

Essays in Philosophy

Volume 3

Issue 2 *Pragmatism and Neopragmatism*

Article 16

6-2002

Review of “Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing”

Susan Armstrong
Humboldt State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/eip>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Armstrong, Susan (2002) "Review of “Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 16.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 3 No. 2

Book Review

Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing. Mary Midgley (London: Routledge, x + 182 pp. \$16.25. ISBN 0-415-13378-5 (ppb))

Now in her early eighties, Britain's Mary Midgley "may be the most frightening philosopher in the country: the one before whom it is least pleasant to appear a fool," according Andrew Brown in a 2001 review (books.guardian.co.uk). She is a rarity in that she did not publish her first book until 1978, when she was 56 and her children were raised. Midgley is also one of the relatively few philosophers whom it is a pleasure to read, this book being no exception. Although most of the papers have appeared elsewhere, the present collection makes them easily accessible. The theme is double-sided: first, "the huge difficulties which we experience in trying to theorize about the world" (ix) and second the specific issues of the position of women and of animals, the state of the environment, the plurality of cultures, and the meaning of artificial intelligence.

The comparison of philosophy to plumbing in "Philosophical Plumbing" is more apt the more one thinks about it. Both activities arise because elaborate cultures such as ours have, "beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong" (1). When something does go wrong with either plumbing or philosophy, serious consequences can ensue for those who depend on them in essential ways. Since neither was "ever consciously planned as a whole," repair is difficult. But, Midgley notes, the comparison soon runs into major differences. The public does not accept philosophers as trained and useful specialists, since the public often does not grant the existence of the underlying system of concepts. When things go wrong it is much easier to look outside ourselves rather than examine the structure of our thought. Nevertheless it must be done when things go badly, as at present.

Can we go to Home Depot and repair the problem ourselves? No, says Midgley, because generally we aren't aware of any alternatives to our ideas. She cites as examples the idea of the Social Contract, an idea which has had an illustrious and noble history, but which is nevertheless partial and provisional. For one thing, it has made individuals look much more separate than they actually are.

In "Practical Utopianism" Midgley calls our attention to the power of ideas. Ideas, like water, are life-giving and wild. "All ideas that are of the slightest interest to anybody can have unexpected emotional and practical consequences. . . ." (12) For example, without utopian ideas we cannot envisage a general change as being really possible. But we need many different types of them: "the world really is too complex to be explained by any single formula" (25).

Who is speaking inside the philosopher? In "Homunculus Trouble" Midgley argues that there is a

need, especially in moral philosophy, for philosophers to transcend the "desolating pointlessness" of meta-ethics and instead to comprehend human life. There is no distinction between "applied" and "pure" philosophy which makes sense, anymore than a distinction between pure and applied history would make sense. Rather, Midgley adopts Collingwood's proposal that philosophy starts with the task of listening to clashes and conflicts and continues through the efforts needed to articulate them better. She stresses that anyone who is successful in articulating these confusions is also always suggesting a way to cure them.

Professional philosophers who sniff at "applied philosophy" as not real philosophy are making the mistake of thinking that it is possible to think about general principles without examining the range of cases where trouble is building up. For example, why do philosophers who discuss personal identity avoid cases of cooperating (e.g., playing in an orchestra) and of inner conflict and dialogue, using instead imaginary examples from science fiction?

In "Myths of Intellectual Isolation" and "The Use and Uselessness of Learning," Midgley describes a prevalent way of thinking about education in terms of information as a "rare and precious metal," ingots of which are fetched from afar and then fitted into the slots of students. Her preferred model is of information as a forest through which we are already struggling. Rather than conceiving of reasoning along the lines of military, dueling and forensic models, we should think instead of reasoning as exploring an unknown piece of country, best done cooperatively. Thought can be considered to be a country to be lived in and cultivated, similar to what Aristotle meant by "saving the phenomena." (47)

In "Sex and Personal Identity," Midgley states that failure to think about gender "muddles our whole notion of a human being." (73) Our moral and political tradition lacks slots for differences in kind; rather, we see difference as hierarchy. The "wider trouble is that our whole intellectual and social tradition centers at present on the idea of an individual, and that individual is conceived as male." (74) This idea of the individual as free, independent, enquiring, and choosing, contains a "deep strain of falsity," not just because it was not applicable to women, but also because it was not applicable to men as a whole. She notes that only Plato and John Stuart Mill, out of all the great European philosophers, approach the question of gender as they would any other topic: calmly and questioningly. The task, for Midgley, is for feminists to contribute to the re-thinking of the meaning of individuality from scratch.

In "Freedom, Feminism and War," Midgley details the "internal conflict" in feminism between the assertion of women's individual rights as equal to those of men in the competitive game of life and a deeper feminist criticism of the the game itself. She urges us to move beyond blaming men to a real resolution of the issues. Feminism must not appear as an isolated cause: "it is essential that the argument should not proceed primarily in terms of men v. women, but more directly about the ideals themselves." (88) Cooperative feminism can add force and clarity to the criticisms of current Western moral ideals such as independence, which is "an extremely strange feature of Western civilization." (93) "The natural state of human life. . .is a balanced mutual dependence adjusted to people's needs." (94) The roles of men and women need to be changed together.

In "The End of Anthropocentrism?" Midgley engages the human claim to superiority. She suggests that this idea is outdated, for several reasons. First, we have come to realize that the universe is a vast formless stage in time and space, dwarfing any human actors. The idea of a central cosmic

purpose is foreign to modern science. She dismisses the "Strong Anthropic Principle" (that the universe must have those properties which allow life to develop within it at some stage in its history") as "simply a piece of wild metaphysics." (102-3). Midgley calls us back to our own planet and what it is for life to have a meaning in this place. It is right for people to have a particular regard for their own kind and their own species: there is no conflict between . enlightened self-interest and concern for other species. This "hospitable, inclusive" kind of humanism is not "anthropolatry", which always sets immediate human interests above those of other life-forms. We need less, not more, ego in our cosmos.

