

Mary Midgley: Philosopher of Human Nature and Imagination

“It is the mark of an educated man to expect in each subject the sort of precision of which it is capable” (Aristotle *Ethics* 1.3)

Life and learning

“Older parents are good because they have more experience of life, and they have often reached a stage where they positively want their children rather than merely finding, with surprise, that they have got them. I think this was true of mine.” (Midgley *The Owl of Minerva*)

During the 1940s, a group of five significant female philosophers emerged from Oxford. Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley and Mary Warnock all studied there during the same time. Several further common threads run through their work: a shared deep interest in human nature, in ethics and moral values, and a serious engagement with public affairs. In this short paper I introduce Midgley through a sketch of her family background and the philosophical views she held. The occasion for writing this paper is that the *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* project, commemorating Midgley and her contributions to Philosophy, runs throughout the year. *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* started in 2019, on the centennial of Midgley’s birth, just one year after her death. At the end of the paper, I give a short overview of *Notes from a Biscuit Tin*, its Tokyo-leg taking place in the summer 2020, and its parent project, *In Parenthesis*.¹

Mary Beatrice Midgley was born in 1919, in London. Her father was Canon Tom Scruton, who was chaplain of King's College, Cambridge during Midgley's early years. Most of Midgley's childhood was spent in Greenford, roaming with her brother among the empty out-buildings of the large demesne and chasing newts around the ponds. Her interest in classics and philosophy awoke at Downe House School in Cold Ash, Berkshire. One day she picked Plato's *Republic* from a bookshelf in the school's library, read it, and

¹ I would like to thank Shoko Kinoshita for her work on translating my text into Japanese and offering insightful feedback which helped me to improve the text. Shoko also helped much with making this publication happen, as well as contributing to the Biscuit Tin website.

fell in love with it. She went up to Oxford in 1937, gaining a place at Sommerville College. There, she read Mods and Greats, eventually graduating with first-class honours.

At Oxford Midgley was in the same year and was close friends with the philosopher and outstanding novelist Iris Murdoch. Along with Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Warnock they all studied at Oxford during the Second World War. Due to the war, the atmosphere at the university was very different from what it used to be like before. Many of the male undergraduates and younger members of faculty were absent, serving in the war. Remembering these times Midgley wrote later that "this experience has something to do with the fact that Elizabeth and I and Iris and Philippa Foot and Mary Warnock have all made our names in philosophy... I do think that in normal times a lot of good female thinking is wasted because it simply doesn't get heard." (2005: 123)

In 1942 Midgley left the university to work in the civil services in order to support Britain in the struggle against Germany. She returned to Oxford in 1947 and enrolled on a doctorate course. Her supervisor was classical scholar Gilbert Murray, and she was working on reconstructing Plotinus's view of the soul. Midgley never completed her thesis. Later she wrote that missing out on the PhD was a good thing, because it allowed her to focus on the big questions, rather than becoming overly specialised. She came to see PhD programmes as distorting philosophical thinking by training people to home-in on small, technical details, causing them to lose track of questions of general importance. In 1949 Midgley took up a philosophy teaching job at Reading. In the same year, she married Geoffrey Midgley, also a philosopher. Soon after, Geoffrey received a position in the philosophy department of Newcastle University and they moved to Newcastle.

During the next decade Mary devoted herself to raising their three sons. From 1962, until her retirement in 1980, she also taught at Newcastle University. In today's business-minded and output-centred world it is amazing that Midgley only published her first book in 1978, at the age of 59. About this she wrote "I wrote no books until I was a good 50, and I'm jolly glad because I didn't know what I thought before then." Her attitude was that ideas should not be rushed; philosophy should not lose sight of the big questions, and figuring out something interesting about those takes time.

Midgley's attitude of focusing on larger issues is in line with her conception of philosophy's role in life. She shows her gift for original and vivid analogies, when she likens philosophy to plumbing: something essential, that usually no one thinks about, until

there is a problem with it.² Just as an issue with one's water supply or a clogged drainpipe means serious trouble, the careless conflation and confused use of concepts can have serious effects on society. It is the job of Philosophers to uncover when complex and difficult ideas and concepts, among them the key scientific, political and moral theories, are misused or exploited for the wrong purposes. Such misuse can lead to mistaken ideas, and support disastrous and dangerous political and economic ideologies, or invalidate peoples' normal thinking about their emotional and community life.

