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Paper on Mary Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword”

In her article, “Trying Out One’s New Sword”, Mary Midgley argues against a position called “moral isolationism”. I will summarize one of her arguments against this view, which says that moral isolationism leads to the conclusion that moral reasoning is impossible. I will then discuss an objection to this argument and a way Midgley could reply. I will argue that while the objector does point out a flaw in Midgley’s argument, Midgley has a good response to this objection. I will conclude that Midgley is right, and moral isolationism is false.

Moral Isolationism is the view that we can never understand any culture except our own, so we cannot make moral judgments about other cultures. (Midgley, 25) Midgley gives several different arguments against Moral Isolationism. I will focus on her argument on pp. 25-26, which says that moral isolationism implies that moral reasoning is impossible. As Midgley puts it, “moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning.” (Midgley, 26) But Midgley thinks that we *can* engage in moral reasoning; if moral isolationism says that we can’t, moral isolationism must be false.

Here is how her argument goes. First she restates moral isolationism. According to Midgley, if moral isolationism is true, we can’t judge any culture without understanding that culture. (By “judge” she just means forming an opinion. (Midgley, 26). And when she says, “we can’t judge”, I think she means that we can’t form an opinion in a reasonable way.) But, she says, “there is much we don’t understand in our own culture too.” (Midgley, 26) So if moral isolationism is right, then we would not be able to make judgments about our own culture. But if we can’t make moral judgments about our own culture, we cannot make moral judgments at all. So moral reasoning is impossible. But moral reasoning is *not* impossible, Midgley thinks. In fact, it is necessary for making our own decisions. (Midgley, 26) So since moral isolationism leads to the false conclusion that moral reasoning is impossible, moral isolationism is false.

Someone might object to Midgley’s argument by pointing out that even though there is “much” we don’t understand about our own culture, there is a lot that we *do* understand. Because of that, they could argue, Midgley’s reasoning fails: moral isolationism does *not* have the consequence that moral reasoning is impossible. Let me explain how that objection might work.

The objector could start by pointing out that Midgley attributes an extreme view to the moral isolationist. Midgley’s view seems to be that the moral isolationist thinks that we can’t judge cultures unless we can *completely* understand them. (That’s why she moves from the claim that there is *much* we don’t understand in our own culture to the conclusion that we can’t judge our own culture.) But the moral isolationist could deny this: they could say that their claim is just that we can’t judge another culture if we don’t understand them *at all*. It is possible to hold that view, but also think that we do not need to understand another culture *completely* in order for judgment to be possible. So, this objector could agree with Midgley that there is much we don’t understand about our own culture. But they could also say that this does not mean that we can’t judge our own culture. So moral isolationism does not need to lead to the false conclusion that Midgley says it leads us to.

What could Midgley say in reply to this objection? I think she would have to admit that the objector is right about one thing: moral isolationism does not need to be the extreme view that we can’t judge another culture unless we understand it *completely*. But Midgley could then point out that given this more moderate understanding of moral isolationism, there is not really a difference between judging one’s own culture and judging other cultures. Moral isolationism is supposed to be the view that we *can’t* judge any culture except our own. But if moral isolationism says that we *can* judge cultures that we don’t understand completely, then there isn’t really a difference between our own culture and other cultures. Midgley could argue that there are other cultures that we can understand as well as we understand our own. So if it’s possible to make moral judgments in our own culture, there will be lots of times when cross-cultural moral judgment is possible too.

This means that if the moral isolationist wants to escape Midgley’s conclusion, they need to give up the main point of their view. Once the moral isolationist agrees that we can judge other cultures without fully understanding them, they open the door to judging cultures outside our own. Since the moral isolationist’s main goal was to rule out cross-cultural moral judgment, they should not be happy with this conclusion.

We have now seen one of Mary Midgley’s arguments against moral isolationism, an objection to it, and a way for Midgley to reply. I think the objector is correct to point out that Midgley’s argument relied on an overly extreme version of moral isolationism. But Midgley had a good response to this objection. Although a less-extreme moral isolationist view can escape Midgley’s original conclusion, it is not strong enough to get what the moral isolationist wants, which is a difference between judging our own culture and judging other cultures. In the end, I believe Midgley is right that we can make moral judgments about both our own culture and others.

**Bibliography**

Midgley, Mary. [1981] “Trying Out One’s New Sword,” from *Heart and Mind*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.