



Mary Midgley
(1919-2018)

Published Books

- *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*. Routledge, 1978.
- *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*. Routledge, 1981.
- *Animals and Why They Matter: A Journey Around the Species Barrier*. University of Georgia Press, 1983.
- *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay*. Routledge, 1984.
- with Judith Hughes. *Women's Choices: Philosophical Problems Facing Feminism*. Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983.
- *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears*. Routledge, 1985.
- *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* Bristol Press, 1989.
- *Wisdom, Information and Wonder: What Is Knowledge For?* Routledge, 1989.
- *Science As Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning*. Routledge, 1992.
- *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing*. Routledge, 1996.
- *Science And Poetry*. Routledge, 2001.
- *Myths We Live By*. Routledge, 2003.
- *The Owl of Minerva: A Memoir*. Routledge, 2005. (Midgley's autobiography)
- editor. *Earthy Realism: The Meaning of Gaia*. Imprint Academic, 2007.
- *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene*. Acumen, 2010.
- *Are you an Illusion?* Acumen, 2014.
- *What Is Philosophy For?* Bloomsbury, 2018.



Philosophical Friends of Midgley at Oxford in the
1940's: Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Iris
Murdoch

Philosophical Friends

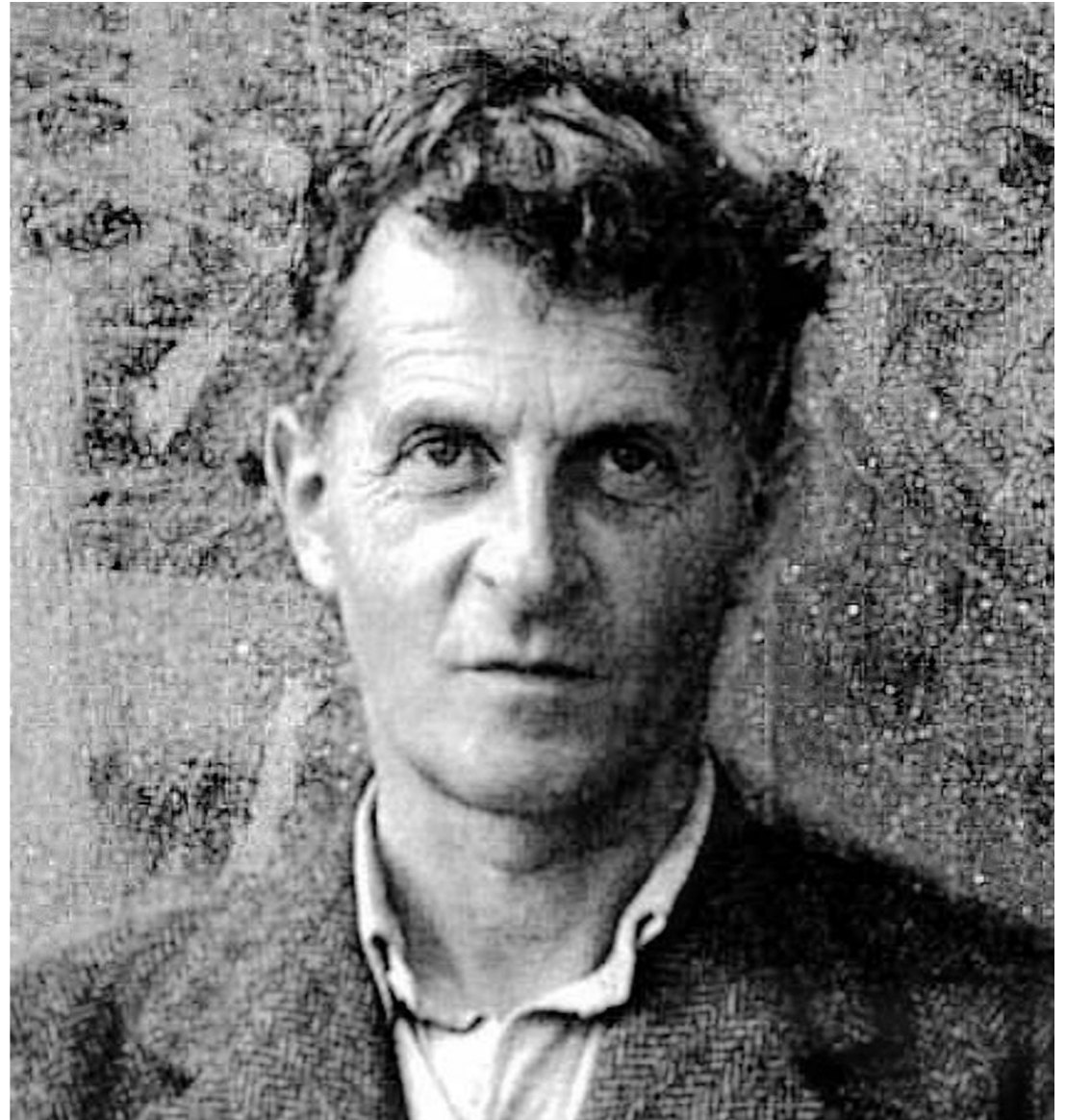
- Iris Murdoch, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, and Mary Midgley met and became friends at Oxford University in the 1940's.
- In the years immediately following the war they met regularly at Philippa Foot's house in north Oxford to set out a detailed and comprehensive philosophical response to the dominant conception of human nature, perception, action and ethics in modern Western philosophy.
- It is important to note that Anscombe was considered by Wittgenstein to be his finest student. She edited and translated his *Philosophical Investigations* which first appeared in 1953.
- Foot helped to secure Anscombe her first academic post.
- Murdoch was Midgley's bridesmaid, and Foot's housemate and lover.

