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Mary Midgeley
1919-2018

Sasha Lawson-Frost and Otto Räsänen

Mary Midgeley passed away on the 10th of October, 2018, at the age of 99. Her last book had been published more than a month earlier, the final marquee event in a remarkable philosophical life. During Midgeley’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, Midgeley said that “the reason was indeed that there were fewer men about then.” In particular, Midgeley 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 work addresses 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 Midgeley 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.”

For Midgeley, 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.”

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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Photography by Dr Ian Ground