**Mary Midgley and our Need For (Good) Philosophy**

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**Philosophy is a necessity, not a luxury**

Mary Midgley thought philosophy was a necessity, not a luxury – something we need to do if our lives are to go well. She described it as ‘something we are doing all the time, a continuous, necessary background activity which is likely to go badly if we don’t attend to it’ (2018:81). But doing it all the time doesn’t mean we’re doing it well; with cooking as with philosophy, there are big differences in people’s enthusiasm, skill, and success, and therefore important questions about how hard they need to work to learn to do those things well.

Philosophy is hard to do well for all sorts of reasons – its complex terminology, abstract concepts, heavy-going texts, and so on. But it’s also difficult to do well because philosophising generates all sorts of temptations and dangers. Identifying and then dealing with these takes a certain set of skills – not just the cleverness and quickness of thought that people associate with philosophy (which are vital) but also a sort of courage, humility, and breadth of interest and sympathy. If these temptations and dangers aren’t taken seriously, it’s more likely we’ll fall victim to them, and lapse into what Mary liked to call ‘muddled thinking’.

Let’s consider two examples that seemed of special concern to her, which I’ll dub *one-way reductionism* and *myopic specialisation.*

**Reductionism and restoration**

Start with an obvious point – the world is very complicated, in lots of different ways, at every level. Its complexities and varieties are quite remarkable, and become more so the more one explores them, whether through study, conversation, or everyday experience. Our visions can become broader and deeper through such education and experience in ways that reveal more of the complexity of the world.

Sometimes, this experience is enjoyable, a source of what the ancient Greeks rightly called ‘wonder’, which in several books Mary characterised as a sense of ‘awe and gratitude at being part of [a] great whole’ – a whole we are able, to some degree, to apprehend and attempt to understand (2001:183). But apprehending the complexity of the world is often intermingled with other feelings of a more negative character, such as acute anxiety, fear, and frustration. Facing complexity can be daunting and quite overwhelming, so we naturally respond by trying to make it more manageable by engaging in *reduction*. We’re very good at reducing wholes to parts, for instance by distinguishing different types of things and focusing on certain aspects rather than others. Such pragmatic selectiveness often comes naturally, although of course it can be cultivated through disciplined training, of the sort that one finds in the sciences and humanities. Reduction is therefore vitally important in helping us to make our problems manageable.

Mary never denied the importance of reduction, of course, since she confined her worries to those specific cases where it involves only a single movement of thought. Confronted with an unmanageably complex phenomenon, like human nature, we reduce it to certain of its parts, such as genes or neurons and typically doing so bears fruit. But the problem is that, once that new understanding is in hand, people often forget to make the second movement of thought by starting to weave back in the initial complexities from which one started.

Such *one-way reductionism* involves a certain type of intellectual failure: we forget the initial complexity by failing to go back and put back in what we had to take out in order to get started. This can be due to all sorts of things – a laziness of the mind, a dogmatic conviction that the world is really much simpler than is indicated by our experience, a preference for the clarity of simplicity over the messiness of complexity, a tendency to become entranced with the alleged powers of our favoured theories and styles of explanation … there are many possibilities, many of which were explored carefully and patiently by Mary.

The point is that reductionism can play important roles in our efforts to make sense of the world and is not a sin, but only as long as it consists of that double movement—of reducing the complexity of the world and then restoring it, by trying to weave back in those messy details. A failure to do so is one source of ‘muddled thinking’.

**Specialisation is not a sin**

The complexity of the world also calls out for specialisation. Mary’s own work was richly fed by many different specialisms – evolutionary biology, ethology, neuroscience, philosophy, to name but a few. Such disciplines each offer conceptual tools that help us understand certain aspects of the complexities that we face, whether they concern personal identity, animal behaviour, or human nature. Mary liked the image of these specialised disciplines offering us the ‘many maps’ we need to safely navigate the world, which, like cartographic maps, order the world in relation to our particular interests. ‘Reality’, she warns, ‘is always turning out to be a great deal more complex than people expect’ (2011:39). If that offends our pride, it ought to stir our humility and teach a useful lesson of prudence: if we’re heading into situations that might pose unanticipated problems, then pack many maps and many tools, just in case.

Specialisation is therefore crucial to our efforts to make sense of the world, just as is reduction, but with a similar proviso: we’re apt to forget that specialism buys its specificity at the price of its scope. Specialisation is like a laser beam – a tightly focused beam of light that does not generally illuminate, even if it can reveal acute details of its target. Such narrow focus is perfectly useful, as long as one doesn’t forget that there’s more out there than what the point of the laser beam reveals. The danger or temptation relevant in the case of specialisation is *myopia*, a failure to see or even to imagine ways of looking at certain subjects other than those we use ourselves. The fact that one likes certain of the shiny tools one has does not guarantee that those are the only tools that one might need.

The comparison with tools is useful here: specialists use their training and resources to build particular types of specialised tools that can do highly specific types of work, which those who are trained to use them properly can then put to work. But specialists are often apt to become entranced by their tools. Perhaps they become captivated by their own cleverness in creating them. Perhaps their appreciation only extends as far as the work for which their tools are apt. Perhaps they think that only their sort of work matters, such that their tools are the only ones that are really worthy of respect.

Whatever the causes, the danger is that we forget that our specialised tools can only do their own because they are fitted for very specific sorts of work. One does not cut bread with a spoon, nor eat soup with a fork, and the costs of trying are much mess and a waste of food. Mary thought that respecting one’s tools means recognising the things to which they are – and are not – properly suited. It’s no insult to our conceptual tools to say that they are not all-purpose, able to be turned to any and all problem. The complexity of the world and the variety of our interests and concerns guarantee that there is always more than enough work to go around. A proper division of labour requires many people, across many disciplines, all with their own sets of specialised tools.

