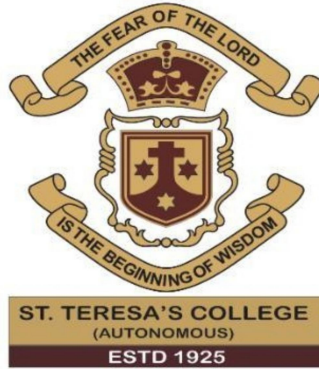


**THE QUESTIONING OF MORAL SUBJECTIVISM IN
POSTMODERNITY: A STUDY OF *METAPHYSICAL ANIMALS: HOW
FOUR WOMEN BROUGHT PHILOSOPHY BACK TO LIFE***



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “The Questioning of Moral Subjectivism in Postmodernity: A study of *Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back To Life*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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Introduction

'Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life' (2022) written by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, two British lecturers in Philosophy, is called a work of historico-logico-feminism. It unearths a suppressed piece of philosophical history that tells the story of four brilliant women philosophers who struggled to make their voices heard in a field traditionally dominated by men, and traces the intellectual trajectory of their thought in finely constructed argument that does justice to the rich, nuanced and intertwined nature of their ideas with its inseparability from our day to day lives. Set in 19th century Oxford, yet connected to other universities or schools of learning and scholarship across the world, the novel plays itself out amongst a society of academics and intellectuals, evoking images of an older, by-gone age where intellectual inquiry was not burdensome work, but a passionate pursuit that wholly absorbed one's thoughts and life energies.

The four women in *Metaphysical Animals* were born right after the 1st World War and witnessed the 2nd World War as young undergraduates at Oxford. They were thus exposed to the great horrors and evils of the time, perhaps most shocking among them the Jewish Holocaust. Therefore they naturally felt the need to denounce and condemn such unimaginable cruelty and to rationalize its immorality.

To quote Philippa Foot, one of the four women, "I wanted to be able to say to the Nazis: 'But we are right, and you are wrong.' I wanted the idea of an objective moral reality against which actions could be judged wrong or bad..."

(qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 144) The philosophers also wanted to understand these new extremes of evil and accommodate it to their prior knowledge of human nature. Most importantly, there had never been a greater need for firm and clear moral principles and reasoning; objective moral truths that people could hold on to and uphold amidst this great depravity and moral decline.

But at the same time, a new way of thinking ('a piece of philosophical history' that would influence the fate of our present day approach towards ethics) was emerging which Iris Murdoch described as 'the elimination of metaphysics from ethics' (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman). The big beasts of 20th century Philosophy— A.J Ayer, Gilbert Ryle and J.L. Austin were on a mission to dispose of topics such as human nature, God, morality, truth and beauty and to confine philosophical inquiry strictly within the limits of observable and empirically verifiable facts and phenomena.

Once the philosophy which tried to discover transcendent truths and mysteries was considered outdated and absurd, right and wrong were suddenly reduced to being viewed as mere human creations— just an expression of emotion or a personal principle. The four women then realized that they stood on the cusp of a new shaky moral ground which fell far short of providing them with the moral certainty that was desperately needed in the postwar world.

The book says, "Expression of personal disapproval or subjective emotion fell grossly short of what was needed, and Philippa was repulsed by the thought that if morality was subjective there is no way one could imagine oneself saying

to a Nazi, "But we are right and you are wrong", with there being any substance to the statement."(Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 144)

It thus became the life-long quest of these four women philosophers to arrive at a secular philosophy which could "use the language of morals", and "speak of objective moral truth"; and also to thus refute the subjectivist approach to Ethics, founded on the Fact/ Value dichotomy, that was the dominant trend in moral philosophy at that time.

This project uses the theories on Moral Philosophy and Ethics created by these four women— Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley and Philippa Foot, by applying them in the context of the contemporary postmodern world to provide an intellectual perspective on morality that is sorely lacking at present. Elizabeth Anscombe was a British analytic philosopher, professor at both Oxford and Cambridge, who was known as one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century. Iris Murdoch, an Irish-British novelist and philosopher, was recognised both for her reputation as one of the greatest British writers since 1945, and for her “transformative impact on the discipline” of moral philosophy. Mary Midgley was a British philosopher, senior lecturer at Newcastle university, who was awarded multiple honorary doctorates for her work on science, ethics and animal rights. Philippa Foot, an English philosopher and granddaughter of a former US President, was one of the founders of contemporary virtue ethics and importantly, an elected member of the American Philosophical Society.

The major theories of moral philosophy discussed in this project were introduced by these four philosophers as part of their efforts to counter the dominant theory of their day— ‘Logical Positivism’, which declared that morality was a subjective notion dependent upon social and individual opinion. During the 20 year period between 1938 and 1958 which included the wartime years, their “unpopular” ideas were violently opposed. But later as the four women fought their way onto the world stage, the enthusiasm and fanaticism that surrounded Logical Positivism slowly died down and their theories started gaining both hearing and acceptance.

The project attempts to use those theories, once used to refute the moral relativism brought about by the philosophy of logical positivism in the 19th century, in the new context of our 21st century contemporary world to question the relativist position on morality that resulted from the Spirit of Postmodernism. It tries to prove that in spite of the skepticism and fluidity typical of the Postmodern Age, human beings still have a background— a shared understanding of life, to refer to in order to make objective moral judgements that transcend individual or social constructs.

The first chapter, ‘A Clash of Worldviews: The Background That Determines Our Thought’, juxtaposes the philosophy of Logical Positivism with Postmodernism to draw out certain commonalities of origin and content, specifically their rejection of metaphysical foundations. By bringing in Lyotard’s theory of Metanarratives and comparing it with Lipscombe’s

Dawkins Sublime (A set of background assumptions, seldom explicitly formulated, that shapes and constrains our intellectual imagination (Libscombe 9)), it showcases the intellectual backgrounds that constrain our thought, which we must strive to break out of, if we are to think with clarity and intellectual humility.

