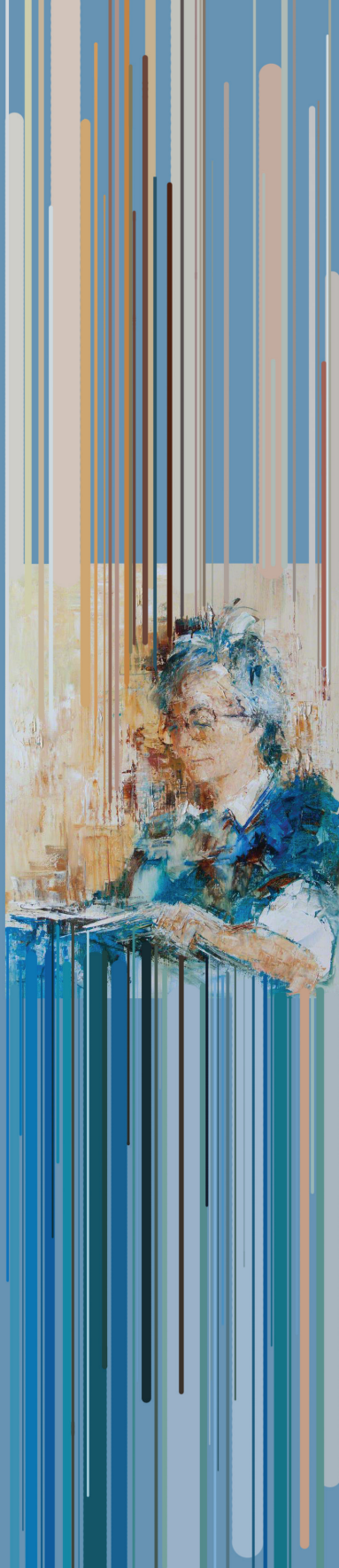


MARY WARNOCK

Ethics, Education
and Public Policy
in Post-War
Britain

PHILIP GRAHAM





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4. The Good Life

‘Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven.’ With this quotation from William Wordsworth, John Searle, an American undergraduate and postgraduate student in the Oxford Faculty of Philosophy between 1952 and 1959, concludes his account of his years in Oxford. Searle, a Rhodes scholar, claims that he was exposed to ‘one of the greatest collections of philosophers in one place since Athens in the fifth century B. C.’¹ There was, he writes, no giant of the stature of Aristotle or Plato, but he lists twenty-three Oxford philosophers of the time, including Mary Warnock, who published prolifically and had international reputations.²

The pre-eminence of Oxford in the study of philosophy which Searle described was, at the time Mary became part of the faculty, relatively new. Until the Second World War, Cambridge, where G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein taught, had held this position. The turning point came with the Oxford philosophy school’s response to the publication in 1936 of A. J. Ayer’s book *Language, Truth and Logic*.³ Ayer had studied philosophy in Vienna where the so-called ‘Vienna Circle’ had developed the philosophical position known as logical positivism. This held that the only truthful statements were those that could be empirically confirmed. Logical positivism, a branch of linguistic philosophy, regarded the task of philosophy as the development of an ideal language that could be the basis of established truth. This could be derived from science and only from science, because only scientific propositions were verifiable. All other propositions, including all metaphysical statements and those that made statements of value as well as ethical, religious and aesthetic judgements, were essentially meaningless.⁴ The way ordinary language was used was a barrier to the discovery of truth because it was so imprecise.

The Oxford analytic philosophers, who, apart from J. L. Austin, only began to contribute to the field after the end of World War Two, also

saw the study of language as the gateway to truth but, in contrast to the Logical Positivists, saw the attempt to establish an ideal language as unhelpful and the careful study of the way ordinary language was used to be a more profitable way to pursue truth. These Oxford philosophers, especially Gilbert Ryle and Peter Strawson, joined J. L. Austin in articulating what later became known as ordinary language philosophy. Austin, in particular, became a master of the study of the uses of language and of the nuanced ways in which the same words and phrases can be used differently. Thus, while the logical positivists saw language as having a 'truth' function, ordinary language philosophy regarded study of the 'use' function of language as far more productive. Wittgenstein's famous dictum: 'in most cases the meaning of a word is its use' may be seen as a concise formulation of this idea, though the Oxford school modified and elaborated on this concept in a variety of important ways.

Logical positivists, as we have seen, dismissed moral philosophy as meaningless and, although ordinary language philosophy did not take this position, inevitably as the most highly regarded analytic philosophers in Oxford were preoccupied with the analysis of ordinary language, other aspects of the subject received less attention. Mary wrote later: 'numerous and various as were the philosophers in Oxford, there was one characteristic they all shared, and that was a lack of interest in moral and political philosophy.'⁵ These were, at that time, not fashionable subjects, and the ambitious men who dominated Oxford philosophy, with one or two exceptions such as R. M. Hare, were largely happy to leave it to their female colleagues such as Philippa Foot, whom Mary greatly admired. Mary studied ordinary-language or analytic philosophy intensely but was more attracted to moral philosophy: the nature of the good, together with the political and ethical ramifications of what the good entailed.

Also out of fashion was continental European philosophy. In Oxford this was held in some degree of contempt and largely dismissed. The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, for example, and the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, both of great significance to continental European philosophers, were barely taught. At a meeting of British and French philosophers held in 1958 at Royaumont, a French abbey north of Paris, ostensibly for mutual intellectual enrichment, Gilbert Ryle, a leader of

the Oxford school, gave great offence by brusquely dismissing Husserl's ideas.⁶

Like Cambridge, Oxford was much more than it is now, when research is of greater importance in its standing, an educational institution primarily dedicated to the teaching of undergraduates. The method of undergraduate teaching at Oxford, especially in humanities subjects, allowed a great deal of autonomy to the student. He or she might be expected to attend only three or four university lectures a week and, as we have seen from the description of Mary's experience, it was the college which was the centre of undergraduate life, both academic and social. The undergraduate would attend a weekly tutorial organised by his college, at which he would be expected to present an essay to his tutor.⁷ The tutorial might be in a small group of two or three but often it was one to one. John Searle, the American Rhodes scholar quoted earlier, describes how the eminent philosopher, Peter Strawson, who saw him individually, required him to deliver his weekly essay a day before his supervision.⁸ When he arrived Strawson would suggest to him what he had been trying to say in his essay but putting Searle's formulation far more powerfully than he had managed himself. Searle would agree this was exactly what he had been trying to convey. Strawson would say "'Well then, it does seem to me that that view is subject to the following four objections'", whereupon he would simply demolish the theory step by step.⁹ This would be done with the utmost civility without any expression of hostility. Searle felt this was the best teaching he had ever had, or ever would have, in his life.

Mary's duties as a philosophy don at St. Hugh's were periodically, but only periodically, onerous. John Searle was undoubtedly right to marvel at the individual brilliance and international eminence of the members of the faculty, but at Oxford and Cambridge in particular, when a young academic such as Mary was elected to her first academic position, it was as a member of a college, as opposed to a university-wide faculty with which she was identified and her primary task was teaching undergraduates in her college rather than tackling thorny philosophical problems. During term-time, Mary would conduct eighteen or more tutorials a week with undergraduates and postgraduates as well as delivering two or three faculty lectures a term. Lecturing however only took place during term time and each of the three terms only lasted eight weeks. So, Mary's hectic teaching schedule lasted for less than half the

year. Postgraduate teaching did go on during the vacations but did not make much of a call on Mary's time and, in any case, could be arranged to suit her own needs. There is no systematic evidence of the quality of Mary's teaching, but the reports of those who were her students suggest she made excellent rapport with them.

