FROM OUTSIDE OF ETHICS

Midgley, Mary. *What Is Philosophy For?*
London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. Pp. 208. $51.66 (cloth); $16.31 (paper). **q1**

This little book was written during the final year of Mary Midgley's life. It was published the week of her ninety-ninth birthday and one month before her death. Midgley tells us that she was motivated to write it by "a rather general exasperation against the whole reductive, scientistic, mechanistic, fantasy-ridden creed which still constantly distorts the world-view of our age" (190). Her book is beautifully clear, free from jargon, and brimming with wit and wisdom. The exasperation that motivated it gives the prose sharp edges and lively pace. I will be giving this book to any aunts, friends, or neighbors who ask me what it is I do and why it matters. I would also set this for first-year undergraduates and A-level students. In it they will find the materials they need to articulate a defense of their chosen subject. They will discover an inspirational and ambitious description of how to use the tools that their philosophical education gives them to make their lives as individuals, and our lives together, better. They will also find that uncommon gem: a style of philosophical prose to admire and mimic. **q2**

In the course of articulating a defense of philosophy, and of the arts and humanities more broadly, Midgley also bequeaths us a sharp critique of contemporary academic culture and of the way that universities are administrated and funded. This critique is all the more valuable and poignant coming from someone who started her university education almost a decade before women could take degrees at Cambridge, whose husband (Geoffrey Midgley) was part of Ryle's army of analytic philosophers (installed in provincial departments to evangelize for the new analytic method), whose department at Newcastle University was closed under Thatcher's government, and who saw in her retirement the introduction in the United Kingdom of research councils, tuition fees, the Research Excellence Framework, and the impact agenda. **q3**

Midgley perceives the "mechanistic creed" that is the target of this book as a driving force behind our climate emergency (187), as operative in our difficulties in understanding and properly valuing mental health (30, 194–95), and as at the root of our troubles with the concept of toleration (65–67). She traces its source back to the Enlightenment and to the stories, myths, and visions that philosophers, scientists, and poets created to fit the new science and its remarkable findings into a workable worldview. As Midgley sees it, those stories and myths have become distorted and have outgrown their use. The visions and beliefs they generated have become too dominant. Now, rather than forming a basis on which scientific inquiry can find its proper and proportionate place in human life, they are preventing us from seeing what is before our eyes and from acting well in the face of that reality.

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Midgley has elsewhere written extensively about the impact of a "mechanistic creed" on our capacity to understand and respond to the natural world and to each other (e.g., Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing* [New York: Routledge, 1996]; and *The Myths We Live By* [New York: Routledge, 2003]). She wants us to be able to view our environment and the animals with whom we share it (human and nonhuman) through the lens of contemporary scientific understanding—to base our responses and actions on evidence and expertise, and to utilize technology where it helps. But she thinks that we must do so while recognizing that the very same world can be viewed through the eyes of the poets, artists, and historians. And she wants us to feel neither panicked by nor complacent about the apparent clashes between these perspectives. For Midgley, different ways of seeing and describing a single reality reflect different but important aspects of the culture of human animals, an ever-changing culture rooted in nature but also in our history and—importantly for Midgley—in the clashes, arguments, and battles for authority that are part of that history. "Culture," Midgley reminds us (crediting her friend Iris Murdoch), is "not just a matter of a few recent films and fashions" but "contains everything that we believe in, including our fashionable views about science itself" (54). And what we believe most deeply and unreflectively is often a legacy of a previous~~, sometimes forgotten~~ battle for cultural, political, or religious dominance between rival authorities.

Our task as philosophers is to reflect on the different parts of human life and language—different ways of seeing and describing our world and the beliefs that underpin each—and to understand how and whether they fit together. Philosophers need to identify clashes between different areas of thought and to uncover tensions that are disrupting our ability to see clearly and to act well. They need to tell us when certain parts of our culture—and so our lives—are becoming dominant to the extent that they are leading us to neglect others or when they are forcing themselves into areas of human life where they do not belong. Philosophers need to speak up when, for example, "fashionable views about science" are preventing us from saying the things we need to say about moral responsibility or the environment. The philosopher's task will often require her to trace concepts and the beliefs that go with them backward to the point in our past where they emerged and then to look at the historical and philosophical context of that initial innovation. For this reason, Midgley insists that philosophers need to take a sharp interest in contemporary culture while cultivating a deep and humane knowledge of history and the history of philosophy—this is the point with which Midgley opens her book (7). Philosophers also need to be able to innovate—to find new words and visions and articulate new beliefs that resolve clashes and rebalance our lives. This is why, as Midgley reiterates in this book, philosophers need to have poetic as well as analytic skills (see also Mary Midgley, "Philosophical Plumbing," *Philosophy* 33 [1992]: 139–51]). This is part of the attraction, for Midgley, of the Gaia hypothesis (see, e.g., Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* [New York: Routledge 2003]).

