

## The Women Are Up to Something: Benjamin Lipscomb

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[music: [Blue Dot Sessions](#), Single Still]

[archival sound] **Mary Midgley, philosopher:** We were all friends, and we tended to spend a lot of time together thinking about, “What’s wrong with philosophy at Oxford?” because we thought something was!

**Christiane Wisehart, host and producer:** Although they didn’t set out to, the British philosophers and friends Mary Midgley, Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot revolutionized the field of ethics in the middle of the 20th century.

I’m Christiane Wisehart, this is Examining Ethics and today I’m joined by the philosopher Benjamin Lipscomb. Together we explore the unique friendship and work of four women who changed the face of moral philosophy.

[Benjamin Lipscomb](#), **guest:** These women looking at what was happening in the world, were charged up about it, saw it as horrific, saw it as something that they needed to direct thought toward. What’s special about them, to my mind, is that they didn’t accept the philosophy that was on offer to them, that they said, “There’s got to be something better than this. There’s got to be an alternative.”

**Christiane:** Stay tuned for more on today’s episode of Examining Ethics.

[music fades out]

**Archival sound from a newsreel:** “[Holocaust Buchenwald Concentration Camp Uncovered](#)” (1945) | **British Pathé. Speaker is Mavis Tate:** I, as a member of Parliament, with nine others, visited Buchenwald concentration camp. Some people believe that the reports of what happened there are exaggerated. No words could exaggerate. We saw and we know. You will now see a few of the sights we saw. And much as they may shock you, do believe me when I tell you that the reality was indescribably worse than these pictures. You cannot photograph suffering, only its results. Here you see no more than a fragment of the full pattern of the horror...

[archival sound fades out]

**Christiane:** It’s 1945 and the British public is transfixed by newsreel footage coming out of the Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps. Images of starved and dead bodies spooled out from the projector while narrators implored audiences never to forget the evil of the Nazi camps.

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At this moment, when the moral stakes had never seemed so high, ethics had fallen out of fashion in the philosophy department at Oxford University. Oxford philosophers taught their students that morality was subjective and that what any one person valued was no better or worse than what anyone else valued.

Enter Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and Mary Midgley, four brilliant philosophers who realized something needed to change at Oxford. Joining me to discuss their impact is Benjamin Lipscomb, whose book [\*The Women Are Up to Something\*](#) explores the work and friendship of these changemakers.

**[interview begins]**

**Christiane:** What did each of these women contribute to the field of ethics?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** I'm as interested in what they contributed together as I am in what each of them individually did, but each of them added something, I think, irreplaceable to their implicit common project. What they did together was to put moral truth, moral objectivity, and a certain approach to moral truth or moral objectivity, back on the table of philosophically acceptable views in a way that it hadn't been when they started their careers.

When they got into philosophy in the 1940s, moral subjectivism was the only view that anybody considered respectable, the idea that judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, are just projections of ours onto a value-free world. And they rejected this. And together, each contributing different things to that implicit project, they put a different view out in front of their peers and the world.

**Christiane:** It's such a fascinating story because they all, more or less, attend Oxford University at the same time. They're all basically the same age.

**Benjamin Lipscomb [crosstalk]:** Yeah. All of them were born in 1919 or 1920, so all of them born to fathers who'd just come back from the war, sort of part of a little baby boom that followed World War I. So they're all university age right as the Second World War is about to begin.

**Christiane:** The Second World War produced some of the worst atrocities of humanity and so it's interesting to think about the main strain of philosophy and ethics saying like, "Values don't exist. We're all kind of making it up as we go along." These philosophers come about in this time, and it seems to me that they weren't very interested in ethics, but they were more or less forced into this, because they were sort of looking around and saying, "Are you not seeing the newsreels?" And so...why was moral philosophy such a despised subject after the Second World War, if we're coming out of this time of obvious wrongs?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** Yeah, there's a lot to say here. The subjectivism that was the dominant view had roots way further back in the history and culture of the modern West, and had come to be thought of as the only scientifically respectable, up-to-date thing that one could think. So however despairing people might be about it, however depressing or uninspiring they might find

it, I think the thought on most sides was, "Well, we just have to accept this. We just have to roll with it. Whatever it means, we've got to deal."

That left ethics, yeah, not being very inspiring to a lot of people. If it was, as Frank Ramsey quipped, a subject without an object, that didn't make it seem very interesting to the most ambitious philosophers of the time. But as you say, these women, looking at what was happening in the world, were charged up about it, saw it as horrific, saw it as something that they needed to direct thought toward. What's special about them, to my mind, is that they didn't accept the philosophy that was on offer to them, that they said, "There's got to be something better than this. There's got to be an alternative to this view that we have put to us."