Sarah Curtis (née Myers), who later went on to work as one of the first women journalists on *The Times*, was an Exhibitioner at St. Hugh's and was tutored by Mary in moral philosophy from 1954 to 1958. Sarah thought Mary was not an original thinker but a marvellously lucid teacher.¹⁰ She made the careful and subtle arguments of Hume and Kant, for example, understandable to her for the first time. Mary used examples from everyday life to illustrate moral problems. 'She taught me,' Sarah claimed, 'how to think. She made you feel you were wonderful.'¹¹ In addition, as her moral tutor, Mary helped to disentangle Sarah from difficulties in her relationships with boyfriends. Sarah came from a largely secular Jewish background and Mary, probably for personal reasons arising from her own background, was particularly interested in this aspect of Sarah's life. When it became clear that Sarah was going to marry a non-Jew, Mary helped her to sort out how she was going to deal with her family's attitude to her 'marrying out.' Towards the end of her time as an undergraduate, she and Mary became personal friends. Sarah had her first baby in the same week as Maria (Boz), Mary's youngest, was born and this was a bond between them. Occasionally, when the needs of Mary's young children made it necessary, Sarah had tutorials in the family home in Chadlington Road. Mary's children were largely out of sight, presumably being looked after by their nanny. Sarah stayed in contact with Mary after she graduated and found her helpful when, much later, she was working in the field of fostering and adoption. She was in no doubt of her debt to Mary. She called her 'the most formative person in my life. Love is a silly word, but I did love her.'¹² For some of the students at St. Hugh's, such as Sarah, she was a role model pointing to ways they themselves might be able to combine professional work and full family life. Another student recalled how Mary 'seemed to us to be constantly pregnant or involved with very small children [...] billowing up St. Giles on her bicycle, exasperated at the beginning of my tutorial because Kit (and Felix) had, to be helpful, just put into the bath all the clean clothes that had been put out for them to wear.'¹³



Fig. 2 St. Hugh's College members, taken during Mary's time there (1949–66), with Mary Warnock front row, ninth from the right. Photograph provided by kind permission of the Principal and Fellows of St. Hugh's College, Oxford, copyright Gillman & Soame.

A little later, in 1960, Onora O'Neill, who became a distinguished moral philosopher herself and a colleague of Mary's in the House of Lords, spent a month having tutorials with her, writing essays, and reading the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Marx. Onora was struck by 'how much fun and how jolly she was.'¹⁴ At about the same time, Adrian Whitfield, later a barrister and Treasurer of the Middle Temple, came into contact with Mary when she gave him tutorials. The text they studied in Greek, was Aristotle's *Organon*. He found it tough going, not 'because of the way in which Mary Warnock tutored me, but because of the inherent difficulty of the exercise. My memory of her as a tutor is one of a person of great patience and clarity of expression.'¹⁵ Much later, in the early 1980s, Patrick Lawrence, who was studying Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Christ Church was sent to Mary by his college tutors. They had been unimpressed by his work in philosophy with, he now thinks, good reason. Mary prepared Lawrence for the paper on Aristotle, but her teaching and guidance extended well beyond

Aristotelian ethics. He found Mary's supervision far more stimulating than any he had previously experienced and started to work hard. After he had handed in a few essays, she was pleased. 'If your other subjects are as good as this, I think you could get a First,' she said. This he did, going on to become a successful barrister and member of the House of Lords.¹⁶

Mary was elected a Fellow of St. Hugh's in 1952, three years after her original lectureship appointment and, as a new fellow, she soon became more involved in the governance and politics of the college.¹⁷ St. Hugh's was a relative newcomer, not accorded full college status, with the right of representation on the University Council until 1959.¹⁸ From 1920, in contrast to Cambridge, women at Oxford had the right to be full members of the university, and to graduate with degrees equivalent to those of men. Generally, women's colleges were somewhat smaller than were those for men, their student numbers having been capped by the university authorities. Most had between 150 and 300 undergraduates (St. Hugh's had 180) while men's colleges ranged in size from 50 to 450 with most taking around 300 students.

At the time Mary was at St. Hugh's in the 1950s and 1960s, just over a quarter of Oxford undergraduates were women. They led restricted lives, not permitted to be members of the Oxford Union, the university debating society, until 1962, or to be full members of the leading drama society, the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) until 1964.¹⁹ Men were not allowed in their rooms unless authorised and signed in until the 1980s.²⁰ They had greater academic demands on them, expected to write two essays a week rather than one as the men did. Their academic achievements were on a par with the men, with more first-class degrees than men in the five years from 1950 to 1973. All the same, they often were made to feel outsiders. Only one of ninety-seven university professors was female.²¹ A woman undergraduate recalled of the late 1950s, 'in my days going to Oxford as a female was like being on the sidelines of a gigantic male public school.'²²

Up to the time Mary was appointed, all but one of the fellows, the senior members of St. Hugh's, had been unmarried.²³ The fact that Mary was married was regarded with suspicion by the other fellows who doubted if she would be able to give the commitment to the college that full-time residence within its walls made possible. For the single fellows

their college was not just the place they taught; it was their home. Their fellow dons were their family. Every day, they lunched and dined together and, after dinner, they retired to the Senior Common Room to converse and gossip together. Some of them almost certainly slept together as sexual partners. As Mary describes the atmosphere, when the fellows were gathered together, 'tension was never absent; jealousy, spite, passionate suppressed love, suspicion of the new [...] were all ingredients in the excitable atmosphere.'²⁴ Not surprisingly, groups of fellows with similar interests were formed. Susan Chenevix-Trench said her heart sank when, shortly after her appointment to St. Hugh's in 1950, she was asked if 'she would belong to the Bird faction or the Flower faction.'²⁵

Although it was over twenty-five years since a major internal dispute known as 'The Row' had divided the members of the St. Hugh's Senior Common Room, the college atmosphere remained strained by this event.²⁶ In 1923, a history don, Cecilia Ady, had been summarily dismissed by the then Principal, Eleanor Jourdain, with whom she had a long-standing tense and difficult relationship having been accused of leaking information about the proposed appointment of a Vice-Principal. A number of the other fellows resigned in protest. Eventually, an enquiry carried out by Lord Curzon, the Vice-Chancellor, exonerated Ady, but Eleanor Jourdain died just before she was due to resign.

Jourdain was decidedly eccentric. Together with her close friend, Annie Moberley, she had written a best-selling book published in 1911, *An Adventure*, about a paranormal experience that had occurred to them when they were visiting Versailles in 1901. They reported having seen figures dressed in late eighteenth-century dress whom they supposed were spirits revisiting their old haunts.²⁷ By the time Mary arrived, Jourdain had long since been replaced as principal, but the atmosphere of wilfulness and irresponsibility she had helped create lingered in the St. Hugh's Senior Common Room. In the 1923 Adey affair many undergraduates had sided with her against Jourdain. It was an early revolt against old ways that presaged later changes. During the 1930s, women undergraduates obtained freedoms from restrictions that nowadays are difficult to imagine. They were, for example, allowed for the first time to attend lectures without a chaperone and to join

the university's political societies.²⁸ Even in Mary's day, nevertheless, discriminations and old attitudes persisted.