q4

Often at the root of a problem, Midgley tells us, is the question, "Who should I put my trust in?" (99). Our "fashionable views about science" give rise to an answer that dominates our age: "Always and only trust Science—never Religion, History, or Philosophy." Midgley argues that this answer is as bad for the scientist as it

is for the priest and the philosopher. This is an important idea and one I will come back to later.

Midgley—in this book as in her others—wants to return us (as philosophers and as a society) to the sanity and common sense that she thinks we might achieve if we escape the fantasy that is the "mechanistic creed." Her view is that philosophy's role is to help us to think and act in the light of a clear-eyed realism about human life and our place in the world, something it does by articulating a coherent worldview. This is her way of interpreting the Socratic directive to live an examined life (11). Right now, argues Midgley, our worldview is not coherent but rather is dangerously disordered, and professional philosophy, insofar as it has bought into the "mechanistic creed" that has come to dominate our culture, is asleep at the wheel.

Unless we have Midgley's firm grasp of the depth and difficultly of the work that is required to achieve this sort of sanity—to let go of the "mechanistic creed"—her call for common sense can appear naive, her ambitions for philosophy upsettingly modest, and her appreciation and representation of scientific practice willfully misleading. Midgley is a philosopher who has sometimes been dismissed by those who work in the academy on such grounds. One of the things that this book is keen to display and explain is the enormous difficulty—intellectual but also psychological, imaginative, emotional, historical, and cultural—of achieving this sort of sane realism. This, I conjecture, is a lesson she drew out of her close engagement with Wittgenstein in the early 1950s. Another focus of Midgley's book is the nature of the "mechanistic creed" and how it is that we can simultaneously recognize it as a fantasy—a gross misrepresentation of scientific practice—and be as a culture utterly in its thrall. To understand this is to grasp something very deep about human nature and about the power of philosophy. Iris Murdoch is another philosopher who grasped this and who, as a result, wrote extensively about the ethical significance of fantasy and imagination.

One aim in this review is to address the misconception that Midgley is a superficial or simplistic thinker. This book, for all its pace and wit, is not journalistic. It is a carefully structured and impeccably argued piece of metaphysics and ethics, one that draws deeply on the history of philosophy and uses specialist philosophical tools. It is underpinned by unified and unifying theories of human nature, mind, and language (for her fullest presentation of these, see Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* [New York: Routledge, 1978]). It deploys these tools with so light a touch that a reader may fail to notice them at work and underlying theories play their role without appearing on the surface of the text as scaffolding, appeals to authority, or extraneous labeling. Midgley was already master of her craft and at ease in her metaphysical system before she published her first book at age fifty-nine. The simplicity and joy with which she writes reflect the fact that she is at home in her own thought system, and this has masked from some the philosophical sophistication of her work.

The book is divided into four parts: "The Search for Signposts," "Tempting Visions of Science," "Mindlessness and Machine Worship," and "Singularities and the Cosmos." Were it composed only of the first two, it would be far less interesting than it is. The charge of "popular philosophy" might be made to stick, and the reader could fairly judge that there was little in it not to be found elsewhere, and

with more detail, in other parts of Midgley's corpus. But it is the way in which the groundwork in those parts meshes with the philosophical work done in parts 3 and 4 that makes this little book worthy of attention from professional philosophers, and it is in these later parts that we see Midgley covering new ground.

