

Final draft – Complete version published at

<https://berlinbooks.org/brb/2020/07/mary-midgley-and-that-beastly-illusion/>

Mary Midgley, Covid-19, and That Beastly Illusion

Mary Midgley was a philosopher, trained at Oxford, who, together with philosopher husband Geoffrey Midgley, lived and taught for much of her life in Newcastle, where they raised three children. She was united by friendship and philosophical interests with a group of some of the most talented British philosophers of her generation, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch. Midgley's work focused mainly on the relation of science and culture, the dangers of ideology, and the need to take better care of animals and the environment. In her *Beast and Man* (1978) and *Animals and Why they Matter* (1983) she argued for a realistic view of human nature informed by science and culture, and for the fair treatment of animals, urging scientists to be more careful when discussing moral psychology and ethics.

Midgley engaged, and tried to improve on, the ideas of popular thinkers advocating scientism and reductivism, like Desmond Morris and Richard Dawkins. Midgley was a fan of science and technology, admiring their potential to contribute to human life, while believing that in themselves they cannot solve the problems of humanity. She emphasized that, in order to do so, we also need to get right politics, policy, community life, and other messy emotional, social, and communal affairs too. She wrote about these topics in her books *Evolution as a Religion* (1985) and *Science as Salvation* (1992). Her autobiography, *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir* (2008), is a witty and eminently enjoyable book, recounting the story of a life spent caring for family and engaging in public philosophy, trying to offer constructive alternatives to popular extreme positions of the intellectual debates of the 1980s up to the early 2000s.

Midgley passed away in 2018, at the age of 99. Her last book, *What is Philosophy For?*, appeared in the same year, spelling out an idea motivating much of her work: that philosophers can be most useful to society when they help to fix some of the usually invisible but nevertheless necessary conceptual infrastructure that people rely on in their

thinking, public debates, political decisions and other matters. In this, she thought, the philosopher is like a plumber: no one cares about them, nor the pipes that ensure that we have clean, fresh water, until something goes wrong. Philosophers can serve society by clarifying ideas and concepts – like those of science, human nature, value, morality, nature – which are, either due to their complexity or due to selfish intents, misconstrued, creating confusion, and are often misused by political campaigns fuelling hate and discrimination, or employed to justify cuts to educational and social services for the vulnerable.

What would Midgley have thought about the current Covid-19 crisis? Would she have thought that this is an occasion that calls for her engagement as a philosopher, or rather for her organisational and political side? Midgley's approach is decidedly community-oriented, encouraging us to take an active stance on social issues and to pursue practical action to bring about change. She might have taken this opportunity to try and encourage people to look beyond the ideas of current politicians and the large corporations shaping public perception – like Google, Apple, Amazon, and Facebook – and to try and think afresh about what society really needs to do well.

The world is in transition at the moment. The US is still the dominant military and political force, yet China is catching up fast, and countries like France, the UK, or Italy, which have been important economies with large influence for a long time, are gradually overtaken in terms of economic weight by India, Brazil, and Indonesia, with others not too far behind them either. These shifts cause significant insecurity, and actors across diplomacy, finance, banking, media, and other fields are scrambling for some kind of safety. Hence, people in many countries voted in recent elections for leaders who are stunningly self-confident and promise quick fixes to all problems. These leaders show a striking lack of concern for the public, and little in terms of leadership qualities, while focusing most of their efforts on PR, so that they appear busy and efficient. They rely on their marketing strategies, which quickly turned out to be irrelevant in the face of Covid-19. Their simplistic mantras of increasing productivity, growing the economy, and replacing public services with private businesses also proved to be doing more harm than good. Their incompetence led to several catastrophic decisions. Midgley, who emphasised the benefits of scientific advances combined with knowledge about society

throughout her work, would have been appalled and enraged by the lack of respect for expert opinion that such leaders have shown.

