

Why A-Level Philosophy Could Do with Mary Midgley

*Amia Guha**

Women in Parenthesis Project

*Corresponding author. Email: guhaamia@gmail.com

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Abstract

Mary Midgley challenges the dominant conceptions of human nature, ethics, community and ecology taught at A-Level. This article considers some of the key themes of her thinking.

I recently took my philosophy A-level and wondered: what would A-Level philosophy look like if, instead of the classic male canon of philosophers, the curriculum was headed by an all-female quartet consisting of Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and, of course, Mary Midgley? Perhaps there would be less of Ayer's and Dawkins's positivist empiricism – letting physical science answer all the questions – and a greater revival of the project of metaphysics. Maybe we would be less enamoured by Sartrean existentialism – man arising free out of nothingness – and observe that the social structure of human life invalidates the assumption that will is generated a vacuum.

There would surely be greater sensitivity to the ways in which metaphor and myth shape our culture and knowledge systems. Take the concept of beastliness. Midgley saw human interactions with the animal kingdom framed around the mythology of 'the beast within' (the irrational, emotional human soul) and the 'beast without' (the ferocious animal predator). Yet, though ethological studies, she saw animals lead a structured, cooperative life. Where now was the

chaotic 'Lawless Beast' outside rational man? False imagery veiled an underlying truth: 'We are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals.'

Threads of her moral philosophy sprang from this conclusion. Utilizing Aristotelian conceptions of virtue, Midgley developed a defence of natural normativity – just as humans naturally have teeth, so they also have virtues. We must therefore ask questions like: 'What is natural for our species to flourish?' and 'What is the role of familial organization in our natural community?' Midgley opens up inquiry into gaps in traditional analytic philosophy: areas of territory, family and personal space.

Midgley's insights would also generate a more constructive environmental aspect to the A-Level curriculum. She saw the earth as a living biosphere, or Gaia, and the human being as an animal in its natural habitat. There is an ecocentric fibre to her work, which denounces existentialism for proceeding 'as if the world only contained dead matter (things) on the one hand and fully rational educated human beings on the other'. More broadly, our atomistic view of social life causes puzzles. How should we



view ourselves? What duties do we have towards something non-human? Why should we be concerned about the fate of our planet? Her embrace of the metaphorical Gaia, the Earth as a single self-sustaining organism, provides a holistic eco-ethic where Cartesian individualism is 'bankrupt of suggestions to deal with non-human entities'.

'Our atomistic view of the social life causes puzzles.'

The philosophical relocation of good in the faculty of the mind – Kant's practical reason, Hume's moral sentiments – has created a tension between human flourishing and the flourishing of ecosystems that humans transform for their own ends. But Midgley embraces it as a natural fact of the human condition that we exist in an

interconnectedness with other species and belong to major ecosystems. Her approach is equipped to address the theoretical and moral conflicts arising from the greatest crisis of our generation.

Reading Midgley would inform conversations about Kant and Moore, alerting students to the problems arising from the idea that we may only be morally accountable for outward action. Midgley prefaces her 'Objection to Systematic Humbug' by asking the question, 'is it quite alright to shake hands with murder in your heart?' Are mental actions not real actions and do they depend on an outward form for full realization? To answer this, Midgley employs Murdoch's vignette of the mother-in-law who behaves 'beautifully' to a daughter-in-law she believes to be beneath her son, until she 'looks again' to view the girl in a more forgiving light. Murdoch underscores the moral transformation in her inner life; she is morally active even when no changes are manifested outwardly. Midgley agrees – moral work can be inner and

private – going further to assert that feeling and sentiment can be ‘educated’. In Kantian terms, we may integrate our ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ moral lives.

Against the empiricist tradition that feelings somehow do not concern morality – utilitarianism’s attempt to organize consequences of outward action, Kantianism’s location of feeling and motivation outside the sphere of reason – Midgley argues that to dislocate the logic of emotions and will is to render life ‘not just unfamiliar, but deeply unintelligible and inhuman’. We are embodied, affective creatures.

Here we see an influence from Anscombe, who advocated for an equally robust philosophy of psychology to support the project of modern moral philosophy. So the task of practical reason can be contrasted with ‘systematic humbug’. What we call in ‘common speech’ reason, namely the task of organizing all of our conflicting wants and interests, is the task of reconciling feeling with action. We can operate as a ‘whole, to preserve the continuity of our being’ without dismissing our emotional nature.

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Midgley also has something to say about games. At A-level, we read Wittgenstein and

Hare and think what the philosopher means by a ‘game’ is something like a system of rules that have meaning because they are played. Like Hare’s infamous argument in *The Promising Game*, the duty of promise-keeping depends on whether one has agreed to play the ‘promising game’. But Midgley sees games very differently. She asks first what exactly a promise-less world would look like. From Nietzsche’s account of nature’s task as ‘the breeding of an animal that can promise’ to the existentialist’s binding commitment, promising appears ‘everywhere a kingpin of human culture’. In which case, it appears more consistent to equate promising to the institution of playing games in general: ‘the condition of having institutions’. Further, rather than a closed system as the term ‘game’ is used in mathematics, Midgley insists upon the existence of games as continuous with the life around them. Indeed, they ‘spring from’ and are ‘fit to’ needs that already exist.

You could not substitute tennis for football. Why not? Well, it is not a team sport, there is no physical contact, and so on. It would probably dissolve into a ‘more primitive ritualized contest of the kind from which football originally sprang’. Thus games are not optional or arbitrary but arise from human needs and activities. Where Wittgenstein fails to identify a commonality in all games aside from a series of ‘family resemblances’, Midgley observes an ‘underlying organic unity’ enabling us to deploy the concept of a game, namely that it meets a human need. A chair embodies the need of supporting sitting, thus ‘to know what a chair is just *is* to understand that need’. Thus we can arrive at a definition of a game through the needs that it meets, and perhaps a new outlook on moral philosophy as a whole, starting with man as a ‘game-playing animal’.

In any case, the addition of such compelling female philosophers like Mary Midgley and the all-female philosophical school she was part of to the A-level curriculum would be a welcome change from ‘the habit of viewing men’s ideas as normal and central, and women’s as an occasional optional variation’. My A-level exam texts, for example, were written by four men named John: John Stuart Mill, Jean-Paul Sartre, John

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Polkinghorne and John Hick. While there is much to admire about these philosophers, we consistently overlook a wealth of comprehensive responses to our philosophical inquires. I urge young A-level philosophers to complement their exam texts with this volume and criticize dominant conceptions of human nature, animal life and ethics with some of Midgley's insights!

Amia Guha

Amia Guha is a nineteen-year-old student researching and charting the school of Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and Mary Midgley under the supervision of Dr Rachael Wiseman and Dr Clare Mac Cumhail. Recently graduated from Westminster School, she is writing a series of papers arguing for the inclusion of each of these philosophers in the Philosophy A-Level and developing a series of granular how-to guides for specific exam boards to link their scholarship topic by topic to existing curricula. She begins her undergraduate studies in philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge in September 2023. A prepublication draft of this piece appears on the Women in Parenthesis website: <https://www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/midgley-introduction-a-level-students/>

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