long before they were fashionable. Aware early on of the horrendous threat represented by global warming, she advocated for ecological common sense and James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis. *The Guardian* called her Britain's "foremost scourge of scientific pretension."[1]

It was from Freddie Ayer's scrapheap, Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman contend, that the four friends retrieved the Platonic tradition, formerly espoused by British neo-Hegelians like Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923), putting the concept of what Hegel called "the ideality of the finite" back on the philosophical table.

But Midgley would have denied that anything ever supplanted it there in the first place. The first chapter of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* is titled "The Elimination of Metaphysics," which he claimed was "nonsense" to him, but he was "simply doing metaphysics himself—expounding one theory of meaning among many others," Midgley riposted. "Empty vaporing is [just] *bad* metaphysics."[2]

What actually "came next," too, philosophically speaking, was Ludwig Wittgenstein. "The grand master of logical positivism," Murdoch called him,[3] and Karl Popper also speaks of "the Wittgensteinian philosophy of the Vienna Circle." The label is

mistaken. Invited to address the Vienna Circle, Wittgenstein had to its members bafflement read poetry by the Bengali mystic Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) to them from for over an hour, then silently got up and left. "I guess he's not one of us," Schlick observed to Rudolph Carnap.[4]

"Metaphysicians are just musicians without musical ability," Carnap scoffed.

Wittgenstein undoubtedly did have musical ability. He aspired, moreover, to be poet.[5] "Everything we do consists of trying to find the liberating word," he told Schlick. In his search for it, though, he got stuck in a swamp of gnomic aphorisms. The Austrian-American physicist Franz Urbach, Popper recalled, objected to Wittgenstein's celebrated assertion that "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," saying: "But it is only here that speaking becomes worthwhile!" Science "opens into metaphysics," as Midgley observes.

To my mind, Midgley was the most important of Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's four women for philosophy. Perhaps one of the most vital thinkers of the twentieth century, she brought to it a female wisdom that had been absent from philosophical discourse. ("All the great European philosophers have been bachelors," she noted. "Don't ask what is wrong with the women, look at what is wrong with the men.")

Exactly how their "Oxford quartet" defeated logical positivism is not, however, satisfactorily elucidated for me in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's book. And there is, I think, an entirely different, better explanation to the persistence of metaphysics. Philosophy arose from religion, and before religion there was immanence, a universal sense of the spiritual in everything. As is true also of surviving "first peoples," every tree, stream, and mountain, animal, fish, and bird, anthropologists contend, was seen by ancient humans as numinous, not so much as having a spirit or being ruled by a spirit, but as actually *being* in some sense a spirit. Our

ancestors will have arrived at this perception through aeons of trying to understand the amazing, but also terrifying, world in which they lived. Science begins with attempts to solve problems, and its original vehicle was imagination, that "blind but indispensable function of the soul without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever," Kant calls it.

Immanence must have been the ruling hominin intellectual paradigm for hundreds of thousands of years—and given that the term "hominin" includes extinct human species, perhaps even for millions of years. There can be scant doubt that Gaia was a theater of immanence for Neanderthals, who spread flowers on their loved ones' graves. Arguably, it may have been so, too, for the likes of *Homo erectus*. The metaphysics of immanence dovetailed with cooperation and compassion, which were characteristics hominin groups needed to survive and perpetuate themselves in the Paleolithic. This understanding dissipated just an infinitesimally short time ago, *sub specie aeternitatis.* It was in any case not so much abandoned with the rise of materialist science, as repressed—anyone who has ever credited a horoscope or knocked on wood has taken a dip in it.

No amount of logical positivism was ever going to cancel the enormous fact that we *evolved* culturally (and genetically too, one imagines) as "metaphysical animals."[6]

***

Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman's entertaining book is less about the adventures of British philosophy, however, than about those of its four fascinating subjects.

"Don't degrade mysteries into problems," the French Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel admonished Iris Murdoch, and she inscribed this in her journal (although she was particularly smitten in those days with Sartre, an existentialist of a very different kind, whose specialty was doing exactly that). No

degrader of mysteries, she would pour her neo-Platonist philosophy into a long series of brilliantly witty novels.

"All human beings are figures of fun. Art celebrates this," says the purported editor/narrator of Murdoch's fifteenth novel *The Black Prince* (1973), who identifies himself as "P. A. Loxias" (cf. the oracular classical deity Apollo Pythios Loxias). "Language is a comic form and makes jokes in its sleep." If this seems a surprising thought, there is the authoritative precedent of Sir Francis Bacon, said to have "renewed" philosophy, "walking humbly in the socks of Comedy. After that … the loftier buskin of Tragedy."[7] The same might perhaps be said of Iris. As the Australian poet Clive James observes: "Common sense and a sense of humour are the same thing, moving at different speeds."[8]

A bisexual romantic, Iris was constantly falling madly in love (and into bed) with people, situations she later dissected in her writing. In 1947, the French fantasist Raymond Queneau had written a poem for her on a metro ticket (he must have had a very fine-nibbed pen), saying, inter alia, "tu passes Iris ma chère comme vu éclair" (you pass by, Iris, my dear, like a lightning flash). Everything was grist for her mill: "John Robert Rozanov," the philosopher in her twenty-first novel, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (1983), tells his daughter Hattie, the key female character, that he had always known that she "would pass me in a sort of atomic flash."