Midgley thought that scientific and technological thinking has its limits, and it cannot provide the inspiration and cohesive vision about how to live life as a community that our societies need. A well-lived life for humans is not simply a life spent ensuring that the economy is alright. As she puts the question in *Beast and Man*:

“Why play? Why (on the human scene) so much time spent in non-productive communication of every kind—idle chatter, lovemaking, sport, laughter, song, dance, and storytelling, quarrels, ceremonial, mourning and weeping? Intelligence alone would not generate these ends. It would just calculate means. But these things are done for their own sake; they are a part of the activity that goes to make up the life proper to each species. Insofar as there is one “impelling force,” it is sociability.” (Midgley 1978, p. 68)

Journalists and researchers made some attempts during the pandemic to encourage adopting progressive measures such as universal basic income, shifts to greener technologies or a slower lifestyle. Most of these failed to reach masses of people and haven't convinced even those who read or heard about them. So far, there has been no widely endorsed constructive and imaginative proposal about how humanity could move forward in the long term. This is where in Midgley's view imagination and irrationality could shine:

“(…) what Blake objected to was single vision – the inability to look at things from any angle other than the scientific one. It was not Newton's discoveries themselves. All the great Romantics made this effort to bring both sides together, which is just what makes them great. Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular went to great lengths to stress that the antithesis between thought and feeling was a false one. They insisted that both were aspects of a single whole that might best be understood by attending closely to its middle term, imagination. Here was the scene of the process of creation, both in art and science – not a mass of idle and delusive fancy, but a constructive faculty, building experience into visions which made both feeling and thought effective.” (Midgley 2001, p. 55)

It is this sense of constructive and productive irrationality, of putting our instinctive collaborative and caring behaviour first and putting ambition and self-interest on the backburner that would be needed. We need genuine compassion: intense feeling for and with others moving us to act. We need representation for the people who are in vulnerable positions, whether it is because they live in countries with weak infrastructures or under the leadership of corrupt leaders, or whether they are increasingly left behind in high-income countries and struggle with high rent while working on zero hour ‘flexible’ contracts, in on-demand employment and other dehumanising positions. (If only the directors and managers of certain companies could enjoy such flexibility!)

Another aspect of public discussions that, judging from her work Midgley would most likely condemn, is how notions of beastliness came to the fore again. I’m not just talking about the blanket racism that many have shown, accusing entire nations of intentionally exposing their own and others’ countries to a disastrous danger. Rather, I have in mind the proposals that all bats should be culled. It is true that bats carry several dangerous viruses, many of which can be transferred to humans. Does this call for more attention and research on this issue, and for better hygiene, regulation and education regarding living and working in areas where bats are prevalent? Yes. Does it call for more careful farm and animal produce laws? It does indeed. Does it call for the extermination of all bats? Certainly not. There are over 1400 species of bats, making up almost a fifth of all mammalian species and living in almost all areas of the world where humans are also present. Throughout thousands of years we have evaded massive scale infections despite the fact that we farm and rear animals near bat populations.

In her *Beast and Man* (1978), Midgley reconstructed how throughout our intellectual and cultural history we humans have often defined ourselves in contrast with animals, relegating all negative aspects of our nature – greed, excess, selfish aggression, perversion – to our beastly sides, and defined humanity in terms of our supposedly most excellent features, like conscious thinking and planning, caring for others, or rule following. The ‘beastly’ features have been identified with animals, and this was supposed to excuse us humans, who have unfortunately had to share in this nature to a certain extent. Based on recent results in evolutionary theory and anthropology Midgley argued convincingly that this picture of human nature is false, and the lives of most animals are anything but beastly.

They follow fairly fixed patterns, being regulated by a large number of interacting instincts and displaying limited flexibility. Wolves for example, take care of their offspring, very rarely cause serious wounds when fighting each other, and support pack members. Humans are different. We have specific abilities, like conceptual thought, which a few other species might have but cannot exercise in the exact same ways as we do. These abilities enable us to be agents who act flexibly, showing a significant variety in the patterns of our responses to similar situations, leading to a large number of possible roads our lives can traverse. This seems to be one of the reasons why being social animals caring for others should be essential, and why, accordingly, some of us create institutions like social care, pension or healthcare, nevertheless, due to the possibilities opened up by our flexibility, others engage in corruption, torture, human trafficking and submit others to slavery, and do other bad things knowing fully well what they are doing.

When people blame bats for the disease this seems to be an interesting manifestation of the wish to ‘outsource’ our responsibility; to say that the pandemic is not the result of how we handle animals, food, and people. It is a way of looking for an excuse: it is not humans who are bad, who have to assume responsibility, who have to fund healthcare and research properly; it is the bats who are at fault! This is a deceiving way of shifting the blame to animals, rather than admitting that we humans have bad sides. It is also a radical proposal, which attempts to mask the many evils committed by humans, which together made the current global situation much worse than it could have been. If the first Chinese doctors who noticed the spread of the disease had not been silenced by the Chinese Government and secret services at Xi’s command, if Donald Trump had not downplayed expert opinions and encouraged US citizens to put their momentary preferences over the interests of communities, if healthcare had been properly resourced in Italy, India, Russia, and other places, if Boris Johnson had taken some time to actually understand the ideas of flattening the curve and of herd immunity before going public with his ideas, if Jair Bolsanaro had cared more about preparing Brazil for the surge of infections rather than waging a Twitter war on evidence...

