

Metaphysical Animals

How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life

by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman

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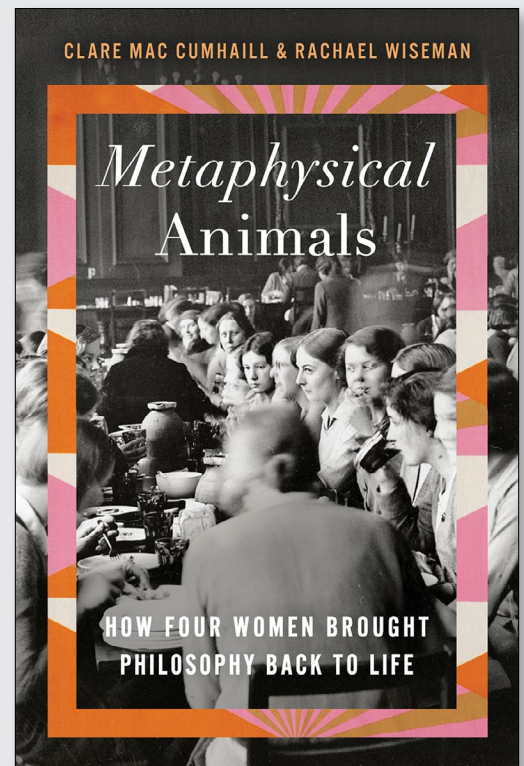
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“The narrative is of four brilliant women finding their voices, opposing received wisdom, and developing an alternative picture of human beings and their place in the world. . . . To read this story is to be reminded . . . that the life of the mind can be as intense and eventful as friendship itself.” —Guardian (U.K.)

ABOUT THE BOOK

The history of European philosophy is usually constructed from the work of men. In *Metaphysical Animals*, a pioneering group biography, Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman offer a compelling alternative. In the mid-twentieth century Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch were philosophy students at Oxford when most male undergraduates and many tutors were conscripted away to fight in the Second World War. Together, these young women, all friends, developed a philosophy that could respond to the war’s darkest revelations.

Neither the great Enlightenment thinkers of the past, the logical innovators of the early twentieth century, nor the new Existentialist philosophy trickling across the Channel, could make sense of this new human reality of limitless



ABOUT THE BOOK

(CONTINUED)

depravity and destructive power, the women felt. Their answer was to bring philosophy back to *life*. We are metaphysical animals, they realized, creatures that can question their very being. *Who am I? What is freedom? What is human goodness?* The answers we give, they believed, shape what we will become.

Written with expertise and flair, *Metaphysical Animals* is a lively portrait of women who shared ideas, but also apartments, clothes, and even lovers. Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman show how from the disorder and despair of the war, four brilliant friends created a way of ethical thinking that is there for us today.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. CLARE MAC CUMHAILL and Dr. RACHAEL WISEMAN are philosophy lecturers and friends. Mac Cumhaill is an expert in the philosophy of perception and aesthetics at Durham University, home of the Mary Midgley Papers; Wiseman lectures at Liverpool University and is a recognized authority on the work of Elizabeth Anscombe. They are the co-directors of www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk, a scholarly project that makes the case for analytic philosophy's first all-female philosophical school.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PREFACE

There are eight sets of discussion points which follow the chapters of Metaphysical Animals.

PREFACE

The **Preface** is written in a different style to the rest of the book. The authors use it to set out their motivation for writing the book and give the reader a taste of what's to come. They also say a bit about their friendship and their experience of being women in philosophy.

1. The authors draw a connection between the "solipsism, skepticism and individualism" characteristic of the European philosophical canon, and the fact that most of the thinkers who populate that canon were men who lived "unusually isolated lives, away from women and children" (ix).

Do you agree that there is a connection between one's life experiences, and one's ideas? If so, what do you think that connection is, and how restrictive do you think it is? How far does it restrict you in your ability to think about issues that concern others? Consider, for example, universal statements, such as "nobody likes to be snubbed," "everybody wants to be loved"? Do you think anyone is ever justified in making claims like those—claims about everyone else—when we all have such different life experiences from each other?

Relatedly, the authors note the fact that the European philosophical tradition comprises mostly "the ideas, visions, hopes and fears of men." The authors seem to think that that is a regrettable state of affairs, perhaps because they believe that there is a connection between one's live experiences and one's ideas (ix).

Assuming for the sake of argument that there is such a connection, why do you think the authors consider it a problem that the European philosophical

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

PREFACE (CONTINUED)

tradition comprises almost exclusively the views of men? What do you think the drawbacks of that situation might be? And for whom, do you think, do the authors think this is a problem—for women only, or for everyone? Why? Do you agree with them?

And why, do you think, is the case that the European philosophical tradition is formed mostly by ideas of men? What do you think women thinkers had been doing? How, do you think, someone's ideas become the dominant ideas in the public sphere?

2. The authors observe that some of the events that took place during the women's youth "would change the human scene" (ix–x).

What do you think the authors mean? In what ways do you think the human scene would have been changed? And why do you think those changes would have come about? What do you think is the connection between things that happen and the "human scene"?

3. The authors introduce two conflicting views of philosophy:

- philosophy is an obsolete subject, best replaced by scientific enquiry;
- philosophy is a way of engaging with the world and with each other which is intended "to help us, collectively, to find our way about in a vast reality that transcends any one of us" (xi).

Do you think that all the questions that matter to us could be, at least in principle, addressed fully in scientific terms?

What do you think the authors mean by the second view? How do you think philosophy can help in those ways?

And how should professional philosophers and the public engage in that endeavor?

4. The authors say that we need "to discover what we are," that we need "a picture that can help us to understand ourselves in a way that will show us how to go on" (xiii).

Do you agree with that view? Do you think that a conception of who we are is important for everyday life, or for specific circumstances? If so, what difference does it make?

5. The authors claim that our communicative creations—"pictures, stories, theories, words, signs and artworks"—"show us that what becomes our shared past is always provisional," that because of the nature of those creations, we "can see our past differently," that we can "rewrite what we understand to have happened" (xiv).

How do you think our communicative creations do those things? And how do you feel at the idea that the past can come to be understood differently, that it can be rewritten? Apprehensive? Liberated? Why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE

PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE

The **Prologue and Epilogue** of this book describe the same event: Mr. Truman's Degree. In 1956, Oxford University voted to award the former U.S. President an honorary degree. Elizabeth tried unsuccessfully to prevent this, and gave a fiery speech in which she called Truman a "mass murderer." In the Prologue we, like Elizabeth, face a puzzle. Why did Elizabeth see Truman's action—of giving the order to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—as mass murder, while almost everyone else (including Truman) did not? What would Elizabeth need to say to get others to see things as she did? What is at stake when a man who has done what Truman did is honored and celebrated? When we return to this scene in the Epilogue, we will know the answers to these questions.

1. In her opposition to the award of an honorary degree to President Truman, Elizabeth presents her view that deliberately killing the innocent is always wrong, regardless of whether it is done for some laudable end, including the avoidance of other innocent people being killed (4–5).

Do you agree with that view? Why?

2. The proponents of the award of the honorary degree did not "approve the action," i.e. the dropping of the atomic bombs. They agreed that "it was a mistake" (5). But they sought to defend the award by presenting two different types of consideration:
 - they sought to detract Truman's responsibility for those actions. They pointed out that all he did was put his "signature at the foot of the order" (5), that he "did not make the bombs by himself" (5). Mr. Truman "was only responsible for the decision" to drop the bombs on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even that he didn't do this "without consulting anyone" (5).
 - they proposed that Mr. Truman's good deeds outweighed the badness—the "mistake"—of dropping the bombs. The dropping of the bombs was "only one episode: an incidental, as it were, in a career. Mr. Truman has done some good" (5).

How, do you think, the first set of considerations are supposed to mitigate Mr. Truman's responsibility? Do you think they succeed?

And, what do you think of the second set of considerations? Do you agree that, if Mr. Truman did other good things, the weight of this 'mistake' is lessened? Why?