The story takes place in the early 1950s, or perhaps even earlier.[9] Rozanov is a philosopher "of the most austerely anti-metaphysical school"; he is "deeply puritanical" and has "spent a lot of time arguing with physicists and attempting to clear up their philosophical mistakes." He doesn't need friends "only people to argue with." He has published a book called *Against the Theory of Games*.[10] He "was tired of his mind … Unless one is a genius, philosophy is a mug's game … It had been his fate not to be interested in anything except everything … He longed to live with ordinariness and see it

simply with clear calm eyes." He "saw at last, with horrified wide-open eyes, the futility of philosophy."[11] In short, he's a sort of bizarro Wittgenstein and just as confused and troubled as the prototype.

Murdoch clearly had very mixed feelings about Wittgenstein, a misanthrope and misogynist, who insisted that women were incapable of doing philosophy. ("Men are foul, but women are viler," he said.) But then again Elizabeth Anscombe, Murdoch's good friend, and fellow member of the Oxford quartet, was Wittgenstein's translator, primary expositor, and finally inheritor of one-third of his estate, including royalties and copyright in his unpublished writings. "Anscombe was an honorary male," Peter Conradi explains.[12]

Faith is a complex thing. The Wittgensteinian Anscombe was also a devout Catholic who condemned abortion, contraception, masturbation, and homosexuality. She drummed the doctrine of transubstantiation into her small children in graphic terms. "The teaching was so successful that one day when Elizabeth returned from the communion rail, [her five-year-old daughter] Barbara asked her reverently, 'Is He in you?' 'Yes,' she said, and to her amazement and delight the child prostrated herself before her."

How's that for immanence in action?

Near the end of *The Philosopher's Pupil*, we are told by another key character, Father Bernard, who has fled to Mount Athos in Greece (he had hoped to take a lady with him but mislaid her en route in Paris, providentially as it turned out, for females of all kinds (except cats) are, of course, denied access to the Holy Mountain):

> Nothing else but *true religion* can save mankind from a lightless and irredeemable materialism, from a technocratic nightmare where determinism *becomes true* for all except the

> *unimaginably depraved* few, who are themselves the mystified slaves of a conspiracy of machines … This has been revealed to me as the essential and only question of our age. What is necessary is the *absolute denial of God.* Even the word, the name, must go. What then remains? Everything …

And that "everything" is, of course, the province of metaphysics.

Just as some people lack a sense of humor, there are those whose chromosomes seem devoid of compassion. The philosopher's pupil of Murdoch's title is a paranoid sociopath fascinated by Nazi war criminals, with whom he identifies in fantasy. "Caliban must be saved too," he protests.

The shipwrecked Prospero, who in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has enslaved Caliban on an island not unlike one of those in the West Indies where the slave empire that so enriched Great Britain was even then in the process of being founded, likewise despairingly appeals for prayer,

> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardoned be,
> Let your indulgence set me free.

"Despair … may seem to be counseled … by the very structure of the world we live in," Gabriel Marcel says. "[T]he only genuine hope is hope in what does not depend on ourselves, hope springing from humility and not from pride."[13] To which one might add Kafka's mischievous reflection: "Oh, [there is] hope enough, endless amounts of hope—just not for us."[14][1] He knew all too well how little humble we are.

[1] Andrew Brown, “Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” *Guardian,* January 13, 2001.
[2] Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London: Methuen, 1985), 103. The epigraph to this essay is from Midgley’s *Are You an Illusion?* (Durham, England: Acumen, 2014), 144.
[3] Murdoch to Raymond Queneau, October 14, 1947, cited in Peter J. Conradi, *Iris: The Life of Iris Murdoch* (New York: Norton, 2001), 263.
[4] See Peter French, “Why Did Wittgenstein Read Tagore to the Vienna Circle?” reprinted in *Protosoziologie im Kontext: “Lebenswelt” und “System” in Philosophie und Soziologie,* ed. Gerhard Preyer et al. (Wuŕzburg : Koñigshausen & Neumann, 1996).
[5] Eran Guter, “Wittgenstein on Musical Experience and Knowledge,” www.academia.edu/en/13351066/Wittgenstein_on_Musical_Experience_and_Knowledge, notes a comment of Wittgenstein’s on the way music “speaks” to us: “Don’t forget that even though a poem is composed in the language of information, it is not employed in the language game of information.”
[6] Change is constant, Heraclitus pointed out two and a half millennia ago, and we are not static things, but processes, which he compared to flames. Cited by Popper, “Back to the Presocratics,” presidential address, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* n.s. 59 (1958–59).
[7] R.P., Elegy 4, *Manes Verulamiani* (1626).
[8] Clive James, “Exploring the Medium,” *The Observer,* February 4, 1979.
[9] Men in this remote era still raise their hats to women. I confess to having once owned a fedora, but raising it to ladies would have seemed more than a little quaint.
[10] Wittgenstein contended in his *Philosophical Investigations* that it was impossible to define the term “game.” The Canadian philosopher Bernard Suits subsequently did so, however, wittily defining game-playing as a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”

[11] Citations from Murdoch, *The Philosopher's Pupil* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983).
[12] Conradi, *Iris,* 266.
[13] Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism,* trans. Manya Harari (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), 26, 32.
[14] Oh, Hoffnung genug, unendlich viel Hoffnung—nur nicht für uns." https://hans-joerggrosse.de/erlesenes/walter-benjamin/walter-benjamin-franz-kafka.

Table of Contents

Peter Richard Dreyer is a South African American writer. He is the author of *A Beast in View* (London: André Deutsch), *The Future of Treason* (New York: Ballantine), *A Gardener Touched with Genius: The Life of Luther Burbank* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan; rev. ed., Berkeley: University of California Press; new, expanded ed., Santa Rosa, CA: Luther Burbank Home & Gardens), *Martyrs and Fanatics: South Africa and Human Destiny* (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).