The four philosophers in the book *Metaphysical Animals*, undertook their philosophical work of refuting Logical Positivism's moral subjectivity by connecting moral judgements to the wider background of our lives. Thus, the second chapter, 'Mending the Great Rift in Reality: The 'Offensive' Reconciliation of Fact & Value', attempts to study the insights the four women arrived at in diffusing the Fact/Value dichotomy (the distinction between statements of fact which are empirically provable and statements which express value judgements) that was central to Logical Positivism, specially in the light of the Truman incident, when Elizabeth Anscombe opposed Oxford's decision to award President Harry S. Truman, an honorary degree. It also highlights the role of language in allowing one to perceive and articulate the reality that surrounds us. The chapter ends with Hume's Categorical Imperative and the idea of moral freedom.

The third chapter, 'Moral Subjectivism as the Flattery of the Postmodern Spirit', is an attempt to answer some of the dilemmas faced by the postmodern world in encountering moral questions. It asks whether morality is truly a social construct, and attempts to make a positive case for how we can transcend the ethical dictates of our socio-cultural milieu, by becoming sensitive to the shared

background that we refer to in making moral judgements. In doing so, the chapter makes references to the theories of the four philosophers in *Metaphysical Animals*, besides Plato's theory of Forms. It also briefly discusses Nietzsche's radical skepticism in questioning metaphysical foundations to understand how the world came to see morality as a 'social construct'. It ends by examining the idea of moral perception by referring to the Truman incident. The concluding chapter sums up the findings of the study.

Chapter 1

A Clash of Worldviews: The Background That Determines Our Thought

“This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think!”

— Søren Kierkegaard (qtd. in ‘The Absolute Paradox’)

The story of the lives of Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot and Mary Midgley and their contributions to philosophy is presented as a *counter narrative* to the popular history of 20th century philosophy that saw the rise of moral subjectivism. This elimination of truth from moral philosophy was a consequence of the ‘fact/value distinction’ that characterized the philosophy of Logical Positivism, fueled by A.J Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). The most prominent proponents of this philosophy, A.J. Ayer, J.L. Austin and R.M Hare envisaged a completely value-free world where values were mere human projections on to a reality devoid of meaning, purpose or morals. “There is nothing deep, transcendent or valuable to be discovered.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 146)

According to Ayer, only two kinds of statements are meaningful:

- (1) statements about the world that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by experience.
 - (2) analytic statements that are true simply by virtue of the logic of our language.
- (Nagel)

To explain this idea briefly, moral judgements like ‘stealing is wrong’ or ‘kindness is good’ were considered to be statements of value which could never usurp the status of fact (=Truth) since they were evaluative propositions; for it was considered impossible for an evaluation to be anything more than an expression of subjective feeling or opinion. Under the method of Logical Positivism with its exaggerated emphasis on the structure of language, statements were often analyzed for linguistic choices of words that betrayed a subjective bias. For instance, words signifying empirically provable entities were taken to be indicators of truth, while words like ‘should’, ‘good & bad’, ‘right & wrong’, ‘beautiful’, ‘just’ etc. were believed to reflect value judgements that are human creations or metaphysical excesses that should be relegated to the realm of ‘nonsense’ since they could not be measured and verified by the cold, calculating methods of science. Thus, Logical Positivism drew a firm and clear distinction between fact and value, a separation or breach that created a wide gulf whereby Morality and Ethics came to be strictly forbidden from the domain of ‘truth’.

It was this limited outlook of linguistic analysis that characterized dominant 20th century philosophy, which led to a shift from seeking to comprehend the nature of truth, morality, beauty etc. to exploring the meanings of the words themselves. For example, philosophers were no longer asking ‘What is Good?’, but rather the starkly different question, ‘What does “Good” mean?’

With that concise survey of Logical Positivism, its ramifications and influence on 20th century thought, the paper will now proceed to juxtapose this philosophy with Postmodernism and its ideas. *‘The End of Metaphysics: Logical*

Positivism and Postmodernism’, a paper by Owen Blayne Chapman compares these two ideological frameworks to draw out certain commonalities of both origin and belief, in particular their anti-metaphysical agenda. Interestingly, both these philosophies are built on the questioning of the foundational metaphysical claims that attempt to construct theories about the nature of reality using the faculties of reason possessed by the human mind. These then function as the background against which knowledge is received, diagnosed or constructed. The logical positivists rejected metaphysical speculation on the grounds that its output consisted of ‘pseudo-propositions’ that could not be verified by appeal to facts. R.J. Collingwood’s reply to this accusation might serve to better explain the function of metaphysics for our purposes. According to him, “Metaphysics is not expressed in fully analyzed statements (or propositions) that can be individually verified. It is an attempt to understand the transcendent background to human life, against which individual propositions may be verified by observation and scientific investigation.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman) He goes on to give an example to illustrate this concept. Suppose you look up and see a piece of string stretched out horizontally above you. You realize that it is a clothes line. But this conclusion- “that’s a clothes line” cannot be verified by observation alone. An empirical investigation of the line of string would not reveal this truth since you know it is a clothes line only because you have pre-existing knowledge of its context, such as that it was placed there to hang washed clothes to dry. In Collingwood’s own words, “this at once situates the object against a vast, rationally structured background of human life and history- a background that

contains clothes and baths and soap, hygiene and standards of taste, ideas about cleanliness and smell and beauty, and reasons and motives and desires. This transcendent background is the subject matter of ethics and without it Ayer's (logical positivism's) favored (scientifically verifiable) propositions are left, like the clothes-line, hanging in the air." (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman)

But while Logical Positivism's elimination of metaphysical questions is intentional on grounds of its empirical uncertainty, postmodernism's incredulity towards metaphysically derived assumptions is a result of its rejection of the system building approach towards knowledge that is typical of modernity. Logical Positivism is described as "standing on the threshold between modernity and postmodernity". Any opposition toward modernity and all attempts to overthrow it, are first characterized by the refutation of metaphysical speculation. But while Logical Positivism still favors systematic construction as a method for the acquisition of knowledge, Postmodernism rejects the very idea of systems of knowledge and instead engages in deconstructing bodies of theory and discourse which claim to offer explanations and conclusions that are 'true'. While logical positivism sees a reality divested of transcendent value or morality, postmodernism does not claim to be able to see reality at all, since by means of its radical skepticism it considers reality to be unknowable! Therefore, the task that postmodernism has chosen for itself is that of deconstructing various bodies of knowledge and their output while carefully refraining from attempts to provide any positive knowledge or 'truth claims' to take its place.