3. The authors highlight something that might be seen as a puzzle: everyone in the hall "had witnessed the same events as Elizabeth but they did not see what she saw" (8). What Elizabeth saw were thoroughly damning actions; what the proponents of the award saw was action which, although a mistake, is not grave enough, and Mr. Truman did not have enough of a hand in it, to bar the award of the highest of honors in full pomp and ceremony.

Do you see that as a puzzle? If you do, why, do you think, it is puzzling? Where does the incongruity lie?

If you're not puzzled, why not? How do you make sense of it? What is the rationale that tie the facts of the situation together?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE
(CONTINUED)

4. The authors close the Prologue with the statements:

“When human actions happen on a grand scale and people make choices in disrupted and difficult circumstances, we cannot take it for granted that we will see clearly what is done, or understand easily what it means.”

“When the background to our lives changes, our words may no longer work as they used to, and possibilities for seeing and understanding each other and the world may be lost.”

If the authors are right, what, do you think, is the relation between the words we use and the background to our lives? And between our understanding, or interpretation of the things we do, and the actions we undertake?

And, when things get disrupted, how, do you think, do we regain our footing again?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER 1: ON PROBATION

Chapter 1, “On Probation,” is set in Oxford in 1938–1939, on the eve of the war. We meet the first three members of the quartet—Mary, Iris, Elizabeth—and learn about the battle for women’s education. As new undergraduates Mary and Iris are swept up in the drama of the Oxford by-election, fought on the issue of appeasement. The chapter describes the changes in British philosophy that had taken place in the preceding decades as the British Idealists of the nineteenth century were challenged first by the Realists and then the Logical Positivists, who in turn challenged both.

1. The authors describe how women were regarded at Oxford at the time (17–21, and later 26–27):
 - they were suspected of corrupting, or at least spoiling, the hitherto stable and reassuring manly setting that was university life, of “bewomaning” the atmosphere (19);
 - until very recently they had been thought as possibly too weak, physically and mentally, to engage in sustained intellectual endeavor (19);
 - many became wives to their much older tutors (20–21).

How, do you think, young women of that time encountering these facts and beliefs and the practices to which they would have given rise, would have felt? How, do you think, would their own intellectual interests and talent have sat with those views?

Relatedly, we learn about Iris’s eagerness to get married (20), and about Mary’s fears that she was not marrying material (19).

How would you fit Iris’s and Mary’s hopes and fears about marriage within the gender climate discussed in the preceding question?

2. The authors give us a depiction of the flurry of political activity at the time: student politics, Jewish refugees already finding sanctuary in Oxford, the Oxford by-election, Chamberlain’s “peace for our time.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 1
(CONTINUED)

Knowing what we know now—about how the international conflict became another world war, about the Nazis’ atrocities, about the atomic bombs—to what extent can you put yourself in the shoes of the people we’re reading about? To what extent can you imagine what it must have been like to live through those times before the war swallowed up their lives?

If you could speak to them, what would you tell them? What would you ask them?

3. We learn that the towering classicist at Oxford and beyond, Professor Eduard Fraenkel, had “wandering hands” with his female students (30). We also see that that fact was well known, and that it did not deter the staff from recommending Fraenkel’s class to their female students, with only a gentle warning attached. We are also told that Iris was “pawed about” by Fraenkel, and that she claimed not to have minded (41).

What do you make of all that, especially in conjunction with the gendered structures and conceptions in discussion point 1?

How, do you imagine, must Fraenkel have viewed his female students? Do you think that he would have bestowed the same importance to their education as to that of the men’s?

And what, do you think, would this have encouraged the women to see themselves as? And what would it have encouraged them to see the men as? And how about the men—given all else we know about how men were seen in contrast to women, how would this behavior have contributed to their conception of the place of women, and of their own?

We see Mary discovering a fresh, vivid sense of what she was doing when studying the *Agamemnon* (39). A “sense of being part of a great timeless effort” to understand something that had happened in a different time, at a different place, the record of which is a hand-me-down of various communicative devices and practices. And the task of any new-comer—Mary’s task, and that of her generation of students and of subsequent generations—is to join in that activity.

Do you think you can grasp Mary’s discovery?

Do you think that, in reading this book, you’re engaging in the same activity, this time with Mary as one of its objects?

4. The authors present three distinct views about our epistemic relation to the world—about how we stand in relation to the objects of our knowledge, including moral and ethical knowledge, and hence about the composition of the world. Idealism, Realism, and Logical Positivism (41–54).
 - Idealism holds that the objects of our knowledge are inseparable from us, from how we get to know them. For Idealists, we give the world as we know it the shape it has. We know beauty, duty, trees, friends, washing lines, roads, rivers, as trees, beauty, duty, trees, friends, washing lines, roads, rivers in virtue of the ways we divide, classify, and organise the content of our experiences. On this view, you increase your knowledge of something, including moral knowledge, by increasing your understanding of how it fits into the wider background of all the other things that form our world as we know it. The main tool for knowledge for the Idealists is thinking.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

CHAPTER 1

(CONTINUED)

- Realism is the view that the objects of our knowledge are fundamentally separate from us. The world as we know it is the world as it is. It exists separate from us. In as much as we know anything about beauty, duty, trees, friends, we know beauty, duty, trees, friends to be independent of us. We increase our knowledge of things, including moral knowledge or knowledge of value, by looking closer at those things. The aim in our epistemic engagement with things is to get as complete a picture as possible of those things. The Realists have two chief tools for knowledge: the senses (sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell) for accessing things; and a special faculty: moral intuition, for accessing moral facts, values.
- Logical Positivism, like Realism, holds that the objects of our knowledge exist independently of us, and that we get to know them through our senses. But in opposition to both Realists and Idealists, the Positivists hold that the senses are, fundamentally, our only tools for knowledge. Hence, anything that cannot be picked up the senses does not exist. Since value—duty, beauty, moral facts—cannot be picked up by the senses, they don't exist. When we use those words in relation to something—when we say “sunshine after a rainy day is lovely,” or “torturing the innocent is wrong,” or “caring for your children is good”—we are simply expressing a like or dislike for those things. No different, fundamentally, from your going “ouch!” when you hit your toe, or “ahh!” when you drink a glass of refreshing water on a hot day. And just like when you go “ouch!” or “ahh!”, you are not making a statement that can be verified through the senses—you are not saying “I’ve hit my toe” or “I’ve quenched my thirst”—nor can statements of value be verified. They can be neither true nor false. They are simply noises, like “ouch!” They are, literally, meaningless.

How, do you think, could we decide which of these views is right? What kinds of things might support or challenge each of the views?

Do you have any sense as to which of these views is more plausible?

How do you, personally, go about making value judgments? How do you go about deciding e.g. whether he is a good person, or whether you were wrong to shout at the car driver, or whether it is wrong to keep birds in cages, or whether Sylvia Plath was a greater poet than Ted Hughes? Which of the accounts presented by each Idealism, Realism, or Logical Positivism, do you think, better captures your own experience of making that kind of judgment?

If you came to be convinced either that Idealism is true, or that Realism is true, do you think you would change the way in which you go about trying to find answers to questions about value, including moral value? If so, how? If not, why not—what would stop you?

If you came to be convinced that Logical Positivism is true, and hence that all talk and thought about value is meaningless, do you think that would change in any way what you do? Would you stop thinking and talking about value? If so, how would you do it, and what would you think and talk of instead? If not, why not?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2: LEARNING IN WARTIME

Chapter 2, “Learning in Wartime,” takes place in Oxford between September 1939 and June 1942. In it we meet the final one of our four philosophers: Philippa Foot. The chapter opens with the declaration of war and ends with Mary, Iris, Elizabeth, and Philippa getting Firsts. It looks at the unusual education the women received as a result of the younger dons being away at war. We meet their teachers: an “old man” (H. H. Price); a “refugee” (Heinz Cassirer); a “woman” (Mary Glover); and a “conscientious objector” (Donald MacKinnon). We first hear the phrase, “metaphysical animal.”

1. The authors describe the men’s departure for the war, including men close to our women: brothers, friends, admirers (56–59). We get an outline of the upheaval and disruption to college life (63–65).

