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WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY FOR?

Amber Sahara Donovan

In this article I explore Mary Midgley's meta-philosophy: her view of the purpose of philosophy and its corresponding methodology. After some biographical information and historical context, I consider Midgley's answer to the question 'why do we need philosophy?'

What Is philosophy For? is Mary Midgley's final book, published when she was 99! In it, she explores why animals like us, with large-scale cultures like ours, need philosophy. Whilst the purpose of philosophy may seem like something we should be clear on *before* we start philosophizing, professional philosophers frequently attribute different aims and methods to philosophy, resulting in contentious disagreements about its purpose. These discussions constitute their own sub-field in philosophy – meta-philosophy – which aims to describe and mediate these debates.

My aim in this article is to share Mary Midgley's view of the purpose of philosophy – namely, her meta-philosophy. I have chosen Midgley, not because these ideas are completely unique to her, but because she is unusually explicit on this topic. Unlike many philosophers, Midgley frequently draws the reader's attention to her meta-philosophical assumptions, thus practising a more self-aware philosophy. I hope that in discussing meta-philosophy explicitly, you will come away with a deeper understanding of the assumptions which shape philosophy, which, in turn, will empower you to read philosophy more critically, and practise it with greater self-awareness. Moreover, I hope that by the end of this article you will see why

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Midgley's meta-philosophy is the meta-philosophy we *need* right now.

Midgley the Activist

Midgley did not simply philosophize, but rather, she *lived* her philosophy. For Midgley, philosophy's value lies in its capacity to facilitate moral change – to change the world, by changing minds. Thus, she was not just a philosopher, but an activist. Doing philosophy helped her to think better, and this allowed her to act better. And Midgley wanted to share this as widely as possible, choosing to address her work to a non-specialist audience, and thus enacting the idea that philosophy is for everyone. Her philosophical work (including her meta-philosophy) was thus not abstract intellectual opinion, but, in many ways, a form of activism.

In the 1980s, many philosophy departments across the UK were closed. Midgley herself campaigned fiercely against this. One of her motivations was that no-one was doing the obvious:

> It struck me that nobody was saying that this ought not to happen. Nobody was suggesting that the subject was important in itself. (Midgley 2018: 9)

Midgley was scandalized by this and wrote letters to several eminent philosophers imploring them to 'Do something!'. The response was underwhelming, and she received two replies that made her 'particularly cross'.

The first letter, from Michael Dummett, argued that it was *wrong in principle* to campaign to keep these 'provincial' philosophy departments open. His reasons turned on his meta-philosophy. Dummett believed that the purpose of philosophy is to understand *the* structure of thought, and that the proper methodology for this is the analysis of language – a methodology as technical and challenging as theoretical physics. This is a pretty hard line on what counts as philosophy. And as a result of this view,

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Dummett felt that any philosophy not done in this highly technical way was useless, and potentially harmful to the discipline. To campaign against the closure of these 'provincial' philosophy departments, whose philosophers had not been 'properly trained', would, he thought, be *wrong in principle.* Just let that sink in.

Midgley, by contrast, would disagree that linguistic analysis is the only appropriate methodology – or indeed that there was any *one* appropriate methodology. Instead, she would encourage us to embrace a plurality of methods, thinking carefully about which is appropriate for our particular practical aims – for the moral change we hope to create. Midgley witnessed first hand the dangers of such a narrow view of philosophy when her contemporaries at Oxford (in the 1940s), who worshipped at the altar of linguistic analysis, were led to reject ethics as part of philosophy at all. This was something that Midgley (and her friends and contemporaries Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch and Philippa Foot) thought quite outrageous, especially in the context of the Second World War.

Sadly, it was because Midgley connected philosophy's value with its capacity to facilitate social change that Peter Strawson similarly refused to support her campaign. Strawson felt that to view philosophy's value in this way was degrading: philosophy should be practised and valued for its own sake, not with some instrumental agenda in mind. Midgley felt that this dramatically missed her practical point about *who* would get to practise philosophy and how this would shape the discipline. The Oxford philosophers could not be left to do all our philosophizing: how would they use it to facilitate moral change if they rejected ethics entirely?