Mary thought her married status was accepted only because her husband was also a don, a fellow of Magdalen College. Her tenuous hold on acceptability was, however, called seriously into question when she began to have children. Kitty's birth in 1950 was followed shortly afterwards by that of Felix. Mary wrote that their names were a piece of good luck because the other fellows could ask after them very much as they asked after each other's pets: cats, dogs and tortoises.²⁹ She recalled the experience of Susan Chenevix-Trench, appointed to a lectureship at about the same time she was. Susan had only been in post a few weeks, when she had to go to the then Principal, a Miss Procter, to say that she was shortly to be married. Like Mary, she was also marrying a don, Oscar Wood, a fellow of Christ Church, but even so, the Principal made her feel guiltily at fault. Mary waited for her outside the Principal's door and described her, on emerging, as 'shaken to the core.'³⁰ During the 1960s and 1970s, more and more married women were appointed as fellows and more began to live out of college, so that Mary's position became less anomalous.³¹ Indeed she began to act as a role model in this respect. Besides, as time went on, and her profile beyond the confines of the college began to rise, fewer of her activities were centred on the college and more on the university and university societies. This was the case for a number of women dons as they looked more widely for professional and social relationships.³²

Life at the college became much more enjoyable for Mary in 1954 when an English scholar, Rachel Trickett, was elected to a tutorship there.³³ Rachel, although not married, had a life of her own outside college. Most other fellows had moved directly from undergraduate study to research lectureships and then to fellowships and had virtually no experience outside the university. Before her arrival Rachel had worked as a curator in an art gallery, as a lecturer at a provincial university, Hull, and had written a highly acclaimed novel as well as a libretto for an opera.³⁴ She and Mary had been contemporaries at Lady Margaret Hall during the war and could reminisce happily about their equally dreadful wartime experiences. They could also discuss together the fraught and, in retrospect, hilariously eccentric meetings of the St.

Hugh's Governing Body.³⁵ Geoffrey would listen to these conversations and marvel at the contrast with the sedate method of conducting business at Magdalen, his own college.³⁶

There was a small number of other St. Hugh's dons Mary found sympathetic. One was Olga Bickley, who, despite her surname was part Russian and part Italian.³⁷ In the Long Vacation she lived in a large palazzo near Genoa. She would sometimes arrive several days late for the beginning of the academic year, enraging the Principal with her excuse that she had been treading out the grapes. The other colleague whose company Mary enjoyed was Agnes Headlam-Morley, the Professor of International Relations.³⁸ Agnes was a devout Catholic and tried, unsuccessfully to convert Mary to her faith. It was through her and the Catholic connection that the Warnocks met Frank Longford, the prison reformer and member of the House of Lords. Longford often came to stay with the Warnocks when he was speaking at the Oxford Union.³⁹

For some married people it is a relief to leave their work behind after a busy day. This was the reverse of how Mary felt. She wrote, 'I pity people who do not share a professional interest with their spouse.'⁴⁰ Academic stimulation for her began at home. Her husband, Geoffrey, was establishing a reputation as an outstanding philosopher. His book on the early eighteenth-century idealist, Bishop Berkeley, published in 1953 was highly regarded.⁴¹ Mary particularly admired Geoffrey's prodigious memory which helped fill gaps in her knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century political history. Through their separate work they got to know the leading philosophers in Oxford and many elsewhere. Between them, they developed a 'pattern of talk and entertaining' which lasted throughout their lives.⁴²

The most stimulating philosophical events Mary attended were the Saturday morning meetings organised by John Austin (professionally known as J. L. Austin), as we have seen, one of the leaders of analytic philosophy.⁴³ Geoffrey was a regular attender at these meetings but, because they were all-male affairs, Mary was initially excluded. When Mary approached Austin to ask permission to attend, his response was that he would like to invite her but he didn't know if the rules permitted it. As he himself was the organiser and made up the rules as he went along, this did not make much sense. Shortly after Mary approached

him, he called at the Warnock house in North Oxford and told her she might join.⁴⁴ She became the only woman participant.

After Austin died, Geoffrey edited his unpublished works and became a scholarly authority on his ideas, writing two books about them. Both he and Mary left personal reflections of these Saturday morning meetings. From Geoffrey's perspective, one remarkable feature of these occasions was the degree to which Austin exercised his authority, apparently effortlessly. Geoffrey believed Austin's motivation was to help his audience to see 'not only for our immediate group but for the sake of the subject, how desirable it was to get out of the "bogs and tracks" of familiar, time-hallowed philosophical campaigning.'⁴⁵ The meetings began with the selection of a philosophical work, sometimes classical such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, sometimes modern or even contemporary. The text would be analysed sentence by sentence using an 'ordinary language' approach around a theme chosen by Austin. So, for one term, discussion centred around the use of words such as 'tools.' Could words really be compared with using tools? How did tools differ from other things that were used, such as utensils and instruments? On another occasion, actual moral situations were discussed to examine the language people used to discuss them.⁴⁶ Austin's approach to problems was direct and straightforward. Mary recalled how R. M. Hare, the moral philosopher, whose theory of moral behaviour appealed to the idea of universally defensible principles, was asked how he would behave if he were offered a bribe by a candidate. He said he would say, 'I do not accept bribes on principle.' Austin interjected 'Would you, Hare? I'd just say "No, thanks."'⁴⁷

Austin discouraged the use of any jargon and instead preferred to rely on the distinctions that could be made by examining the way language was normally used. His influence made his audience focus with great concentration on finding a solution to the problems that were being addressed. What Mary admired about him was his 'impressively direct, fresh and straightforward' approach. 'He seemed genuinely to want to go back to the beginning to cut away any philosophical jargon we might have picked up and use without thinking [...]'⁴⁸ These Saturday mornings were clearly the highlight of Mary's week. It was the feeling that what might happen was unpredictable, 'that light might be cast in unexpected ways which made these meetings, most of them so

enlivening and such a strong defence against boredom, both for oneself and one's pupils.⁴⁹ Indeed, Mary found these meetings very helpful in guiding the way she conducted her own tutorials with her pupils over the following weeks. She wrote: 'I was fully aware that what had been said and discussed on Saturday made a palpable difference to my teaching in the next week. It was extraordinary how often distinctions which had been apparently casually drawn proved relevant to whatever was the subject of a tutorial.'⁵⁰ Austin died prematurely of lung cancer in 1960 and attempts to revive Saturday morning meetings under other leadership failed.⁵¹

Although Mary managed to circumvent the rules against female attendance at Austin's meetings, she made no attempt to find her way into an all-male dining club of which Geoffrey was a member. This was simply called The Club. Its members were drawn from a variety of disciplines, particularly philosophy, economics and law. From what Mary gleaned from Geoffrey about the subjects discussed, a great deal of time was spent in deciding who should be invited to be a member. The criteria were unclear but some degree of social smartness, high intelligence and a capacity both for amusing others and being amused oneself were essential. The members dined twice a term in the college of one of its members.⁵² A great deal of the rest of the time was spent in gossip about colleagues. Mary suspected that the reason why the distinguished philosopher Stuart Hampshire was never elected was because, if he had been, it would no longer have been possible to gossip about his personal life which was a rich source of amusement to the existing members. These called each other 'Brother.' Thus, 'Brother Warnock' called Isaiah 'Brother Berlin' so this in itself was a reason why a woman could never be a member. When eventually its members decided that a woman, not Mary, should be invited to join, there was consternation as to how she should be addressed. In the end she was also called 'Brother,' perhaps an early though not very politically correct example of gender blindness.