Can you imagine what it must have been like for all concerned? And how they must have viewed things so as to remain able to carry on?

This was also, of course, another marker differentiating the women from the men: the men go, the women stay. How does it fit, do you think, with the other gender differences we have encountered so far, e.g. Chapter 1?

2. In this chapter, the authors tell us how variously the young men approached the question of whether to fight. For some, it was clear that they ought to fight: Frank, Michael (57), Nick Crosby (58). For others, the duty not to fight was also clear: Peter Geach (66). For others, the question was tortuous and, for all we know, they might have continued to harbor doubts even after they had made their decision: Richard Hare, Mary’s brother Hugh (66).

Do you think that all of those approaches are equally legitimate and justified, or do you think that some of them (or one) are almost certainly wrong, and others almost certainly right? Why?

We are also presented Elizabeth’s reasons for opposing the war: the government’s intentions for joining the war were not just; the means to be taken could not be trusted to be moral; the outcome was unlikely to produce more good than evil (68).

Given what we now know about how the war and its aftermath unfolded, do you think Elizabeth was right in her judgments?

Given what she knew then, was she right?

3. In this chapter we see that the drainage of men at the onset of the war generated a demographic change. Of the men who remained, many were “rather harmless,” according to Mary (70).

What do you think Mary meant by that?

And by implication, in what sense might the men who’d left not been harmless?

We are also introduced to more of the woes and devastation brought by the war as it progressed: the persistence of the Blitz; the influx of evacuees into Oxford even as many refugees there were being rounded up; the ceding of many of the

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 2
 (CONTINUED)

university's facilities to the war effort (73–75). All this under the prospect of a likely invasion (75).

Do you find it possible to relate to those circumstances at all? Or is it a completely alien scenario?

If you can relate to those circumstances, what, do you think, makes it possible? What kinds of thoughts, or attitudes allow you to transport yourself to that setting?

If you find it impossible to relate, what do you think stands in the way?

4. We see H. H. Price explain Hume's answer to a philosophical puzzle (76–77). Price uses the example of a cat to illustrate the puzzle and Hume's solution to it:

You see the cat sitting in one corner of the room. You look at your newspaper. When you look up again, the cat is no longer where she was. She is now sitting in the opposite corner instead.

Your immediate thought would be that whilst you were looking at the paper, the cat strolled from where she was to where she is now. The puzzle is: why would you think, so naturally, that that is what happened, given that you didn't see it? In other words, why is it so natural for us to think that objects continue to exist and to engage in certain activities when we perceive neither?

Hume's answer: because we have had experiences of perceiving both a thing's continued existence and its engagement in activities before. The memory of those past experiences fills in the gap in cases where we observe only some of the events.

Do you think that the same puzzle arises with respect to the cat? E.g. when she sees you sitting in the armchair, has a nap, and sees you standing by the window when she wakes up?

And what do you think of the answer to the puzzle?

How would you know that a past experience applies to this case?

We see Elizabeth's own puzzlement about what it is that she sees when she looks at an object (77–78). There is her packet of cigarettes. She's looking at it. "But what do I really see? How can I say that I see here anything more than a yellow expanse?" "And the back of things?"

Do you share Elizabeth's puzzlement? Do you think that, when you look at and object, you see the object, or just its surface?

What, do you think, does it take to see an object?

5. We are presented with an illustration of the view that the moral worth of an action resides in the intention behind the action, rather than in the "movements of bodies" (84). The same "movement of bodies," in the example, eating a plateful of oysters, is right, wrong, or neutral, depending on the intention behind it.

Do you think that that is right?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 2
 (CONTINUED)

Suppose that the “movement of bodies” is, instead of eating a plateful of oysters, torturing one of the servants. The motivations remain the same: person A does it because she enjoys torturing people; person B does not enjoy it, but does not want to offend the host; person C might or might not enjoy it, but she does it because she wants to prevent another guest whom she dislikes from having a go.

Do you think that the different intentions here change your moral evaluation of the events?

Suppose, going back to the original example, that unbeknownst to the dinner guests, the oysters proffered to them have been unlawfully harvested—perhaps they are a protected species, or have been extracted from a conservation area.

Would this change your moral judgment of what each of the guests does?

What do these further examples tell you about where moral value lies in what we do?

Mary Glover’s idea is that we need love to discover moral truth (85).

What do you think of this idea?

Do you think that if you are a misanthrope it is not possible for you to somehow recognize what morality requires of you?

6. [This section relates to Discussion Point 2, above.] We witness Donald MacKinnon’s tribulations about whether he’d made the right decision to not join the war. He was tormented by guilt about the fact that he was not suffering whilst others were (88).

And, as the devout Christian that he was, he was weighed down by the question of whether “bearing witness to the life of Christ [was] really compatible with conscientious objection in the face of Hitler’s aggression and purpose.”

Would you be able to help him answer that question?

Do you think that love, as per Mary Glover’s advice, would help him answer his question? Love for what?

And what about his guilt? Do you think that that is telling him something important about the morality of his choice? Or do you think that it is just a psychological side effect, which he simply should learn how to deal with?

We learn Donald MacKinnon’s views on the nature of human beings (90–91). Their essence, he thinks, “is expressed in [their] curiosity and imagination” as manifested in their discourse and questions “about goodness and beauty, meaning and truth.”

Do you think that all the things that we are curious and imaginative about are, fundamentally, about goodness, beauty, meaning, or truth? Or do you think that we are curious and imaginative about other things that don’t fall into those categories? If so, what?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 2
(CONTINUED)

And what about the curiosity and creativity displayed by other animals—from dolphins, to rats, to chickens? Do you think that tells us anything important about their natures and about how it differs from ours?

We find MacKinnon articulating the realization that when we talk about metaphysical issues—issues about goodness, beauty, meaning, truth and their foundations—we “attempt to leap, with human words, across an unbridgeable chasm” (91). This realization, he reassures us, should not lead us to desist asking those questions. We can use the language of poets to “catch the sense of a world,” even if that world “cannot be directly comprehended.”

What do you think about the use of poets’ language as communication tools? What, do you think, is their potential for successful communication and for misunderstandings compared to standard prose?

More fundamentally, what do you think about MacKinnon seemingly tying up the appropriateness of asking metaphysical questions with the capacity of language to help us answer them?

Do you think that language is the only vehicle of communication?

And, do you think that questions are always asked to be answered?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 3)

CHAPTER 3: DISORDER AND HARDSHIP

In Chapter 3, “Disorder and Hardship,” the drama moves to London and Cambridge. Set between 1942 and the end of the war (1945), the quartet have graduated and Iris, Mary, and Philippa are in London to undertake war work. Elizabeth—by now married with a child—moves to Cambridge to start her graduate studies. There she meets Wittgenstein and we begin to see the way in which Elizabeth will connect philosophy back to life. Iris and Philippa share lodgings and lovers in London, and Mary ends up back at school.

1. The authors present an outline of Elizabeth’s DPhil project (102–104; 117–118). She is going to pursue the question “What is a man?” (103). She has already been thinking about two contrasting answers to that question:
 - Descartes says that a human being is “a thinking thing,” “a conscious being; that is, a being who doubts, asserts, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many, is willing or unwilling; and that has also imagination and sense” (103).
 - Aristotle says that a human being is “an organized body,” like any other living thing. The organization of the body is set by a principle of organization—the soul—and that forms the patterns of life of human beings, just like the principle of organization of turnips form the life patterns of turnips (103).

Do you think Descartes’s and Aristotle’s are answers to the same sense of the question “What is a human being?”

If so, which do you find most helpful? Why?

If not, which different senses of the question are they each addressing? And do you find one of those senses more helpful than the other? Why?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 3
 (CONTINUED)

At the beginning of this chapter, we learnt that war had upended not just the lives of people, but of other animals too (96–98).

How important do you think the presence of other animals, of their life rhythms and of their well-being, is for humans?

Do you think that, in some way and to some degree, awareness of their well-being contributes to ours? Or do you think that paying attention to their well-being is an indulgence that has to be jettisoned when the well-being of humans is at stake?