As you can see, Midgley was at odds with some of her most esteemed contemporaries. In fact, in many ways, Midgley was – and still is – on the margins of academic philosophy. She didn't write her first book – *Beast and Man* – until she was in her fifties, which was unusual then and almost unthinkable now. This gave her plenty of time to

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gain experience of the world, including having children, before she started writing. In fact, she later remarks that she was glad of this, as it was only at this point that she actually knew what she thought.

In addition to her training at the school of life before publishing for a non-specialist audience, Midgley also abandoned her PhD after just a year. She later reflected that this meant she escaped being trained in the skills of a lawyer – all narrow focus, attention to detail and nitpicking argument – at the expense of an appreciation for the bigger picture. An appreciation for the wider context of life in which all narrower philosophical questions are situated – having a view of this bigger picture is required to practise philosophy that genuinely connects with the world. The kind of philosophy that can be a form of activism.

Midgley (2005) notes that the great philosophers of the past practised this kind of philosophy. They were not just lawyers but 'volcanic phenomena' (Midgley 2005) who found new problems, grappled with the issues of their age, and often 'growled explosively' about bad influences on thought – a description that, to my mind, very much fits Midgley herself.

Why We Need Philosophy

Okay, so now we have some context for all this, I want to explore Midgley's view of why we need philosophy. In one of her most well-known papers, Midgley explores this question by comparing philosophy to plumbing. She writes:

> I have made this comparison a number of times when I have wanted to stress that philosophising is not just grand and elegant and difficult, but is also needed. It is not optional. (Midgley 1992: 139)

This view, which 'treats philosophy, like food and shelter, as something that we must have because we are in real trouble without it', may come as a surprise. Many of us

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think of philosophy as a highly technical discipline, tucked away in ivory towers, far removed from our everyday lives. However, it is precisely this picture of philosophy (championed by Dummett and perhaps Strawson) as 'splendid because it is gratuitous – something grand and exalted, which people could quite easily live without', that Midgley challenges. Replacing it with a picture of philosophers as humble tradespeople, providing a vital service, Midgley writes:

> Plumbing and Philosophy are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures like ours have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong. In both cases, this can have serious consequences. (Midgley 1992: 139)

The 'complex system' philosophers are tasked with fixing is, loosely, our complex system(s) of concepts and/or ideas, and the relations between them – our system of tools of understanding (concepts, patterns of thought, imaginative visions, metaphors and myths). These systems are more deeply hidden; and to see them is to 'bend thought round so that it looks critically at itself' (thinking-ception!) (Midgley 2005: 139). This is no easy task, but it must be done. It must be done because, much like plumbing, it is woven into the fabric of our societies, of our lives, thus, when it goes wrong, so do our lives. Moreover, this task will never be complete, as, much like plumbing, this system requires constant maintenance.

However, as Midgley (1992: 139) notes, whilst 'we may indeed complain that life is going badly – that our actions and relationships are not turning out as we intend. . . . it can be very hard to see why this is happening, or what to *do* about it' – how are you meant to understand what's wrong when it is your very tools of understanding which are failing you? Indeed, often, until we begin to *think* differently, we cannot see how to *do* differently.

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A good example of this is the ongoing public discussion surrounding gender and sexual orientation. As a result of this cultural shift, there are more ways of understanding gender and sexual orientation than ever, and, as these spread across the public domain, we see more and more material expressions and explorations of gender and sexuality. What is notable is that we had to start thinking, speaking and *seeing* gender and sexuality differently, to light a path towards these new ways of being. That is to say, we had to begin to think differently *before* the material expression of these ideas could take serious, widespread, hold. Importantly, these discussions are only happening because there are people who have a stake in the outcome. There are people who *need* these new understandings. They need us to start thinking differently so that they are able to express themselves and flourish.