Philosophical views

“I am questioning nothing that any scientist says on week days in his working tone of voice. But I certainly am questioning what a very few of them say in an edifying tone of voice on Sundays.”

(Gilbert Ryle *Dilemmas*)

Midgley's philosophical work exemplifies well her view of what philosophy's role is. In her writings, she addressed confused ideas running rampant in the public sphere – in media, popular science, and politics. She clearly saw the danger that such ideas could influence law-making, economic priorities, and peoples' thinking about what it means to be human. Midgley identified several cases when people took ideas from a particular sphere of activity, where those ideas worked reliably, and planted them in an unrelated context, resulting in strange and often appalling ideologies. This is the case for example when Darwinian ideas about competition between individual animals are used to justify competitive business management ideas, and then those ideas are extended to the management of education and healthcare. What worried Midgley wasn't simply sloppy thinking, but rather that such confused ideas provide support for discrimination, divisive ideologies and policies. Midgley pointed out examples of such thinking in the popular writings of Richard Dawkins, in the political thought of Margaret Thatcher, and in the writings of several other high-profile thinkers and public figures.

Midgley was good friends with several scientists, greatly admired modern engineering and medicine, and completed a degree in ethology. She knew well and held

² See her *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers*, especially chapter 1, titled ‘Philosophical Plumbing.’ See also Rachael Wiseman's review of Midgley's *What is Philosophy For?* (Wiseman 2020) and Ellie Robson's short discussion of this idea of Midgley at the *In Parenthesis* blog (Robson 2017).

in great esteem the work of Darwin. However, she was very alarmed when scientists – usually in the last chapters of their books intended for non-specialists – made speculative claims about topics on which their actual research was silent. In the eyes of the public, the authority of these researchers lent credibility to their speculations, and what was often poor-quality philosophising was therefore regarded as well-founded science. Most writers making such mistakes did so with good intentions. Their mistakes were honest; they were simply not trained in arguing about human nature, morality or politics, and often could not tell what did and what did not follow from their experiments and scientific theories.

Her outlook and approach infuse every aspect of her first book, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (1978). In this book, she weighed in powerfully on the topic of human nature, and took up the task of clearing away two kinds of misunderstandings about it, which she identified in the history of Western philosophy and culture. The first kind of misunderstanding was the idea that what is really human are only the unique and potentially excellent abilities of humans. The second kind of misunderstanding was that all bad characteristics and features are beastly, and as such they truly belong to animals, rather than to humans. It is simply unfortunate that humans have to share these characteristics with animals. She offered a number of examples of philosophers like Plato and Descartes arguing for versions of this view.³

To correct such misunderstandings, Midgley relied on findings from ethology to show that most animals do not exhibit noticeable human follies, like unsatisfiable desire for dominance, spontaneous lethal intraspecies aggression, greed, and so on. She debunked the general myth that animals are ‘beastly’, that is, that they are lacking in self-control, or are unreasonably brutal and vicious, often killing without purpose, lacking in socially beneficent qualities. She also argued that we should endorse observation-based accounts of animal behavior, and a more balanced picture of human nature. Such a picture shows that humans are animals too, and while certainly we are very unique animals, much of our nature is shared with other living beings, especially with social mammals.

To provide an example of how people projected some of their worst sides onto animals, she describes in detail what has been written throughout history about wolves: wolves have frequently been described as cruel, treacherous, murderous, and having an

³ See Midgley 1978/1995: 24-26.

insatiable appetite.⁴ In contrast to this picture of wolves, modern systematic, observational studies by zoologists show the opposite:

They pair for life, they are faithful and affectionate spouses and parents, they show great loyalty to their pack and great courage and persistence in the face of difficulties, they carefully respect one another's territories, keep their dens clean, and extremely seldom kill anything that they do not need for dinner. (...) they live very regulated social lives, in general avoiding to fight to the death, avoiding fighting females and pups, and sharing their prey within their group. (Midgley 1978/1995: 18)

One of Midgley's particular targets in *Beast and Man* was Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*, which appeared in 1967. In his book Morris argued that there are several animal qualities also exhibited by humans, and wrote in detail about some of the shared behavioural patterns of humans and great apes. Midgley's position was in broad agreement with this, emphasising that humans are animals and thus have many features in common with other species. She was alarmed by the popularity of Morris's book because it promoted sociobiological ideas. Midgley opposed this, since the version proposed by Morris, and other popular authors of the time like E. O. Wilson, was heavily reductivist and overly ambitious. Their version of sociobiology claimed that everything about human behaviour could be understood in terms of evolution, and more specifically, in terms of genetics. Such a view ignored the effects of education, socialisation, and other important factors in human behaviour. In Midgley's reading, Morris also made out animals to look worse than they are. Since Morris also argued for deep similarities between humans and other animals, he ended up portraying humans in the same negative way as animals; as fundamentally irrational, cruel and lacking self-control.