The authors relay some of the content of one of Chatham House's lecture series (114). This is a lecture by anthropologist Margaret Mead, who had been studying the dietary patterns of Allied soldiers and civilians. She explained "how environmental change, scientific knowledge, and symbolism could all disrupt or alter patterns of eating and living."

Why, do you think, would that happen?

What must the relation be between our food intake on the one hand, and our environment, scientific knowledge, and symbolism, on the other for the latter to affect the former?

A little later in the chapter, we see Elizabeth still preoccupied with the question of what is a human being (117–118)? Instead of looking inside herself (as Descartes had done) she is going to look outside, led by the question "What sort of object do I perceive when I perceive human beings?" (118).

What difference, do you think, this new approach would make?

To what extent, do you think, can you pursue the external question without pursuing the internal one? If you look at a human being, how much can you tell about them without making assumptions about their inner life? And, do you think you can make assumptions about another's inner life without extrapolating from yours?

Elizabeth was pregnant when asking the question "What is a human being?"

Do you think that that might have given her a valuable perspective? Why?

2. In this chapter, we see Iris, Mary, and Philippa thrust into adult life amidst the chaos and wreckage of war, to help in the national war effort.

Can you get an idea of what it must have been like for a young person to have had these early steps into adulthood, in those circumstances of uncertainty about what the future held, decided for them?

Thinking of the different lives that Iris, Philippa, and Mary were leading after graduation, during the war, can you think of any fresh opportunities that the circumstances might have opened up for them, alongside the many restrictions?

We learn that Iris is having intimate relationships with both Frank and Michael (107).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 3
 (CONTINUED)

What do you think of those parallel relationships? Do you think that Iris was betraying one or the other, or both? Or do you think that the intimacy involved in each was different enough to evade conflict?

All we know about Iris tells us that she was a profoundly caring person who treasured her friendships deeply. And then (108) we see her and her old tutor, Donald MacKinnon, continuing to nurture their infatuation with each other, despite MacKinnon's young wife, Lois, pleading with him to stop, and (120–121) knowingly causing enormous suffering to Michael and to Philippa.

How can we explain it? How can someone as good-willed as Iris do such things?

We learn of Frank's death and of Michael's captivity (128–130). We are not told how this news impacted the already strained atmosphere at Seaforth, but we can hazard a guess that it must have been shattering. But similar news must have been arriving to so many other households, many of which must have also been enveloped in high tension because of the effects of the war.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to go through your everyday life when so many of the people with whom you interact—from the bus driver, to a colleague, to the person next to you in the queue—will have been grieving in already enormously testing circumstances, or fearing that they'll soon be?

3. Elizabeth and Wittgenstein meet, and they are a perfect match (124). Elizabeth was serious and seriously puzzled. Her philosophical conundrums—what do I really see?, what is this “behindness” Plato talks about?—were tied up to her faith. This made her an optimal philosophical companion for Wittgenstein. We are presented with some of Wittgenstein's ideas which Elizabeth encountered when she became his student (127). He highlights a range of things we, humans, do: “give orders, measure, draw, report an event, speculate [. . .].” And he tells us that “[e]ach activity has its place among the overlapping patterns that make up the human form of life.”

What do you think Wittgenstein means by that? What “overlapping patterns,” do you think, is he talking about? And in what sense do those activities have their place there?

Can you imagine what it must be like to be as serious and as seriously puzzled as Elizabeth was (124–125)? What must going through life in that intense mode be like? What riches and drawbacks must it bring, in comparison with a more relaxed stance?

4. We are treated to a nugget of Mary's wisdom: “The world is divided at any time into those who can see that it is possible to [take firm steps to change things that are actually wrong] and those who can't. At that time [when working at the Ministry of Production] I was one of the can'ts” (122).

We can safely infer that at a certain point Mary became one of the cans.

How, do you imagine, might one change from the can'ts to the cans?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 3
(CONTINUED)

We find Mary tasked with defending the value of “dead languages” to the nation (134).

What do you think is the point of “dead languages,” if any?

Do you think we should bother to continue updating our translation dictionaries, and teaching those languages to our children?

Or do you think we should think that they’ve long had their day, and that we don’t have much to learn from them anymore? Why?

5. We read, in Iris’s letter to David Hicks, her description of the delights of seeing the National Gallery’s works return to their proper place, and how that “felt really like peace” (135).

Because this letter was dated nearly a month after VE Day, that last remark—that it “felt really like peace”—suggests that Iris was still getting used to peace, that she was still absorbing that new fact.

Why, do you think, peace is something that needs getting used to, that needs time to be absorbed?

And how is it similar and how different to getting used to war?

We are treated to one of the insights Gabriel Marcel gifted Iris (136). He differentiated between problems and mysteries, and explained that “‘mystery’ belongs to a realm of human experience that cannot be formulated publicly using objective categories, and its solution must be personal and individual.”

If objective categories—i.e. the categories to which we refer, or allude, when we use words—cannot help us solve mysteries, what means might we use instead?

Are there other ways of understanding things besides words? If so, what are they?

The chapter ends with the authors relaying grim facts in numbers: 1.5 million soldiers would have been killed had the atomic bombs not been dropped. The 200,000 civilians killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the price paid to save the lives of 1.5 million soldiers.

Do you think that was a fair price? Or do you think that no such transaction can ever be fair? If so, why?

Have your views about “Mr. Truman’s Degree” changed at all since you read the book’s Prologue?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 4

CHAPTER 4: PARK TOWN

Chapter 4, “Park Town,” is the first post-war chapter. It takes place in a number of different locations. Philippa, Mary, and Elizabeth are all back in Oxford—along with many of the young men and dons who left for the war in chapter 1. The mood is upbeat and lively and the men pick up where they left off. J. L. Austin trains a team of young men in the methods of linguistic analysis—Elizabeth is not happy about

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 4
 (CONTINUED)

this! Mary works as Gilbert Murray's secretary, and Philippa begins volunteering in the newly founded Oxfam. Meanwhile, Iris is on the move. First in Belgium and then Graz with the United Nations Refugee Rehabilitation Administration, then returning to her family home in Chiswick. In Brussels she meets, and is impressed by, Sartre. While working with displaced persons, she decides to return to philosophy if she can—but things do not go entirely according to plan.

1. The authors set out Ayer's points of agreement and of disagreement with Sartre (140). Ayer agreed with Sartre that life "has no transcendent purpose," but disagreed that was cause for despair. Rather, we should embrace the freedom that gives us and seek pleasure for pleasure's sake.

If you thought that there is no transcendent purpose to life, would you be with Ayer or with Sartre?

Or do you, instead, think that the value of your life does not depend on whether it is nested within a bigger purpose?

Do you think you can tell with any certainty whether your life is part of a bigger purpose or not?

Later in the chapter we encounter more of Sartre's teachings (149–150).

What do you think of his view that we create ourselves entirely? That there is nothing more to you other than what you make yourself into every time you make a choice? That the values by which you lead your life are entirely your own and you are entirely free to discard them at your pleasure? Does that resonate with your experience of what it is to be you?

2. We learn that neither of the women who'd been critical in bringing in the new philosophy—Susan Stebbing and Margaret MacDonald—got a mention in Ryle's book charting the history of that new movement, *The Revolution in Philosophy*, even though Ryle knew the women and their work well (141).

Are you surprised to learn that Stebbing and MacDonald were written out of the history of modern philosophy so quickly?

Why, do you think, Ryle would have thought it appropriate to leave them out?

Do you think it matters that they were? Why?

3. The authors tell us about Mary Glover's excursion into factory work to learn about "the effects of mechanized factory work on the mind and the spirit" (141–142). Glover (and her colleague Winnington) observed that faced with the dreary factory work one might take refuge in fantasy or engage in recreational activities. Fantasy offers relief, but dulls the spirit, whilst recreational activities—e.g. "art school, explore the Cotswolds on a bicycle, enjoy a circle of friends" (142)—nourish and enrich one's life.