**Christiane:** Now we're going to start talking about them somewhat as individuals, although, as you said in the beginning, their work is very much intertwined with each other's work. As I was reading your book, it struck me as sort of funny that Philippa Foot wasn't really interested in ethics. Because of course, Philippa Foot invented the most famous ethics thought experiment, the Trolley Problem. So why did she, in particular, turn to thinking about moral philosophy and ethics?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** As she narrates it herself in a series of interviews late in her life, it was the newsreels that came out from the Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps. Shortly after the liberation of the camps, the UK sent over a delegation of parliamentarians to visit the camps, and with them went newsreel companies. The worry on the part of members of Parliament, the government, and media organizations was that no one would believe these stories, even a little bit of a worry of, "Could they possibly be true? Are we giving way to propaganda?" But they did go, and they saw for themselves the conditions after the liberation of the camps.

These newsreels, they were shown in cinemas. And Foot saw these, the evidence seems to point to early in the fall of 1945. She sees them and emerges just in shock, as many people had when they saw these. She reported going to her undergraduate mentor, Donald MacKinnon, and saying to him, "Nothing can ever be the same, can it?" And he said back to her, "No, nothing can be the same now."

From that moment, she says she thought, "Whatever is true in ethics, this subjectivist view that the men around me hold just can't be right." She already had at least one friend, her undergraduate peer and later colleague Elizabeth Anscombe, who, as a devoted Catholic, was having no truck with the subjectivism of their peers. So she had in her ear, she had available to her, a contrasting view. She didn't know what she wanted to say yet, but she immediately felt disquiet. She thought, "This view that's on offer to me, it can't be right. There's got to be more to say."

**Christiane:** Her relationship with Elizabeth Anscombe is just a...seems like a beautiful thing because they helped develop each other. They sort of helped develop ideas together. And much

like Philippa Foot, Anscombe, again, was sort of thrust into ethics. So what pushed her into ethics?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** Anscombe had been devoted to Catholic teaching about moral problems since she converted at age 15 in the mid-1930s. She and an undergraduate friend published a pamphlet against British conduct in the Second World War in 1940 and got themselves into trouble with the archbishop. So she'd been always capable of being fired up about practical questions when she saw, especially, some grievous wrong being committed. The evident policy of the British government early in World War II, that if we need to, we're going to bomb cities, she saw this coming, and she and her co-author condemned it and said it raised questions about the justice of the British involvement in the Second World War if this is where they were prepared to go. Well, it's the same thing.

She then stops thinking about ethics, or at least stops writing about it, for a decade and a half, until Oxford University proposes in 1956 to give an honorary degree to Harry Truman. It was the same thing she'd written her pamphlet about. Truman had authorized the incineration bombing of two cities. This, she said, can't be squared with traditional just war criteria. This is murder. This is killing the innocent as a means to your ends.

And she protested, not very effectively in political terms, but loudly and conspicuously. She denounced this nomination. She tried to resist it. And it was when almost none of her colleagues... Philippa Foot and her husband and one other colleague voted with her against the degree, but almost no one else. And she thought, "How can this be? This is as clear a violation of traditional just war criteria as you could think of."

She put a reward out, advertised a reward in an Oxford newspaper, saying, "If anybody can show me on international law or traditional just war criteria that Truman was allowed to do what he did, I will pay," what would be today around 2,000 pounds to this person. "Just show me. I dare you."

Why then was no one willing to protest with her? Why were people so embarrassed that they wouldn't stand against what she regarded as clear-cut murder? She thought maybe the problem is in their views about ethics. She had recently started doing ethics tutorials because Philippa Foot was going on sabbatical. She'd been reading the standard texts that Oxford students were being assigned, and she thought, "This is awful. I see exactly why it is that people formed by this kind of theory would think the things they think." This set her off. This got her going on a stream of writing against the ethical thought of her time.

**Christiane:** There are two other women that are a part of this story, Iris Murdoch, who's a famous novelist and philosopher, and Mary Midgley. So how do these other two women fit into this picture of Oxford at this time and the burgeoning ideas about ethics?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** They're all outsiders in their own ways, simply as women in a male-dominated environment, not being invited to some of the key gatherings and discussion groups, treated, talked about, slightlying at times, and holding very much a minority view that

people had to struggle at first to get their heads around. This makes all of them outsiders, but there are degrees of outsiderdom.

Anscombe and Foot both wrote the kind of philosophy, even if the views they were espousing were unusual ones or contrary ones, they were the kind of philosophy that was recognized and respected within Oxford philosophical circles at the time. Murdoch and Midgley did not. Midgley mostly goes silent as a philosophical writer in the 1950s. When her first child was born at the beginning of the 1950s, her first son, she wanted to be at home with the boys. So she gets back into philosophy in the mid-60s, when her youngest son goes off to secondary school. But that period outside was really formative for her. She was reading lots of stuff other than philosophy that ended up coming back to influence and shape her philosophical contribution.

