

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Interrupting the conversation: Donald MacKinnon, wartime tutor of Anscombe, Midgley, Murdoch and Foot

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Abstract

Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot all studied at Oxford University during the Second World War. One of their wartime tutors was Donald MacKinnon. This paper gives a broad overview of MacKinnon's philosophical outlook as it was developing at this time. Four talks from between 1938 and 1941—'And the Son of Man That Thou Visiteth Him' (1938), 'What Is a Metaphysical Statement?' (1940), 'The Function of Philosophy in Education' (1941) and 'Revelation and Social Justice' (1941)—give a foretaste of the conception of moral philosophy that he later articulated in *A Study of Ethical Theory* (1957). We identify aspects of his philosophical outlook and unusual treatment of method that likely shaped his teaching. We trace his influence in the work of Midgley, Murdoch and Foot, all of whom studied with him from Trinity Term 1940 until their finals in 1942. In the case of Anscombe, though she was briefly his student—he taught her Plato—she and MacKinnon moved in shared intellectual circles, and there is reason to think that some of the forces that shaped MacKinnon's outlook also shaped hers. The sketch we offer is incomplete—in particular, we are not able to do justice to MacKinnon's explicitly theological writings—but we hope to achieve three things. First, to go some way towards indicating the importance of the

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teacher MacKinnon to understanding the work of his better-known pupils. Second, to introduce a philosopher for whom the teaching of philosophy, practical ethics and metaphysical theory were deeply entwined. Third, to reflect on the relationship between, on the one hand, a conception of the practice and significance of metaphysics and, on the other, a view on the role and nature of philosophical teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS

conversation, Donald MacKinnon, ethics, metaphysics, moral philosophy, wartime quartet

Elizabeth Anscombe, Mary Midgley, Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot all studied at Oxford University during the Second World War.¹ One of their wartime tutors was Donald MacKinnon. This paper gives a broad overview of MacKinnon's philosophical outlook as it was developing at this time. Four talks from between 1938 and 1941—'And the Son of Man That Thou Visiteth Him' (1938), 'What Is a Metaphysical Statement?' (1940), 'The Function of Philosophy in Education' (1941a/2011) and 'Revelation and Social Justice' (1941b/2011)—give a foretaste of the conception of moral philosophy that he later articulated in *A Study of Ethical Theory* (1957). We identify aspects of his philosophical outlook and unusual treatment of method that likely shaped his teaching. We trace his influence in the work of Midgley, Murdoch and Foot, all of whom studied with him from Trinity Term 1940 until their finals in 1942. In the case of Anscombe, though she was briefly his student—he taught her Plato—she and MacKinnon moved in shared intellectual circles and there is reason to think that some of the forces that shaped MacKinnon's outlook also shaped hers (see Berkman, 2021; Haldane, 2019; also discussed below).

The sketch we offer is incomplete—in particular, we are not able to do justice to MacKinnon's explicitly theological writings—but we hope to achieve three things. First, to go some way towards indicating the importance of the teacher MacKinnon to understanding the work of his better-known pupils. Second, to introduce a philosopher for whom the teaching of philosophy, practical ethics and metaphysical theory were deeply entwined. Third, to reflect on the relationship between, on the one hand, a conception of the practice and significance of metaphysics and, on the other hand, a view on the role and nature of philosophical teaching and learning.

TWO UNEASY INTERESTS

Donald MacKinnon was born in Oban, in the Scottish Highlands, in 1913. Though he was only six years senior to his wartime tutees, both Foot and Murdoch took him to be much older, revering him as 'an ancient prophet-figure, a holy man' (Conradi, 2001, p. 128). Foot was astonished to learn, around 1990, that he was almost her near contemporary.

MacKinnon was educated at Winchester College, before going up in 1932 to read Mods and Greats at New College, Oxford.² Among his own teachers were R. G. Collingwood and refugee scholar Ernst Cassirer, whom he was 'awed' to hear lecturing on Kant.³ In different ways, both Collingwood's and Cassirer's liberal and sophisticated historicism made their mark on MacKinnon's thinking. A third important influence was the Platonist H. W. B. Joseph. In the Preface to *A Study in Ethical Theory*, MacKinnon records an indebtedness 'especially' to this 'teacher' (MacKinnon, 1957, p. v). MacKinnon remained an admirer of his work and following Joseph's death (in 1943), he repeatedly (though unsuccessfully) attempted to secure the posthumous publication of Joseph's 1932 lectures on 'Internal and External Relations and the Philosophy of Analysis' (cf. Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, 2022, p. 142).

