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| Headline | Notes From A Biscuit Tin |
| Subhead | Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachel Wiseman Launch a Project That Celebrates The Poetic Vision of Mary Midgley |
| Author credit | Clare Mac Cumhaill is Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Durham University.Rachael Wiseman is Lecturer in Philosophy at Liverpool University.Rachael and Clare co-direct *In Parenthesis* which studies the lives, philosophy and friendships of Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley, Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot. See www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk |
| Photos | Any high res images of Mary or the tin would be really good. |
| Captions/credit |  |
| Pulled quotes | 1 The great philosophers of the past had the poetic vision needed to invent new concepts2 Philosophy is a way in which we service the deep infrastructure of our lives3 Professionalisation of philosophy hones technical skill but not the vision needed to make philosophy socially relevant |

Mary Midgley died last year, aged 99. At her birthday party she signed copies of her latest and last book for friends and family. *What is Philosophy For?* is the culmination of nearly 70-years of philosophical thinking and something of a manifesto. In it, Mary once again sets out her provocative vision of the status and role of philosophical thinking. She returns to an analogy she first set out in the early 1990s: “philosophy is best understood as a form of plumbing”.

Like all the visions and analogies that burst from Midgley’s writings, the metaphor is at once disarmingly simple – it is one that can be grasped by a child – and remarkably sophisticated. It aims at descriptive truth but it contains a diagnosis of our current societal woes, a far-reaching critique of the contemporary philosophical practice, a plan of action, and a good dose of sharp wit.

First, to the descriptive aspect. Plumbing and philosophy, Midgley tells us, are crafts the need for which emerges when societies reach a certain level of complexity. A developed society will typically have a complex plumbing system that has grown up somewhat organically over many generations, a tangled nexus of pipes, tanks, valves and other mechanisms for conveying water and waste. Some parts of that system will be known, carefully recorded on maps stored in Town Halls; some will be visible and communal, as village pumps are. But other parts will be largely uncharted, the result of civic schemes that are now forgotten or of ad hoc fixes and ingenious interventions by individual tradesmen who never bothered to make a record. From time to time something will go wrong in the system – things will begin to stink, as Midgley puts it. A plumber will be needed, either to interpret the plans if they exist or to look under the floorboards at the handiwork of past plumbers, and to work out both what they did and why it is no longer fit for purpose. They will also need to use their craft to fix things – either an off-the-peg solution to a familiar problem or a makeshift invention to stymy the flow.

Like plumbing, Midgley writes, philosophy is a “way in which we service the deep infrastructure of our lives -- the patterns we take for granted because they have not really been questioned”. The “infrastructure” and “patterns” that Midgley is thinking of here are those laid down by our concepts and represented in our language. The image evokes Wittgenstein’s remark, “Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses”. The echo is surely conscious – Midgley was reading Wittgenstein’s later writings in scrapbook form with G. E. M. Anscombe long before they were published*.*

Midgley’s image of an infrastructure of concepts, laying down patterns for thinking and acting, does a lot of work in her philosophy. One aspect of her view is worth making explicit. For Midgley – as for Wittgenstein, Anscombe, Murdoch and Geach, to name just a few – a concept is not a mental representation, an abstraction from experience, nor an object for which a word stands. Rather a concept is a human tool that opens up (and also constrains) our possibilities for acting and thinking. When the concept of “toleration” was invented, for example, new ways of thinking about and structuring the civic space, and new kinds of relationships with distant others, came to be possible. For an individual to possess that concept is for her to be able to think, act and see under that description, to recognise in concrete situations what toleration calls for, and to be capable of shaping her life and character in response to the patterns that the concept lays down. Learning to use a concept like “toleration”, collectively or individually, is a never-ending task – more like learning to play a musical instrument than learning the alphabet.