But it must be understood that postmodern skepticism in claiming that reality is unknowable and hence objective knowledge impossible, starts out from a position of uncompromising and absolute objectivity. Since it has already concluded that reality is unknowable, it does not leave any room for doubts about this belief. It says “I know this about reality-- that reality is unknowable.” As we can see, it is a self-refuting statement.

A postmodern concept that must be weaved into the thread of these arguments at this juncture, is the idea of Metanarratives. This was a term developed by Jean-François Lyotard “to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.” (qtd. in Klages) Postmodernism is thus defined by incredulity towards grand narratives or overarching stories which attempt to interpret and explain all events and phenomena through the lens of its own distinct and exclusive set of beliefs and perspectives. In the book ‘Metaphysical Animals’ the lives of the four women and the intellectual trajectory of their thought is traced as a counter narrative to the prevailing history of 20th century Philosophy, which is a Metanarrative that narrates a discourse in which the discipline of Philosophy was lost in an analytic desert starved and deprived of metaphysical value.

Even then, the four women philosophers had a term of their own to diagnose the kind of intellectual conceit prevalent in their time which excluded an entire body of thought from their criterion of acceptability. They called it the ‘Billiard-Ball Picture’ of the universe as a value-less reality grounded in the fact-value

dichotomy which had infiltrated the contemporary philosophy that Elizabeth, Iris, Mary and Philippa were determined to fight. Since no ethical propositions could be derived from facts, human beings were condemned to create value and meaning of their own amidst an alienated existence in a cold and bereaved world.

Benjamin Lipscombe, author of *'The Women are up to Something'*, another book based on the four women, describes this 'Billiard-Ball Picture' as an example of 'the Dawkins Sublime', a term that he introduces to reveal the background pictures that frame human thought. He refers to this as "A set of background assumptions, seldom explicitly formulated, that shapes and constrains our intellectual imagination." (Lipscombe 9) According to Lipscombe, the background picture handed down to us by 20th century philosophy as an aftermath of the scientific revolution, was one of a value-less material reality. But this was supposed to be a mere theoretical simplification, that afforded a helpful pattern of explanation, mainly for the service of the empirical sciences. Instead, intellectuals began to apply this lens intended to aid one in understanding and studying the physical world, indiscriminately to all aspects of reality including the intangible and transcendent. Thus, "Value became something unreal", and anything transcendent, anything of value such as virtue, beauty or God had to be mere human creations; or as written in *Metaphysical Animals*- "projections on to a value-free reality."

Thus, Metanarratives, startlingly similar to the concept of a Dawkins Sublime, constrains our intellectual imagination within the frameworks of overarching theories which claim the status of objective truth. Both refer to

comprehensive patterns of interpretation which attempt to diagnose reality through a particular perspective. It is extremely difficult for us to think outside these pictures that frame our thoughts or even to realize that there is a background picture in the first place.

Interestingly, even while it engages in deconstructing Metanarratives, Postmodernism itself assumes the status of a grand narrative since it provides a background against which knowledge is received and constructed, if only in the form of rejecting the positive propositions of modernism. Postmodernism is grand, overarching and attempts to interpret everything through a distinct lens.

Postmodernism is also a worldview, perhaps a fragmented one, but a worldview nevertheless. Even a claim like "There is no absolute truth' is a tremendously consequential assertion since it creates a fundamental premise upon which a worldview is constructed. For example, if you believe that absolute truth does not exist, you will inevitably come to reject anything that claims to be absolute. Thus you already have a lens through which you view the world, even though the ideology which gave you the lens claims to be engaged in deconstructing and disposing of all such lenses!

But perhaps the inconsistencies and contradictions within this body of knowledge, can be explained though not justified by its radical deviation from traditional approaches towards knowledge. As I pointed out in brief earlier, Postmodernism rejects system-building- the systematic, step-by-step construction of knowledge from bottom upwards, guided by our powers of reason. According to Deleuze and Guattari, while Modern or Enlightenment thought could be

likened to the model of a tree where “everything that is the tree is part of a coherent organic system which has grown vertically, progressively, and steadily”, (qtd. in Klages 176) Postmodern thought can be compared to a ‘Rhizome’, a model of fungi which has “no central point, no particular origin, no definitive structure, no formative unity.”(qtd. in Klages 176)

It was such a dismal view of the world, one stripped of order, coherence or unity which assaulted a young Lieutenant Richard Hare’s (one of the prominent logical positivists) vision during the 2nd World War when he fought for the Allied Forces in Japan. It was through his traumatic exposure there to the brutalities of war and the depths of evil and depravity that human beings could stoop to, that he lost all faith in an objective moral reality and came to accept *Language, Truth and Logic*’s (by A.J. Ayer) background picture of a value-free world. For Hare, the irreconcilable clash of his moral beliefs with those of a Japanese commander who thought nothing of sending innocent men to their deaths in the interests of “magnifying their emperor and their country”, forced him to believe that morals were indeed a product of one’s culture or upbringing. Hare recalls that in the prisoner-of-war community “there was no background, no shared understanding of what mattered, on which he could depend.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 185)