Do you think that that advice would have been news to the factory workers?

And, do you think that those for whom it was news would have responded by resolving to eschew fantasy and to fill their free time with art endeavors and outings to the Cotswolds? If not, why not? What, do you think, makes people do what they know is not good for them, even when what they know is good is within reach?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 4
 (CONTINUED)

We read Mary Glover's observations on some of the horrors committed during the war (144):

"The 'Belsen cruelties were inflicted by people who saw what they did' . . . but there 'is little ground for self-congratulation if we prefer the cruelties we cannot see.'"

"Nagasaki has shown us 'that there is no degree of cruelty from which we shall shrink if it seems to assist in the achievement of national purpose.'"

Do you think that her first charge applies to current times? Do you think that, currently, we are contented with cruelties we cannot see? If so, which ones?

And notice the "we" in her inculcation about the atomic bomb.

Do you think that the atrocities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are an indictment of Truman any more than of us, as human beings? Why?

We find Philippa exposed to the facts and images of the Nazi concentration camps and telling her old tutor Donald MacKinnon "Nothing is going to be the same again" (144).

What, specifically, would Philippa have thought would never be the same?

And, thinking of how things are now, of our shared conception of the world and our shared ways on going along, what things, if any, would be different if the Holocaust had not happened—or if we didn't know it had—if we didn't have that stain in our history?

We get a glimpse of Mary's and Philippa's different attempts to accommodate within a picture of human beings the cruelty we are capable of (147).

- Mary proposes to look wickedness in the face, up close. We have to be "willing to grasp imaginatively how [wickedness] works in the human heart, and particularly in our own hearts."
- Philippa, by contrast, seeks to build a picture of human beings around the resistance to wickedness. For that she finds inspiration in some young German men who'd refused to join the SS even as they knew that would cost them their lives.

Do you think that one of Mary's or Philippa's approaches is more helpful than the other? If so, which and why? If not, how would you combine them?

And what do you think Mary means when she says, in the same breath, that wickedness is 'a general kind of failure to live as we are capable of living'?

Relatedly, we read Iris's assertion in her fellowship application that "Any given attitude to ethics must be based, explicitly or implicitly, on some definite theory of the nature of the self and of communication between selves" (157).

How and why, do you think, might our conception of human beings and of communication between them, inform our ethical views? What is the connection between human nature and human relations on the one hand, and ethics on the other?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 4
 (CONTINUED)

4. We read about Philippa's advice to her students on how to engage with Wittgenstein's philosophy. It "really needs to be done live, with two people, one trying to articulate what one naturally wants to say, the other trying to get deep into their head and diagnose what is going wrong" (159).

Do you think you are able to "get deep into" your own head "and diagnose what is going wrong?" Or would you need another—a friend perhaps—to help you?

Elizabeth arrives at two new questions. "What is the difference between perceiving myself doing something and seeing someone else do it?" And "What is the difference between understanding what someone says and saying it myself?" (160)

Could you help Elizabeth out? What do you think is the difference in each of those cases?

We hear from Wittgenstein that emotions, "like pride and fear and grief and joy and love are not simple inner experiences, but each is connected with patterns of speech and action, patterns that are part of the deep fabric of . . . our lives together" (161).

Do you think that to understand what love, grief, love, etc. are you have to live in human society?

What do you think of Wittgenstein's view that to understand the meaning of a word you have to understand the social and cultural background in which it is used (169)?

Do you think that that is true of all words? Of only some? Of none? Do you have your own examples that chime with or challenge Wittgenstein's views—perhaps examples from encountering different languages, or even specialised language from a field unfamiliar to you?

We see another instance of Wittgenstein's difficult personality bursting through (171–174).

Do you think that if that was the price of getting access to his genius, we should be willing, if not with undiluted delight, to pay it? Or do you think that his university, Cambridge, should have reined him in?

5. We see what Mary's DPhil project is going to be. She is going to start 'from a distinction between existence and reality' (176–177).

Can you grasp Mary's distinction between existence and reality?

The authors outline Iris's own project (177–178). She is going to draw on Buber's distinction between the I-It relation and the I-Thou relation. When I see something, or someone as an It, I see them "in an objective manner." Here my speech will use "concepts that can be publicly formulated and expressed to anyone." When I see someone as a Thou, "much is often unsayable and difficult to express."

Would the characteristics of the I-Thou relation make it difficult to find the moral objectivity that Philippa thought was so important for ethics? Or do you think that, in contrast, it points to it, in some way?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 4
(CONTINUED)

What, now, do you make of Iris's letter to Philippa (reprinted on 163–164)? Do you think it recasts the events of 1944 in a new light? Or do you think that it does nothing to change those events, even if it attempts to chart a new path forward for Iris and Philippa?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 5

CHAPTER 5: A JOINT “NO!”

Chapter 5, “A Joint ‘No!’” is set during the 1947–48 academic year. It sees the quartet begin to build their response to the philosophy of Freddy Ayer and Richard Hare. Mary says that from their “joint ‘No!’” a lot of metaphysics would follow. They would need to reconnect facts and values, give an account of action and perception, understand human nature and virtue, uncover insights into the human form of life from Aristotle and Wittgenstein, and find a way to re-instate Plato's ideas of Goodness and Beauty. Writing in her journal at the end of the year, Iris writes of “a world of women” and adds, “I reflected, talking with Mary, Pip & Elizabeth, how much I love them.”

1. In this chapter, the authors relate how the war made, not just our women, but Richard Hare, too, turn to moral philosophy. They all wanted a framework within which to fit what they had witnessed.

The women, especially Philippa, wanted to find objective standards which would allow her to condemn the atrocities that had taken place. Hare, in contrast, had come to believe that no such standards exist, and instead sought to develop a moral theory that dispensed with those standards, but that could at least make rational discussion possible between people with different moral outlooks.

The women set out to show that value is out there in the world for anyone to find. It, therefore, stands as an objective and public standard against which to judge what we do (183, 186).

For Hare, in contrast, values are our creations. They are things we choose. For something to be of value is for it to be chosen by someone. No choice, no value (184–185). The only standards by which we might judge what we do are standards of consistency (186–187). For example, when judging whether what the Nazis did was right or wrong, or whether the hooligan kicking the homeless person is right or wrong, we do not look at whether those actions themselves are right or wrong. We instead look at whether they express values that are consistent with other values held by the authors of those actions.

What do you think about each of those positions?

We witness a reconstruction of a discussion between the four women, which ends in an apposite manner, given the subject of discussion (195–198).

One of the implications of Hare's view of morality—of the view that values are not in the world, but that each individual creates their own—is that there is nothing necessarily untoward with two people agreeing on the description of a situation, and disagreeing about the value of that situation—about whether the situation is right or wrong. This is why moral objectivity is not possible in Hare's picture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 5
 (CONTINUED)

Philippa thinks she can show that picture wrong by means of a counterexample. Some words, such as the word “rude,” are obviously evaluative: when we say that someone is rude, we are condemning him. But they are also descriptive. They describe a situation in which an “offence that we all recognize” has been committed. E.g. not thanking your hosts for their hospitality.

Iris’s contribution to the discussion alludes to the fact that Elizabeth might be described by some as “rude.” This, Elizabeth considered an extremely rude suggestion, told her friends as much, and abandoned the party, leaving Mary, Philippa, and Iris wondering what was rude about Iris’s intervention.

What do you think about Philippa’s challenge to Hare’s position? Do you think it is successful?

Do you think that describing something as “offensive” is the same as describing it as “causing offence?” Which of the two, do you think, is Philippa alluding to? Do you think that the term “rude” applies equally to both?

And how do you think Philippa would explain the disagreement about what is rude between herself, Mary, and Iris on the one hand, and Elizabeth on the other?

2. We are introduced to Iris’s nascent view of concepts (205). “Each person’s concepts have their own individual history.” As I go through life and “fall in love, repent, feel remorse, forgive, hate, trust, my understanding of those words changes, becomes more personal, more tied to me, and to the particular circumstances of my life.”

Do you think Iris is right?