Midgley also took aim at the existentialist idea that humans can shape their character in any way they choose to. She did not want sociobiological ideas to be replaced with the other extreme, the claim that genes and other inherited factors play no role at all in shaping the ways in which humans behave. Chapter 3 of *Beast and Man* presented the ways in which closed and open instincts form the foundation of a most of our behaviour. This meant, that she rejected the existentialist idea that there is no human nature, no natural inclinations and we are free to shape ourselves into whatever we want to be.

⁴ Midgley 1978/1995: 19 offers examples.

In *Beast and Man*, as in her other works, Midgley's approach was sympathetic to the natural sciences, building many of her arguments on their findings. At the same time, she rejected scientism, the idea that the sciences would provide the only right way to answer normative and epistemological questions. According to Midgley's general approach to truth one has to look at the findings of the natural sciences and use what is relevant, and one should also draw on the social sciences, humanities, the arts, everyday experiences and anything else that makes a contribution to understanding. This is in line with her rejection of reductionism, the idea that there is an ordering of explanatory levels, and complex phenomena can always be better understood in terms of lower level explanations. This reductionist idea is often coupled with an unwarranted positivist optimism that the natural sciences, especially physics, are the fundamental explanatory level, and that therefore it is always in their terms that any phenomena – including social, moral, and political events – can be grasped most truthfully. She wrote that

We are surrounded all the time by matters that are of the first importance to us – for instance the attitudes of those around us – which we know a good deal about, but where we cannot fully explain our knowledge. And what explicit knowledge we do have about them depends greatly on what we choose to attend to. We have to cultivate the art of deciding things sensibly on very patchy evidence. And when we try to talk about things that are greater than ordinary human life we naturally have to speak about them indirectly, using inadequate images drawn from things that are familiar. The ability to handle such images – to understand symbolic meaning clearly – is essential for our inner life all the time, not just in religion. (Midgley 2005: 20)

Compassionate concern for animals and nature was another longstanding feature of Midgley's thought. She read Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* when it appeared and was an early advocate of the animal rights movement. She wrote in her memoir, *The Owl of Minerva*, that “the technological revolution that accompanied the rise of factory farming after the war was in full swing and the facts that Singer had carefully collected were unmistakably hideous. All my sons became vegetarian some time in that decade, leading to endless confusion in the housekeeping, and eventually I joined them (...).” (Midgley 2005: 33) Midgley was for several years also chair of the Royal Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. On account of her voluminous work on animals⁵ one of the characters in J. M. Coetzee's – winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in literature – *The Lives of Animals*, is based on Midgley.

Picking *The Owl of Minerva* as the title of her memoir is also noteworthy, and not only because it features an animal. She borrowed the title giving image from Hegel, who wrote that philosophy is like an owl – belonging to Minerva, the goddess of wisdom – which descends at dusk. A standard interpretation of what Hegel meant by this is that philosophy reacts to changes in the world too late, after events already took place, and hence, while it can provide deep understanding, it cannot make a difference. Midgley rejected this pessimistic interpretation and provided her own positive take on what the image of the owl arriving at dusk portrays: we should see philosophy as coming when there is darkness and confusion, and lending us help in clearing up the darkness. Just as owls can navigate well in the dark, philosophy has the right tools to sort out conceptual confusions, ideas applied in harmful ways, deceitful and malicious arguments and propaganda, and other misuses of ideas and words.

Besides being an ardent supporter of animals, Midgley was also an advocate of James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', the idea that the organic and inorganic components making up planet Earth form a single, complex, self-regulating living system. Midgley was excited about the Gaia hypothesis, partly because it was supported by science, and partly because it had clear moral implications, namely, that we have to protect the planet where we live, including the environment and non-human beings. This meant that humans should develop sustainable forms of life, potentially changing fundamental social and political structures. As she described in her short piece, *Gaia: The next big idea*, instead of the values dominating our current public thinking, like economic and business performance or success in political and military power projection, we should endorse the intrinsic value of society, of nature, and of our spiritual connectedness to our world.