A Previously Unrecognized Philosophical Movement

- Though previously unrecognised as such, these four women are a unique case of an all-female philosophical school. To some extent the conditions for this were adventitious, the main factor being WWII and men being conscripted into service.
- It is worth knowing that women were only allowed to take degrees at Oxford from 1920.
- A commentator writes: “their work was distinguished both by their deep moral seriousness and by a willingness to engage in real-world problems, going beyond the narrow limits which linguistic philosophy had set for itself.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951)

- All of these thinkers accepted Wittgenstein's critique of Western metaphysics as *Luftgebaude* ("air-castles") e.g., Plato's theory of Forms, Leibniz's monadology, Descartes's dualism.
- They also accepted Wittgenstein's unsettling vision of the human as tempted to picture itself and others in self-defeating metaphysical terms e.g. as windowless monads, isolated Cartesian egos, or as mere physical objects.



The Problem of Philosophy After Wittgenstein

- Wittgenstein said that his philosophy “seems only to destroy... all that is great and important. (As it were, all the buildings, leaving behind only bits of stone and rubble.)”
- Is the work of philosophy simply one of “show[ing] the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”?
- Our 4 female philosophers all reacted by attempting to extend Wittgenstein’s thinking into the moral realm where Wittgenstein himself had been notoriously silent (notwithstanding the moral seriousness or intensity of his writing).

Midgley after Wittgenstein

- Midgley, in particular, developed three further themes of Wittgenstein's philosophy in her own work:
 - 1) The key role of the **imagination** in philosophy: visions, myths.
 - 2) The attack on **scientism** (combined with a respect for actual science and its results).
 - 3) The importance of **poetry** for philosophy.

Theme 1: The Role of the Imagination in Philosophical Reflection

- The first theme is the importance of the **imagination** in philosophical reflection. This challenges the widespread idea that philosophy is all about the construction of rationally based systems of thought.
- Wittgenstein taught that the grip of metaphysical ideas ultimately rests on imaginative “pictures” of ourselves and the world and of the relation between them.
- Wittgenstein remarks, “A *picture* held us captive. And we couldn’t get outside it, for it lay in our language, and language seemed only to repeat it to us inexorably.” [sic]