Thus it was against this grim, desolate and unforgiving background of War, that objective moral certainties disintegrated into a value-less abyss which failed to offer man hope, purpose or meaning. According to Iris Murdoch, in the War-time world, they felt “rudderless”, “living outside the usual framework”. “Free to

do as they wished, they lived in fragments, acting on every passing thought or desire; nothing mattered”. (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 112)

“They were looking for a worldview with an emphasis on freedom and individuality, and which was less buttoned up”. (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 38)

Thus, even bodies or frameworks of theory and knowledge such as Postmodernism or Logical Positivism are formed against the background of historical events, social revolutions and their effects on the pattern of human life. These broader backgrounds of our lives create the beliefs, attitudes and assumptions which then in turn function as the intellectual backgrounds that constrain human thought and imagination. Therefore, human beings have always had a background as a reference point for their thought. Human thoughts, judgements and intellectual endeavors have never been free of prejudice or bias since these are always rooted in the wider structures and patterns of life and society. The next chapter delves more deeply into the idea of backgrounds and its implications for moral philosophy.

Chapter 2

Mending The Great Cleavage In Reality: The 'offensive' reconciliation of Fact and Value

“When the backgrounds to our lives change, our words may no longer work as they used to, and possibilities for seeing and understanding each other and the world may be lost. Sometimes, when it matters most, what another person is doing (or what we are doing) can be obscure and dark. This is when philosophy comes into its own...”

— *Metaphysical Animals* (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 9)

At the crux of the counter-narrative that ‘Metaphysical Animals’ sets out to construct is an incident provoking feverish confusion and debate over the question of Ethics and Morality. On 1 May 1956, in an act of phenomenal moral courage, Elizabeth Anscombe stood as a lone dissenter amongst a room full of Oxford dons, the majority of whom were male, who had gathered to finalize a decision to award Harry S. Truman, former US President, an honorary degree from Oxford University. In spite of the popularity and respect that he commanded, Truman’s name was irrevocably tied to one act that he was famous for— signing the order that led to the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Elizabeth was convinced that to honor a man known everywhere for one 'terrible' action that led to the mass murder of innumerable innocent lives was to label that very act as being good or acceptable and to pick it out as "a clue as to how to go on". (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 294) She was thus deeply troubled by it and was determined to oppose the giving of the award.

In response to her moral claim, the Oxford dons could only see a man who had made the best of a complicated situation and done what he could to end the war and save the lives of his own countrymen. They failed to imagine Mr. Truman (a distinguished man of good character) as being wicked or evil enough to be capable of what Elizabeth was accusing him of— willful mass murder! After all, the only role the President had had in the affair was that of placing his signature at the bottom of a piece of paper. They considered Elizabeth's one-woman protest to be 'intemperate', 'high-minded', 'discourteous' and an 'embarrassment' to the university.

In order to combat the flurry of outrage directed against her assertions, Elizabeth resorted to the groundbreaking philosophical insights on Ethics discovered by the four women during the course of the intellectual journey that they had embarked on to try and mend the great cleavage in reality caused by the Fact/Value dichotomy. In a pamphlet Elizabeth published about the Truman incident, where she argued exhaustively against awarding him an honorary degree, she situated the former president's act within its transcendent background in order to afford *factual* credibility to the *value* judgment that she had made about it.

At that point in history, moral philosophy and any ideas about morality rested on the contrast discussed in the first chapter, between statements of fact and statements of evaluation. But the four women had discovered one fundamental mistake or gap in such a conception of morality. We make moral judgements or evaluations about an act, only in the face of certain fixed, undeniable facts which

do not differ according to individual perception. Therefore, as Philippa Foot pointed out, “so much of our language is both evaluative and descriptive!” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 196) For example, if I judge a particular action - of a little boy sharing his food with a classmate who forgot to bring his lunch- as being ‘kind’, I am referring to some criterion of kindness that both my listeners and I agree upon in order to give credibility to my judgment. This could be the boy’s thoughtfulness, lack of self-interest and desire for another’s well-being that was demonstrated in his action, all encapsulated in the word ‘kind’ which is both an evaluation and description. Thus, through the language I use, I am not just evaluating the boy’s action but also describing it by pointing to some factual conditions of kindness that we all recognise and accept.

For the four women, this radical reconciliation of fact and value was inseparable from a study of the structure of language and its use in our everyday lives. Elizabeth Anscombe proposed that our ability to perceive and understand actions and events depended upon our knowledge of the larger background within which our day-to-day lives were situated. According to the ideas of her mentor Ludwig Wittgenstein that Elizabeth drew from, this background or what to us is ‘reality’ is constructed and limited by the structure of human language. Or in other words, it was through language that one gained access to participation in human life since reality was constructed by language. Here, Elizabeth provides the example of a baby who sees his mother posting a letter in the mailbox. This is how an adult onlooker would describe the act, but this is not actually what the baby sees. Until he knows about letters and stamps and postmen, he cannot

receive this impression or give this particular description to the act. Thus, “This part of what is visible to us (that his mother is posting a letter) is invisible to him.” In Elizabeth’s picture of the world, “The richness and variety of the human world grows and shrinks and alters as we learn to speak and act.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 226)

Since our perception and awareness of the world is constructed by the language we use, we must turn our attention back to language in order to confront our dilemmas over the nature of morality. During one of their tea-room discussions, the four women study the word ‘Offense’ in order to understand its ‘contextual- situatedness’ in our everyday lives. In order to qualify an action as being “offensive”, I would need to connect my evaluation with some facts or “conditions of offense” that are widely recognised. For example, it seems absurd and senseless for me to say that reading a book is offensive. But if I fill out a background against which the act is situated- in which the book in question denigrates and abuses women, my evaluation would begin to make more sense. Thus, “the ethical dimension of a judgment comes into view when the background makes a connection to something that is of serious importance in a human life.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 197) In this example, for instance, it is the equality and dignity of all human beings. Thus, even when we may disagree about what is and is not ‘offensive’, “occasions for offense belong to a pattern in the weave of life... an evaluative description makes sense only when it is located in a (complex) pattern of human life.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 196,197)