Midgley also appreciated the potential of art, and especially of literature to influence society. In her *Science and Poetry* she described vividly the power of poetry to

⁵ See for example her books *Animals and Why They Matter* (1983), *The Ethical Primate* (1992), and *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers* (1996).

shape how people relate the world, including their society. Discussing for example the often invoked, and in her view mistaken, contrast of thought and emotion, she wrote

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: 55)

As she notes in her essay ‘The Irresistible Escalator’, imagination is very important because it shapes our values and motivations. This way it also shapes how we act towards others, how we vote, and what causes we support. It is important what moves peoples’ imagination: what do they believe in, what forms their worldview? Is it their religion? The main political messages they hear in the news? The praise of business-thinking in motivational videos? In a passage on the recent popularity of evolutionary theory she explains how theories can capture our imagination and organise much of our thinking:

Evolution, then, is the creation myth of our age. By telling us our origins it shapes our views of what we are. It influences not just our thought, but our feelings and actions too, in a way which goes far beyond its official function as a biological theory. To call it a myth does not of course mean that it is a false story. It means that it has great symbolic power, which is independent of its truth. (Midgley 2005: 246)

Midgley was a proponent of evolution and of Darwin’s work, and what she notes here is that some authors who write about evolutionary theory make evolution sound more like religious teaching than actual science. As such, it comes to look as if it could explain much more than what it was ever designed to explain, for example competition in the workplace. When theories or views have this status of religion, they acquire this role in public thought, and can lead to misperceiving what we are.

One of Midgley’s longstanding worries was that some scientists and science popularisers – like Richard Dawkins, with whom she had a long-standing dispute – promote such a myth-like role for science. They argue that science can serve as an overarching world-view and solve all our problems, answer all our questions. Midgley

respected and cheered on scientists and engineers in their work. What she rejected were superficial attempts to deduce ethical and political norms from evolutionary theory, attempts to restructure society based on ideas that work for managing factories, and attempts at replacing human decision-making in morally sensitive areas – like healthcare or educational policy – with AIs. She urged to be more cautious and to carefully scrutinise claims even if they were put forward by a scientist.

In other books and articles Midgley engaged with religion, artificial intelligence, morality, and ideas about God and free will. It seemed to her that while wonderful progress was made in several fields, such progress encouraged people to propose bold and blundering extensions to these progressive ideas. Some of these blunders are still with us today, and many new ones are produced and popularised day-by-day. These ideas are often published online and in popular science books, and are repeated in YouTube videos, by politicians and by talk show ‘experts.’ Since such cases are so common, Midgley’s way of deflating such views and her general approach to dealing with them can be put to great use. While in the 1980s and 1990s one of the main dangers was that ideas originating in science were exported to contexts where they led to exploitation, maybe today she would be alarmed by politicians who deny the existence of objective truth and express doubt about scientific consensus on such issues as global warming or rising inequality.

3. Remembering Midgley with Poetry and Philosophy

“[P]oets (...) are prophets, not in the sense of foretelling things, but of generating forceful visions. They express, not just feelings, but crucial ideas in a direct, concentrated form that precedes and makes possible their later articulation by the intellect and their influence on our actions” (Midgley *Science and Poetry*)

Midgley’s active and engaged life and philosophical work are celebrated throughout the year by the *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* project. The name refers to a gesture Midgley was known for: she took a biscuit tin to debates and classes, and offered cookies to her debating partners. This simple, humorous and kind gesture is emblematic of her approach, which eschews a battle of wits for wits’ sake, and takes a serious interest in issues that have an impact on our societies. This does not mean that Midgley was tame or soft in her approach: her writings are peppered with irony, satire, and jokes at the expense

of her opponents. Personal accounts by people who knew her also mention that in debates “She’s a daunting opponent” and that “Her speaking and writing were always direct and vigorous and were informed by wide reading, a sharp critical intelligence and a gift for vivid metaphor.”⁶ Still, the purpose of her work is always to clear away confusion, in order to free the way for constructive ideas.