MacKinnon's introduction to the new 'Philosophy of Analysis' was not, however, from Joseph or Collingwood, both of whom were critics of the new method. Rather, it came from its enthusiasts. His philosophy tutors in New College were the philosopher of perception H. H. Price and a young Isaiah Berlin. Price was unusual for an Oxford don in having undertaken postgraduate training at Cambridge, and his 1932 *Perception* was still warm off the press when MacKinnon first took his seat in Price's rooms. Isaiah Berlin tutored MacKinnon for three years. Berlin's loquacious style rubbed off on MacKinnon, but more important was Berlin's interest in the Cambridge realism of Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, as well as his mentorship. In the summer of 1936, Berlin invited his student to join a select all-male discussion group, who called themselves 'The Brethren' and among whom were J. L. Austin and A. J. Ayer, each two years MacKinnon's senior. Ayer—and logical positivism—set their agenda (cf. Rowe, 2023). *Language, Truth and Logic* had been published earlier that year, and the journal *Analysis* had been running since November 1933, showcasing work by, among others, Viennese positivists Moritz Schlick and Rudolph Carnap. MacKinnon was familiar with both. Writing a reference for him in 1936, for a fellowship at Keble College, H. H. Price was happy to describe MacKinnon as 'devoted to the ideals and methods of the so-called "Logical Analysts"' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, 2022, p. 89).

But these were not the only ideals to which Donald MacKinnon was devoted. Price's reference goes on:

[he] is as well-versed in the latest developments of Symbolic Logic as a non-mathematician can be, he is also keenly interested in the problems of the religious life; moreover he knows them from the inside, being himself a deeply religious man. I cannot think of any philosopher in this country—or indeed abroad—at the present time who has precisely this combination of abilities and interests... (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, 2022, p. 89)

MacKinnon's concern for 'the religious life' is a prevailing feature of his biography and pervades his moral philosophy. As a schoolboy at Winchester, he was confirmed as a Scottish Episcopalian. The rite of the Eucharist was, in MacKinnon's own words, 'a focus of thought, of aspiration, of intercession, of the offering of perplexity' (Macintyre, 1989; quoted in Müller, 2010, p. 23). However, the Spanish Civil War, which raged from 1936 to 1939, challenged both his faith and his politics. The Church of England supported the non-interventionist policy of the British Government and the League of Nations. MacKinnon, like many of his generation, supported the Republic. He was appalled by the actions of the Spanish Church which, he said, 'sowed' in his mind 'scepticism concerning the value to be assigned in this present to preserving the external life of the Church, at least in forms easily recognizable as continuous with those which we know and take for granted' (quoted in Müller, 2010, p. 85). This scepticism brought him into conversation with members of the lay Catholic movement Pax, whose key figures belonged to Oxford's Dominican community, among them, Gerald Vann and Victor White. White would later tutor the 'remarkable' undergraduate, Elizabeth Anscombe (for more, see Berkman, 2021; Haldane, 2019).

By the time Anscombe joined Pax (in 1937), the Second World War was imminent. By then, MacKinnon had a clear sense of why the two interests that Price identified in his reference letter (the religious life and the new philosophy of analysis) could not be easily held together. Ayer's programme for philosophy was trenchantly anti-metaphysical. The job of philosophy, Ayer argued in his book, was not to speculate, discover or comprehend, but to clarify and define. Analysis was to be carried out using the new symbolic logic, as developed by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell and repurposed in various ways by the Viennese positivists. Statements about material objects were to be analysed phenomenally into statements about sense-experiences or sense-contents that could be verified by observation. Any proposition that was not amenable to this analysis was held by Ayer to be either analytic or nonsense. His verdict of 'unintelligibility' extended to the affirmation or denial of any proposition that purported to 'refer to a "reality" transcending the limits of all possible sense-experience' (Ayer, 1936/2001, p. 14; see also MacKinnon, 1991, p. 49).

Plainly, claims about the nature of metaphysical reality and religion cannot be reduced to statements about sense-experience. Nor can they be verified by sense-observation. After all, as MacKinnon later put it, 'the claim that God exists defie[s] any attempt made to specify conditions under which we would suppose it confirmed or refuted'. It

followed from Ayer's method that '[a]gnostics and atheists as much as theists [are] engaged in unintelligible disputes' (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 49).

Perhaps surprisingly, ethical statements did not fall completely to this charge of unintelligibility, despite being, on the face of it, unanalysable. Ayer saved them by classing evaluative language as merely expressive. This expressive mode of language completed the triad into which Ayer divided significant sentences: reports of sense-data, representations of linguistic rule or calculus, and expressions of emotion.

