**Mary Midgley**

***By Ellie Robson***

Mary Midgley was a vibrant moral philosopher whose inexhaustible imagination and persistent questioning of the 20th century analytic philosophical paradigm spanned her long life. But despite her refreshingly accessible style of writing, and engagement with real-world problems, Midgley’s broader philosophical vision has been largely unappreciated. Certain aspects of her work are widely known – such as her engagement with animal ethics and criticism of Richard Dawkins – but the breadth of Midgley’s philosophy stretches far beyond these topics.

Unlike many other analytic moral philosophers who often focus on abstract puzzles or defend specific philosophical doctrines, Midgley was more concerned with broadening and augmenting our vision of things. Her books brim with rich ideas about human moral life; she is deeply concerned with human beings, our nature, and our place within the world. Yet once you read Midgley’s books you will notice similar themes and messages - in this sense, Midgley’s philosophy may be described as both holistic and systematic. Engaging in debates of modern science, evolution, environmental ethics and feminism, her philosophy displays a constant and pragmatic concern for the next ‘task at hand’. She presents a positive and problem-solving approach to the everyday anxieties we face in this ‘deeply puzzling’ modern world.

Midgley wasn’t always sure about her philosophical direction. Her academic career took a somewhat unusual shape. Whereas most of her contemporaries published a steady stream of books and articles, Midgley focused on being a teacher, scholar, and mother, only writing academic philosophy towards the end of her professional career. This strange shape may have slowed the uptake of Midgley’s philosophy into the philosophical literature - but, as Midgley tells us in her ever-sensible tone, she was ‘jolly glad’ she waited until her fifties to publish: ‘I didn’t know what I thought before then!’

Midgley’s memoir, *The Owl of Minerva* (2005), presents a thoughtful and light-hearted portrayal of Mary’s early life. Born in London in 1919, Mary was the daughter of politically-minded parents, Lesley and Tom Scrutton. Her father later became a chaplain at King’s College, Cambridge. In 1924 the Scruttons moved to Greenford, Middlesex, where Mary enjoyed a typically middle-class upbringing. She describes her nature-loving childhood, recalling timeless outdoor adventures with her brother, Hugh. Aged twelve, she began attending The Downe House school in Newbury. Immersed in poetry, Latin, and drama, she recalls reading Plato at sixteen and thinking it was ‘tremendous stuff’ (Midgley, 2005).

In 1938, Midgley began reading Classics at Somerville College, Oxford. Among the minority of women philosophers, she describes entering Oxford at a time when philosophy was dominated by clever young men. Philosophy, to these men, was a competition to win arguments in fractious displays of intelligence - the aim was not advancing understanding but avoiding appearing *weak.* A.J Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) had appeared only two years earlier and was highly influential. In it, Ayer argues for a trenchant separation of fact and value. But this left ethical questions within an autonomous sphere, devoid of any factual content. It also reduced the work of the moral philosopher to little more than linguistic analysis.

Midgley was not satisfied with this ‘moral philosophy’ that Oxford offered her – and luckily, she was not alone. At Oxford she befriended three like-minded philosophers – Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch – all of whom have gone on to be formidable philosophers in their own right. When the War began in 1939, many young men were enlisted, leaving this quartet in a unique historical position – freed from the prevailing demographic norms of male-dominated study. Midgley and her friends would use their wartime education - they were taught by older dons and conscientious objectors – to offer an alternative moral philosophy to the Ayer-inspired paradigms that had taken Oxford by storm. Instead of engaging in relentless linguistic analysis, these women again focused on our ‘deeply puzzling world’, placing ethics back into the sphere of human experience. The legacy of their collective work is still being charted by the *In Parenthesis* project at Durham University, led by Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman.

In 1950, Mary married fellow philosopher, Geoff Midgley, and the couple moved to Newcastle, where they spent their entire professional lives. After raising her three sons, Midgley began to write. Despite her late start, once Mary began to publish there was no stopping her: between the age of 59 and 99 she wrote over two hundred books, articles and chapters, contributing frequently to *The* *New* *Scientist* and *The* *Guardian*. Her energetic tone and straightforward good sense continued to sound through radio broadcasts, and for many years she spoke on programmes such as *The Moral Maze* and *Women’s Hour*. She engaged directly with notable thinkers of the day, such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, and became a renowned moral philosopher and public intellectual. Midgley published her last book *What is Philosophy for*? in 2018, just before her death, at the age of 99.

