

# Dorothy Emmet

HUGH MELLOR

I'm delighted that Manchester University's Philosophy Department has decided to establish a series of lectures in memory of Dorothy Emmet, and I'm very honoured to have been asked to introduce the first one.

Dorothy Emmet was born in 1904, and came to Manchester in 1938 from Newcastle-on-Tyne, where she'd been a lecturer in philosophy since 1932. Here, she started as a lecturer in the philosophy of religion, and became a reader in philosophy in 1945. From 1946 and until she retired twenty years later, she was the Sir Samuel Hall professor of philosophy, and head of the Philosophy Department: a department which – in the words of one of her obituarists – she 'built up from a handful of students and a single lecturer to four hundred students and a strong and varied staff'.

I only came to know Dorothy after she retired, when she came to live in Cambridge with Richard Braithwaite and his wife Margaret Masterman. When she arrived I was a new assistant lecturer in the Cambridge University Philosophy Faculty, where Richard, then in his last year as the Knightbridge Professor, was a mentor of mine who became a life-long friend. It was through him that I first met Dorothy, who also became a great friend, and one with whom I had many philosophical conversations in the last thirty years of her life, until she died in the year 2000.

Although Dorothy and I mostly worked on very different topics, we did share an interest in causation, which we discussed a lot while she was writing her 1984 book *The Effectiveness of Causes*. Though that's a fine book, it's not had much influence, for reasons that I think, oddly enough, show why Dorothy was such a good philosopher, teacher, colleague, administrator and friend.

She and I worked very differently. I'm the kind of selfish and unscholarly thinker whose main interest in other people's ideas is in using them – with due acknowledgement, of course – to correct and improve my own ideas. Dorothy on the other hand was more interested in other people and their ideas for their own sake, and for what they contributed to our understanding, not only of philosophy, and in her case of religion, but of people and society. Not that Dorothy's interest in other philosophers was ever merely exegetical, or that of an uncritical disciple, not even of A. N.

Whitehead, whose seminars at Harvard she'd attended in the late nineteen-twenties, and whose later work she made clearer to me, if not more appealing, than he or anyone else ever did.

And that's what I think makes *The Effectiveness of Causes* less influential than it deserves to be: the fact that it doesn't present her own worked-out theory of causation in a self-contained way that's relatively easy to extract and assess impersonally, as for example David Lewis's theories are. What it does give us, as her other books do, are superb accounts of other people's views, and of her acute and profound reactions to them, which anyone working on the subject today would still do well to take note of.

But if Dorothy's perceptive and constructively critical interest in the ideas of her philosophical interlocutors has hindered the appreciation of her own ideas, it's also part of what made her a great head of department. It's also why, if you want to learn how Manchester philosophy developed as it did in her time, you need only read three chapters of her 1996 book *Philosophers and Friends: Reminiscences of Seventy Years in Philosophy*: chapter 7, 'Samuel Alexander in Manchester'; chapter 8, 'Philosophy in Manchester: Religion and Metaphysics. Michael Polanyi'; and chapter 9, 'Philosophy in Manchester: Theories in the Social Sciences. Alasdair MacIntyre, Max Gluckman'. I think, indeed, that these chapters might usefully be made required reading for all Manchester philosophers, if they aren't already; just as the whole book should be required reading for anyone who wants to learn both what philosophical conversations should be like, and why I, like everyone I ever met who knew Dorothy, was devoted to and inspired by her.

Our first Dorothy Emmet lecturer, Professor Catherine Elgin of Harvard University, tells me that her work has little or no connection with Dorothy's. Even so, I suspect that she and Dorothy have more in common than she thinks, since her webpage says this: 'I am an epistemologist with an interest in aesthetics and the philosophy of science. In recent works I have argued that the same epistemological issues arise, and similar solutions are available, in the arts and in the sciences.' That statement, and the title of her lecture, 'Nature's Handmaiden, Art', seem to me to bespeak the all-too-rare breadth of philosophical interest that Dorothy herself had, valued and instilled.

Professor Elgin