If she is, how do we still manage to communicate with each other? What allows it to happen?

And, do you think that this puts paid to the hope of finding moral objectivity? Or do you think one could still find objective standards in that picture? If so, do you have any idea of what those standards would be?

We find Iris’s remark: “We are, from the start, not alone” (205). This, Iris thinks, is critical for comprehending important aspects of us, not least the variety and complexity of our relationships to others.

What, do you think, does Iris mean when she says that we are not alone? In what sense aren’t we alone? Do you think she is right?

How would Iris explain the fact that so many of us often feel an acute sense of loneliness?

And how would the idea that we’re not alone fit with Iris’s view of concepts we’ve just seen above, according to which as we use concepts, they become ever more idiosyncratic, ever more individual? Do you think that this feature of concepts would pull us apart from each other? Or do you think that, even if it does, the fact that we still manage to communicate with each other shows, or manifests, some sense of the idea that we are not alone?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 5
(CONTINUED)

3. We see Elizabeth take on C. S. Lewis's argument against naturalism (198–200). According to Lewis, naturalism holds that all relations between things are ultimately causal—like a billiard ball being caused to roll by another ball hitting it. But naturalists, Lewis points out, defend their view on rational grounds. Yet rational grounds are a type of relation, so they too must be causal. Hence, Lewis concluded, by naturalism's own lights, there are no reasons to think that naturalism is right. Naturalism is, therefore, self-defeating.

Elizabeth put it that Lewis had been confused. She contested the idea that the only relations that count as natural are causal relations. Rational relations, hence rational grounds, are perfectly natural, she contends. "It is part of our nature to [think and reason, to question and explain]" (200). It is, therefore, not right to say that naturalism itself prevents the naturalist from presenting reasons for naturalism.

What do you think of Elizabeth's answer?

It seems that she and Lewis are using different conceptions of "nature." As we've seen, for Lewis something is natural if it can be fully explained in causal terms—if it can be shown to have been fully caused by something else which also can be shown to have been fully caused, and so on. For Elizabeth, it appears that something is natural if it flows from the nature of something.

Do you think that in Elizabeth's picture there is room for anything to not be natural? If so, how? If not, how does that leave her argument against Lewis?

We read Elizabeth's confession to Wittgenstein about her difficulties facing questions in public discussions (202).

Were you surprised by that admission? Does it alter your image of Elizabeth? If so, how?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 6

CHAPTER 6: BACK TO LIFE

Chapter 6, "Back to Life" is set mostly in Oxford, between 1948 and 1951. "Miss Anscombe" gives her first lecture—Elizabeth is only the fifth woman to give a philosophy lecture in Oxford since she herself arrived as an undergraduate in 1937. She gets into trouble for wearing trousers! Mary gets her first academic appointment—a lectureship at Reading. Iris and Elizabeth face a crisis in their friendship while Philippa begins to do serious work in ethics—with Elizabeth and Iris's help. Elizabeth is working with Wittgenstein on the manuscript that would become the *Philosophical Investigations*. When he finds out he is dying he moves into Elizabeth's attic where he makes his will.

1. Mary Wilson reports that she found Wittgenstein's and Elizabeth's "whole 'inconclusive' approach 'wonderful'" (214).

Is that a feeling you recognize—finding some wonderful in its being inconclusive?

What does it tell you about Mary W's own approach to philosophy? Serious, as Elizabeth's? Playful? Other?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 6
 (CONTINUED)

And do you think that is particularly conducive to learning? Or would, perhaps, the attraction to the inconclusive make one aversive to settle on any view?

2. We are treated to Elizabeth's first lecture at Schools (214–215). There she takes on Protagoras' doctrine that "man is the measure of all things." Elizabeth explains to her students that Protagoras is wrong. The measure of anything must be a constant against which things are placed and assessed. But an individual's own assessments are not constant. They are in perpetual flux. The measure of things, then, must be external to the individual. And, drawing on Wittgenstein's teachings, Elizabeth locates that measure—that standard—in the public realm, in the patterns and structures which we build together.

What do you think of Elizabeth's view? If I cannot be my own measure of things, can I be that of others? And if nobody can be their own measure, can everybody together be the measure of everybody?

3. We read about Iris's preoccupation about her relationship with Elizabeth (221). "Iris had a need to be seen and heard directly by Elizabeth" (emphasis added). And she was worried "that what E is dealing with is not me but my image." The authors wonder, too, whether Iris was not relating to an image of Elizabeth.

What do you think the difference here is between the "me" with which Iris refers to herself, and the image she thinks is all Elizabeth is dealing with?

Are you surprised that Iris and Elizabeth might have been dealing with an image of each other, given how close and intense their relationship was? Or do you think that whether you deal with another or with their image is not directly connected to how close your relationship is?

Also, if Iris (and the authors) were right in their fears, how, do you think, could Iris and Elizabeth progress from dealing with an image of each other, to dealing with each other? What is involved in bringing that change about?

We get the fragments that point to a crisis between Iris and Elizabeth (221–223).

Have you got any idea what might have happened?

What, do you think, can we infer from the facts that they made sure it stayed a secret, and that it caused them both so much turmoil?

As part of the cryptic remnants of the crisis that engulfed Iris and Elizabeth in their crisis, we read out of Iris's journal: "If one does something, even tho' one has some sort of repentance, it is almost impossible to regard it as one would have if one had not done it" (221–222).

What do you think that means?

And what do you think it tells us about what might have happened between them?

Later we find a snippet of a conversation between Iris and Elizabeth (234). Elizabeth said, and Iris disagreed, that "you can't write love poetry when you are feeling in love—it's not like a letter, it's not related to being in love like crying is to grief, it's indirect, it's a picture."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

CHAPTER 6 (CONTINUED)

Do you agree with Elizabeth or with Iris?

What, do you think, is the relation between being in love on the one hand, and understanding love on the other?

Later we find love being appealed to as an instrument for knowledge (239). Iris says: "Love is the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."

What do you think that means?

Do you think it illuminates Iris's preoccupation about how Elizabeth related to her?

4. We are introduced to Mary's way of separating the wheat from the chaff in philosophical inquiries (228–229). You can entertain philosophical doubt as a metaphysician (229) or just be indulging in "an insatiable appetite for reassurance, a neurotic craving exposed by never gaining its object" (228). You can tell the two apart with 'an assessment of the character of each philosopher'. And to assess their character "I rely here on a criterion of sanity and naturalness which can't be fully analyzed" (229).

Do you agree with Mary's criteria for telling the two approaches apart?

Do you think that the two ways of pursuing philosophical enquiry are so easy to tell apart? When should one's appetite for reassurance be sated? Who is to decide?

Where, do you think, would Mary's criteria place Wittgenstein? And Elizabeth?

We see Mary piecing ideas together from Plotinus (229). She writes: "The real is the beautiful, and as it turns out this means that it is what draws the soul because it is akin to it, because it makes the soul more really itself."

What do you think this means? What does it mean to say that the soul can be made more really itself? Isn't the soul itself however it is? How can we make sense of the idea that the soul—or anything—might be more or less itself?

And, if it were true that the beautiful draws the soul to it because it is akin to it, how would we explain our attraction to the ugly—in films, literature, the news stories we choose to read, the Daily Mail's sidebar of shame?

We are presented with Russell's skepticism about what we can know (229–230). Not much, it turns out. This is how the authors put his view: "Everyday life depends on our blindly accepting, without evidence, the uniformity of nature and the persistence of the individual." (230).

Why, do you think, would one think this? On what basis, on what reasons or observations, might one reach that conclusion?

Do you think Russell might have a point?

How, do you imagine, would Russell regard Hume's explanation of why you believe the cat walked across the room when you weren't looking, which was the subject of discussion point 4, in chapter 2?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
 CHAPTER 6
 (CONTINUED)

We see what Mary's and the Idealists' response to Russell skepticism would be (see chapter 2, discussion point 4). It is only if you think that the only things you can know are the objects of your experience, and you rely solely on experience for that knowledge, that you will always be short of certainty. But we have other tools with which to gain knowledge, and which reach into objects other than those that are the objects of our experience. "Poetry, art, religion, history, literature and comedy" are tools which enable the study the background against which our experiences are intelligible to us.