Iris Murdoch is living and working in Oxford alongside Anscombe and Foot, and it was a very painful experience for her, because she is this enormously widely read person, reading, especially, French, but also German and Russian and other figures, and trying to answer, and I think even more effectively answering the question that Anscombe was asking in the context of the Truman dispute. Anscombe wondered, "Why are people so morally corrupt? Why do they go in for these views that I see as abhorrent?" Murdoch, from her position as someone who was reading all of the literature and philosophy of the West in her time that she could get her hands on, trying to synthesize all of it, she was looking for zeitgeist-y phenomena. She was looking for, "What's going on in the spirit of our age that drives the moral views that we see around us?"

This was a vital contribution. I think she gave something to her friends and to the world that nobody else could have, but it served to isolate her because this was not fine-grained, close linguistic analysis of the kind that was the respectable thing in Oxford at her time. It was big, visionary stuff about huge transcultural worldviews. She appeared sloppy and messy to many of her colleagues, to many of her contemporaries, and eventually it drove her out of philosophy entirely.

She liked to talk in interviews about how, "Oh, my novels aren't philosophical. You shouldn't look for philosophy in them." Most readers of Murdoch who are also familiar with her philosophy find this an absurd thing for her to say. Maybe she just meant that she didn't write didactic novels like Ayn Rand. But I think what that shows us is that she'd internalized a sense of what real philosophy was and that what she did wasn't real philosophy. I think now a lot of philosophers would reject that, but at the time this was a burden to her.

**Christiane:** The thing that I really appreciate about this book is that you make concrete relational ties between the women that produced big ideas. These women have a legacy of their writing or their BBC talks, or the words that they left behind, but when they were interacting with one another, they did things like Foot got Anscombe a job, or somebody takes over for somebody else when they need a break, or somebody steps up when somebody gets sick. A lot of this book is so relational. And so...I just wondered if you could comment on that.

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** I got interested in writing this book at all when I read Mary Midgley's memoir, *The Owl of Minerva*, which I highly recommend. I knew already that Anscombe and Foot and Murdoch had been contemporaries, had known one another, had had something to do with one another, but I think I thought of it as just a clustering of talent in mid-century Oxford. Then I read Midgley's memoir, and I realized how much more there was.

Midgley doesn't go into great depth on it, but she said enough that I could see, "Here's this group of people who were a support to one another and a prod to one another in their work over the course of decades." And I thought, "There's got to be a book here that would be both about the ideas, which are important and fascinating, and about these four wildly different personalities and their friendships" That's what interested me in the book.

I have asked myself along the way, and people have asked me in interviews, "Does it help with the philosophy to know the biography? Does it change how you read their work to know what was going on with them outside the pages of their work?" I think it does. I don't want to exaggerate this, but take Elizabeth Anscombe's protest against Harry Truman's honorary degree. When you know about that background, when you know how isolated and alone she felt in her protest, how the whole town was against her, with the exception of her devoted friend Philippa Foot, who, as you said, saved Anscombe's job at one point, offered to resign when it appeared there wouldn't be enough work for two of them, so that Anscombe, whom she regarded as the most brilliant philosopher of the age, could still have a position. Foot said, "I couldn't respect myself if I kept the job and she was left unemployed. If anybody should be employed here, it's Elizabeth."

When you know this background, Anscombe's most influential and important book, it's a short little monograph called *Intention*. When you read it knowing about the Truman protest, you see her trying to work out about a quite technical matter in the philosophy of action. When do you intend something? When do you merely foresee it? When you know that she's thinking about dropping bombs and killing people by dropping bombs, and the ethics of war, even though this doesn't come into the text, it's all in the background, she looks like she's just pursuing these technical clarifications, but it is all in service of making it, she hopes, impossible for her colleagues to go on saying the things they had been saying about bombing civilians, I think the book appears in a different light.

**Christiane:** What did Mary Midgley add to this conversation? Because she starts writing a lot later than all of the other women.

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** Midgley, I think, can inspire anyone who's thrashing around in their twenties or thirties, or later, wondering what's going to come of their life's work, if anything, because she does publish her first book, her first book of 16, in her late fifties, in the late 1970s, after this long period of latency in which she's removed from Oxford, in which she's reading very widely, especially in animal behavior studies, and in which she's thinking about what she's

reading. What she's reading has to do with the development of her children as she watches that happen, and what it has to do with ethics, with moral philosophy.