In parts 1 and 2, Midgley sets out her understanding of the object of philosophical thought. She begins with a contrast between scientific and philosophical thinking. The aim of specialist sciences like crystallography or ornithology, she writes, is to "spiral inward and down toward particular parts of truth" (71). Their particular object of inquiry is fixed and given—crystalline solids or birds—and their aim is to understand that object in greater and greater detail. Our joy in this sort of inquiry comes partly from a fascination with our own capacity to measure our world precisely, an occupation that Midgley reminds us is "quite a new phenomenon, invented recently in our culture." This relative newness will later take on significance in her argument: "We are not, after all, animals whose whole evolutionary history has centred on becoming able to measure the world precisely" (44). Thinking of this kind is properly called "research" because it involves, in Midgley's words, "a static mining operation" (17). There is a clearly defined search area to be reworked, measured, and understood more deeply or in greater detail. This is not to say that surprise discoveries may not be made in these fields, or that those discoveries might not utterly transform our understanding of their object, but only that the sort of thinking that constitutes "scientific research" is on the whole about getting a deeper and more detailed understanding of a well-defined subject area—returning more accurate and precise measurements of roughly understood phenomena.

It is a fact about human nature that we take pleasure in this sort of drilling-down activity, that we enjoy uncovering obscure or concealed features of our world through obsessive focus on one tiny part of everything that calls for our attention. It speaks, Midgley conjectures, to a much more ancient set of instincts and interests, ones that our brains have indeed evolved to center—the brain's left hemisphere specializes in "obsessive, specialised interest" (15) and "diving into the smaller details" (28). But as a species our overarching motivation in pursuing scientific research is instrumental. Through this kind of thinking we have made enormous progress not just in our understanding of the world but also in our technology. We have been able to construct machinery that can perform many jobs that past humans had to do by hand: we can use machines to perform in microseconds calculations that would have been laborious and time-consuming for our grandparents or to convey us from London to Edinburgh in a matter of hours rather than days. And in addition to becoming more efficient, we have also built machines that allow us to do things that were previously impossible for creatures of our kind. We can fly, something barely conceivable a few generations ago; we can see microscopic objects, grow new organs, and speak in real time to people on the other side of the globe.

change 'perform' to 'do'

What then of philosophical thinking? For Midgley philosophical thinking is not a "new phenomenon"—a recent addition to human culture—but an activity that has been a central part of human culture from its beginning. It is thinking that aims, as we have seen, at making connections between different areas of our lives and thought in order to construct a "coherent world picture." In this sense, specialist scientific research faces in the opposite direction to philosophical thinking.

While the former drills downward, spirals inward, "philosophy ranges indefinitely outward, always looking for helpful connections—new patterns of thinking and living that explain the ways in which we think and live now" (72). When we ask "where [our current world pictures] came from we shall probably find that they have been shaped by earlier philosophers who influenced our tradition" (73). This is why the philosopher must know the history of philosophy (and the history of science), while the crystallographer need not know the history of crystallography.

The difficulty of finding connections and new patterns of thinking and living is the difficulty of philosophy and also the difficulty of taking a sane and realistic stance. In our modern lives, the difficulty is connected to the fact that there exist a vast array of specialist sciences and so-called academic disciplines, each of which has its own history, terminology, and scholarly journals. These disciplines often generate descriptions of our world that are, on the surface at least, inconsistent either with each other or with our more everyday understanding of the world and each other. These inconsistencies may go unnoticed if they concern arenas that do not immediately impact our day-to-day lives, but when we learn from the neuroscientist that moral responsibility is a myth, or from the economist that self-interested individuals benefit society, we are forced to attend to the disconnect.

But though our modern problem is exacerbated by this divergence of specialisms—a divergence itself exacerbated by contemporary universities' focus on "research"—it would be a serious mistake to take this modern manifestation of our problem for the problem itself, as if the difficulty of constructing a coherent worldview emerges only with the distinction between biology and genetics, sociology and psychiatry. Rather, the tensions, gaps, and contradictions in our worldview are internal to the human form of life, to a life shaped by culture. Practical and conceptual problems arise from the conflict between our first-person experience of our own existence as temporally unbounded and our understanding of ourselves as mortal creatures; from the need to reconcile different species of causal explanation (e.g., teleological and efficient); from our knowledge that we are at once fully responsible for our actions and beings who are predictably shaped by our upbringing, our experiences, and local customs; and from the fact that justice may demand what friendship prohibits. No specialist knowledge is needed to generate these clashes in worldview.

insert
', for example, '