With that said, whilst all tools of understanding which take serious widespread hold – and hence become manifest in action, practices and even institutions – will be underpinned by some genuine human need(s), they will be variously successful at meeting the need(s) that underpin (s) them. Humans are fallible, after all, and we don't always know what is best for us, even when we think we do. As such, whilst all our tools of understanding must be in some sense 'needed' to take widespread hold, the complexity and contingency of any given context can distort our perception of what is needed, in a way which gets us further from, as opposed to closer to, human flourishing.

A good example of this would be any tools of understanding which facilitate 'othering'. Usually, the impulse to 'other' is borne of fear and hence of a genuine human need for safety and security – this is why the most effective method for tackling hate is familiarity with what is perceived as other. Obviously, such 'othering' prevents us from creating a society which genuinely meets the human need for safety and security. Despite this, in our current context of systemic 'othering', a context born of a colonial history (a history born of this same tendency to 'other'), it is depressingly common to 'other' in a misguided attempt to

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fulfil this need for safety and security (e.g. by scapegoating minority groups). To disrupt this pattern of behaviour, we obviously need more than just new tools of understanding, however. New tools of understanding, which help us, for example, to see all fellow humans as kin and not 'other', will certainly have a role to play.

This is why we need philosophy, because good philosophy, for Midgley, helps us identify tools of understanding which are not serving us, and replace them with those that are better placed to help us achieve human flourishing. In an age where so much of what we do seems to lead us closer to a future none of us wants, it is easy to understand Midgley's insistence that philosophy is not optional, but rather, like plumbing, it is *needed*.

Meta-Philosophical Assumptions and Methodology

This view of the role of philosophy is, for Midgley, reflected in the history of philosophy. She writes:

> The reason why some philosophers are eventually remembered is not that they have revealed new facts, but that they have suggested new ways of thinking which call for *different ways of living* – paths which were *really needed.* (Midgley 2018: 59; my emphasis)

Midgley isn't (here) arguing that good philosophy *should* light a path towards ways of living which are really needed, but rather impressing upon us the fact that this is *already* the relationship in which philosophy stands to society – though indeed this is a relationship that must be actively maintained. In her eyes, this fact reveals what society needs from philosophy, and hence what service we, as philosophers, ought to be providing: the illumination of needed ways of living through new ways of thinking.

However, this fact about who was remembered doesn't, on its own, entail anything about the purpose of philosophy.

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Strawson and Dummett might agree that the philosophers who were remembered suggested needed ways of living. However, they would deny that this is necessarily a mark of good philosophy and as such, that this tells us anything about the purpose of philosophy. Indeed they, and many others, would probably argue that philosophers *are* in the business of discovering new facts and that any paths illuminated are merely a byproduct of philosophy, as opposed to its central aim, as Midgley suggests. Recall that Strawson found the idea that philosophy's value is tied to its ability to create social change to be degrading. A likely reason for this is the concern that practising philosophy with the aim of social change will obstruct the attainment of truth and hence degrade philosophical knowledge outputs.

However, such an argument relies on certain assumptions about knowledge and truth (and language) in the context of philosophy, assumptions that Midgley would reject. So, to defend Midgley's meta-philosophical position, we would need a defence of her position on knowledge and truth in the context of philosophy. Whilst Midgley herself never makes such a defence, this view is not unique to her, so the resources for this do exist (e.g. in Anscombe or feminist epistemology), though I will not reproduce them here. Instead, I want to share two metaphors that Midgley uses to illuminate her understanding of knowledge and truth.