Our concepts reflect the inventions, imagination, and crises of previous generations. The concept of a social contract and with it new associated conceptions of rights, duties, freedom and civic responsibility was, Midgley reminds us, forged in the context of a crisis of about the authority of Kings and Queens: “contract thinking … was meant to debunk supposed duties toward the supernatural because those duties had been used to justify fearful religious wars and oppressions”. The philosophical plumbers of the Renaissance fashioned a tool -- the notion of a contract between citizens and equals -- that could be used to fix a stink that was bothering them: a “blockage” in thinking and acting caused by their prior reliance on a notion of duty and contract that could hold only between individuals arranged in a formal hierarchy – civilians and their ruler or God.

This brings us to the diagnostic dimension of Midgley’s work. The infrastructure that was built by those Renaissance innovators to deal with a blockage in their system, may now be itself the source of a blockage for us. By joining tightly the notions of rights and duties to the idea of a contract entered into freely by two rational individuals of equal standing, those earlier philosopher plumbers left us with a problem. The infrastructure they left us is put under terrific stress if we try to use those concepts -- rights, duties, responsibilities -- to, for example, speak of the rights of animals, our duties to children, our responsibility for future generations. So too if we try to approach moral matters from a holistic and co-operative -- rather than individualistic and competitive -- perspective. Our concepts won’t let us do it. But as we look to our future – and in particular our future relationship with the planet that is our only home – these different sorts of thinking are just what we need.

Out of this diagnosis Midgley’s develops a damning critique of the contemporary university’s impact on contemporary philosophical practice. In the mid-nineties she was already warning of the dangers of the professionalisation and of the ways in which a culture of metrics -- outputs, research projects, grant capture and the pressure on young philosophers to publish -- would leave philosophers lacking those very skills that would be needed when things started to stink. It is all very well, she warned, having philosophers of great technical ability and superbly analytic minds, but what the great philosophers of the past have had in addition, is the poetic vision need to invent new concepts -- a feat she compares to the invention of a new musical instrument (which, recall, we then have to learn to play together!). It was, Midgley tells us, the poetic dimension of the philosophical mind that invented our current concepts of rights, duties and responsibilities. And if we are to fix the problems those concepts are now giving rise to, we will need poetic philosophers once again. But the system of academic philosophy -- at least in the UK -- weeds out the poets and leaves behind only the lawyers.

Looking to the future -- to new technologies and climate change in particular, and to the myriad of practical and ethical issues that come their wake -- Midgley offers us both a prophecy and a challenge:

“What actually happens to us will surely be determined by human choices. And if this is right I suspect that philosophical reasoning will become rather important. We shall need to think about *how* best to think about these new and difficult topics -- how to imagine them, how to visualise them, how to fit them into a convincing world-picture.”

To celebrate Midgley’s philosophical vision - and to help philosophers rediscover their inner poets, parts of their intellectual personally they will need to reawaken if Midgley is right -- we are launching a year-long project in September 2019.

Mary Midgley’s biscuit tin -- from which she dispensed wit, wisdom and ginger snaps over many decades -- is off on a world tour! The tin will travel to 12 destinations and at each stop-off a conversation will take place between a poet and a philosopher on a theme from Midgley’s work. Themes range over the broad terrain of Mary’s interests, encompassing the self, instinct, beasts, the domestic, wickedness, science, language and naturalism.

Each poet will write a new composition in response to Mary’s words. Confirmed “biscuit tin” poets include Gillian Allnut, Ruth Padel, Sarah Howe, Deryn Rees-Jones, Helen Humphries, Yasuhiro Yotsumoto, Ulrike Draesner, and Kayombo Chingonyi. The tin will trace a journey from Newcastle, to Somerville College, Oxford, to London, then Liverpool. It will wind its way to three locations in North America, before landing in Sydney and Tokyo, returning to Europe in Summer 2020 and finally to its home at the Midgley Archives in Palace Green Library, Durham in October 2020 to coincide with the Durham Book Festival.

An Instagram account will document the tin’s journey, along with its hidden messages! For more information, follow us on twitter - @parenthesis\_in. You can also follow the tin’s progress and find out about the poets, philosophers, locations, and opportunities to participate at [notesfromabiscuittin.com](http://www.notesfromabiscuittin.com).