Through their separate work, Mary and Geoffrey were familiar with all the leading philosophers at Oxford and many elsewhere. Mary attended occasional lectures given by Stuart Hampshire, Isaiah Berlin, Gilbert Ryle, Bernard Williams and A. J. Ayer and sometimes attended the same social gatherings as they did. The presence of these

philosophers, some of whom were based in Oxford with others visiting from time to time, made philosophy the exciting subject it was widely seen to be. Analytic philosophy was not the only subject in which there was outstanding teaching. For example, Bernard Williams ran a seminar on Kant, H. L. A. Hart talked about freedom of the will from the point of view of the philosophy of jurisprudence and Isaiah Berlin lectured regularly on human rights. The only philosophers Mary saw more frequently, indeed much more frequently, were Peter Strawson and Marcus Dick. The Warnocks talked philosophy with them, but the relationship was not primarily academic. As the next chapter will show, Mary, Geoffrey and their children became close family friends with both the Strawsons and the Dicks.

There were two women philosophers, both fellows at Somerville, who impressed Mary. She greatly admired Philippa Foot's major philosophical contribution: her insistence, contrary to current teaching by logical positivists, that values could not be separated from facts. Mary regarded Philippa, with whom she had little contact, as 'someone infinitely above me, as one might regard a much older member of a grand family.'⁵³ Elizabeth Anscombe, a strong champion and friend of Ludwig Wittgenstein,⁵⁴ the Cambridge philosopher, taught Mary as an undergraduate. She was unimpressed by Mary as a student and told her she would never make an academic philosopher.⁵⁵ After Mary graduated, they saw little of each other especially after Anscombe was appointed to a chair in philosophy at Cambridge.⁵⁶

Anscombe's devotion to Wittgenstein, an enthusiasm which Mary found hard to share,⁵⁷ played a key role in one particularly memorable meeting of the Jowett Society.⁵⁸ This had been an undergraduate society but in the post-war period it became the custom for dons to attend and read or reply to papers. Because everyone, dons as well as undergraduates, had been away, all had papers to read and ideas to discuss. Anscombe had spoken to the Jowett Society of the work Wittgenstein was doing in Cambridge, a kind of philosophy very different from his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). In 1947 Mary, during her term as secretary of the society, encouraged Anscombe to persuade Wittgenstein to attend one of the Jowett meetings (though not to read a paper). The meeting in Magdalen on 14 May 1947 had been eagerly awaited and was a highly charged affair. The room was packed by the time Wittgenstein

arrived to take his place at a small table between Anscombe and the young Oscar Wood, then an undergraduate at Corpus Christi, who was to read a paper on whether Descartes' 'cogito ergo sum' is a valid argument. Wittgenstein was to reply but, according to Mary's account at the time, he struggled to say anything coherent at all. He began by saying, accusingly, that Mr. Wood had appeared to make two points, one about knowledge and one about substance, but Wittgenstein was almost inaudible and his sentences trailed off before he had finished, whereupon he would laboriously start again. Wood tried to steer him towards talking about knowledge, but Wittgenstein seemed 'in an agony of indecision.' There were long periods of silence when Wittgenstein tore his hair or buried his head in his hands, occasionally muttering to himself 'No, that's not right at all.' Mary declared herself familiar with 'this way of going on' because Anscombe had, as a true acolyte, adopted many of the same mannerisms.⁵⁹

Amongst those present was an aged and eminent don H. A. Prichard, who had been Austin's tutor at Balliol before the war, sitting immediately beside the table where the main protagonists were placed. He was afflicted by a terrible cough which silenced everyone when a fit came on. Prichard was becoming more and more angry and tried to intervene three times to get Wittgenstein to address the question Oscar Wood had asked. At one stage, not in reply to Prichard, but more or less out of the blue, Wittgenstein said 'If a man looked up at the sky and said "I think it's going to rain therefore I am" I should not understand him.' This was too much for Prichard, who said: 'With respect to you and your colleagues, what Descartes said is of far more importance than anything you have said,' got up and 'tottered out, to everyone's acute embarrassment.' Shortly after this, Wittgenstein suggested an adjournment until the following afternoon, a proposal which was greeted with general relief as it was already past eleven p.m.

The next day there were fewer senior members of the university present and no Prichard. This time Wittgenstein made no pretence of responding to Oscar Wood's paper but embarked on an apparently directionless set of observations which began to take some suggestive shape as they developed, talking first about the difference between 'psychological' verbs describing experiences and others, then launching into a discourse on thinking of the different languages we use and keep

ready to hand like tools in a box. This was unfamiliar territory for most of the undergraduates present, including Mary, who describes coming away exhausted, but feeling on the brink of understanding something completely new. It was not until a year later that Anscombe showed her some parts of her translation of what was to be the *Philosophical Investigation* (1953), and 'things began to fall into place.'

A third colleague who made a deep impression on Mary at the time was Iris Murdoch, then a fellow of St. Anne's, who was shortly to make another career as a celebrated novelist.⁶⁰ They first met in 1948 when Iris was twenty-nine, five years older than Mary, who found her 'a figure of enormous glamour and romance.'⁶¹ Murdoch had travelled all over Europe working with UNRRA (the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency).⁶² The man she had been in love with had been killed in the war, following which she had numerous, well-publicised romantic relationships. After a brilliant undergraduate career during which she had been sexually harassed by the same older don who had abused Mary (see Chapter Three) she had gone on to pursue careers first as a civil servant and then both as a novelist and as an academic philosopher. Mary reports that she had only one proper conversation with her,⁶³ but there were numerous similarities in their lives and values. Both married other Oxford dons. In 1956, Murdoch married John Bayley, an English don at New College. Both Murdoch and Mary wrote books about existentialism but were simultaneously fascinated and repelled by it. Iris's book dealt mainly with Sartre as novelist but had a chapter on his philosophy.⁶⁴ Mary's much more extensive work on existentialism is discussed later in this chapter. Both were, in an important sense, deeply religious but did not believe in God. Both were moral philosophers but there were considerable philosophical differences between them. Murdoch was a thoroughgoing Platonist, endorsing the Idea of the Good.⁶⁵ Mary reports that she loved Plato, but was more of an Aristotelian by temperament.⁶⁶ As they moved into middle and older age, they moved further apart in their approach to moral philosophy. While Mary's approach was rooted in the practical moral problems she confronted in her public life, Iris's philosophical ideas became more and more metaphysical, culminating in her book *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992) which Mary, like many others, found virtually unreadable.⁶⁷

In 1953, shortly after Geoffrey's book on Bishop Berkeley had been published, Mary met a BBC Talks Producer who was lunching at St. Hugh's. Mary suggested there might be some interest in Geoffrey giving a talk on the Third Programme about his book. The Third Programme, the precursor of Radio Three, was increasingly looking to Oxbridge dons to give talks on their subjects. They, in their turn, were delighted at the publicity that was offered to them for their work. So pleased were they that there was a story going the rounds about an Oxford philosopher who, on the suggestion he might give a broadcast talk, for which the fee would be twenty pounds, asked the producer if he should pay the twenty-pound fee by cash or cheque. The Warnocks were not as naïve as this and were simply content that broadcasting could provide them with at least a small, additional income.