In this regard, we must also realize that it is the particular words we use— such as kind, offensive, patient, jealous— with their specialized meanings that both describe and evaluate an action, which connect the action to the broader metaphysical background behind human life from which we are able to draw objective moral judgements. Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot drew a distinction here between ‘general’ words and ‘specialized’ words in making moral evaluations. General words such as good, bad, right and wrong were vague terms which divulge very little about the metaphysical background and moral awareness which lie behind the judgment. “The meaning of these concepts is exhausted by their condemnatory or commendatory content.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 276) But specialized words like kind, honest, just, courageous, cruel, arrogant, treacherous, dishonest etc. constitute a richer vocabulary which not only evaluates, but also identifies, describes and distinguishes an action, by providing the listener access into that meaningful frame of reference against which these judgements were made. Such words have a “deep, ramifying structure that connects to the multi-patterned background of human life”. (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 276)

Words and other signifiers do not exist as independent units, carrying their meanings in compartmentalized packages within them. They “come alive” in the context of a particular society in a distinct time and place. Thus in order to bring a word to life, we must ground it in its unique socio-historical context. In this light, this paper attempts to locate the word ‘Offense’ in the pattern of our contemporary post-modern world.

We know that the Spirit of our Age worships freedom and individuality; it rejects anything absolute, rigid or immovable outside of our own wishes, desires and impulses. We inhabit a 'Post-truth world' constructed out of the ravages of the Post-World War landscape that poisoned our faith in the 'good' and those moral certainties which flow from it. Thus as evil erupted over the world, humankind lost all clarity over what is right or wrong, good or bad, and morality came to be relegated to the sphere of the subjective. Moral truth was soon seen as a myth, while morals were mere social constructs- the upshot of one's particular upbringing.

Interestingly, in the 21st century world that has whole-heartedly embraced moral relativism, the word 'offense' has come to be inextricably linked to moral judgements in popular culture. On looking up the word in the Dictionary, it was found to contain two meanings: "1) A breach of a law or rule; an illegal act. 2) Annoyance or resentment brought about by a 'perceived' insult to or disregard for 'oneself'." It is the second meaning that is important in this paper. It is tremendously suggestive that the definition of 'offense' talks about "a *perceived* insult to *oneself*." A 'perceived' insult seems to suggest an action being 'interpreted' as offensive, meaning that the criterion of offense is open to subjective interpretation. Secondly, an offense is defined as an insult incurred exclusively to 'oneself'- an injury affecting or wounding one's personal feelings. Surely, it is therefore no matter of chance that this word carrying such a deeply intrinsic connotation of the subjective, has come to be projected as the emblem of moral judgment or evaluation in our language today. It signifies the postmodern

preoccupation with the subjective and our indulgence of the 'self' above all rule or authority. For instance when we say, "What she said was offensive!" we usually mean something like, "My *feelings* were wounded by what she said!" We don't even think of whether the act was right or wrong; our primary concern is with how it affected *me* or with what 'I' thought of what she did.

But when the reference point for moral judgment is oneself, we deprive ourselves of the shared background that we rely on "to orient ourselves in ethical relations to others." (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 276) That background could be a set of principles, an understanding of what is important in human life or as Elizabeth Anscombe says, "A relation to the divine." (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 197) But when this background is stripped away, it is natural that values and ethical judgements enter into a state of flux, driven along by the unstable, unreliable currents of human feeling and opinion. For instance, their inability to perceive the background within which Mr. Truman acted made it impossible for the Oxford dons to evaluate the president's action correctly.

In her pamphlet about the Truman incident, Elizabeth Anscombe pointed out that when the world changes quickly or violently, our language becomes inadequate to articulate the new, unfamiliar reality that surrounds us. It was in such a radically altered world, set against the harsh, disordered background of disintegrating security and uncertainty brought about by the Second World War, that the former President acted. And in such situations, "when it matters most, what another person is doing (what we are doing) can become obscure and dark." (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 9)

And Elizabeth writes, "Harry S. Truman acted in a reality that transcended him." (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 292) What she means is that his act of signing a piece of paper ordering the dropping of the atomic bombs, was carried out within a grand scheme of things comprised of institutions, conventions, machineries of war, treaties etc. where he, as the President of the United States, was located within that pattern in a unique way with certain powers that he was fully aware of. Therefore Mr. Truman did not merely put his signature on a piece of paper— that is only a *value free*, literal description of his action. Truman's act can be accurately judged only if it is *described* and *evaluated* against the transcendent background in which it was carried out. Therefore, the description 'ordering the bomb' applied to his act because of the circumstances inside which it was carried out. (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 292)

But this unique background or set of circumstances in which 'signing an order' amounted to the mass murder of innocents, was "of such scale and complexity" that the onlookers and even Mr. Truman could not accurately judge the action by associating the signature and the dropping of the bombs with each other. Thus Elizabeth goes on to conclude, "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." (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 293)

Perhaps this is why one of the four women philosophers, Iris Murdoch, believed, "True moral freedom is the ability to look steadily at reality and to see things justly. To see what matters, what things are important and good. To look

again and to rethink the past... This work of looking is a continuing task.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 238) And as Iris’ beloved professor and mentor, Donald McKinnon puts it, “It requires humility and purity of heart.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 239)