Theme 2: The Attack on Scientism

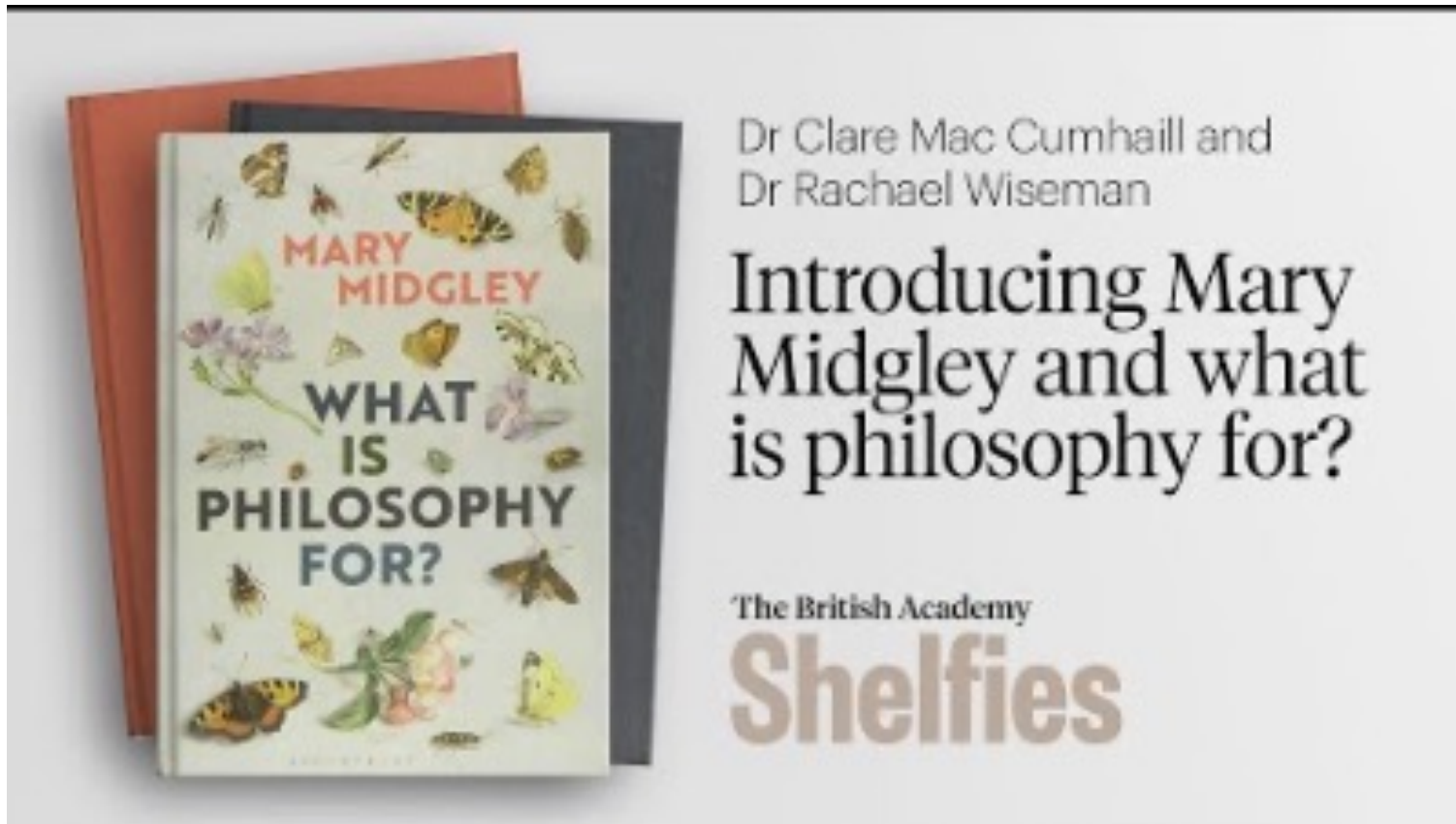
- The second theme is the **attack on scientism**, the ideology that science is capable of answering all the important questions of human life.
- Wittgenstein remarks,
 - “Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.
(The word “philosophy” must mean which stands above or below but not beside the natural sciences.)
The object of philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts.
Philosophy is not a theory but an activity.
A philosophical work consists essentially in elucidations.”
- The implication is that the problems of philosophy are not problems of science. So the method of dealing with them will not involve scientific inquiry. Some other techniques must be found.