Notes from a Biscuit Tin consists of 12 conversations taking place in 12 cities around the globe, including Berlin, London, Oxford, Sidney, and Tokyo. These conversations start with a poet and a philosopher introducing some of the central concepts of Midgley’s work and continue as open discussions with the audience. At the time of writing this article, poet Yotsumoto Yasuhiro / 四元康祐 and myself are preparing for the Tokyo event, which will be held at the *Good Heavens* in Shimokitazawa during June or July 2020. We will first talk about Midgley’s ideas about instincts, beastliness, and human nature, and briefly touch on rationality and imagination, ending up with discussing magic, and what poetry and philosophy are for. This will take about half an hour, and then the audience will be welcome to continue with us our joint enquiry.

A little bit of background on how *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* started, and how it so happens that there will be a Tokyo-leg: two years ago Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman embarked on an ambitious project to tell a new story about the work of four well-known female philosophers of the 20th century. These four philosophers were Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris Murdoch, and Mary Midgley. Clare and Rachael took a look at the work of these four philosophers, and discovered that the facts that they all studied in Oxford at the same time and became important philosophers is not the only common thread running through lives. All four of them were deeply interested in ethics, society, and morality. They all wrote and published on these topics, and they all took virtue ethics and a substantial realism about morality seriously. Also, they knew each other well, and kept in touch throughout much of their lives. Clare and Rachael had the idea that there is a story here which has to be told in much more detail. Their guiding idea is, that the work of Anscombe, Foot, Murdoch, and Midgley can be better understood and appreciated, if we take them to have formed a group. This is the core idea of the project

⁶ See Andrew Brown’s tribute (Brown 2001), written at the occasion of the publication of *Science and Poetry*, and Jane Heal’s obituary (Heal 2018), both in the *Guardian*.

they started, which is called *In Parenthesis*. Besides, this project often covers Mary Warnock, just a few years younger than the others, as well.

Luckily for me, Clare and her husband visited Tokyo last year, and during their trip Clare gave a talk about *In Parenthesis* to the Tokyo Forum for Analytic Philosophy at the Komaba Campus of Tokyo University. After the talk the organisers, John O'Dea and Richard Dietz, invited everyone to dinner. During this cheerful and lively evening Clare and I talked much about ordinary language philosophy, the firm and ferociously intelligent moral work of Anscombe, the excellent literature of Murdoch, and the formative role that Collingwood had on the philosophical development of the four protagonists of the *In Parenthesis*-story. A few weeks later Clare contacted John and me to ask whether we would be up to join the *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* and set up a Tokyo event. Of course we said yes. Poet Yotsumoto Yasuhiro joined our team as the local poet.

I met Yotsumoto thanks to a great friend whom I asked to recommend me contemporary Japanese poets with a strong interest in Philosophy. Thanks to my friend's good taste and enthusiasm I could get to know a splendid thinker in Yotsumoto. Yotsumoto is now writing a cycle of poems on Midgley and her ideas, and we are exchanging meditative letters prompted by our readings. We plan to publish the poems and our letters as a short volume to accompany our event. Finally, philosopher Shoko Kinoshita joined our team, and provided us with excellent and much needed help in the form of translating one of Midgley's essays, 'The Concept of Beastliness.' You can read her translation on the website of the *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* project.

As a way of closing this introduction to Midgley, I want to briefly highlight why Midgley's work, and the type of Philosophy she held important, deserve attention today. Midgley encouraged philosophising with a practical attitude. In the following decades humanity faces climate crisis, growing income and ownership inequality, the automatization of several public decision-making procedures through AI, and the realignment of relations between the superpowers. Due to the clashes of interests generated by all these changes there is an enormous amount of propaganda, fake news, and ideology, aimed at influencing the public in sinister ways. In such times it is crucial that people with strong critical skills unmask such misleading messages, and help others to stay sane and rational. What's more we also need a forward-looking perspective, a constructive vision. This is where according to Midgley's view poets – and writers in

general – play an important role: they can articulate inspiring forward-looking visions that are emotionally moving and engage peoples’ imagination. They can motivate to be moral, to aim at kindness, solidarity, and to find a sustainable, peaceful way forward. I hope that the *Notes from a Biscuit Tin* project and Midgley’s work will inspire at least a few people to engage with public life critically and to use their imagination constructively.

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Penultimate DRAFT

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Notes from a Biscuit Tin and *In Parenthesis* can be found at the following addresses

<https://www.notesfromabiscuittin.com/>

<http://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/>