This idea of moral freedom, the ability to soar above the backgrounds and circumstances clouding our thought and forcing us to act within their restrictive frames, was further expounded by Emmanuel Kant in his *‘Critique of Practical Reason’*. According to him, deeply embedded in the heart of morality is a moral law called ‘The Categorical Imperative’, Kant’s term for the knowledge that we *‘ought’* to do something against our desires or impulses in certain circumstances. Such judgments are often the product of much meditative reflection and careful thought, by which we reach a conclusion of what is the right thing to do. Kant believes that to arrive at a knowledge of what one *ought* to do, is to thereby make an accompanying judgment that one is *capable* of doing it. This awareness places us outside the cause and effect pattern of our sensations, impulses, desires and the circumstances that control them. It brings me a recognition of something greater and nobler, situated outside my immediate circumstances and bodily impulses; something to which I am held accountable and which thus reveals to me a higher calling which transcends that of the finite world in which I am situated. Kant says that this stirs within us both reverential awe for the infinite and a feeling of deep purpose, for we thus gain insight into our own human nature- “We are finite beings, belonging to... and determined by the laws of causation. And yet, we belong too to the world of freedom; we can choose freely, our will is

unconstrained.” He likened this sense of wonder to the feeling evoked by “the great expanse of the starry heavens.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 81)

Back in 1956, the Oxford dons justified Truman’s action by claiming that he was compelled to act as he did in deciding to pass the order to drop a rain of atomic devastation on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, because of the peculiar circumstances in which he was situated. According to them, he was forced to make the deadly decision in the interests of ending the war and saving the lives of his countrymen. But as Kant’s Categorical Imperative demonstrates, human beings are not just *capable*, but also possess an *obligation* to arrive at a knowledge of what one *ought* to do in a particular situation and to likewise *act* according to it. We have been endowed with the mystical gift of moral freedom. Hence, Truman was fully *capable* of doing the right thing despite the extenuating circumstance that he was trapped in. In Mary Midgley’s words, “Wickedness is a general kind of failure to live as we are capable of living!” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 147)

During the Second World War, Philippa Foot read of two farm boys from Sudetenland, Germany who had refused to join the SS (a Nazi organization) and consequently faced execution. On the day before their murder, they wrote to their parents, “Both of us would rather die than stain our consciences with such deeds of horror. I know what the SS has to do.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 147) This is a perfect example of human action undertaken in response to a higher calling that transcends the limits placed on how one could act within the compulsions of circumstance and self-interest. The boys, even now, inspire

respect in us, because in exercising their moral freedom to live as they were capable of living and doing what ought to be done, they became truly free.

Thus, it is possible for a moral judgment to become objective if one bridges the artificially constructed divide between fact and value, by connecting a value judgment to the descriptive criteria that is rooted in the broader background of our lives. Only by accurately perceiving this transcendent background and situating human actions within them, can we make credible moral judgements such as in the case of the Truman incident. Yet through the mysterious gift of moral freedom, human beings have the capability to act outside the confines of the various backgrounds that confine us. This capacity to defy the dictates of one's social-historical milieu or the trap of personal circumstances, is what gives us ethical responsibility and accountability to choose rightly and to do what ought to be done.

Chapter 3

Moral Subjectivism as the Flattery of the Postmodern Spirit

“Far away there in sunshine are my highest aspirations.
I may not reach them,
But I can look up and see their beauty,
Believe in them and try to follow where they lead...”

— Louisa May Alcott (qtd. in Elbert Hubbard’s Scrap Book)

It is only natural that to us in the contemporary postmodern world, the concept of objective moral truths could be difficult to reconcile with the multiplicity of cultures, and the resulting diversity of thought and opinion that interact in our globalized world. “How can different people be made to agree on what is morally right or wrong?”, one may ask. The postmodern framework of theories and ideas have led to ‘truth’ being made subservient to ‘value’. In fact, the concept of truth itself has lost its linguistic grounding. Truth is no longer something pre-existing that one must discover, rather it is something subjective and personal— truth can now be created by individuals!

Similarly, as per the philosophy of Protagorean phenomenalism, individual perception is believed to be infallible, so that things are in reality however they *seem* to be to each individual. For example, if a man feels that a wind blowing through his house is warm, while his wife feels that the *same* wind is cool, both propositions are taken to be true. The truth of the warmth or coolness of the wind, does not exist independently of individual perception— “Each individual man is the measure of all things... All is flux.” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 216)

The Greek philosopher Plato's response to this idea is that if each man carries the measure of all things within himself, "then each person will be the measure not only of how things are, but of how things will be (in the future)." (qtd in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 216) But that cannot work either as an abstract concept or by virtue of its pragmatic application because our knowledge of how the future will turn out to be depends upon that which we understand and perceive at present. For example, a doctor treating a particular patient will be able to judge better than anyone else if he will recover and live, or die of his disease in the future; a farmer's judgment that his crops that year will yield a rich harvest is better than that of the grocer buying raw materials from him. Thus, truth in fact depends upon an individual man's 'competence' to perceive or predict reality as accurately as possible. This is why one doctor might consult another doctor to check whether her judgment on a group of blood samples is indeed correct. But if 'each individual were the measure of all things', there would be no sense in us talking about right and wrong or placing so much grave importance on it. As Wittgenstein said, then one might as well say "whatever is going to seem right to me is right." (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 216) Therefore, it seems mandatory that 'truth' or 'right and wrong' must be derived externally, from outside the individual, independent of his own feelings or perceptions, if they are to mean anything at all.