That reply tells us that we have more ways of knowing, and that there is more to know, than Russell allows.

But, do you think that it delivers any more certainty about things than Russell thought?

5. We are introduced to some of Wittgenstein's remarks in his *Tractatus* (235). Amongst his pronouncements is this one: "In [the world] there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value."

Do you think that being a value and being of value are the same thing, or different? If different, in what ways? If the same, how can we make sense of the idea of a value of no value?

We see Iris's take on Sartre's existentialism (237–239). The existentialists have touched on something which "most of us can recognize in the crises of our own lives": "the desire to 'give a fresh meaning to [our] past experience,' to create 'a new view of [our] personality'" (237).

Is that something that you recognize, as Iris expects you to?

Do you think the existentialists are right to think that that desire drives all our lives, rather than just appearing in times of crises, as Iris thinks? If you think the existentialists are right, how do we manage to differentiate between crises and normal life?

We see Iris's take on the plight of the existentialist (237–238). If you believe that "we confer meaning, not only upon ethical and religious systems, but upon the physical world too . . . then this meaning could in principle vanish, leaving us face to face with a brute and nameless nature." This would be "a plunge into the absurd" (238).

How, do you think, could meaning vanish?

And if it did, given the creatures that we are, do you think we'd leave things "brute and nameless," or do you think we'd spring forthrightly into "making" new meanings?

We find this fragment from Wittgenstein, which he wrote when he knew that he was nearing his death (241):

"Life can educate one to a belief in God. And experiences too are what bring this about; but I don't mean visions and other forms of experience which show us the 'existence of this being', but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
 CHAPTER 6
 (CONTINUED)

These neither show us an object, nor do they give us rise to conjectures about his. Experiences, thoughts,—life can force this concept on us.”

If Wittgenstein is right that experiences like suffering “can force” the concept of God on us, why, do you think, it happens only sometimes? On what would it depend whether a certain experience of suffering “forces” the concept of God upon one or not?

And, also assuming for the sake of argument that Wittgenstein is right, how would we explain the converse phenomenon, that is, people ceasing to believe in God in the face of their own, or others’, suffering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
 CHAPTER 7

CHAPTER 7: METAPHYSICAL ANIMALS

Chapter 7, “Metaphysical Animals,” takes place in Oxford and Newcastle between 1950 and 1955. Here we see the quartet about to launch into the work and careers for which they would become famous. We get a glimpse of the importance that art and poetry will play in the quartet’s work, partly through Philippa and Elizabeth’s friendship with Lotte Labowsky of the Warburg School, and partly through Iris and Mary’s talks on philosophy and poetry. Mary has her great insight: “We are not just like animals, we are animals!”

1. Elizabeth explains the idea that the name of an object has an internal logical structure which constrains how we can use that name (251–253). To illustrate this consider the sentence “Mount Everest chased Napoleon out of Cairo” (252). This sentence makes no sense because “Mount Everest” is the name of a mountain, and mountains are not a kind of thing that can chase. This is the sense in which the name “Mount Everest” has, internal to it a “logical form” which sets constraints on how the name might be used.

In this way, we come to see that “[a] person who knows that ‘Elizabeth’ is the name of a human, uses her name in a way that reflects the pattern and norms, and the considerable changes that belong to human life” (253).

In other words, if you know that “Elizabeth” is the name of a human, you know to use that name in contexts that make sense of a human. This is connected with a quote we read from Wittgenstein (252): “One has already to know (or be able to know) something in order to be capable of asking a thing’s name.”

What do you think Wittgenstein might have meant by that?

Can you see any connections between Elizabeth’s ideas about names and essence, and her DPhil project (chapter 3, discussion point 1)?

2. We learn Wittgenstein’s answer to Iris’s question: How can we do more than we get? That is, when we are shown a part of a pattern, or a sequence of actions, how do we know how to continue that pattern, that sequence by ourselves? (255)

The example used is that of a teacher who shows her pupils how to follow the rule “+2.” She first uses small numbers: “2, 4, 6, 8, . . .” She then moves on to bigger numbers: “11, 13, 15, . . .” then to bigger still “144, 146, 148, . . .” And then she instructs her pupils to carry on the sequence with numbers “1000, 1002, 1004.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 7
 (CONTINUED)

These are numbers which the children have not seen in their teacher's demonstration. But the children do as they are asked: "1006, 1008, 1010."

Wittgenstein's response to the puzzlement we might feel about the children's ability to go on with the pattern is to point out that human beings simply are pattern-spotting and pattern-making creatures. It is in our nature to pick out patterns and to follow patterns in what we do. If we weren't like that, we wouldn't live the kinds of life we do. The children in the example are simply being human.

What do you think of Wittgenstein's response? How useful is it, do you think, for other aspects of life?

And, what difference, do you think, would it make if the children, instead of being told explicitly that the rule the teacher was demonstrating was "+2," they had not been told what rule it was, and had instead been told: "Look at what I'm doing. 2, 4, 6, 8, . . . ; 140, 142, 144, 146, Now do the same from 1000?" Do you think Wittgenstein would say the same thing? If so, what, do you think, does that tell us about our relation to patterns, and to naming patterns?

3. We are presented with Iris's early attempts to pinpoint her disagreements with Wittgenstein, specifically with his focus on language as it's used in the public sphere to present our thoughts (259–261). Iris thinks that the individual is not entirely subsumed under the net of language, that there remains an important private dimension. The authors articulate Iris's position thus: "On the whole . . . we do not think in statements, expressed in inner speech that we could publicly share . . . by uttering ordinary words. No. In thinking, language, if it is present, is inextricably bound with feeling and metaphor and semi-sensible image" (259–260).

What do you think about Iris's position? Do you think that it is true, that that is the quality of our thoughts? If so, what is it that we do when we tell our thoughts to others?

Also as part of Iris's departure from Wittgenstein's views, we see her draw attention to the inner life and to its own relation to language: "The inner world, like the outer, alters as our concepts deepen, and as new metaphors and images allow us to see new connections" (260).

What do you think that means?

And how, do you think, does it fit with her view that any language used in thinking, is "inextricably bound with feeling and metaphor and semi-sensible image?"

We come across Mary's view of philosophy. The purpose of philosophy is to clear up and repair conceptual organizations, much as plumbing involves clearing up and repairing pipes (262–264).

What do you think of Mary's view? Do you agree with it?

Do you think that philosophy is valuable for other reasons too, perhaps?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
CHAPTER 7
 (CONTINUED)

In as much as philosophy is conducted through concepts, does Iris's view of concepts—how, as we use them, they shape us and us them—suggest other things that we do when we do philosophy?

4. In this chapter we also learn that Mary had been worried that she might be some sort of “changeling,” “ugly,” “with the needs of a woman but without the means to satisfy them,” “masculine brains thrown in as a sort of consolation” (244–245).

Does it surprise you, in light of all we've been told about Mary—her intellectual curiosity and drive, and her enjoyment when engaging in intellectual pursuits (think of her revelation in the Agamemnon class, see chapter 1, discussion point 3)—that she regards her brains a “consolation” for lacking feminine features?

Do you think it tells you something important about Mary? Or about her times? Both?

Mary implicitly denounces the scarcity of women in professional philosophy (268). But when charting the progress that women have made in their social status, she states that women are no longer regarded as ‘men who have accidentally come out the wrong shape’ (269).

Do you think that these remarks show that Mary had, by this time, moved on from her worries about having “masculine brains” (245)? Or do you think that both views can be held together?

And do you think that her assessment of how much progress had been made was consistent with her observations about the lack of women in philosophy?

Still thinking about the lack of women in the philosophical canon, Mary observes that, although it is not unusual for philosophers to miss big things in their methods and theories, it is the job of subsequent philosophers to point the lapse out. But this has not been done with “the woman question.” Mary hazards a guess as to why that might have been: “The vested interest involved was, until recently, too strong” (269).