Midgley's contention is that as universities have embraced the notion of "research," and with it the associated model of specialist thinking, philosophy has made the mistake of falling in line and rebranding itself as a kind of specialist research, one with a fixed area of inquiry and the promise of fact-finding, progress through specialist knowledge and drilling down. David Chalmers (47) and Daniel Dennett (101) provide her foils here, but Midgley's target is quite general. To the extent that we philosophers have accepted the characterization of our work as "research" and its aim as "progress," we too have fallen in line. One symptom of the widespread acceptance of this paradigm is a general lack of interest in the history of our own discipline (2–13). But for Midgley this rebranding is disastrous and leaves professional philosophy exposed. Philosophical thinking is not designed to do the job of a specialist science—a philosopher will inevitably fail to deliver "research findings" that can compete with those of the crystallographer because, unlike the crystallographer, the philosopher does not have a small, well-defined

area to cover. Her topics—consciousness, intention, subjectivity, toleration, God—range across the whole of human life. She cannot take her subject matter for granted because a large part of her work is to identify what her subject matter is. She needs to look outward, to take in everything that calls her attention and not be drawn in by some tiny part of the whole. Again, Wittgenstein's influence is visible here. The philosopher's inevitable failure to give answers and discover facts that pass muster as "research findings" leaves the discipline vulnerable to the sort of thinking that led to Midgley's department at Newcastle University being closed in the 1980s, along with metallurgy—another research specialism that was presumably failing to deliver the goods (9).

"Philosophy," writes Midgley, "is not just one specialized subject among many, something which you only need to study if you mean to do research on it. Instead, it is something we are all doing all the time, a continuous, necessary background activity which is likely to go badly if we don't attend to it. In this way, it is perhaps more like driving a car or using money than it is like nuclear physics" (81). The "background activity" that has been the province of past philosophers will, of course, go on happening without us: it is "not a private luxury [but] something we all need for our lives" (73). There is no option for individuals to stop trying to make sense of things, nor any place from which to avoid the conflicts and tensions that arise when different ways of looking at our world come into contact. With philosophers otherwise occupied, the task of making sense of our world remains, so the result of our (philosophers') abdication is not that people stop trying to build a coherent worldview, but that they build bad ones; worldviews that are overly simplistic and primitive and rely on childish imagery—battles, animals, or a parental authority—will be likely to triumph (177). Propagandists know this well: the War on Terror, the Nanny State, and Taking Back Control are recent examples.

q6

replace semi-colon with full-stop and capitalize 'worldviews'.

So far we have spoken of the specialist sciences as "drilling down." But Midgley argues that in the absence of a coherent worldview, and with philosophy otherwise occupied, the myths and stories that Enlightenment thinkers told to fit the new science into a worldview that was workable for them—myths and stories created in the context of a deadly battle between secular and religious authority—have begun to exercise greater and greater control over our imaginations. It is now unexceptional to think that while the aims of the specialist sciences are, naturally, limited, the "aim of Science as a whole" is boundless—that the sum total of scientific knowledge will be the sum total of knowledge simpliciter. It is true, Midgley writes, that if we are to give sense to the question "What is the aim of Science as a whole?" the answer would "have to be something very general," something like "the sum of all the particular truths, along with the relations between them" (72). But this ought not to lead us to embrace the myth of scientism. For while science "as a whole" may aim at the "sum of all the particular truths," the "particular truths" that are the business of science make up a world seen from just one angle: namely, the objective, disinterested stance of a creature occupied in the business of measuring, examining, drilling down into one particular area. The claim that the sum of scientific truths is "The Truth" is one that Midgley thinks we should hear first and foremost as a claim of authority, one that is meant to settle the prestige question: "which is the top discipline, science or some part of the Humanities" (88). Such a question is, Midgley thinks, as misguided as the question "Who is

more intelligent, Newton or Shakespeare?" or "What is more useful, a hammer or a knife?" (142). The answer to all these questions depends on what it is you are trying to do.