The first, which appears in Midgley (2001), is an aquarium with many windows. Each window, or set of windows, offers a different view of the aquarium but there is no way of seeing the entirety of the aquarium from any one window, or set of windows – it's simply not possible to see the entire aquarium from every angle at once. Our tools of understanding each offer us a different view of the aquarium – and which of these we can access will depend on where we are and how much power we have to move. However, which window(s) we need to look through, which window(s) is best, will depend on what we are looking *for* in particular, or what we want to *do*. For example, if we want to see crabs, we'll be better off lower down.

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The other metaphor, sometimes referred to as the 'many-maps' model, is most often used to counter the tendency to reduce all other disciplines to physics. Midgley reminds us that whilst there may just be one place, there are different ways of mapping this place depending on what we are mapping and why – for example, a political map vs a climate map. Despite this, we wouldn't say any one of those maps is reducible to any others, and which map we use will depend upon what we are trying to *do*. Importantly, we also wouldn't say that there was 'one true map': they are all true as they all show us different aspects of the place that they map.

These metaphors are designed to impress upon us that knowledge is both situated and practical. Knowledge arises in a context and its truth (or otherwise) cannot be properly apprehended outside this context. For example, if I note the location of a crab relative to a starfish from one side of the aquarium and claim that 'the crab is left of the starfish', this is true, but the opposite will be true from the other side. And knowledge is practical insofar as what I can do is constrained by what I know. For example, if I'm stuck at the top of the aquarium, I'm not going to be able to study crabs; in fact, I probably won't even know what they are. And if I only have a political map, I'm not going to have much success climbing a mountain.

When we act as though it is possible to find the one true way of understanding the world which transcends all contexts, this is akin to acting as though it were possible to see the whole aquarium at once, or to create the one true map to rule them all. When we carry on in this way, what we are really doing is burning the rest of the maps and blacking out the rest of the windows. Certainly, we may all then be looking at the same map and through the same windows, but how much do we miss when we do this? Do we want to be stuck only ever looking at crabs? This might be okay for those crustacean fanatics among us – perhaps they were the ones who blacked out the other windows – but it certainly isn't going to work for

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everyone in every context and so it will ultimately do more harm than good.

Instead, Midgley sees an aim of philosophy (insofar as it is concerned with doing the kind of thinking which can guide our lives in needed ways) as being to bring together genuine insights which appear to be in tension, in a way that would make these different ways of thinking available to guide our lives. Instead of pitting the person who says the starfish is on the left against the person who says the starfish is on the right, we must find a way to bring together these two genuine insights – for example, by helping them to see that they both have different points of view; points of view which may *seem* to be contradictory but may not be once we consider these claims *in context*.

Importantly, this doesn't mean that we can't correct the person who falsely believes that all the crabs are dead. Contextualizing this claim may help us understand it: for example, when we realize that they have been stuck looking through a middle window and have never seen the aquarium floor. However, we will still treat those who can see the sea floor as more reliable on the topic of crabs than those who have never seen them. The reason we can do this is because, first, we are all looking at the same aquarium and, second, because the point of having knowledge at all is to *do* something with it: knowledge is practical. This means that when we act on our knowledge, we're going to get some feedback from the world in which we are trying to act. If the crab-denier tried fishing for crabs, they would realize their mistake.

Similarly imagine someone who takes the right kind of map – a hiking map – to go hiking. However, it turns out to be a map of the wrong place (France rather than England, say). They're going to figure out pretty quickly that they have the wrong map: as they interact with the world it will reveal parts of itself. And what is revealed will not match the map, so they will realize that they are using the wrong map. Notably, this doesn't mean that the map is broken

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and we should therefore burn it. The mistake is in the person's use, and not the tool itself.

This is why the role of philosophy, for Midgley, is not to describe a god's-eye view of the aquarium or find the 'one-true-map', but something more pluralistic and practical. Philosophers must work out which maps or windows are needed in which contexts and why, suggest new maps or windows when the context demands, work out how the different maps or windows are related to each other, and which maps or windows actually should just be burned or blacked out, and why. And all of this with a wider practical picture in mind.