What vested interest, do you think, Mary might have been alluding to?

Do you think, as Mary seems to, that those interests are no longer?

Still with Mary and her reflections on the lack of women in philosophy, we now find her wondering whether philosophy written by women might have been different from that written by men (269). Whether, if women had been allowed into the Western canon, philosophical thinking might have not been so focused on ‘solipsism and freedom’.

How would you help answer Mary's question? Do you think that philosophy produced by women might be different from that of men? If so, in what ways? And why? (You might want to revisit discussion point 1 of the Preface.)

5. We meet Simone Weil, another thinker whose ideas Iris was studying (271). Weil, like Mary Glover, joined a factory in order to gain firsthand understanding of the conditions of the proletariat. To understand their struggle, Weil, like Glover, wanted to live like they lived, and experience the working conditions that they did.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

CHAPTER 7
(CONTINUED)

Do you think that Weil's efforts would put her on a par with the proletariat?

Do you think that if you choose to work in the factory, for a purpose other than surviving—in Weil's and Glover's case the purpose of learning,—and know that you can walk out whenever you wish, the experience of factory work would be similar to that of the other workers? If not, why not, what difference do those considerations make? If you think the experience would be similar, what does that tell you about the strength of the connection between what happens to us, and the broader understanding within which what happens to us takes place? In other words, what would be the connection between what happens to us and what we think about it?

We find Iris's evolving views on our epistemic engagement with the world (272). As we go through life, continuously developing our understanding of things, we are often prevented from meeting with reality by our insatiable drive for consolation, for indulging our ego. What that gets us is a distorted picture of things. But we can meet with reality through great art. The great artist attends to reality freed of those drives, and the work they produce “enables us to see reality” too.

Do you agree that that is what the great artist does?

How, do you think, would looking at a faithful representation of reality—a representation created by the artist—enable us to see reality, if looking at reality directly does not?

We again encounter love viewed as a tool for knowledge (273). This time it is Simone Weil who believes, as the authors put it, that “the human soul comes to know reality through love.” And Iris hits much the same key: “the only organ of contact with existence is acceptance, love. . . . That is why joy and the sense of reality are identical.”

But a little earlier, we had Weil state: “The experience of suffering is the experience of reality. For our suffering is not something which we invent. It is true” (271).

How, do you think, can we reconcile both views—that is, that both love and the experience of suffering are our tools to access reality? Are love and suffering connected in some way which would explain how they both give us access to reality?

And, what do you think Weil means when she says that “our suffering is not something which we invent”?

We are privy to fragments of conversations between Iris and Franz (274). He tells her: “A cut-off past is in a way easier to convey to another than a continuous one.”

What do you think Franz means?

Do you agree with him?

6. We are introduced to Mary's evolving ideas about the various relations between human beings and the other animals (277–279). She observes that we have created our conception of animals as beasts largely in order to create a

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

CHAPTER 7
(CONTINUED)

contrasting, elevated conception of humans as somehow special. But, Mary points out, all species are special to themselves. And attention to how the other animals live, reveals that human lives are “in many ways continuous” with theirs (278). Indeed, sometimes divisions between people are at least as deep as divisions between different species (279). “We are not just rather like animals,” she will say later, “we are animals” (298).

If Mary were right, do you think there would be moral implications for how we treat the other animals? If so, why? And what would those implications be?

We finally see how Philippa intends to cement moral objectivity (279–280). We can’t detach the ideas of good or bad from what is good or bad for humans, she says. And what is good or bad for humans is not up to them—it is simply dictated by their nature. Whether a human life is going well or badly is a matter of whether it is going well or badly according to the “standard internal to the species human” (280). “It is not up to us to decide . . . what makes a good human life” (280).

What do you think about that?

Do you think it follows that whether your life is going well or badly has little to do with what you think about it? If so, why?

In this chapter we also learn that Philippa had, since childhood, been preoccupied with the question, “What is happiness?” (253)

Given Philippa’s ideas about a good life, how do you think she would answer that question?

And how would you compare the happiness of the lobotomized patient who is “happy all the day long picking up leaves,” with Wittgenstein’s happiness, who was angry, irritated, and anguished so much of the time?

7. We encounter one of Iris’s best well-known statements: “Man is a creature who makes pictures of himself and then comes to resemble the picture” (284).

What do you think Iris means? How can we best make sense of it?

Do you think that she means that we make the pictures intentionally, with the aim of then resembling them?

Or do you think that they get formed, surreptitiously, through our encounters with our environment? Think, for example, of the pictures of themselves which Oxford would have encouraged our young women to form when they arrived and it was explained to them that they were “on probation,” and that they might be “pawed about” by one of teachers but never mind?

Whether you think we create them intentionally or not, what constraints, do you think, are there on what pictures of ourselves we might create?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE, MR. TRUMAN’S DEGREE, AGAIN

1. In the **Epilogue**, the authors return to the book’s starting point: Elizabeth’s address to Convocation opposing the award of an honorary degree to US President Harry S. Truman. Here, though, we find ourselves after the event.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
EPILOGUE
 (CONTINUED)

Elizabeth is back home. She's printed her address to Convocation, and is selling copies of it from her home, 27 St John Street.

But we also get a taste of the correspondence she received, be it from familiar names at Oxford as well as from the rest of the country, and from further afield.

Is there anything that strikes you about the content of the letters she received? Do they tell us anything about the kind of thing that people value?

Knowing as we now know Elizabeth's argument against the award of the degree, what, do you think, would her response be to the "ex-P.O.W. of the 'delightful' Japanese" (289)?

The authors reprint a section of one of the letters Elizabeth received (289). It is from Jessie Street, an Australian women's rights campaigner who had collected accounts from those who witnessed the atomic attacks. In her letter she encloses some of those accounts, and it is a section of one of them that the authors reprint.

Do you find that, upon reading that extract, your moral judgment of what Mr. Truman did changes in any way? Do you think it adds anything extra to the points already made by Elizabeth in her address? If so, what? If not, why not—why do you think those details are irrelevant?

Whether learning about the details on the extract does or does not affect your moral judgment of the dropping of the bomb, what does it tell you about the nature of moral judgment, about the kinds of things that carry the moral weight in actions?

We are reminded of one of Elizabeth's statements to Convocation: "Protests by people who have not power are a waste of time" (294).

Do you agree with Elizabeth?

What standard is Elizabeth applying in her judgment? Where is she locating the value of an action if she thinks that the action of protesting if you have not power is pointless?

What, do you think, is the point of protests?

2. The authors write: "Growing up is coming to act and see under the descriptions that our language contains, and that our world and our shared forms of life make possible" (291).

What you think that means?

How would you fit individual creativity there? Do you think that this conception of the social human pre-empts, or at least restricts, individual creativity? Or do you think that it sets the conditions that make it, and our appreciation of it, possible?

The authors write: "The background to our lives can, if it is badly arranged, make wicked acts very easy for quite ordinary and friendly people. Indeed, it can make it so easy that nobody, including the person who is doing it, even notices" (293–294).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
EPILOGUE
(CONTINUED)

Can you think of what a “badly arranged” background to our lives would look like?

Can you think of examples where things are as they authors say: where ordinary people do wicked things without being aware of it, but are led to do them by the structures that surround them?

Having now read the whole book, do you think you are able to answer the questions that puzzled Elizabeth and the authors, in the Prologue? Namely, why did Elizabeth see Truman’s action of ordering the dropping of the bombs as mass murder, while almost everyone else (including Truman) did not? What would Elizabeth need to say to get others to see things as she did? What is at stake when a man who has done what Truman did is honored and celebrated?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:
TO END

TO END

What have you learned?

Are you left wanting more of any of the topics touched in the book? If so, what?

At the end of the Preface, the authors recommend that, if you can, you read the book with friends. Having now read the book, why, do you think, did they make that recommendation? What do you get from reading it with friends, which you don’t if reading it alone?

Why, do you think, did the authors write the book?

What, in your view, were they trying to achieve, and do you think they have been successful?

Find the historical map resource of The Quartet here: [Mapping The Quartet](#)

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