In "Is A Dolphin a Person?" Midgley responds to a 1977 trial of two people who freed two bottle-nosed dolphins used for experimental purposes at the University of Hawaii. The judge found it obvious that the word "person" did not include dolphins. In contrast, Midgley affirms that, on the contrary, there are well-established precedents for calling non-human beings "persons." She notes the use of "person" for the Persons of the Trinity, and for corporations. She demonstrates that the law can create persons. (This reviewer is reminded of Christopher Stone's famous argument in *Should Trees Have Standing? -- Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects*. Los Altos: William Kaufmann, 1974.)

Why should a certain kind of intelligence and language use determine the limits of our moral concern? And what bearing does language ability of chimps, gorillas and dolphins have on moral concern? And why is there such a "furious opposition" from people who feel threatened by animals who use a simple form of language? The answer to the latter question is that articulate apes and cetaceans are much harder to exclude from moral consideration.

For Midgley it is emotional fellowship which is most important. Those who emphasize the intelligence of computers do not at present want to call them persons. So it does not seem to be speech which really matters. What does matter is the "glaring fact" that apes and cetaceans are highly sensitive social beings. Consequently, the law needs to be changed, just as it needed to be during the days of slavery.

In "Sustainability and Moral Pluralism" Midgley confronts the loss of faith in progress which the current environmental difficulties have caused. Our situation requires that we rethink our various ideals: postmodernism is right (at least) about that. Such rethinking is most profitable in the middle ground between ideals and reality. Habit is the obstacle here: "habit. . .has extraordinary force, a force greatly exceeding the wish for self-preservation." (121) Enlightenment thought, still being used, ignores habit and instead puts great trust in enlightened self-interest. But is the "species-egoist" approach adequate to the task? Midgley thinks not.

Human rationality is capable of forming comprehensive world-pictures which have and can promote reform. But since the Renaissance the commonly accepted world-picture has narrowed only to the human, or even to economics. In contrast, Midgley quotes a survey conducted by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, which indicated that people see themselves living within nature, an overarching whole which is the source of all value and which deserves respect. Naess suggested that those basic value-judgments should be articulated and admitted into policy analysis.

Midgley argues that "value" is probably too ordinary and limited a word for use in environmental ethics. She suggests "importance" instead (a term featured in the writings of Alfred North

Whitehead). Likewise, the notion that we must find one right set of principles is a "mere distraction." We need many partial answers. For example, the language of rights is powerful for Americans, but not Europeans. "Stewardship" seems to assume a God, but atheists could affirm that we are stewards for our posterity. We have much to learn from other cultures. The universality to seek is a "wide appeal to thoughtful people", coherent with their other ideals and strong enough to lead to action.

In "Visions: Secular, Sacred and Scientific" Midgley tackles the relationship between science and religion, a topic she also explores in *Evolution as a Religion* (1985), *Science and Salvation* (1992) and *Science and Poetry* (2001). For more than a century our culture has swallowed the positivistic pattern which treats religion and science as competitors, with the religious tribe being childish (because characterized in accord with fundamentalist Christianity) and the other mature.

The trouble with science is that its prestige obscures other truths which are "every bit as well established and important" -- for example the truth that people need imaginative vision as well as bread in order to live (136). Science-worship overlooks the fact that all our thought arises out of imagination. Science has always been much more than the collection of facts. But lately science has not provided a healthy imaginative vision; rather it has produced variations on the machine-myth, variations which contain visionary promises which remind Midgley of hymn-books. Midgley identifies the religious element in such visions as Evolution, which is "now welding machines and human minds together in an unspeakable mystic union, a state of 'hyperintelligence'" (146).

What hunger is being satisfied here? Drawing on C.S. Lewis, Midgley cites two powerful components: an awareness of the numinous, the magical, awe-inspiring, superhuman, and a sense of the moral. While some have united these components in a crude "evolutionary ethics", survival of the fittest, Midgley urges instead that we join our wonder at nature with our growing concern about the state of the planet. Lovelock's notion of Gaia is helpful here: the claim that life on earth is an interdependent and hence vulnerable system. Such a view can coexist with theism but does not require it.

In "Artificial Intelligence and Creativity" Midgley notes that it is not enough for machines to do certain tasks better than human beings: they must also make better choices. We human beings are not short of knowledge or problem-solving capacity. What we need is the ability to pick out the right problems to solve. Computers can be immensely useful in practical contexts where the aim is well specified. But in areas where aims themselves are questionable, the misuse of machines seems likely. Consciousness involves acting and suffering and enjoying, and hence, machines are not likely to solve our problems for us.

Midgley's assertions and arguments as collected in these essays are not new: they can be found in the writings of other contemporary philosophers. But she excels in expressing points concisely and directly. To cite but one example, she dismisses the over-emphasis by linguistic philosophers on a few key terms by saying: "No doubt clarity is always a gain, but you can't till fields with a nail-file." (13) This reviewer is generally in Midgley's camp and so can add only an appreciation of her fine writing and clear attention to what matters. As a quibble, some of these essays could have been pruned to good effect. But even unpruned, they stand as examples of what philosophy is at its best: the persistent attempt to make sense of things in a way which invites others to join in.

Susan Armstrong
Humboldt State University

Copyright © 2002, Humboldt State University