One of MacKinnon's earliest papers, 'And the Son of Man That Thou Visiteth Him' (1938), attempted a 'tentative' critique of Ayer's philosophy and of the broader cultural currents of logical positivism. He saw in the positivists' phenomenalism an ambitious hope that science could be unified—this is because once all sentences are reduced to statements about sense-data, sentences belonging to distinct domains of knowledge can (it was hoped) be inter-translated. But alongside this promise, MacKinnon also saw the threat of authoritarianism. Given that it was precisely to counter dogma and prejudice that the earliest members of the Vienna Circle developed their 'logical empiricism', this fear might seem incredible. After all, an appeal to experience is surely democratising. But MacKinnon worried that if the 'stuff of the physical world' is merely the data of sense-awareness, the practice and purpose of scientific understanding would be distorted. Science's task, MacKinnon feared, would be transformed from 'a quest to discover the nature of an external reality' into 'the elaboration of technical devices whereby the order of our sensations may be predicted and controlled' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 263). In a later paper, 'Ayer's Attack on Metaphysics' (1991), MacKinnon offered an illustration of this shift. It might be thought that it is part of the structure of colour, understood as a property of the world, that the same surface cannot be simultaneously coloured red and blue, and that the source of this exclusion could be an object of scientific enquiry. But for the positivists, this putative 'material exclusion' does not arise out of the 'essence of colour whereby it was differentiated into various mutually exclusive manifestations' but is instead a result of our 'conscious or unconscious choice of conceptual organization' (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 56). On this second view, MacKinnon points out, a scientific theory about colour exclusion is really a proposal concerning our linguistic rules, and the only possible criterion for acceptance of such a proposal is 'convenience'. In this brave new world, MacKinnon warned, '[t]he emphasis [would be] laid not upon the truth of the scientific schema as affording an insight into one or other aspect of the structure of facts, but on its utility as an instrument of control' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 263).

This was the 'greatly daring' conclusion MacKinnon reached in 1938. Where there are no essences to grasp, rationality becomes 'a faculty of manipulation, not of comprehension' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 264). Mastery of technique subordinates living and doing. Most striking from our perspective is the connection that he drew between the positivist's elimination of metaphysics and an implicit doctrine of mankind.

I might suggest that part of the logical positivist achievement is its interpretation of the famous Aristotelian definition of man—'rational animal'—in the context of scientific empiricism. For this scientific procedure, which by the logical positivists is erected into a kind of absolute, demands surely before all else efficient calculating machines. Otherwise, that manipulation of the sensibly given, which is the task of science, will be impossible. The translation of 'rational animal' into 'efficient, calculating machine' is an extremely complicated task.

The logical positivist seeks, I suggest, to prepare man for his subordination to the process of empirical science which is erected into an absolute. The elimination of metaphysics is before all else an assault on man in the interests of a method. (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 269)

THREE STRANDS OF THINKING

By the time that Anscombe, followed by Foot, Midgley and Murdoch, came to sit in MacKinnon's Keble rooms for tutorials, their teacher had then already developed a distinctive and critical understanding of logical positivism and

the anthropology that, as it seemed to him, it promulgated. In this section, we fill out three strands of his thinking at that time—partly gestured at already—that make up his positive picture and which together give rise to his distinctive philosophical method.

Receptivity

As we have seen, MacKinnon attacked logical positivism for the implicit doctrine of man contained within it. Still, there was one aspect of Ayer's programme for which MacKinnon had deep sympathy. MacKinnon praised Ayer's 'devotion to sense-experience', which was 'in part at least occasioned by a conviction that hard fact was to be found there' (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 61). MacKinnon too was devoted to the empirical if not empiricism. He later said that G. E. Moore's critique of idealism had made it possible for him to form a conception of a reality that transcended experience, as well as allowing him to view truth as not being a matter of coherence (Müller, 2010, p. 46). He saw in Ayer's 'devotion' mutual recognition that we discover what is given in perception; we do not fashion reality for ourselves. For someone so drawn to the rite of the Eucharist, it is not hard to appreciate the intellectual and spiritual importance of this realist ontology—that is, one that allows for unmediated contemplation of an object that does not depend for its existence on human cognition (Müller, 2010, p. 25).

In MacKinnon's work however, empirical realism is coupled to a kind of Kantianism, though one that rejects Transcendental Idealism's dualism of the phenomenal and noumenal. Where Kant places that to which our Will should be freely bound—the Moral Law—outside the realm of experience and necessity, MacKinnon found the source of the demands of morality within experience. This meant rejecting any conception of 'experience' as mere sense-data. For MacKinnon, we encounter living particulars in experience,⁴ something his positivist interlocutors could not say.⁵ And unlike the positivists, but like the (realist) Oxford Intuitionists H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross, MacKinnon also believed moral reality could be met with in experience and, accordingly, that moral statements are truth-evaluable and not (as Ayer would have it) merely expressive.