Philippa Foot went back to the natural world, to illustrate her view of a moral standard of goodness and badness for human life that is completely independent of individual choice or opinion. The logical positivist Richard Hare had claimed

that when cacti were first imported to Britain, there were no standards of evaluation by which one cactus could be judged good or bad, better or worse than another. It was only later that people began to create and introduce standards like height, color, weight etc. Thus, whether one cactus was better than another was subject wholly to human preference. But Philippa retorted to this claim by explaining that the cactus being a living organism, has a form of life that sets an internal standard for the entire species. Therefore whatever a human individual might prefer, it was an objective matter independent of their judgements, “whether a particular cactus is healthy or unhealthy, flourishing or damaged.” “Nature is alive and ordered... with a source of value that is quite independent of human activities.” Someone who has sufficient knowledge of the internal workings of the species cacti, will be able to judge accurately whether a particular specimen of it is healthy or not, and how it can be harmed or helped in its flourishing. (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 280)

In the same way, the human species too has an internal standard according to which “a human life is going well or badly.” It is not up to us to choose what is good or bad for human life or how it ought to be lived. Elizabeth Anscombe’s observations about the nature of the human animal led her to juxtapose biology with the ethical dimension of our lives. For instance, the sentence ‘Man has 32 teeth’ is not one that can be empirically verified by counting the teeth present in the mouths of different humans. On an average many human beings have fewer, but nevertheless 32 is a full set of teeth and anyone falling short of this number is missing some that he *ought* to have had. Even if every human on this earth were

missing a few teeth, the statement 'Man has 32 teeth' would still hold true.

Likewise, Elizabeth believed that just as it was ideal for human beings to have a full and complete set of teeth, a full and ideal combination of virtues is also a norm for us. But just as most of us do not have all 32 teeth, none of us possess a perfect set of moral virtues. We may be kind, but lack patience; we might be brave, but not honest. "To be deficient in this way is to be missing something, even if many others are deficient too." (Mac Cumhail and Wiseman 118)

A parallel can be drawn here with Plato's theory of Forms, according to which the objects and ideas present in our physical world are simply mere imitations of the perfect ideal which is found only in reality, otherwise called the World of Forms. So too, Plato conceived of a perfect moral absolute, the basis of the universe, which he called 'The Form of the Good', existing in the World of Forms. Therefore, the presence of imperfection in the physical realm is but evidence of a perfect, ideal reality since Plato believes that even our ability to imagine and conceive of moral perfection in spite of having experienced only that which is imperfect, is itself proof of its existence. (Macintosh) For instance, we are able to understand that a line is curved only because we already have some idea of what a straight line is supposed to look like.

Postmodern anti-foundationalism rejects the concept of these metaphysical foundations which function as the background to human inquiry and knowledge. Fredrick Nietzsche's nihilistic position posits an end to the shared background of beliefs and premises which are said to inform and influence our understanding of the world. By means of this radical skepticism which questions our ability to

know anything about reality, postmodernity issues a mandate which compels us to abandon all notions of absolute truth, instead replacing it with the idea of pragmatic value. “Any assertion of a new metaphysically deduced foundational truth will inevitably fail to overcome Nietzsche's thought since his position appropriates all “truth-discovery” by marking it as misguided “truth-creation.””(Chapman)

It is under the influence of this philosophy, that morality came to be conceived of as a social construct in the world today. It is the elimination of the metaphysical background behind knowledge and belief, which caused us to direct our focus inwards into the private society of human beings, rather than the idea of an externally derived calculus to explain and substantiate our beliefs about what is right or wrong, good or bad. While Kant's Categorical Imperative envisions moral obligation as a call of freedom which enables us to act outside the confines of our socio-cultural circumstances, the radically different contemporary picture of morality imagines it instead as a set of constructed rules which bind us to our society.

At this point I would like to draw a divide to distinguish the realm of subjective opinion or social rules from the domain of transcendent moral absolutes and ethical obligations. Perhaps due to the postmodern world's undue dependence upon the subjectivity of ‘truth-creation’, it has lighted upon my notice that many of us today are unaware even of the difference between social rules or norms and morality. For example, different cultures and even different individuals can have varying conceptions of whether it is right and acceptable to address

elders by their first names. This is simply a part of social etiquette or the norms unique to a particular community. On the other hand, the belief that it is right and good to be truthful and honest in all circumstances or to be just and fair in your dealings with others, is a moral belief that transcends the divisions of space and time, i.e. of culture and history. Larry Nucci, a psychologist at the University of Illinois, has worked extensively in the area that studies the distinction between social convention and morality. His book, *'Education in the Moral Domain'*, identifies three areas of human behavior— the *personal domain* of subjective individual preferences without any objective standard, the *domain of social conventions* which consists of socially imposed laws and rules, and the *moral domain* where behaviors are known intrinsically to be right or wrong. Through his psychological studies and experiments, Nucci finds that children all over the world are able to instinctively distinguish between these three domains. For example, in an interview he conducted with a four year old girl, the child identifies the behavior of her noisy classmates as being wrong because it violates a classroom rule, but she also admits that if there were no such rules, she would not consider their behavior to be wrong. In this case the child was operating in the social domain. In another situation, the girl says that it was wrong for one of her classmates to hit another boy so hard that it hurt. She identifies this behavior as being wrong even if there were no rules prohibiting it because the boy would get hurt. The child was thus operating in the moral domain. Thus, Nucci's research demonstrates that "concepts of human welfare, fairness and rights are inherent, not socially conditioned or constructed."(Dobrin) Moral questions are addressed

by criteria such as human welfare and rights, fairness and justice, the consequences of an action etc. while social rules are subjected to institutional authority or cultural norms. (Dobrin) Like Socrates said in his conversation with Euthyphro, “Social conventions don't make morality. It is morality that judges social conventions.” (qtd. in Dobrin) This, indeed, is the transcendent metaphysical background, the shared understanding of life, to which we must refer to in order to make meaningful and objective moral judgements.

Take the example discussed in the last chapter, of the baby watching his mother posting a letter. According to Elizabeth Anscombe's account of perception, “I am restricted in what I can see by my physical attributes and my location in space and time...” (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 226) Therefore the baby cannot see the ‘truth’ about what his mother is doing, until his mind is able to expand and accommodate within itself the rich and complex background against which the act was carried out. The child cannot look within himself in order to see reality as it is, he must direct his gaze outward and connect the bare skeletal action that he now sees to a broader pattern of human life that lies outside himself.