This brings us to the pivot of *What Is Philosophy For?*—where Midgley moves beyond "familiar history" and onto new ground: "What I want to say next, however, is less familiar: I want to point out that the idea of physical science has itself a strong and effective symbolism. . . . It is now the central example of a compulsory doctrine, something that has to be believed. It is an oracle. And this status has disturbing effects on the way we now think about science itself" (85). The word 'oracle' is carefully chosen here by a philosopher who studied classics. "When human beings get lost their commonest response is to look for an oracle—an agency that will take the next decision for them" (123). In ancient myth an oracle is a priest of medium through whom the gods speak, and to whom "bewildered" mortals go seeking prophesy and direction (122). Midgley, in introducing the image, reminds us, too, of the traditional dangers of trusting one's fate to an oracle, and of the need for care in interpreting the message: "Croesus, king of Lydia, asked the Delphic oracle whether he should attack the Persians, and was told that, if he did, he would destroy a great empire. (That was, of course, correct, only the empire was his own.)" (125). With philosophers occupied with "research," and with the gods no longer an option, one might imagine that the oracle of which Midgley speaks is the scientist—that her thought is that the resting place for scientism is the deification of the scientist, or at least of science. But Midgley presents us with a much more frightening vision. Our culture's oracle, she proposes, is not the human scientist but the machine itself. Science won the power struggle with the humanities, but the victory has proved Pyrrhic, as the disinterested search for truth has morphed into "the cult of impersonality" (159). This is the topic of parts 3 and 4.

typo. replace with 'or'

q7

In "Mindlessness and Machine Worship" and "Singularity and the Cosmos" Midgley describes some of the fantasies about "cleverness," "intelligence," and "knowledge" that scientism has primed us to accept. Absent in its worldview is the perspective from which Shakespeare, Socrates, Bach, or Mother Theresa might be judged intelligent—much less that from which a dolphin or octopus might be thought so—and instead we are offered a flattened-out, linear, quantifiable image of intelligence, one that is also captured in the notion that we might arrange ourselves in order of intelligence based on the results of IQ tests (141). From this perspective it is perfectly sensible to say, "Alan Turing is more intelligent than Frida Kahlo," "This computer is more intelligent than a human," or "Soon human intelligence will be outrun by machine intelligence." Or, it might be sensible to take literally the phrase "artificial intelligence." Scientism is a myth that primes us to replace the sane observation that intelligence is "a general term like 'usefulness' or 'rarity'" with the "hopelessly unreal" idea that "'intelligence' . . . names a single measurable property, like 'temperature' or 'weight'" (142).

The idea of artificial intelligence, in contemporary culture, terminates in the notion of the "Singularity"—a moment at which machine intelligence so outstrips human intelligence that reality is forever beyond human ken. This idea is incoherent, thinks Midgley, based as it is on that unreal conception of intelligence, and it may seem below a philosopher to "waste time discussing such wild

projects" (133). But Midgley thinks that the way in which the Singularity is being discussed—the intellectual and emotional character of that conversation—reflects a deep malaise in our culture, one that does call for our attention, connected as it is to the genuinely existential threat we currently face from climate change. She begins by observing that the terror that one would expect in those who believe that the Singularity is coming is strangely absent: "the most surprising thing about these manifestos is surely their welcoming and reverent tone" (145). This absence of terror for her signifies the way in which this image, and more broadly the idea of "artificial intelligence," is now fulfilling a psychological and emotional need that should be being served by philosophy. In the absence of a coherent worldview, in a state of "bewilderment," the idea of abdicating responsibility—intellectual and ethical—for our futures and placing it in the hands of an oracle is great. We can stop paying attention, stop trying to figure it out, because greater artificial intelligences are doing it for us. The mythic idea that we are no longer smart enough to make decisions, to take control of our future, to figure out what to do next—about climate, war, environment, or education—is a comforting sedative but is ultimately suicidal. If it was foolish and risky to trust in the words of a divine oracle, to trust instead those of an imagined future inanimate mechanism is certainly no improvement. "If this is right, I suspect that . . . philosophical reasoning will now become rather important. We shall need to think *how* best to think about [our future]. And if we don't do that for ourselves, it's hard to see who will be able to do it for us" (208). This is an ambitious and humbling prophesy but seems to me to be a timely wakeup call for those of us who call ourselves philosophers.

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Q2. Au: please double-check usage of various styles throughout the article to ensure that they are in accord with journal style as follows: (1) italics are allowed primarily for initial mention of key terms; (2) single quotations should be used only for "mention quotes" (i.e., when mentioning a word rather than using it); (3) double quotations should be used for (*a*) quotations from other works, (*b*) scare quotes, or (*c*) when defining a term/expression for particular use in an article. DONE

Q3. Au: expansion of "REF" correct here? If not, please clarify. YES

Q4. Au: correct to remove the em dash before "that resolve . . . " (to avoid the construction "to innovate . . . that resolve")? If not, please clarify sentence structure. CORRECT, THANKS

Q5. Au: correct to change "by those of who work" to "by those who work"? If not, please clarify. CORRECT, THANKS

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