Human nature

As we saw above, part of what MacKinnon came to fear in the philosophy of logical positivism was its distortion of the Aristotelian—and Thomist—notation of man as 'rational animal'. MacKinnon's theological commitments are perhaps most deeply woven in this part of his thinking, but we can bring to the fore what is most relevant to our present philosophical concerns by focussing on the ethical understanding of the norm of humanity that MacKinnon wanted to secure. It was this that, as he saw it, Ayer had replaced with a vision of the ideally rational human as an 'efficient, calculating machine'.

The logical positivist's assimilation of human reason to the activity of calculation and symbolic manipulation emerges from the way in which his accounts of meaning and experience combine.

First, recall that the empiricist divides language into three modes: reporting sense-data, representing linguistic rules or calculus, and expressing or evoking emotion. As MacKinnon observes, for Ayer it is 'only within the second mode [viz. when language is used to represent calculus] that the question—Why?—[can] be asked in the sense in which man qua rational asks it' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 265). 'Why?' cannot be asked within the first mode, because the sensuously given is passively received through the senses. This means that it is understood as data, rather than as a source of external rational constraint.⁶ 'Why?' cannot be asked within the third mode, because it is mere expression.

Second, by treating the sensuously given as data, and restricting reason to the realm of conventional symbolism, Ayer's brand of empiricism—somewhat ironically—thereby cuts the faculty of reason loose from that of comprehension. Reason—like science—becomes an activity of symbolic manipulation rather than the discipline of seeking

to comprehend the sensuously given. Man's rationality on this picture, MacKinnon notes, 'resides solely in his self-consistency in the observation of the conventions he has established' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 265).

Against the logical positivist's highly restricted, formal notion of rationality, MacKinnon sets a rich practical conception, grounded in his distinctively realist and Kantian understanding of the given. For him, the question 'Why?' is not to be restricted to the realm of language 'as calculus', but belongs rather to 'the business of living' (MacKinnon, 1938b, p. 265). For MacKinnon, the 'Why?' that is the mark of the rational animal emerges of necessity in the context of human life, in which we are confronted with a reality that defies our capacity to understand it. Questions and doubts, he writes, 'take a living practical form' as we seek to make sense of the living particulars—ourselves and others—that we encounter among the 'hard facts' of experience.

For MacKinnon, the norm of humanity, or the ideal of human reason, is seen in our active rational engagement with the problem of living, which is also the problem of making sense of reality. For him, this activity is bound up with our status as creatures who not only are 'conscious of [our] creaturehood' (MacKinnon, 1941b/2011, p. 144) but also have 'minds open to comprehend the analogy of our being with that of our Creator' (MacKinnon, 1941a/2011, p. 14). Human reason, MacKinnon thinks, is fitted to both these tasks.

Metaphysics

The logical positivists took themselves to be eliminating only what was unintelligible. But MacKinnon insisted that those 'eliminative operations' must be seen against a 'background' that makes clear what broader socio-historical forces were motivating them. In his 1940 'What Is a Metaphysical Statement?', MacKinnon writes that it is 'manifestly obvious that, when positivists eliminate the unintelligible, it is because they are convinced that it is not merely unintelligible, but also superfluous'. This notion of superfluity is both normative and historically and culturally sensitive. It assumes an idea of what human knowledge is: of its aim, scope and purpose, and of its place in human life (MacKinnon, 1940, p. 7). These assumptions belong to the historical context in which the discourse of the logical positivist is itself meaningful—they are among what, as Collingwood might have said, logical positivism presupposes (Collingwood, 1940/1957).

MacKinnon points out that, even on his own terms, there is at least one entity the phenomenalist cannot make superfluous: the experiencing subject, without which the phenomenalist programme cannot be so much as begun. MacKinnon uses this way of undercutting the coherence of phenomenism as the starting point for an alternative conception of the human tendency to metaphysics. For MacKinnon, the self cannot be—as the phenomenalist inchoately acknowledges—'standpointless'. Humans exist at places and times, that is, in space and history. This locatedness generates perplexities in the form of practical problems—the 'Why?' of the rational animal. MacKinnon's own biography offers an example. He struggled with the practical question of whether to fight in what he took to be an unjust war, albeit against a real evil, or to take a stand as a conscientious objector, a genuine problem of living.