This is why Midgley, unlike many philosophers, frequently draws on relevant features of the historical context surrounding particular concepts, patterns of thought, etc. to tell a story about how and why they came to be, how they came to be used in new and different contexts and whether or not they are fit for purpose in these contexts. For example, she traces the privileging of 'reductionism' – the methodological ideal that everything can be understood, in principle, by breaking it down into smaller parts – back to Enlightenment Europe. She notes that:

> It is surely no accident that the reductive method had its first triumphs in the seventeenth century, at the time when wars of religion filled Europe with terrifying confusion. The monolithic pattern of knowledge seemed able then to impose order on intellectual chaos. (Midgley 2003: 30)

In drawing our attention to the *motivation* or *intention* behind reductionism, Midgley is situating these ideas in context; reminding us that people don't have ideas in a vacuum, and that those which persist do so because of their perceived ability to fulfil a *human* need *in a particular context.*

Here, we have the human need for safety and security, and then a particular historical context (seventeenth-

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century Europe) which brings particular challenges to our ability to fulfil this need. In this case, the fact that different religions had different and often conflicting stories to tell about the world that we live in resulted in 'terrifying confusion'. And reductionism, with its promise of a universally agreed upon edifice of knowledge, offered a way of imposing 'order on intellectual chaos'. Delivering us from 'terrifying confusion' to the safety and security of intellectual order – a promise that many humans find perpetually seductive.

When we view our tools of understanding in this way, we open up avenues for analysis which are obscured when we consider them ahistorically, devoid of their context (as is often done in philosophy). We can evaluate which paths of action were illuminated by these ideas. For example: much of the progress of the natural sciences is owed to the prevailing ideal of reductionism. However, we can also see where this pattern of thinking may have been applied in areas where it is wreaking havoc. For example, in mental health: by believing that everything can be explained by reference to its smallest parts, we were led to believe that mental health conditions could be reduced to neurochemistry or genetics and treated at that level alone. Whilst this may be a useful avenue to explore, exploring mental health almost exclusively at this level has had disastrous consequences for many people.

This is one example of how a difference in meta-philosophy can open the doors for a different methodology – in this case genealogical arguments which consider the history of the idea itself, or its genealogy. Though Midgley often employs this style of argument, she is not in the business of dismissing ideas *because* they are conditioned by their context – as someone looking for the 'one true map' may do. Instead, she is rejecting the possibility that ideas can be considered ahistorically at all or that there can be 'one true map'. The person who feels that the legitimacy of an idea is threatened by its historical contingency has different meta-philosophical assumptions from those of Mary Midgley.

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For Midgley, the methodology of genealogical argument allows us to consider ideas in their context. This gets us closer to a self-aware philosophy which understands, and is explicit about, its tools and methods (the windows and maps) and the bigger practical picture in which it is situated. That is to say, it understands why *this* method or tool is appropriate for our particular aims in our particular context – with recourse to some practical aim, something you are trying to *do*. Such a philosophy is necessarily pluralistic as this allows for greater sensitivity and responsiveness to our particular context, problem and audience, but it is not relativistic (there's still just one aquarium).

For Midgley, that ideas arise in a context, and no two contexts are the same, is the reason that philosophy's job will never be complete, and is why there can be no grand unifying theory of everything – there can be no final word on *the* structure of thought. This makes things much messier, for sure; however, Midgley's point is that life *is* messy, it *is* complex, it *is* in constant flux, so why would we expect our ideas to be any different? Now, we can either refuse to acknowledge the messiness of the world and go on as though such a grand unifying theory, or a view from nowhere, were indeed possible, or we can wake up, get real, and start working with the mess. And once we accept the mess, and stop trying to use philosophy to have the final word on the matter, we are able to see that philosophy's task is not to disabuse us of the mystery of the world, but rather to help us to do the kind of thinking that will help us flourish within it, mystery, mess and all. That is to say, philosophy becomes centrally concerned with *changing minds* to change the world – namely, a kind of activism.

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