Theme 3: Writing Poetry & Writing Philosophy

- Wittgenstein remarks,

“I believe I summed up where I stand in philosophy when I said:
really one should write philosophy only as one *writes a poem*.”
- This remark condenses the other two themes: writing philosophy is nothing like writing science; and writing philosophy has a lot to do with expressing imaginative pictures.
- Another idea is that writing philosophy is an act of self-expression, the creation of a distinctive voice.

Clare MacCumhaill & Rachael Wiseman



Taking Tea

- One doesn't need to be Japanese to see that taking tea is a ritual that has deep resonance.
- In the Japanese tradition it is linked to the aesthetic known as *wabi-sabi*, a world-view centred on the acceptance of the transience and imperfection of things.



Philosophy over Tea

- In an English context, drinking tea is a fitting setting for open-ended conversation amongst friends.
- That Midgley discussed philosophy over tea suggests something about her style of philosophy: that it is convivial and unpretentious, down-to-earth, but close to the simple things that really matter most.



The Threat of Scientism: Examples

- “the deep and universal questions of existence and the meaning of life are scientific questions which should properly be dealt with in science classes” – Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist.
- “‘You’, your joys and sorrows, your memories, and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.” – Francis Crick, molecular biologist.
- “The self is a conceptual chimera” – John Paulos, mathematician.
- “... we are just meat machines” – John Horgan, science journalist.
- “The purpose of life is to disperse energy.” –Scott Sampson, paleontologist.

What is Scientism?

- Scientism is not the same as science and is not presupposed by it.
Def: “a strange, imperialistic, isolating ideology about science”.
- Scientism is the ideology that every legitimate question is a scientific question to be answered by appeal to the methods and results of the sciences – especially the physical sciences.
- Midgley: “Scientism... extends the impersonal, reductive, atomistic methods that are appropriate to physical science into social and psychological inquiries where they work badly.”
- It springs “from a peculiar vision of the world, a set of imaginative habits that have been associated with modern science since its dawn in the seventeenth century.”

The Myth of Science as a Mirror of Nature

- It is commonly supposed today that the human mind has the job of “mirroring” the world. On the one hand there is the world and on the other our beliefs about it – which are either true or false.
- This is part of the scientistic myth of modern science which views science as the best “mirror” of nature we have so far constructed.
- Following Wittgenstein, Midgley thinks this conception of the relation of mind and world, and of scientific practice, is overly simple. She challenges it in essentially two ways.

Midgley's Response: 1. Opposition to (Scientific) Reductionism

- “We cannot have a single comprehensive view of the whole aquarium [which is our world] – a single all-purpose philosophical view of everything... The world is simply too rich for such reductive strait-jacketing. There is not – as Leibniz hoped – a single quasi-mathematical language into which the views of all aspects can be translated. This does not mean that no understanding is possible. We can relate these various aspects rationally because they all occur within the framework of our lives. We can walk around and look at other windows and discuss them with each other. But we cannot eliminate any of them. We have to combine a number of different ways of thinking – the views through several windows, historical, biological, mathematical, everyday and the rest – and somehow fit them together.” – Midgley

Midgley's Response 2: Methodological Pluralism

- **“the way in which the universe works isn't confined to the things that science tells us about it.** That universe has hugely many aspects. It includes ourselves and our direct perceptions. It also includes the views of life that have been built up through aeons of human experience. That history has gone into the building the background of today's common sense, which is not a fixed formula, comparable to a particular science, but is something more like a great stretch of mental countryside full of different kinds of vegetation – life forms that keep developing to suit what is going on around them.” – Midgley

- In the previous quotation Midgley acknowledges that there are, in addition to the things discovered by the sciences, also **non-scientific things which we know about and explore in non-scientific ways** including selves, artworks and artifacts – all aspects of what Sellars calls “the manifest image of the world”.