This 'Why?' of the rational animal is, MacKinnon holds, also the 'Why?' of the metaphysician. Because we are receptive to reality, and because we are limited in our perspective and in our capacities, our freedom and moral agency, it happens that we are constantly engaged in metaphysical enquiry.⁷ For MacKinnon, metaphysics not only belongs to philosophy but arises out of human life in general. As MacKinnon elsewhere writes, '[h]uman life, especially when informed by a certain degree of self-conscious awareness, ... [is] a place where the problem of metaphysics is set, and the question of its possibility most sharply raised' (MacKinnon, 1974, p. 25). It is a characteristic feature of the self-subsistent self-consciously aware rational animal that he or she seeks to comprehend his or her being and activity and the being and activity of those he or she encounters. This is part of our nature as 'metaphysical animals'. Inevitably, the kind of clarity to which a linguistic philosophy aspires cannot speak to the individual in the grip of a real moral dilemma or confronting the paradox of her own freedom and constraint.

A METHOD AND A PEDAGOGY

MacKinnon's conception of metaphysics is the background for his 1953 UNESCO report 'The Teaching of Philosophy in the United Kingdom' (MacKinnon, 1953). The report was written in response to UNESCO's 'international enquiry into the place occupied by the teaching of philosophy ... in the educational systems of various countries, its influence on the moulding of the citizen, and the contribution it can make towards bringing about better understanding among men' (Canguilhem et al., 1953, p. 7). A guiding motivation was the idea that philosophical education could be an instrument for toleration, intercultural understanding and—following a world war—ultimately for peace. MacKinnon's report from the United Kingdom was published alongside reports from Cuba, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, India and the United States. In the 'joint statement' that forms the preface, the reports' authors wrote that in their view:

teaching should be maintained and preserved wherever it already exists, and extended and reinforced wherever it is being established, but also ... that it should be set up, with due regard for educational and cultural traditions, in countries where it does not yet exist. In expressing this wish, the Committee is not unaware of the risks involved in the act of free and autonomous reflection, but it considers that it is true to the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in maintaining that a man can become fit for intellectual freedom only through the exercise of that freedom. (Canguilhem et al., 1953, p. 13)

In his own report, MacKinnon lists an illustrative set of texts the British student was likely to encounter (this list, he says, 'gives some assurance that students are not allowed to forget that their subject has a history'), alongside two examples of 'great' teachers who 'by their integrity of mind and will, have left their mark on their day and generation' (MacKinnon, 1953, p. 121). They are the British Idealist, Radical and political philosopher T. H. Green, and the Cambridge Realist, and idol of Bloomsbury group, G. E. Moore. MacKinnon's focus on individual philosophers whose work manifests the practical perplexity of the metaphysical animal is characteristic of his approach. Green and Moore were not 'preachers', he writes, yet their philosophy arose, however indirectly, out of a 'public need'—as we shall see, this too is the place where 'the problem of metaphysics is set'. The report continues:

Indifference to the needs of the world at large as well as intellectual inbreeding are, let us admit, besetting sins of the academic philosopher: but the way of amendment is not that of confusing his function with those of the priest or poet, but rather perhaps in a wider experience of, and sensitivity to, the human and natural contexts in which his work is done. (Canguilhem et al., 1953, p. 121)

These words echo in MacKinnon's *A Study in Ethical Theory*, published four years later. There the observation assumes the status of a philosophical method linked to the three strands of his thinking described above. This method takes the form of an understanding of what the moral philosopher does.

The moral philosopher, MacKinnon argues in that book, is someone who 'sooner or later' is involved in certain kinds of conversations. These are conversations about matters that are of 'deep human concern'—human conduct, goodness, how to live. The moral philosopher 'interrupts' these conversations at a particular moment in time, and does so self-consciously; he talks, but he also 'talks about his talk'.⁸ There is thus what MacKinnon calls a 'two-levelledness' to the moral philosopher's contribution to these conversations. It is because of the philosopher's self-consciousness along the second dimension ('talk about talk') that he can speak in the first way to the concerns of those who 'are trying in concrete to answer the question of how they shall live their daily lives' (MacKinnon, 1957, p. 7).

MacKinnon gives H. A. Prichard, the Oxford intuitionist realist, as an example of a philosopher who contributes in this way. Prichard interrupted a longstanding conversation about the relation between moral action and the promotion of some good—for example, welfare or happiness (Prichard, 1912). This is a conversation to which theorists as diverse

and temporally distant as Plato, Mill and G. E. Moore have contributed. Prichard interrupted this conversation in the context of a broader (post-Victorian) cultural anxiety about the nature of duty and its relation to convention and tradition. He intervened to shift the terms in which the conversation was being conducted by showing where conceptual distinctions had been blurred or confused. He pointed out, for example, that our ability to recognise where our duty lies is not necessarily connected to the promotion of interests nor to our knowledge of conventions and rules. Here Prichard is working at the second level (talk about talk). Still, it is at the level 'of ordinary engagement in the business of living' (the first level) that the moral philosopher speaks to those in need. As MacKinnon writes:

Moral philosophers, whether this be their intention or not, do clarify or obscure, or at least somehow speak or fail to speak to, the needs of those in perplexity, of those trying to decide a moral question—say, the salvaging of their marriage, the bringing up their children, their attitude to the claims upon them of a religious or political authority. (MacKinnon, 1957, p. 9)

These two levels are folded together, says MacKinnon, when some thesis that the moral philosopher advances about the status of some concept, or set of concepts, is received as doctrine. He cites G. E. Moore's influence on Maynard Keynes and the Bloomsbury set as an example of a case where this has happened: a moral philosopher's theses or ideas are taken up as doctrine, in answer to the question 'how to live', and they thereby come to shape a way of living.

We know, then, that by the 1940s, MacKinnon conceived of metaphysics as concerned with the question of how to live—in other words, the question of what, through our action, we should bring into being. The problem of metaphysics arises, as Kant saw, because we must answer these questions from within our empirical—sensory and epistemic—and mortal limitations. In the final section of this paper, we look at how these ideas fed into the philosophy of the Quartet. But prior to that, we want to ask how this understanding of metaphysics and human life might have shaped MacKinnon's teaching. As David Bakhurst puts it (this issue), 'As soon as the concept of life is brought to centre stage, then philosophical attention must alight on education if only because education is so critical to the human lifeform. No account of the character of a human life can fail to countenance the transformative power of education' (Bakhurst, 2022, p. x).

Stories of MacKinnon's charismatic and—at times—alarming style as a teacher abound. He lay on the floor, hung out of the window and paced the room—descriptions from his students are of a man in continuous physical motion and psychological distress.⁹ 'He's perpetually on the brink of a nervous breakdown', Murdoch observed (Conradi, 2001, p. 123). He formed deep intellectual and personal connections with his students—Foot, Midgley and Murdoch all felt themselves 'created' as philosophers by MacKinnon. It is easy to dismiss these stories of his style as a teacher as philosophically irrelevant, but as with Wittgenstein's teaching, the separation between style and substance here is not easily drawn.¹⁰

First, MacKinnon wanted his students to see themselves as entering historical conversations at a place and time. The moral philosopher is someone who interrupts conversations, all the while knowing that their philosophical interventions have the power to be received as doctrine. This orientation requires close attention to the questions that philosophers actually ask, and to the particular moment in history in which they arose.¹¹ It also requires a level of moral seriousness. The philosopher must be aware that his interventions can have practical, ethical import for others—can shape the way in which a woman deliberates about a divorce, or a young man resolves a dilemma about whether to become a conscientious objector. This seriousness MacKinnon displayed in his teaching by refusing to hide the extreme difficulty—intellectual and personal—of the sort of thinking required. Second, because metaphysical enquiry starts with recognition of the limitations of any individual's perspective, there is a natural impetus to search for another whose different perspective may supplement one's own. The search for truth is cooperative or (as MacKinnon puts it) conversational. This might be thought to contrast with the style of argumentation that characterised Brethren meetings before the war (as well as much recent analytic philosophy); the Brethren were said to have been like 'a pack of hounds' (Ignatieff, 2000, p. 85). Where the task is the comprehension of reality, and the

search for truth is mutual (each of us limited in our perspective, each of us needing to make ourselves understood to an equally limited other), MacKinnon taught that philosophers need to use language in ways that outdistance the techniques of the logical positivist. We need, that is, to use metaphor, analogy and poetry—language that cannot be empirically verified. This sort of speech is a means by which we imaginatively take up what another is saying, seek to understand their perspective on reality, or attempt to articulate features of our own that are beyond their experience. This sort of work requires philosophers to attend to each other fully, as fellow metaphysical animals. To teach it demands a level of intimacy between teacher and student of just the sort that Foot, Midgley and Murdoch describe.

MACKINNON'S INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCE

The philosophy that Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch went on to produce is inflected by or shares many of the themes in MacKinnon's own writings. Just as MacKinnon chooses to illuminate philosophy by giving as exemplars 'great' teachers who 'by their integrity of mind and will, have left their mark on their day and generation', the teacher MacKinnon can be an exemplar through which certain unifying features of the Quartet's corpus come into view. We are not, of course, claiming either that the Quartet should be viewed as 'MacKinnonites', nor even that he is the fundamental or most significant influence on the thought of any one of them—this would be misleading or false in different ways in all cases. Rather, we claim that viewing them in constellation with this particular teacher reveals a deep current of metaphysical thinking in which they share.