Geoffrey gave his talk to great approval. It was then suggested by another BBC Talks Producer, T. S. Gregory, that there would be interest in a series of broadcast debates between philosophers on topics of general interest. Gregory came to Oxford, stayed with the Warnocks and drank much of their brandy and a format was agreed for a series of broadcast debates on philosophical topics. The Warnocks recruited Peter Strawson and David Pears, dons at University College and Christ Church respectively. So these four dons, Mary and Geoffrey Warnock, Peter Strawson and David Pears, sometimes joined by other philosophers, broadcast a number of debates in 1953 and 1954.⁶⁸ Topics included the nature of perception, personal identity and explanations of human behaviour. Although a perfunctory attempt was made to suggest the debates were spontaneous, they were carefully rehearsed. The four participants would first have an informal meeting with Gregory to work out the ground to be covered. They went away and each wrote a script for themselves. Then they would meet and mesh their prepared scripts together, with each taking a part, after which they would all go up to Broadcasting House in London for what might be termed their performance. Mary often played a secondary role as was still seen as generally appropriate for a woman. She asked questions because she didn't quite understand what was being said. She wrote later, 'my usual role was to play the silly-ass character, who didn't understand and needed something to be said again in different words.'⁶⁹ According to her, these performances were derided by the more professional performers among

their academic colleagues such as Isaiah Berlin, Stuart Hampshire and Iris Murdoch. Mary felt that, for her, the discussions which preceded the broadcasts were highly educational and again, informed her teaching.

These broadcasts did little to enhance Mary's academic status. Such status in Oxford at that time depended particularly on two areas of achievement, principally the quality of one's teaching and lecturing. In the 1980s and 1990s, research output became virtually the only criterion of academic status but from the 1950s to the 1970s it was the quality of a don's teaching that marked him or her out as anything between outstanding and downright poor. Some historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and Alan (A. J. P.) Taylor developed national reputations by lecturing on their subject on television. Lecturers such as Isaiah Berlin attracted undergraduate audiences that went far beyond those studying for degrees in philosophy. But it was the don's capacity for engaging and inspiring undergraduates face-to-face, often in one-to-one supervision that made his or her reputation. As the social historian José Harris wrote of this period, 'Oxford continued to reserve the highest palm for the dedicated Socratic tutor who made overall guidance of the young a higher priority than his own or other people's learned publications.'⁷⁰ Mary was reckoned, as we have seen, to be an excellent supervisor, but as a don in a woman's college, specialising in a branch of philosophy that was not as fashionable as the analytic study of language, it was unlikely that she would be given the opportunity to supervise the brightest men.

The production of original work was the other criterion for academic status. In philosophy, this was measured especially by the publication of original articles in a prestigious philosophical academic journal such as *The Philosophical Review* or *Mind*. Highest status was won if the article produced major debate and controversy, stimulating other philosophers to disagree or expand on the original thesis. Second-best was publishing a book that had a similar effect. Mary reckoned that she did not have the capacity for such original thought as would be required for an article in a professional journal. For this, she wrote, one had to be, using a metaphor coined by her undergraduate tutor, Eduard Fraenkel, a 'blood and bones' philosopher, someone who lived and breathed philosophical ideas and arguments; she did not count herself as one of those, though Onora O'Neill disagrees.⁷¹ All the same, she was ambitious to achieve in her field and the opportunity came to write books that were not in

the first rank of original philosophical thinking but that served a useful purpose in articulating the thoughts of others, placing their work in the context of the history of ideas. It was in this way that Mary made her academic mark.

During the latter part of the 1950s, Mary was commissioned by J. L. Austin, the editor of a series of books of philosophical topics published by Oxford University Press, to write a book on recent philosophical contributions to moral philosophy.⁷² Geoffrey had already published *English Ethics since 1900* (1957) in this series.⁷³ Mary's *Ethics since 1900* (1960) turned out to be a lucid survey of ethical thought in English-speaking philosophy since the late nineteenth century.⁷⁴ The main thrust of the book was dissatisfaction—by then quite widely shared—with deflationary mid-century attempts to deny moral judgments their authority in a science-minded world and so rob moral philosophy of its distinctive subject matter.

Mary's book begins with a brief account of F. H. Bradley's 'metaphysical ethics' and goes on to consider at greater length G. E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903). She then discusses the work of the intuitionist and emotivist approaches to ethics and points to their indebtedness to Charles Stevenson, the American philosopher. She senses that moral philosophers are slowly beginning to realise the importance of the inter-relationships of persons as moral agents, making moral evaluations and facing practical moral problems.

Mary concluded *Ethics since 1900* with a rather negative judgement on those philosophers whose work she had discussed. The one common theme taken by moral philosophers over the period, she noted, is that they are all hostile to ethical naturalism, that is they all agree that defining the good cannot depend on an assumption, the 'naturalistic fallacy,' that the good is based on natural properties or features of the natural world.⁷⁵ Mary, who was herself unhappy with the naturalistic fallacy, nevertheless considered that the concentration of the philosophers who rejected it on the basis of linguistic analysis of ethical language had resulted in 'the increasing triviality of the subject.'⁷⁶ Most such philosophers of this period seemed determined to avoid expressing any moral opinions at all. In Ayer's view, this was desirable. He drew the distinction between moral philosophers who analyse moral judgements and moralists who elaborate moral codes or encourage their observance.⁷⁷ Mary felt that

confining the scope of moral philosophy to such arid analysis was likely to condemn the subject to triviality and she expressed the hope that philosophers might turn their attention to 'how people actually decide, or what moral decisions are actually like.'⁷⁸

The critical reception of *Ethics since 1900* by contemporary philosophers was largely positive. Her account of the subject was repeatedly referred to as not only readable but lucid. Nevertheless, her rejection of the linguistic analysis of ethical language was questioned. A. C. Ewing, for example, thought it was of real practical importance to give a coherent (linguistic) account of ethics to defend against the charge that 'ethics is merely a subjective matter incapable of real justification.'⁷⁹ *Ethics since 1900* went into three editions and remained in print for many years. It was found by successive generations of undergraduates studying philosophy to be of invaluable assistance in preparation for their final examinations. One such Oxford student in the late 1960s recalled it fifty years later as 'immensely helpful as it was written so clearly.'⁸⁰

Mary's book was nearing completion when, one morning, she was telephoned by Austin to request that she include a chapter on existentialism.⁸¹ She described how she spent the whole of the following Long Vacation in 1959 reading works by Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism's founding father. Indeed in his address at the memorial service held six months after Mary died, her son Felix recalled how, during the summer of 1959, when he was seven and had a sister one year older and a younger brother and sister, his mother 'simply cast us children loose on the beach, to sink or swim, or possibly just freeze to death, as we chose, while she took up position on an exposed rock armed with a battered copy of Sartre's *L'Être et le néant* and a large French dictionary. In the midst of family chaos, she was at work on her first book.'⁸²

Although, on her own account, she had no previous special interest in existentialism, Mary was by no means unqualified to write about it. She was already knowledgeable in one of its primary sources, German phenomenology, the influential school of which Husserl (dismissed by Ryle) was a leading thinker. She had studied Descartes, but she was far less familiar with the more recent French philosophical tradition. She did, however, speak reasonably fluent French and this was an advantage. When Mary came to write about Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (1943) had just

been translated as *Being and Nothingness* (1957) into contorted English, which made Sartre's obscurity even worse than it was in the original.⁸³ Mary preferred to read Sartre's work in French without a translator as an intermediary.