Midgley's Response 3: The Mediating Role of Imagination

- Apart from its reductionist monism, the scientistic myth of science leaves out of account the mediating role of *imagination*.
- In a highly complex many-sided world, we use imaginative “pictures” (Wittgenstein), or “visions” or “myths” (Midgley) to help us organize and describe reality.
- “Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world.” – Midgley

The Myth of Atomism: Ancient & Modern

- For example, the ancient Democritean conception of the universe as “atoms and the void” is a scientific myth.
- It was transmitted in the form of Epicurean atomism by the Roman poet Lucretius whose poem “On the Nature of Things” (*De rerum natura*) was rediscovered in 1417.
- This poem had a large influence on Pierre Gassendi’s atomist system which, in turn, influenced the emergence of early modern atomism in the 17th century.

Atomism: In Science & Social Life

- “Morally... atomism seemed to point the way, not only away from religion* but also away from communal thinking and towards social atomism – that is, towards individualism. And for scientific knowledge itself atomism seemed to promise a most reassuring kind of simplicity and finality – a guarantee that the world would prove intelligible in the end in relatively simple terms, once we had split it up into its ultimate elements...” – Midgley

(*since it showed that natural causation was independent of the gods.)

- Note Midgley's awareness that a myth that has proved useful in one area (physics) is often put into service in another area (social life) without any justification.
- And her awareness of what we might call the natural history of myths, the way they are serviceable for a time and then become a hinderance to further thought – needing to be retired & replaced.

Myths and their Limits: The Case of Atomism

- “Both of these promises – the social reliance on individualism and the intellectual confidence in final simplicity – were central elements in Enlightenment thinking. Both have been very useful to us and are still prominent in our thought today. But we are now reaching areas where they can no longer help us. On the physical side physicists no longer think in terms of hard, separate, unchangeable atoms at all but of particles that are essentially interconnected. And on the social side, attempts to treat people as disconnected social atoms has repeatedly turned out very badly.” – Midgley



Comparison: Richard Rorty

- “the more books [of literature] that you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human you become – the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another. The great virtue of the literary culture is that it tells young intellectuals that the only source of human redemption is the human imagination...”
- Rorty only sees imagination as a good thing; Midgley sees that imagination has its dark sides.

The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy & Poetry

- Plato remarked that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.
- More recently C. P. Snow (1959) argued that science and the humanities had split into “two cultures” each of which found the other alien and uncomprehending.
- Midgley works to overcome this quarrel or split in ourselves.

Imaginative Visions: Science & Poetry

- For Midgley, the mediating role of the imagination is one that unites science and poetry.
- This is worth emphasizing at a time when it is widely thought there is some kind of strict dividing line between the sciences and the humanities – one that goes with the dangerous myth of a dualism of fact and value.
- “Our visions – our ways of imagining the world – determine the directions of our thoughts, as well as being the source of our poetry. Poetry exists to express those visions directly, in concentrated form.”
– Midgley

On Poetry

- Echoing Shelley, Midgley writes, “Poetry exists to express [imaginative] visions [of the world] directly.”
- “But the business of poets and other prophets is not only to celebrate things... Just as often, they need to denounce things, to shake us from our dogmatic slumbers, to warn us, to point towards what is going wrong. Sometimes, that is, they have to act as unacknowledged legislators of the world.” – Midgley

Poetry Lessons from Midgley

- Poetry can provide a synoptic view of things, by bringing together many diverse perspectives into a single vision. Arguably, this is a principal virtue of the humanities as a whole.
- Poetry is a defense of the ordinary and extraordinary meaningfulness of things in our lives from a scientific skepticism that is apt to call anything that is not simply 'atoms and the void' illusory and without content. Consider, e.g., the popularity of materialist views of persons or artworks.
- Poetry is a defense of the self speaking, the self that voices itself – perhaps in an act of ventriloquism, by giving voice to another, the persona of the poem – and in so doing becomes a poet.