MacKinnon's twin interests in the religious life and symbolic logic were, as Price observed, unusual. Anscombe would later note that people were (and still, perhaps, are) often surprised that a 'seriously believing Catholic Christian should be analytic philosopher' (Anscombe, 2008, p. 66). Though Price thought MacKinnon 'unique', his orientation speaks to an alternative tradition in analytic philosophy, one that eschews the anti-metaphysical naturalism that the logical positivists traced to Hume, and instead uses the tools of linguistic analysis to re-animate a form of metaphysical thinking that involves looking at the world, and finding there 'enormously interesting' facts; facts that are not 'information' but are about the essence of things. Though, from the present perspective, this is rightfully considered a branch of *analytic* philosophy—Moore, Stebbing and the Oxford intuitionists have their place; the *Tractatus* we look to is Anscombe's rather than Ayer's (see Anscombe, 1959, and discussion thereof in Wiseman, 2022). It is a strand that is also fruitfully understood as continuous with British Idealism, and which brings in marginalised figures such as A.D. Lindsay, R. G. Collingwood and H. W. B. Joseph as well as Dorothy Emmet (whose *The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking* was published in 1945). In this tradition, part of what it is to conduct analysis is not to reduce, simplify and homogenise, but to seek connections, to place that portion of concrete reality that confronts an individual into the context of a wider whole or background that goes beyond the limits of what is observable,¹² to locate difference. What runs through this is the view that the opposite of having the metaphysical facts in view is not having a mistaken theory about how things are, or must be, but having a distorted, confused or partial view of things—a *misplaced* perception or understanding of how things hang together. Good metaphysical thinking, according to this tradition, does not yield explanatory power but a clear vision. And this vision is unifying. MacKinnon's work illuminates the deeply ethical, and indeed spiritual, dimension of this project. As Midgley would later observe, from the intention to mend the positivist's cleavage between fact and value, 'a lot of metaphysical consequences would follow' (Midgley, 2016).

CODA

We offer here some brief comments on specific ways in which aspects of their teacher's conception of philosophy infect the work of Murdoch, Foot and Midgley. Anscombe, who we leave out, was taught only briefly by MacKinnon,

and her relation to her teacher is markedly different from that of the other three. The recent work of John Haldane (2019), John Berkman (2021) and André Müller (2010) on Blackfriars, and the Oxford Dominican community there in the 1930s and 1940s, has begun to map the shared circle of intellectuals in which both MacKinnon and Anscombe moved. MacKinnon was a close friend of Victor White, the deputy editor of the community's scholarly journal *Blackfriars*, with whom Anscombe studied Aquinas in 1939 (Berkman, 2021). Both Anscombe and MacKinnon were members of the lay community Pax (see Anscombe, 1939/1981), and when Anscombe interrupted Oxford's Convocation in 1956, protesting the proposal to award Harry S. Truman an honorary degree (see Anscombe, 1956), MacKinnon wrote to her to express his 'sincere admiration for your courage and integrity in acting as you did' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, 2022, p. 289).

Iris Murdoch

MacKinnon's intellectual influence on Murdoch was profound and arguably lifelong. This shows up in many places.¹³ Both were committed to the particular. Both were concerned with the problem of metaphysics and with moral progress and freedom. Both saw the attractions as well as the detractions of existentialism. In an application for a Sarah Smithson fellowship at Newnham College Cambridge in 1946, Murdoch reports that it was only towards the end of her course at Oxford that she realised that ethics could be done 'seriously and profoundly treated from an academic view' (see Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman, 2022, p. 157). She is speaking of MacKinnon. Following her 1982 Gifford lectures, which became *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), she recorded in her journal that she had received a letter. The letter-writer reported that among Gifford lecturers, only Donald MacKinnon (and one other), whose lectures on *The Problem of Metaphysics*, were given more than 15 years earlier (in 1965 and 1966), had made anything like a similar impact, 'talking to us not just with wisdom but love'. Murdoch jotted: 'I have received the letter I have been waiting for' (Murdoch, 1982, p. 27).

Most broadly, in methodological terms, Murdoch can be seen as engaged in the genealogical task of uncovering the latent metaphysics that guides morality. Like MacKinnon, her motive is to understand what happens to our moral and political lives when philosophy is received as doctrine. Indeed, this kind of analysis is the task of moral philosophy.