There were, in fact, various reasons why Mary should have found writing about existentialism a congenial task. By mid-century, Germany had lost its earlier intellectual pre-eminence. In the nineteenth century, from Kant onwards, it had been in the forefront not only of philosophical ideas but in virtually all branches of scientific endeavour. It had lost ground after the First World War, and by the end of the Second World War the country was in ruins not only physically but culturally. Most of the leading German-speaking philosophers, many of them Jewish, had fled Germany in the 1930s. Indeed, as we have seen, Mary had been taught by some of them during her undergraduate days in Oxford. Instead of Germany, the world now looked to France for intellectual leadership in the humanities and to the United States and Britain in the sciences. With extraordinary speed, after 1945, for any young writer, artist or philosopher, Paris became the most exciting place in the world to be. Existentialism became a byword 'for the young and rebellious who took it on as a way of life and a trendy label.'⁸⁴

Jean-Paul Sartre had become the undisputed leader of French philosophical thought. He was not just a philosopher, he was a novelist and dramatist who had become a cult hero, indeed a celebrity. In 1945, when Iris Murdoch went to hear him speak in Brussels where she was then based, she found that vast crowds larger than those that had been attracted at a recent visit by Chico, the Marx brother celebrity, had turned out to see him.⁸⁵ As we have seen, Iris was one of Mary's intellectual heroes in Oxford. Herself a philosopher and novelist, she had been deeply influenced by Sartre and had, as we have seen, published a book about him.⁸⁶ Mary was in awe of her. If Iris could take Sartre seriously, there was every reason why Mary should do so too. While in fact there is rather little similarity between what Iris Murdoch had to say about existentialism and what she herself wrote, Mary regarded the philosophical chapter in Iris's book as 'an indispensable and saving thread to guide me through the labyrinth of what seemed at first to be impenetrable prose that I had to make sense of [...]'⁸⁷ Later, Mary admitted that,

having been brought up in the somewhat austere atmosphere at Oxford, one of the most amazing things about first reading Sartre was that he was prepared to talk philosophically about passion and love, sex and obesity, cooking and all sorts of domestic subjects. There is an amazing passage in *Being and Nothingness*, about the nature of the obscene, which would have been regarded in English philosophy as pornography.⁸⁸

Sartre thus appealed to Mary's imaginative spirit, even though she was, at the same time, repelled by many aspects of his philosophy.

As Mary recounted, the basic concept on which existentialism rests is that 'existence precedes essence.'⁸⁹ What Sartre means by this is that human beings, in contrast to inanimate objects, are not made to certain specifications to fulfil a certain purpose. Instead, they first exist and what they become depends on what they choose to do. Sartre gives as an example a paper knife which is designed for a specific purpose. A cook, in contrast, is not born a cook, he chooses to become one.⁹⁰ Mary points out that people are not by any means perfectly free to choose to become whatever they want. This is indeed illustrated by the characters in Sartre's novels who are constrained, at least to some degree, by their circumstances. Sartre calls an inanimate object a 'being-in-itself.' Human beings, in contrast, are 'beings for themselves.'⁹¹ In explaining human behaviour, Sartre suggests that 'beings-for-themselves' to fill a void strive to achieve a purpose for themselves and it is from this striving that much of their conscious life arises. One prominent feature of this conscious life common to human beings is *nausea*, experienced as a reaction to the senselessness, the absurdity of the world.⁹² Another feature is the sense of *viscosity*, (stickiness), Sartre's general term for things that are neither clearly material nor clearly mental and so disturb us by being hard to categorise in ways that go beyond the sense of touch.⁹³ *Sliminess* is a good example. It is not strictly a physical property. It depends crucially on us. But nor is it purely mental like the thought of the Eiffel Tower or abstract, like the number five. The unpleasant sensations of nausea and viscosity are avoided, Sartre contends, by a mental process (what psychoanalysts would call a 'defence mechanism') that he calls *mauvaise foi* or *bad faith*.⁹⁴

Sartre stretched this concept of bad faith to include other ways in which we deny our freedom, avoid making choices and take refuge in playing a role rather than in making a definite life choice. Mary quotes

two examples from *Being and Nothingness* to illustrate this idea. The first is a woman who is being courted sexually by a man. She allows her hand to remain in his when he takes it, not as an active decision, but to postpone a decision about whether to allow a sexual relationship to develop.⁹⁵ The second example is of a waiter in a café who rather than really choosing to be a waiter, is playing the part of waiter. He performs the role of a waiter, speaking and moving in prescribed ways in order to avoid the many choices available to him as a human being. This, Sartre alleges, results in the waiter being in the mode of '*Being-what-I-am-not*.'⁹⁶ Mary suggests these examples of bad faith arise because of what Sartre would regard as the individual's wish to become an object, a being-in-itself, like a paper knife.⁹⁷

Mary points out that the problem with these explanations of human behaviour, a problem shared by psychoanalytic explanations with some of which they have more than a passing resemblance, is that they cannot be refuted.⁹⁸ There is no way they could be shown to be wrong. She is more sympathetic to Sartre's well-known analysis of shame. He gives the example of a man who, out of perhaps curiosity or jealousy, is looking through a keyhole. Suddenly he hears footsteps and realises he is observed. The feelings this experience arouse in him such as guilt and shame reveal several important features about human relationships. First, the suggestion from sceptical philosophers that other people could be mere delusions—there may not even exist 'other minds'—is fatally undermined by experiences such as these. We could not experience such feelings of shame unless we knew that the observer of our shameful behaviour was 'essentially' the same as us and would disapprove or hold us in contempt.

There is a basic tension in Sartre's world between a person's actual freedom and his/her appearance as an object for the other. Mary finds this part of Sartre's theory fascinating. She says it 'has a kind of bewildering power which derives from the intensity of Sartre's imaginative vision of each of us forming his own interpretations of the world, and locked in a constant battle with other people, with whom we are obliged to recognise as possessing as much freedom as we do ourselves.'⁹⁹ However Mary remains critical of Sartre's overall metaphysics which, she says, is too vague and incoherent to lead to any definite conclusions. His supreme value is freedom, but 'it is not wholly clear to what a man is committed if he chooses freedom, or what his alternatives are.'¹⁰⁰ What is clear is

that Sartre considers that it is not possible to distinguish moral from political questions, which is why for Sartre, the question of whether to join the Communist Party was so significant. But joining any party almost inevitably leads to a man compromising his values and therefore to demonstrating 'bad faith.' So, Sartre's beliefs, in Mary's view, only lead to the asking of difficult questions to which he fails to provide answers. Mary's main contribution in the chapter on existentialism in *Ethics since 1900* was to put Sartre's ideas into more precise historical context than had previously been attempted, confirming her own view of herself as less a philosopher than a historian of ideas.