Midgley’s thought is holistic, which makes it difficult to place in any particular philosophical ‘box’. Unlike the linguistic paradigm dominant in the Oxford of her youth, according to Midgley there is no significant distance between philosophy and human life; to pass from one to the other is much like walking around the rooms of a house – effortless and familiar. ‘Philosophy’, she writes in *The Owl of Minerva*, ‘is not a luxury but a necessity’ – it is an inevitable part of the human condition, much like growing up or falling in love. When we do philosophy, we should not operate as ‘isolated intellectuals’, taking part in a sterile enterprise - rather we are part of a collaborative, living process of shared human development. Philosophy is simply and naturally human. As a human endeavor, Midgley’s conception of philosophy rejects the distinctions between fact and value, a practice so prominent among Midgley’s male contemporaries.

Midgley’s conception of philosophy as oriented around real-world problems is most visible in her meta-philosophy – that is, her view on the approach and role of the moral philosopher. Detailed in *Utopias, Dolphins, and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing’* (1996), Midgley’s enduring comparison is between philosophy and plumbing. Both concern underlying structures that play a vital yet unnoticed role in supplying people with necessary resources for everyday life, quietly working below the surface of our attention, exposed only when they break down in floods of confusion. When this happens, and our concepts become stagnant, it is the job of the philosopher, like the plumber, to ‘pull up the floorboards’ and examine our faulty concepts, setting about trying to fix the problem.

This powerful metaphor underlines Midgley’s argument for the centrality of philosophy to life. Philosophy really does matter. Even if, like the plumbing, we can get away with ignoring it for a long time, sooner or later the myths which we live our lives by – to borrow a turn of phrase from Midgley – will become stagnant and need repairing.

One constant theme of Midgley’s philosophy is that of ‘world-pictures’ or ‘myths’ – imaginative visions, expressing stories about the kind of norms and practices human society lives by. In *The Myths We Live By* (2011), Midgley unsettles many of these – for instance, the myth of the social contract is still a prevalent today. Popularised by Enlightenment philosophy this is the idea that ‘morality is essentially just a contact’, freely entered into by isolated and autonomous individuals within a society. In her autobiography Midgley notes that the practice of unsettling myths demonstrates to what extent philosophy is like therapy, an essential activity ‘when things become dark and difficult to see, rather than when they are clear and straightforward’. But while she recognises that such broad visions are needed by us to make sense of this ‘deeply puzzling world’, problems arise, she thinks, when we are tempted to think that one story or vision can capture the world in all its complexity; our vision is then prone to being one-sided and reductive. She does not argue that the social contract myth is *false*, but rather that it is a ‘typical piece of Enlightenment simplification’.

This notion of embracing the multi-faceted complexity of ‘this deeply puzzling world’ places Midgley at odds with an increasing philosophical tendency to reduce and level-out the moral scene. That is, the tendency to fixate upon some singular idea or entity – genes, competition, markets – so as to give a unified explanation of moral reality. Midgley airs her suspicions of this tendency by criticizing notions such as ‘social atomism’ and the ‘selfish gene’ in *The Solitary Self* (2010) and *Science as Salvation (1994).* In a similar vein, she warns us of the dangers of ‘exaggerated individualism’ encouraged by an unrealistic acceptance of a radically competitive human nature in modern versions of Victorian Social Darwinism. In *Evolution as a Religion* (2002) she suggests that modern scientific figures such as Richard Dawkins have distorted Darwin’s theory of evolution to create the harmful myth that human beings are radically isolated individuals, homeless in a natural world that is an arena of relentless competition. This is a damaging myth for Midgley, because it encourages us to see ourselves as ‘disembodied minds’ rather than ‘earthly creatures’ – a self-conception that will likely lead to our lives going badly. Again, Midgley is drawn back to this idea that philosophy is not a solitary endeavor. Rather, our philosophy, like our plumbing, is a shared cooperative and collaborative exercise needed to ‘keep the water flowing’, and to co-construct pictures that we live by.

