Mary Midgley

1919-2018

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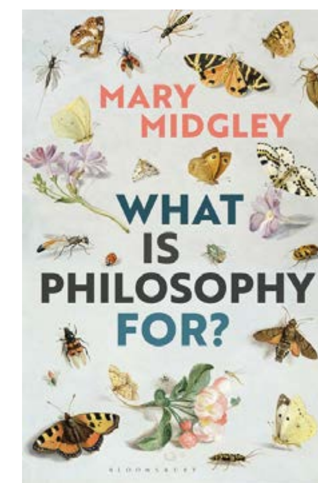
Photography by Dr Ian Ground

In her final book, *What is Philosophy For?*, Mary Midgley writes, "It is indeed interesting that our forefathers apparently could not see through their previous muddled ways of thinking until someone like Rousseau lit them up." The words "lit them up" are chosen because Midgley is talking about what she calls Rousseau's "intellectual explosives"— Rousseau's withering critique of the freedom-stifling society and culture of his time, a critique which he grounds in an appeal to a clearer vision of human nature. Midgley immediately goes on to wonder about the possibility of such transformative criticism in the present: "But then, what are we taking for granted today that will be seen through tomorrow?"

Despite the destructive nature of the explosive metaphor, neither thinker is interested in just tearing things down. In his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau laments the influence of philosophers who "move around in all directions, armed with their fatal paradoxes," only to "undermine the foundations of faith and … virtue." For Rousseau, any serious search for truth is an uphill battle; since for any one way of getting things right there are always going to be a multitude of ways of getting it wrong. The result is that the pursuit of knowledge is full of people creating fundamentally negative projects. These projects can rigorously critique our existing forms of life, but they do so without finding any adequate replacement for them. And if any philosophers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries could be said to evade Rousseau's charge, Mary Midgley is perhaps one of the clearest examples. Whilst being a harsh and unrelenting critic of dogmas like reductionism and scientism—once observing "What makes me write books is usually exasperation"—Midgley also provides us with a clear and positive vision of what philosophy is and what is for.



What Is Philosophy For?
Midgley's final book, published in 2018.

For Midgley, the job of philosophy is to make sense of our existing, muddled ways of thinking by drawing connections and patterns between them. Whilst we can't tackle all the problems of philosophy at once, neither can we reduce them down to a single philosophical picture. We need philosophy to provide us with the conceptual tools and insights for navigating our various world-pictures, but still we cannot escape the deep complexity of nature. She is wary of the excessive use of technical vocabularies which run the risk of "inviting us to be clever at the expense of being realistic."

Mary Midgley passed away on the 10th of October, 2018 at the age of 99. Her last book had been published no more than a month earlier, the final marquee event in a remarkable philosophical life. During Midgley's time in Oxford from 1938 onwards at Somerville College, she formed intellectually stimulating friendships with a group of other remarkable future philosophers: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Iris Murdoch, all of whom joined Oxford in the years 1937-1939. Asked why so many brilliant female philosophers all began appearing at Oxford during the Second World War, Midgley said that "the reason was indeed that there were fewer men about then." In particular, Midgley describes how their small wartime classes involved men and women who were "all more interested in understanding this deeply puzzling world than in putting each other down."

Leaving the institution in 1942 upon completion of her degree and in her early twenties, it would be several decades until her first book was published; she was fifty-nine and now at Newcastle University when *Beast and Man* (1978) came out. From then onwards she would be prolific as an author: sixteen more books would follow. Her works address a huge breadth of philosophical issues, including the moral significance of the relation between science and ethics, philosophy of the environment, and the moral significance of our animality. The way Midgley addresses these issues is strikingly different to the work of much modern philosophy. She does not tackle positions like moral egoism or scientific reductionism as stand-alone philosophical propositions which can be critiqued or emended as theoretical positions. Rather, she sees these approaches as ones that are situated in a much broader cultural context, and with an influence that extends well beyond the realms of academia. Morality and ethics are, on this conception, a fundamental part of what it means to be a part of the kind of world we live in. To have a world without morality then, would mean "losing the basic social network within which we live and communicate with others, including all those others in the past who have formed our culture."

Under this conception of what philosophy and ethics are for, philosophical reasoning is crucial and necessary for understanding the innate complexity of the world, and it is not something which can ever be done away with. Philosophy is needed for illuminating the models and thought systems which underlie our thinking about pretty much everything—from science, to ecology, to human nature. We cannot simply get away from these models and thought systems: "the [only] alternative to getting a proper philosophy is not avoiding philosophy altogether, which cannot be done, but continuing to use a bad one."

Midgley's legacy is one that will not soon be forgotten. The insights she offers us about human nature, ethics, and how we do philosophy, are both illuminating and extremely needed. Her life and work, as well as those of Anscombe, Foot, and Murdoch, continues to be explored and celebrated, for example with the Royal Institute of Philosophy's 2018-19 London lecture series, and with the *In Parenthesis* project, a research collaboration based in Durham and Liverpool, which also had a reading group running in Oxford this year (**womeninparenthesis.co.uk**).

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