From the Editors

The Challenge of Tribalism: Is It Time for a Truce?

We are all tribalists living in a multitribal world. Loyalty and dedication to one's group, or "tribe" is an inescapable part of all our lives, and the relations among differing tribes, be it national, political, religious, or ideological, is often tense.

One need only be aware of current events to see the destructive power of tribalism as US against THEM stokes anger at the "enemy." The loss of civility, the toxicity of hurled insults, and the distrust of motives are the trenches that separate rational discourse.

The field of bioethics does not escape tribalism. We have our own fiercely defended silos on a wide variety of issues: opponents versus proponents of abortion, supporters versus adversaries of euthanasia and more recently, those for or against moral enhancement, to name a few. The positions in these groups are incompatible; and they often end up with unproductive and uncrossable lines in the sand.

Mary Midgley, British philosopher and early supporter of this journal, died in October 2018. In her piece "A Golden Manifesto,"[1] she has left lessons that we would be wise to remember today. Acknowledging the bloodiness of intellectual battles, she asks if it must always be so. For Midgley, the warlike mentality and destructive feuds that reign in any competitive atmosphere prevent serious discussion. The obsession with skewering one's opponents as in blood sport does not, as a Buddhist would say, lead to enlightenment.

In competitions where the aim is to vanquish the opposition, Midgley points out, the noisiest are the likeliest to prevail; but where there is much noise, there is little light. She points to the fact that much of Plato's early dialogues were devoted to explaining why the warlike approach is antithetical to illumination of thought. For Midgley, effective thinking needs to be carried out as a co-operative enterprise, a joint effort, and anything less distracts from the enterprise.

Toward this end, she calls for a drastic change in pedagogical methodology that teaches cooperative rather than competitive thinking.

Our tendency toward planting our boundary flags should not surprise us, since we acquire early the habit of staking out and defending our territory. Most of us tend to grow up resistant to much of the thinking that extends beyond our own familiar experiences.

This myopia prevents us from developing the flexibility of thought that could help us to grow intellectually. Sharpening our own thought processes requires being open to self-assessment regarding our most firmly held positions and, as Midgley says, may call on us to make repeat visits to our past assumptions and say '"Let me look again."

However, in an environment where building a career can seem a survival of the fittest, honing one's skills to defeat an opposing camp may appear to mean the difference between living to fight another day and extinction. A story Midgley

Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2019), **28**, 389–390.

doi:10.1017/S0963180119000276

recounts in her essay can be used as a metaphor for making quick and decisive work of the opposition. One of her students had recently returned from Japan and described the Samurai practice of *tsujigiri* ("cross-roads cutting"). Warrior etiquette involved testing his new sword by "bisecting his enemy with a neat single downward slash on one shoulder, rather than striking crookedly in a way that might produce a mess" (members of his own Samurai tribe being safely excluded).

In zero sum games of "We win, you lose," in bioethics, it is intellectual progress that is the real loser. When different sides are deaf to the opposition's arguments, the players remain outsiders to each other, precluding the possibility of meaningful understanding.

What it shows is that the one-sided approach, the defense of what one side believes as the final and infallible answer, is a dead end. Only by viewing our arguments through a larger lens are we able to test our positions and make course corrections when necessary. Returning to Midgley's theme of cooperation rather than conflict, our best work is done not by perfecting our attack skills but by laying down our swords and engaging with others to improve our own arguments as well as theirs.

In a private moment with Mary Midgley at Girton College, Cambridge, she shared a favorite quote from F.D. Maurice, the 19th century English Anglican theologian, that should serve as a credo for all of us wrestling with the complexities of ethical questions: "I failed to look for the truth in the mind of him who was contending with me."

Note

1. *Philosophy Now*, Issue 116, October/November 2016

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