Philippa Foot

While Foot conducted much of her early and late conversation about ethics at the second level of talk that MacKinnon identifies—where the philosopher self-consciously maps the logic of some domain of language, within the context of a historical conversation—her work was fundamentally shaped by the spirit of her times. She wrote that she first turned to ethics because she needed to find a response to questions that the Holocaust and Nazism had raised (Voorhoeve, 2011, p. 91). This is metaphysics in MacKinnon's deep sense. While living in America (1969–1991), she wrote about abortion and euthanasia, connecting both to the practical difficulties of acting when justice and charity make different demands. One of her late essays, 'Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?' (2000), self-consciously references (in its title) the Prichard paper that she likely studied with MacKinnon. Like Prichard, she interrupts a conversation, this time to highlight a respect in which non-cognitivist theories—'one and all'—are based on a mistake about the concept of 'reasons for action'. The Aristotelian ethical naturalism of her late work chimes with a comment made in MacKinnon's 1941 'Revelation and Social Justice':

In my own work in moral philosophy I have found myself increasingly dissatisfied with a deontological view of ethics, and I will not deny that more and more I have found myself compelled to adopt some such conception of a norm of manhood as the basis of ethical judgment. (MacKinnon, 1941b/2011, p. 145)

He describes this task as one of 'appalling difficulty'. This is the task that Foot takes up. Her late appeal to natural goodness is to forms of life that are the background or wider circumstances against which we can see something as being the kind of thing it is and that, in this sense, can be said to transcend here and now (Foot, 2001).

Mary Midgley

Like Murdoch and Foot, Midgley's work can also be read as 'interruptive'. With Murdoch and MacKinnon, she sees in the legacy of Enlightenment (and the Newtonian world picture and liberal politics that underlies it) a scientific picture of man. In Midgley's work, this picture is also seen as subordinating the creaturely dimensions of our lives in, as MacKinnon put it in 1938, the interests of a method. Midgley's work is not anti-science. Rather she rails against the transfer of a methodologically fruitful reductivism to domains of life and thought where it does not belong. At the same time, she reveals the religiosity of the scientific aspiration—where science is conceived as salvation (see especially Midgley, 1992b).

Like MacKinnon, her metaphilosophy teaches that the world pictures—myths, stories and theories—that we receive as doctrines have, like Kantian categories, the power to shape our thought and lives. These are the 'myths' we live by Midgley (2003). The philosopher-genealogist is one who can, like a plumber, survey the underlying conceptual infrastructure that organises our lives and diagnose when, at the second level (talk about talk), there is a mismatch between our concepts and the terrain for living they are supposed to make navigable (see especially her 1992a). Such work is the work of analysis. But Midgley recognises too the perspectival and limited nature of our world pictures, something that metaphor and poetry can overleap and enlarge (see especially Midgley, 2001).

The closing sentences of MacKinnon's UNESCO report identify the need for a 'corrective' that Midgley's philosophical corpus, it might be said, seeks to provide:

It might not unfairly be said that in the present situation, for all its continuing vitality, there is a tendency to forget the setting of philosophy in general human culture, and to cultivate an almost philistine indifference to what defies expression with a peculiar sort of precision ... As a corrective of our impatience, we need a deeper hold on the history of our intellectual tradition. (MacKinnon, 1953, pp. 147–148)

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For more philosophical, biographical and historical background, see Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2022).
- ² For biographical detail that follows in this section, we are indebted to Müller (2010).
- ³ MacKinnon later expressed regret that he had not then understood the forces that had brought the Rector of Hamburg University to Oxford. Nazi legislation passed in April 1933 had excluded Jews and other political opponents from all civil service positions. See MacKinnon (1992).
- ⁴ This theme is implicit in his writing but see, e.g., MacKinnon (1957, pp. 276–277). Murdoch scholars will note future echoes of M&D (in her 1970) in the discussion of moral discovery and progress.
- ⁵ Here, the empiricist W. V. Quine's later slogan 'to be is to be the value of a variable' marks the apotheosis of the idea that MacKinnon rejected when he saw it in the work of Ayer: that what existence amounts to is to be understood in terms of the logic of our language (Quine 1948).
- ⁶ For an influential version of this objection to empiricism see John McDowell (1996).
- ⁷ And see also the 'why?' of Anscombe's (1957).

- ⁸The idea that the moral philosopher is someone who 'interrupts a conversation' is a motif in MacKinnon (1957, pp. 29, 94, 150, 207, 209).
- ⁹MacKinnon appears in parody form as the philosopher George Moore in Tom Stoppard's play *Jumpers* (1972).
- ¹⁰For interesting reflection on the relationship between MacKinnon and Wittgenstein, see Bowyer (2018).
- ¹¹Cf. the 'question and answer' method defended by R. G. Collingwood in his 1939 essay.
- ¹²For partial discussion of this idea in Anscombe, see Mac Cumhaill (2021).
- ¹³One possible example is discussed in Mac Cumhaill (2020).

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