This brings us to the idea of moral perception— of looking steadily at reality and seeing things justly, as they truly are. When we look back into history, this is indeed what has happened for conceptions of morality to change. We have had men and women in the past who looked courageously and truthfully at their reality, who saw the evils and ills in their societies for what they really were, and condemned and opposed them in adherence to their moral convictions, which

transcended those of the cultures they were born and bred in. We have a great many such examples of moral ideals being identified and pursued often at great personal or even general cost. For example, William Wilberforce devoted his entire life towards abolishing the slave trade in Britain, facing great opposition and hardship in order to do so. In another instance, there was a great civil war in America under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln, as a consequence of the tensions between the northern and southern states over the abolition of the slave trade and equality for the blacks.

Coming back to our book *Metaphysical Animals* set in 20th century Oxford, the last chapter talked of a young Elizabeth Anscombe and her 'intemperate' opposition to Mr. Truman's act of putting his signature on the order that doomed countless innocent lives to death in the two cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One is able to realize that Elizabeth found her moral convictions in sharp and glaring disagreement with the general consensus in her day and age. Therefore, objective moral truths clearly stand in stark contradiction to those conventional and orthodox expectations and ethical conceptions of a particular historical period and cultural setting.

Hence, we are able to thus look steadily at reality, and make accurate moral judgements about the world that surrounds us, even if they conflict with the orthodoxies of our social and historical milieu, only when we are able to "fill out a certain background" that will allow us to relate an act with a set of moral principles. For example, William Wilberforce, in realising the deplorable wickedness inherent to the slave trade, must have drawn a connection between the

depraved practices of slavery and those great and noble principles which affirm for each human being the birthrights of equality, liberty and dignity. So also, Elizabeth realized that it was not morally acceptable to kill the innocent as a means to one's end, even if that end was to end a war and save the lives of one's countrymen.

Therefore, in order for humanity to preserve its sanity and prevent itself from falling into an abyss of moral decline and corruption, it is imperative that we keep the metaphysical background of our lives— the shared understanding of what is right or wrong, of what is humane and just— intact. Once it crumbles away entirely, we will be deprived of a common edifice upon which to construct a brighter future. In the essay '*The Rebel (1951)*', Camus describes the cumulative effects of Nietzsche's Nihilism and its radical skepticism: "Metaphysical collapse often ends in total negation and the victory of nihilism characterized by profound hatred, pathological destruction and incalculable violence and death." (qtd. in Prat)

Conclusion

In a letter written to Mary Midgley, her father says, "The great thing is, to clear one's mind and REFUSE TO ACCEPT OUTWORN PRESUPPOSITIONS. Form a picture of mankind as it should be and think out the path to that state."(Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 39). This was the attitude that Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Midgley and Iris Murdoch adopted as they approached their intellectual journey, keeping in mind at all times the ideal end for mankind, as they strove to discover a way of ethical thinking that could enable people to live vibrantly successful and flourishing human lives. All their talk about ethics was based on one foundational consideration– what makes human lives go badly or well.

The women believed that philosophy was needed in times of difficulty, uncertainty and chaos because it shows us the right way to think about the world and how to go on. We are metaphysical animals because "asking, and seeking to answer, metaphysical questions is a natural and essential part of human life." (Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 189) Thus for these four women, the abstract and esoteric speculations of Philosophy are inseparable from the urgent and real ethical, practical and spiritual questions that confront all of us in our daily lives.

The mission to eliminate metaphysical foundations from human inquiry, and the body of theory and knowledge which flowed from that attempt, acquired popularity and prestige against the living background of a war-torn world quaking in the aftermath of new revelations of evil beyond man's wildest imagination. It was then, as the human race hurtled down the darkening tunnel of moral decline

and madness which poisoned man's faith in the 'good', that humanity lost the framework of social stability and familiarity within which it had previously operated. Thus the younger generation of that Age violently rejected the 'rules' which attempted to reign them into a pattern of life which had already been rattled beyond repair. They grew relentless in their quest for "a worldview with an emphasis on freedom and individuality, and which was less buttoned up."(Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 38) Elizabeth Anscombe used to say that the academic output of Oxford moral philosophy with its emphasis on the subjective, was therefore "conceived perfectly in the spirit of the time; indeed it is the flattery of that spirit." She also boldly implied that "the typical Oxford moral philosopher was a conformist— a "child of his time." He has no resources in his philosophy (or character?) to resist the worst ideas and practices around him."(Lipscombe 158)

One must therefore realize that the postmodern rejection of objective truth and absolute moral foundations, is also a philosophy, similarly conceived "perfectly in the spirit of the time." And if we blindly accept its presuppositions, we too are turning into 'conformists'— children of our age, as we yield compliantly to the intellectual mandate and ideological consensus of our socio-historical milieu. Just as the four women in *Metaphysical Animals* sought to do, we also must strive to find within our minds and intellectual strivings, ideas and ways of thinking which can understand and cater to the predicaments of our age, rather than wholly surrendering to their influence.

It is a privilege inherent to human nature, to question and rethink the “outworn presuppositions” that one is surrounded with. As Donald Mackinnon says, “Deprive human animals of the capacity and opportunity to ask metaphysical questions, as totalitarianism does, and what is left? Cynicisms, skepticism, fear. Mere beastliness.” (qtd. in Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman 91) By questioning and re-examining our contemporary discourses on the nature of morality, in the light of the four womens’ theories, this project has attempted to reveal the deep and complex nature of morality, framed by its broader metaphysical background. It makes a case for the existence of objective moral ideals by connecting value to fact and positing the concept of ethical obligation.

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