Indeed, the many attempts by people to try to myopically apply some single set of tools to the whole range of tasks facing us always ends in disaster—for instance, the insistence on trying to construct comprehensive accounts of human nature using only the tools of genetics, which is like trying to build a house using only a shovel. The real danger in these cases isn’t just that the work will be done badly, but that those of a myopic frame of mind will start to think that the work was done well, since it was done with their favoured tools. If a hammer is the only tool you have in your toolbox, then soon everything looks like a nail … and once everything’s been duly hammered, one is at risk of thinking that the day’s work is done.

**Philosophy is a team game**

How do we resist these dangers? It’s not easy: simple stories are easier told; easy explanations easier sold; the dramatism of dogmatism attracts crowds, wins converts, and sells books. The best of us are still subject to the temptations of egoism, laziness, and the other traits that can lead us into muddled thinking. Mary’s own interest in human nature often shows itself in her own reflections on how we live and think and on what living and thinking well would mean for creatures like us, with our complexly dappled characters, shot through with selflessness and selfishness,cooperativeness and competitiveness, wisdom and wickedness. Part of what it means to think well for Mary was to recognise that we’re struggling not only against the difficulty of our problems, but against certain rather natural tendencies of human beings – to want to show our cleverness, to impress or put down others, to have *our way* established as *the way*, and so on.

Mary shared this attitude with Ludwig Wittgenstein, who once advised that ‘the question always to ask when exaggerated, dogmatic assertions are made is: What is actually true in this? Or again: In what case in that actually true?’ (1980:14e). He, too, argued that philosophy often involves a struggle against our own tendencies, in the sense that getting certain sorts of insight and understanding can only be achieved when we have made genuine progress in ‘dismantling’ the ‘edifice of our pride’ – a task which involves ‘terribly hard work’ (1980:26e).

Dismantling that edifice may be too ambitious a job even for a large team of very dedicated specialists, especially if Iris Murdoch is right that that everyone faces the powerful challenge of ‘the fat, relentless ego’ (1997:378). She, too, was interested in the double effort required by philosophy, the simultaneous effort to ‘explore one’s own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth’ (1997:337). Murdoch’s complex response involved a return to Platonic talk of a transcendent Good, disclosed through forms of acute attentiveness to our moral and aesthetic experience. I don’t want to dispute that, but it would only attract certain types of people. Mary’s own response was more prosaic, involving the importance of collegiality and the mutually satisfying possibilities of thinking with and for – and not just *against* – other people.

Humans are social animals, and this means that we do better when we live and work with others in appropriately responsive ways, in all the forms that human sociality can take, from families and friendship circles to departmental communities and social movements. We need one another and tend to do badly otherwise. This is true of our emotional and personal needs, of course, but also true of our intellectual efforts to solve our urgent problems and to cultivate the sort of wondering understanding of the world that’s a gorgeous and distinctive part of our natures. It’s needlessly herculean to imagine or expect that solitary individuals should have all of the skills and dispositions needed in order to make progress in their efforts to understand and conduct their lives well. Life is not a solo endeavour, and the real struggle is often to balance our needs for solitariness and sociality.

It may sound rather obvious that complex problems need many people, who can bring their own distinctive tools to the job, enough at least that most people will grasp it and go on to conduct themselves in ways that reflect its truth. But our needs for one another do not automatically guarantee that people will indeed start to work together. Despite our natural self-interest, we’re not always sensible in acting on our needs, whether for reasons of idiosyncrasy, stubbornness, or whatever. To work together, we need to have certain virtues or qualities, ones that make us perceptive of, and responsive to, our own needs and those of others. Such virtues of sociality include humility, patience, considerateness, an openness to unfamiliar ways of speaking and thinking, and a kind of straightforwardness in our dealings with people. Philosophers talk a lot about the need for clarity and precision in speaking, which is certainly very important, but those traits help us to deal well with concepts and ideas, rather than helping us deal with people. In Mary’s writing, one finds warmth and wittiness, an attractive beckoning candour that fulfils the crucial task of welcoming people on-board, without which they’ll never be close enough to get involved.

The virtues of sociality help us to fulfil our own needs, while also serving those of other people. When they’re properly exercised, they afford a shared trust in one another’s goodwill, a quiet background confidence of collective commitment to a common set of concerns. Such solidarity is sometimes derided by critics who think it’s bought at the cost of tenacity, rigour, and other virtues of criticality. The critics worry that our tender-heartedness undermines the tough-mindedness which they see as constitutive of real thinking, as they protest a soft touch is no good when dealing with hard problems. Naturally, tender-hearted virtues can tip into excess: one shouldn’t be patient with dawdlers or let humility be corrupted into servility. But this is also true of the tough-minded virtues. Tenacity can bloat into relentlessness and rigour can become ruthlessness. Since there are potential excesses on either side, the wisest thing is to seek our balance in one another. The tender-hearted virtues help to create and to sustain the communities that help us deal with both our problems and our bad tendencies, thereby providing the conditions for the proper exercise of the tough-minded virtues.

Mary’s own advice was that we find our balance best with other people. We can only do so much by ourselves. Many tasks require an energy and array of competencies beyond any single one of us – that’s why we need to band together, pool our resources, and work our fair and sensible ways to perform a division of labour. Throughout her writing and example, Mary reminded us again and again that the virtues of criticality must be balanced by the virtues of collegiality. Given our own natures and the scale of the tasks facing us, complexity demands community.

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