

Gregory S. McElwain

Mary Midgley: An Introduction

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Mary Midgley was *sui generis*. Is there even a *loosely* comparable figure today – or indeed in the whole history of philosophy?

We have writers like Frans de Waal and Sam Harris (and their forebears like Francis Bacon), who are not philosophers but engage philosophical topics at a popular level. We have philosophers like Peter Singer and Michael Sandel (and their forbears like John Locke), who make regular forays into popular venues alongside their more specialist work. But is there – has there ever been – anyone like Midgley? She published the first of her sixteen books – on topics from human nature to ethics to science studies – when she was almost 60. She was always read more outside the academy than within. Trained as a philosopher, she made it her life's work to engage the confusions of popular thought *as* a philosopher – pausing, disentangling, suggesting alternatives. She regarded her work as public service, though; she likened the philosopher's task to a plumber's.

Because Midgley's work was popular in this way, because she wrote so much, and because much of her work was occasional – job work, locating kinks and blockages in the plumbing of popular conceptions – it can be difficult to get a sense of her outlook and achievement as a *whole*. This is what Gregory McElwain sets out to do in this welcome study.

In his overview, McElwain aims at the same plain-spokenness that Midgley herself achieved in her writings. Midgley urged this on McElwain, he says. (Honouring her wishes, he relegates most intricacies of argument and interpretive disputes to his – very substantial – endnotes.) McElwain became a friend as well as an interpreter to Midgley over the decade he spent on this project. Midgley is compulsively quotable – a crucial skill for a popular philosopher – and one of the delights of McElwain's book are the many quotations he includes, not only from across her enormous oeuvre, but also from years of interviews conducted at her home outside Newcastle.

After an introductory chapter on Midgley's life and her self-concept as a philosophical plumber, McElwain offers readers seven chapters, each on a major theme or topic in Midgley's work. These are not neatly separate in themselves or in Midgley's writings: questions about 'Human Nature and the Self' or 'Morality and Wholeness' are closely connected to questions about 'Animals and Why They Matter' and 'Our Connection to Nature.' But establishing some headings and devoting fifteen or twenty pages to what Midgley had to say about each of these topics – cross-referencing liberally – enables McElwain to draw out the unities across Midgley's work. (Indeed, McElwain's

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headings end up functioning in his text somewhat like internal hyperlinks or like recurring tags in the work of a long-time blogger.)

One unity McElwain draws out is integration itself: the importance, to Midgley, of considering (for instance) our kinship and resemblances with other animals when we characterise human nature. Another unity he draws out is related: the misleading lure of binary oppositions in *all* these areas: feeling and thought (or *Heart and Mind*, in the title of one of her books), nature and nurture, human and non-human, masculine and feminine, individual and community. All of these oppositions she regards as temptations. They are frequently represented as opposed alternatives or forces when they are really complementary aspects of a more complex and encompassing whole, a whole she pushed her readers to map more intricately. In one of her many memorable analogies, Midgley likens these oppositions to an opposition between knives and forks.

With all the cross-referencing and integration, McElwain's exposition is sometimes repetitive; given the character of Midgley's work, this would have been difficult to avoid. Still, I found most satisfying the chapters on other animals and on the wider world, where McElwain's independent expertise in animal ethics and environmental ethics enables him to work out the *significance* of Midgley's integrative, complicating outlook for a particular domain of thought.

As McElwain observes, Midgley challenges *both* dominant positions in animal ethics: Singer's utilitarianism and Regan's modified Kantianism. Like Vicki Hearne, whom she admired, Midgley develops a *relational* ethic that takes species differences seriously without minimising the claims of non-human animals on us. Yes, it is important not to torment other creatures, and to take seriously that they are subjects of their own lives. But determining what good treatment means with respect to any particular animal requires close attention to that animal's natural history and complex web of motives. (Midgley herself spent her 30s and 40s reading everything she could lay her hands on in ethology. She and Jane Goodall became lifelong friends.) The standards of good treatment will vary, then, from species to species. What would be unacceptable in dealing with a chimpanzee might be perfectly all right with a chicken. This is not vicious speciesism; it is dutiful, even loving attention to the *real*.

This will seem merest common sense to some. McElwain quotes Midgley from one of their conversations, saying she regularly worried that the things she was arguing were too *obvious*. But then she would look again and see that influential people were denying what she wanted to affirm: like theorists who represent gathering eggs from a pet chicken as exploitation, akin to sweatshop labour or forced surrogacy. And then she would write anyway.

There are a few choices I wish McElwain or his editors at Bloomsbury would have made differently. One of each:

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As I remarked earlier, Midgley is compulsively quotable. McElwain sometimes lets himself be carried away by this. He supplies the reader with many long block quotes that go beyond illustrating the specific points he has in view. As a fellow Midgley reader (in full disclosure, McElwain is a friend, and I offered comments on one of his chapters), I understand the temptation. But there were moments when I wanted more of McElwain's own, expository voice, the voice that emerges most clearly in chapters 4 and 5.

Inexplicably, Bloomsbury set the book in a sans-serif font that made the reading experience more laborious than it should have been.

Neither of these points makes McElwain's book any less valuable a contribution to the literature, orienting readers to a thinker who can be a conscience and a guide to them on many important topics in contemporary life. It was a large job and a useful one, and I don't know if anyone could have done it better.

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