So, what is Midgley’s vision of ethics? According to *Beast and Man* (1979), philosophy is the study of our complex nature and our situation within the natural world; a study of very real bonds of friendship, kinship and social dependence and of how it is we live as dependent social beings. Her moral philosophy, then, may be broadly placed within the camp of ethical naturalism; ethics is dependent on facts of human life, facts that must be discovered by careful study of the human animal. Our rich culture is therefore embedded in and enabled by the natural world, rather than alien to it. However, Midgley’s naturalism is not reductive. Much like the naturalism present in Foot’s *Natural Goodness* (2001) Midgley suggests our ethical and rational natures are a rich and complex product of our human ‘life form’.

Midgley’s consistent emphasis on dependence, relationships, and holism are highly relevant to contemporary philosophical debates in feminism, environmental ethics, and animal ethics. In *Beast and Man*, Midgley describes another problematic myth, namely the misconception that there is some great division between humans and animals - between the lawless mechanistic ‘beast’, and the rational, intelligent ‘man’. For Midgley, we can learn very little about our true nature by drawing this harsh distinction – especially when we become trapped in this narrow tool of dualism. Instead, we must situate ourselves among the animals; ‘we are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals’. Midgley’s naturalism encourages us to view the human animal as equally responsive to instincts as the rest of the Animal Kingdom. Again, we find a common thread in Midgley’s writing, a criticism of this fantastical notion of isolated man, espoused by the myth of the isolated individual.

Encouraging philosophers to reinterpret the myth of Beast and Man offers fruitful perspectives on our treatment of non-human animals, and our relationship with the natural environment more broadly. Seeing ourselves as continuous with the natural world reframes discussion about human practices – such as the meat industry - that damage the planet we live in. The application of Midgley’s thought to feminism remains profoundly relevant: she emphasises the need to value our close personal relationships and human bonds by attending to and caring for them, not only in moral theory but in everyday practice.

What is Midgley’s legacy, then? Underpinning Midgley’s prolific writing is a myth of her own. A picture of a philosophical human being, who is at the same time an animal. A being who lives in accordance with ‘world-pictures’ yet nonetheless refuses the urge to reduce and simplify in the ever-changing world. For Midgley, embracing *this* myth involves painting over the shallow myth of the isolated man, and drawing in its place a richer, multifaceted picture of a human animal at home in the natural world. As a philosopher Midgley was truly ahead of her time. I sincerely encourage you to pick up her philosophy.

**Primary Texts**

Midgley, Mary. 1979. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Routledge Classics.

- 1981. *Heart and Mind*. Routledge Classics.

- 1983. *Animals and Why They Matter*.

- 1985. *Evolution as a Religion: Strange hopes and stranger fears.* Methuen and Co.

- *1994. Science as Salvation.* Routledge Classics.

- 1996. *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problem of Philosophical Plumbing*. Routledge Classics.

- 2001. *Science and Poetry*. Routledge Classics

- 2005. *The Owl of Minerva.* Routledge Classics

- 2010. *The Solitary Self*. Routledge Classics.

- 2011. *The Myths We Live By*. Routledge Classics.

- 2018. *What is Philosophy For?* Bloomsbury academic**.**

Foot, Philippa (2001) *Natural Goodness.* Clarendon Press. Oxford University Press

**Recommended Further Reading**

Kidd, Ian James and McKinnell, Liz. 2016. *Science and the Self: Animals, Evolution and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Mary Midgley*. Routledge

Midgley, David. 2005. *The Essential Mary Midgley.* Routledge.

Mac Cumhaill, Clare and Wiseman, Rachael (2018). *A Female School in Analytic Philosophy: Anscombe, Foot, Midgley and Murdoch.* Found at:<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/in-parenthesis-at-upenn-usa-and-queens-canada-read-our-talk/>

Warnock, Mary. 1996. *Women Philosophers.* J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd

For more information of Midgley and her contemporaries visit the *In Parenthesis* project website:<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/>