These were all failures leading to the current dire situation. At this moment – at the end of July 2020 – we can count close to 17 million cases and more than 650,000 deaths. This is evidence that unlike animals, humans are capable of being uncaring, of disregarding

evidence, and of being evil. With severely overworked doctors, nurses and other essential workers, and no guarantee of a vaccine, with months if not years of the pandemic ahead of us, Midgley might stress two things. First, that evil is real and some people need to be pulled up and held responsible, as she emphasised in her book *Wickedness*. Pointing to beasts or our animal nature provides no excuses. During the last decades a misplaced optimism took hold of politicians and infected much of the population with it: if the economy is alright and the formal conditions for democracy are in place, then everything will be fine. Discourse has shifted from notions of responsibility, decision making and communal decision making towards talk about economic goals, working more, improving quality and so on. Moral discourse, about guilt, negligence, selfishness, as well as other traits that create many of our current problems, has been swept under the carpet. Midgley might have diagnosed this as a responsibility-evading move similar to projecting our negative qualities onto animals and depicting them as beasts.

Second, based on her work on imagination and protecting the environment, Midgley might stress that we need much higher quality plans for the future than what we have now. The visions that got our self-promoting, loud leaders elected do not address any of the important issues we will, with certainty, face in the near future. The largest economies and armies are not worth much, when they don't protect and serve our communities. How could we believe that these celebrity leaders will show us the way out of the bigger troubles of climate change and resulting mass migration, of increasing military tensions, or of rapidly growing inequality? Midgley worried in her *Science and Poetry* that a primitive, ideological understanding of the sciences would take over the role of religion as a powerful, hubristic ideology. She might write now that science's reputation did improve and add that this is probably for the better. But large corporations and politicians have hijacked science's reputation in order to talk up their economic and technological agendas and products instead of their scientific potential. As a result, they present themselves and the financial circles backing them as experts improving the lot of humanity through their work. It is quite frightening to witness how masses of young people at university fall for this narrative and want to serve the very companies that staunchly oppose every law and policy protecting society, and are doing everything in

their power to fragment our societies into ever more individualistic and vulnerable, smaller units.

What would be the antidote based on Midgley's work? It might be time to pay more attention to poets and others who are willing to shake things up in creative, constructive and fresh ways. As Mark Blyth, David Graeber, Guy Standing, and many other economists, political analysts and sociologists have noted in recent years, the nature of work in countries with more advanced economies has changed: the large majority of people now work in the services industry, many of them doing jobs that don't provide job security, a stable income or a professional identity. These people however are not represented in politics, and there is no way for them to pool their influence – their money, their votes, their energy – to stand up for their own interests and push for legislation that could change the current situation. We need a vision, we need ideas, and we need it in an understandable, emphatic, fresh way. As economist Ha-Joon Chang has pointed out, we need to have the confidence “to discuss economics for what it really is – a political argument – and not a ‘science’” (Chan 2014: 164). To reform our economy and our politics we need to envision a future that we can try to bring about and that treats people better, while also helping us to forge a better relationship with nature. This is a task where Midgley's work suggests to turn to those who understand human nature and culture well and have the creative talent too: poets and other writers, environmentalists, artists, and, perhaps, philosophers too.

References

Chan, Ha-Joon. *Economics: The User's Guide*. Penguin Books, 2014.

Midgley, M. *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Routledge, 1978; revised ed.1995.

Midgley, M. *Animals and Why They Matter: A Journey Around the Species Barrier*. University of Georgia Press, 1983.

Midgley, M. *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears*. Routledge, 1985; reprinted with new introduction 2002.

Midgley, M. *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning*. Routledge, 1992.

Midgley, M. *Science and Poetry*. Routledge, 2001.

Midgley, M. *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*. Routledge, 2005.

Midgley, M. *What Is Philosophy For?* Bloomsbury, 2018.

Midgley, M. *Wickedness*. Routledge, 1984.

Istvan Zoltan Zardai

Keio University, Tokyo and

Hungarian Academy of Sciences Morals and Science Research Group