Although there were attractions to writing about existentialism, there were serious challenges too. The most daunting and, to Mary, the most irritating of these was Sartre's prose. She wrote of his style

His method of composition is cumulative. He often attempts three or four ways of conveying a certain impression, which do not necessarily stay exactly the same as, and may even contradict each other. Almost everything he says about, for instance, perception, could be discussed and quarrelled with. But if one did that one would mistake his purpose; for, regrettably perhaps, he does not want to be precise, nor to get things exactly right. He is interested in presenting a picture of what things are like, in bludgeoning his readers into accepting a certain view of the world and he does not much care what weapons he uses to do this.¹⁰¹

Mary describes *L'Être et le néant*, the key to much of Sartre's thought, as 'written in an extraordinarily thick, obscure style, full of technical terms of a grotesque kind, derived from Hegel.'¹⁰² Such a style is almost exactly the opposite of that to which Mary herself aspired. Those who comment on her style use words like 'lucid' and 'precise.' So, in her chapter in *Ethics since 1900* and in her books on existentialism, she did her best to translate Sartre's obscurities into understandable ideas that could be discussed by those who wished to know more about them. Mary regarded her task as not to replay or précis Sartre's dialectical oratory, but to analyse the arguments he deployed. It was not an easy task.

A further problem in explaining Sartre's ideas even to an informed readership, was that these underwent a radical change in the years following the Second World War. A central tenet of existentialism, as we have seen, is that men (Sartre, in line with then current usage, refers to 'men' when he means 'people') are free to choose between courses of action and it is in the choices they make that they demonstrate their

humanity. He writes in 1945 'the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.'¹⁰³ It would scarcely be possible to articulate a more individualist doctrine. But by 1960, and the move had been apparent long before then, in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre had undergone a radical conversion to Marxism. At this point he had become convinced of the significance of history in determining the action of individuals and, 'the agent of change in history turns out to be not the individual free revolutionary, but the group of which he is a member.'¹⁰⁴ By 1960, from Mary's point of view, though not that of Sartre, who unsuccessfully sought to modify Marxism by introducing existentialist ideas, Sartre had ceased to be an existentialist in its original sense. Necessarily therefore, in explaining Sartre's ideas, she turned to his earlier formulations, though she took trouble to describe his subsequent conversion.

After the chapter on existentialism in *Ethics since 1900*, Mary was commissioned to write three more books as well as edit another book on the subject. Her own books expand on the historical context which underpins Sartre's philosophical work. She begins *The Philosophy of Sartre* (1965) with a discussion of the influence of Descartes, concluding with a discussion of the problem of reconciling Sartre's earlier views on the defining importance of individual freedom with his subsequent radical conversion to Marxism in his latest book, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).¹⁰⁵ This had only just appeared when the earlier chapter in *Ethics since 1900* was written.

In *Existentialist Ethics* (1967) and *Existentialism* (1970), Mary considers some of the other philosophers who had influenced Sartre, in particular Friedrich Nietzsche, Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The common theme here is the rejection of the claim of science to objective truth, pointing the way to Sartre's conclusion that perception precedes knowledge. Mary then reconsiders Sartre's own work, concluding, as she had done many times before, 'The Existentialists have given us many particular insights, especially in their discussion of persons, and of perception, but if philosophy is to continue to exist, then it is necessary to reject the subjective dogmatism of their attempt to reveal the ultimate meaning of Existence.'¹⁰⁶

Finally, in this connection, there is a collection of critical essays Mary edited under the title *Sartre* (1971) in a series titled *Modern Studies in Philosophy*. This consists of fourteen essays written by British and American academics on different aspects of existentialism. After a lengthy exposition of Sartre's thought by Alisdair Macintyre and a brief review of *Being and Nothingness* by Stuart Hampshire, there are contributions by other philosophers, literary critics, and sociologists on the way Sartre's particular brand of existentialism has illuminated their fields of study.¹⁰⁷

Mary's extensive writings on existentialism attracted some interest from British and French philosophers, but most of the reviewers were unimpressed. A. C. Ewing noted the contents of the chapter on this subject in *Ethics since 1900* but confessed he remained as puzzled by Sartre's philosophy and its mode of expression after he had read it as he had been beforehand.¹⁰⁸ French philosophers were slightly but not much more sympathetic. Gérard Deledalle in *Les études philosophiques* noted that Mary almost felt the need to excuse herself for spending time on a philosopher whose metaphysical approach had been so firmly rejected by British philosophers.¹⁰⁹ In a review of the book published in the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, the reviewer chose not to mention the chapter on existentialism at all.¹¹⁰ Van Marter, in a review of the book on Sartre published in *Ethics*, reported that 'during 1963–64, if Oxford philosophers were asked what they had to say about contemporary philosophy at Paris, they usually replied by smiling incredulously at the thought that anyone should take seriously what goes on south of the Channel. Usually too [...] they paused long enough to point out with great sobriety that Mary Warnock was writing a book on Sartre.'¹¹¹ He considered that Mary's treatment of Sartre, including his theory of imagination, was conducted in 'a stimulating and seminal fashion [...] Her gift for terse expression often achieves results in formulation that are incisive and lucid.'¹¹²

One might well ask why Mary wrote so much about a philosophy which, she repeatedly said, she regarded as leading nowhere other than blind alleys. Indeed, in the last interview she gave only a few weeks before she died, when asked about existentialism, she said with great feeling 'I loathed it,' and explained this deep dislike on the basis of Sartre's lack of concern for evidence.¹¹³ The answer to the question of

why she devoted so much time to it is not clear, so we should perhaps accept Mary's own explanation that she was simply responding to commissions. If she had not quite 'cornered the market' in existentialism, she was, at least, an obvious choice of author because she had already shown interest in the subject and wrote as clearly as it was possible to write on a topic known for its difficulty. It is also possible that Sartre's philosophy was rather more attractive to her than she admitted. Far more than most people, at different times of her life, she exercised her freedom of choice in ways that might not have been expected. This was partly because her background and social contacts put her into a highly privileged position in the making of choices but also because features of her personality, especially her intellectual restlessness, made her particularly open to new challenges. To some degree at least, she lived out Sartre's idea of a good life by choosing to explore areas of life previously almost completely unfamiliar to her. There is a further reason why Mary might have been attracted to Sartre's writing. He constantly pointed to the way people avoided freedom by adopting the roles expected of them by virtue of their occupation or social status. Perhaps more than can be said of most people, Mary did not adopt the false selves that might have been expected of her. She was an unconventional female don by virtue of being married and having children. Though she loved her children, she was, as we shall see, in no way a typical mother. So, like Iris Murdoch, the other philosopher who wrote about existentialism though deploring its intellectual incoherence, she led the life she wanted to, not the life she might have been expected to. Iris Murdoch, in an essay entitled "On 'God' and 'Good'" wrote 'To do philosophy is to explore one's own temperament and yet at the same time to discover the truth.'¹¹⁴ Mary would have agreed.