Her contribution is that she makes a positive proposal. Murdoch and Anscombe and Foot had each diagnosed something wrong with the thought of their contemporaries and had suggested in a promissory way, "Here's the kind of thing that should replace this. We need some sort of objective ethics that is somehow grounded in the world of facts, grounded in the kind of creatures we are, the kind of animals human beings are, and our needs and possibilities." But this was all promissory. Midgley is the only one who knows enough biology to begin fleshing that out in any serious way, because she stepped away from Oxford philosophy, because she stepped away from the quick back-and-forth of testing and refining little philosophical proposals. That's a vital enterprise, but nothing like what she did was going to happen by someone who needed to maintain their career doing that.

She steps back. She reads everything, and I think in the catalog system it would've been section 591, animal behavior. She reads everything in section 591 in the library of the University of Newcastle. And she gets to a point where she's seeing how to marry together the work that—the critique that her friends had issued and the suggestions they've made about a better way, with serious biology.

**Christiane:** Okay, I'm embarrassed by this question. I am going to say it's a bad question. But when I read about Mary Midgley, I got up the nerve to ask it, which is, do you think there's something about being socialized as a woman in the 20th century that gives women's thinking about ethics more stakes?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** It's not a bad question. It's a hard question. It's one you hesitate to ask, and I hesitate to answer too definitively. It's an obvious question raised by the book. What difference did it make that they were women? I can point to social differences that it makes, and it's so striking that it's a group of women who band together and stand against the dominant view of their male contemporaries. There's got to be something there, but I'm really hesitant to make essentialist claims about, "Well, of course, a woman would think this or would see that."

Midgley speculates about this. Midgley, who is raising her three boys... She's not the only mother in the group. Anscombe is a mother of seven. Midgley speculates that women, at least in her time and place, and maybe in some deeper way, are people who keep more going at once than men do. I think this might be something that social psychologists have looked into, comparative multitasking abilities of men and women. At any rate, in her time and place, women kept more going at once than men did.

Midgley is, in her philosophy, and I don't think she's alone among her friend group in this, in her philosophy she's someone who is trying to balance bodies of knowledge, trying to swat aside easy and tempting reductionisms in ethics. She gets very cranky with Richard Dawkins at one point, and they have kind of a hot back-and-forth about what she saw as oversimplifications in

his use of moral psychology. She's against tidy simplifications, and all of these women had that in common. Does it have to do with the fact that they're women? I'm not sure, but I suspect so.

**Christiane:** Is there a through line to the development of care ethics in the '70s?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** When you read Nel Noddings and others formative in care ethics, everybody who does this sees a kinship between the virtue ethics, the revival of Aristotelian ideas that's especially associated with Anscombe and Foot, to a lesser extent with Murdoch and Midgley. There's something there about what kind of person you are mattering centrally, what kind of dispositions you form being central to the best human life, to the needs of our species and what it takes to meet them being central to moral life.

I'm not as expert in care ethics as a lot of people are, so I want to preface this by saying that. But my sense of it is that the virtue ethics, the Aristotelian revolution comes first, to open space for a more biologically grounded and dispositionally centered approach to ethics. And care ethics is one of many things that then flowers with that possibility opened.

**Christiane:** Why do you care about this story? What brought you to this story?

**Benjamin Lipscomb:** I admired each of the four of these philosophers. I found them, in different ways, inspiring, and I found their ideas to be compelling ones. So upon discovering that this cluster of ideas that these characters worked together and shaped one another, I just thought, "This is too good of a story to let go."

And you know frankly, I work at a small liberal arts college with substantial teaching and administrative loads. I identify strongly with things I learned about Philippa Foot and how much of a burden she carried as a teacher and as an administrator at Somerville College in the 1950s and '60s. There's a lot to do, and it gets in the way of writing. In some ways, this is good to be slowed down in one's writing, to wait to have your thoughts.

But when I thought, "There should be a book on this," my second thought after that was, "I might be lucky enough to get to write this book," because there is a level of philosophical training that you need in order to understand and expound the ideas. And so a straight historian or a journalist might not have the philosophical background. But someone pursuing tenure at a Research I institution in philosophy is going to need to be doing that kind of honing the cutting-edge work that I was talking about a few minutes ago, that Mary Midgley set aside when she moved away from Oxford. Someone pursuing tenure in philosophy is typically going to have to be doing more technical philosophy. They won't be able to pause to do the archival research and the interviews getting into the biography.

But maybe for somebody working at a little teaching college, this half-and-half project might fall through into my hands. I thought, "Oh, this book should just exist, and I might be positioned, in terms of the way tenure expectations are lighter for me, the way my life is structured, to be able to write it."



**[Interview ends]**

**[music: [Blue Dot Sessions](#), Entwined Oddity]**

**Christiane:** If you want to know more about Benjamin Lipcomb's other work, check out our show notes page at [examiningethics.org](http://examiningethics.org).

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