What impact did Mary's formidable set of publications have on anglophone interest in existentialism? There is no information on the numbers of her books that were sold, but it is likely sales were modest. There is also no evidence that Mary's books found anything other than an academic readership. All the same, by 1966, according to Geoffrey Strickland, Sartre was no longer a writer of the *avant-garde*. As an 'established classic,' he was a 'prescribed author in most English universities and also for A level examinations.'¹¹⁵ However, existentialist philosophy, though it found a place in some schools of therapy, never

achieved the importance in English-speaking universities that it did in continental Europe. In English and Cultural Studies, it was soon replaced by various forms of post-modernist thought. Finally, what impact did such intense exposure to existentialist thought have on Mary's own philosophical ideas? Every time she wrote on the subject, she concluded with a negative, often a strongly negative appraisal of Sartre's work. While she admired the force of Sartre's style and the theatricality with which he illustrated his arguments, she persisted in her belief that existentialism did not add up to a coherent philosophical system. Nevertheless, she continued, for the rest of her life, to acknowledge the impact it had made on moral philosophy. In the introduction to a set of readings from women philosophers—*Women Philosophers* (1996)—she wrote 'I have no doubt that existentialism changed moral philosophy in this country and made it less arid and depressing than it had been in the period after the Second World War.'¹¹⁶ She goes on to contend that, from the 1960s onwards, as a result of the arousal of political consciousness by the Vietnam War, university students all over the developed world began to look for more relevance to political and social issues in the content of their curriculum. 'Something akin to the existentialist mode, at any rate the application of philosophy to live issues, began to appear in almost all philosophy departments [...]'¹¹⁷ Whether such intense reading of existentialist philosophy played any part in Mary's own life is not clear, but it is hard to think it can have had no effect. Mary was not alone in thinking that existentialism had an enduring appeal. Nearly fifty years after it was written, Richard Eyre, the British theatre director, who was excited by existentialism in the 1960s, referred to *Being and Nothingness* as providing 'a topographical account—a moral template that helps me navigate the more shadowy parts of my existence'¹¹⁸

Mary's description of Oxford moral philosophy as 'arid and depressing' before the advent of existentialism is telling. José Harris, in her account of Oxford University arts and social sciences over this period reports that 'by the 1950s linguistic philosophy had little to say about theoretical and moral issues.' Its approach was increasingly seen as purely negative, a judgement typified by an accusation Ayer levelled at Austin: '[...] you are like a greyhound that refuses to race but bites the other greyhounds to prevent their racing either.'¹¹⁹ Mary might well have had some sympathy with this view as well as with the London-based

philosopher, Bernard Williams, who wrote: 'Contemporary moral philosophy has found an original way of being boring, which is by not discussing moral issues at all [...] [it] leaves an impression that all the important issues are off the page and that great caution and little imagination have been used in letting tiny corners of them appear.'¹²⁰

By the early 1960s Mary was looking at the possibility of finding a way out of academic philosophy. Although she gave other reasons for quitting her fellowship of St. Hugh's College in 1966, it seems likely that a sense of disillusionment with analytic thought, not just in moral philosophy but in other, more mainstream branches of the subject may have played some part in her decision. If that were the case, she would not have been alone. Much earlier, in 1950, Mary Midgley, the distinguished philosopher who focused especially on science, nature and the moral status of non-human animals, had left Oxford, where she was a fellow of Somerville College, for the University of Newcastle. In her autobiography, *The Owl of Minerva* (2005), she describes how, before she left, she attended a meeting of the Jowett Society, the discussion group Mary had chaired when she was an undergraduate, deeply depressed by the feuding that accompanied the arguments and by the progressive narrowing of the subject. She was much happier in Newcastle.¹²¹ Another probably more influential refugee from Oxford philosophy was her senior colleague, Iris Murdoch. Iris's reasons for resigning from her fellowship at St. Anne's College in 1962 were mixed. She had become emotionally entangled with a woman colleague to a degree that had earned the disapproval of the Principal, Lady Ogilvie. Some of her students were finding her supervisions less than helpful. One described Iris spending the statutory hour lying mutely on the floor with her eyes closed. Probably most importantly, she was now achieving significant success as a novelist and wanted to be able to spend more time writing.¹²² Whatever the reasons, Mary could see that it was possible for a woman don to find another life for herself out of Oxford academe.

Besides, Oxford was increasingly being seen by its own as a narrow and inward-looking place to be. *Camford Observed*, a book written in 1964 by two Cambridge dons, Jasper Rose and John Ziman, though largely couched in language sympathetic to the ancient universities, was a penetrating critique of the Oxbridge system. It pointed to the privileges of the don's life, the freedom he or she enjoyed and the lack of evidence

that this level of autonomy produced results especially in the education of undergraduates which most then saw as the main purpose of these universities. The book was widely reviewed and discussed. Further, in the 1960s, new universities were being created in Britain and many young Oxbridge academics were attracted to found new departments in their subjects. As we shall see, the Warnocks' philosopher friend, Marcus Dick became one of these and there were dozens of others. In an account of her friendship with Rachel Trickett, the English don who became head of St. Hugh's, Mary claims that Rachel's novel *The Elders* (1966) gave the best account she had read of the atmosphere of Oxford in the Long Vacation.¹²³ Trickett describes a group of highly intelligent dons who spend the ample amounts of free time at their disposal during their sixteen-week summer holiday in scheming and gossiping over an academic appointment of trivial importance to anyone outside the university itself.¹²⁴ Mary must have wondered whether it was not time to seek work which would give her a wider context in which to exercise her talents.

Notes

- 1 John Searle, p. 173.
- 2 John Searle himself became an internationally renowned philosopher who went on after leaving Oxford to make a major contribution to the philosophy of consciousness. In his eighties, however, he was found guilty of sexually harassing several much younger female colleagues and stripped of his emeritus status at the University of California, Berkeley.
- 3 Ayer, 2001.
- 4 Warnock, 2000, p. 46.
- 5 Ibid., p. 49.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 184–185.
- 7 Thomas, p. 215.
- 8 Searle, p. 190.
- 9 Ibid., p. 196.
- 10 Sarah Curtis, née Myers, personal communication, 27 January 2020.
- 11 Ibid.

- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Schwartz, 2011, p. 84.
- 14 Onora O'Neill, 'Mary Warnock remembered', *The Observer*, 14 December 2019.
- 15 Adrian Whitfield, personal communication, 21 May 2020.
- 16 Patrick Lawrence, personal communication, 22 October 2019.
- 17 Warnock, 2000, p. 16.
- 18 Howarth, p. 352.
- 19 Ibid., p. 356.
- 20 Ibid., p. 362.
- 21 Ibid., p. 353.
- 22 Ibid., p. 355.
- 23 Warnock, 2000, p. 112.
- 24 Ibid., p. 114.
- 25 Schwartz, p. 86.
- 26 Ibid., p. 70.
- 27 C. A. Moberley and E. Jourdain, 1911.
- 28 Schwartz, 2011, pp. 51–52.
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Fig. 3 Geoffrey and Mary on their wedding day (1949), provided by the Warnock family, CC BY-NC.

