

WN Columns

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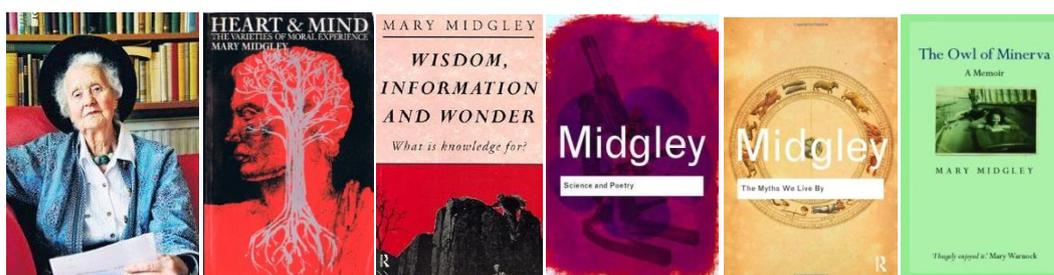
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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon

Food and nutrition, health and well-being

What they believe: 1. Mary Midgley Values



The moral philosopher Mary Midgley and five of her books, which consider big issues of the human condition and our place in the world and biosphere

The thing about food, and therefore nutrition, is that while like money it is vital in itself, its main value is what it represents. In narrow aspects, food and money are types of fuel, mere daily needs. In broad aspects, both touch on most aspects of life on Earth. To see nutrition as a whole we need to think big. So here now I begin with the moral philosopher Mary Midgley. First, credentials. Here she is above, with five of her many books. She is 93 at the time of writing. She is one of the generation of Oxford philosophers including Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Mary Warnock and Iris Murdoch, who formed the most formidable school of thought in the English language concerned with how to live well in the world, and with issues of real life, such as purpose and meaning, the relationship between arts and science, phenomena like consciousness and conscience, and always, value. She is now commonly seen as the most distinguished British living philosopher. As French *pensants* do, she tackles big issues, and in the Victorian scholarly tradition she speaks her mind.

Cannon G. What they believe: 1. Mary Midgley: Values. Also, What I believe.

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Speaking her mind

'Her great gift' says the Irish novelist John Banville 'is clarity, both of thought and especially, of expression... To follow her reasoning... is like watching a ballet dancer walking in the street: there is a liveness, a gracefulness, an ease of articulation'. True, except this omits her toughness. Thus, she lays into *The Selfish Gene*. She sees Richard Dawkins not as an objective scientist but as an obsessive evangelist (but of bad news). She says: 'The ideology Dawkins is selling is the worship of competition. It is projecting a Thatcherite take on economics on to evolution. It's not an impartial scientific view; it's a political drama', and 'Its imagery of selfishness, spite and grudging, ... cheats, war games and the rest... reflects the naïve social atomism of the 1970s and 1980s'. Our times now are too troublesome to justify being nice about powerful people who hawk nasty and dangerously wrong notions.

One of her main themes is the nature, domain and limits of science, including the biological sciences. A corresponding theme is the place of quality – which by its nature cannot be measured – in all creation, and in everyday judgements and choices. Another is the mind-sets we tend not to notice, that control our thoughts and actions in our personal and professional lives. Box 1 lists 16 of her books. After almost 30 years as a university teacher, she first became a full author in her late 50s. She was then sufficiently sure of her main themes: hence the title of her autobiography *The Owl of Minerva*, after the saying of GWF Hegel 'The owl of Minerva only takes flight as the dusk begins to fall'. (Minerva being the goddess of wisdom).

Box 1

Books by Mary Midgley

Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature, 1978; *Animals and Why They Matter*, 1983; *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*, 1983; *Wickedness: A Philosophical Essay*, 1984; *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears*, 1985; *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?*, 1989; *Wisdom, Information and Wonder: What is Knowledge For?*, 1991; *Science and Salvation: A Modern Myth and its Meaning*, 1992; *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality*, 1994; *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing*, 1996; *Science And Poetry*, 2001; *Gaia, the Next Big Idea*, 2001; *Myths We Live By*, 2002; *The Owl of Minerva*, 2005; *Earthy Realism: The Meaning of Gaia*, 2007; *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene*, 2010.

The New Nutrition **Spiral philosophy**



The spirals like those here that symbolise The New Nutrition express the theory of knowledge that best corresponds to the real inner and outer worlds

The need for an ethical framework becomes obvious when we perceive the scope of nutrition. The spiral images above, from Beijing, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Durban and Valparaiso, stand for nutrition as a multi-dimensional discipline, social, economic and environmental, as well as biological and behavioural. Begun in 2005 as the *New Nutrition Science*, this conceptual framework is now commonly accepted or assumed, as reflected in UN and other authoritative reports and other documents.

In *The Giessen Declaration* (5), introducing the *New Nutrition Science* (6) the first principle proposed is: ‘All sciences and all organised human activities are and should be guided by principles...The overall principles that should guide nutrition science are ethical in nature’. Also: ‘The over-riding responsibility of nutrition science is to work to handing on to future generations an improved human, living and physical environment: healthy people, healthy populations, and a healthy planet’ (7). Principles by their nature are not absolute, but need to be shaped by and to shape circumstances as they actually are and foreseeably will be. The implication is that we are in most need of an ethical compass at times of crisis. Like right now.

Darwin, and evolution, progress

Old guides may fail us now. Take evolution theory, a foundation of the biological sciences. Mary Midgley points out (2), as does Lynn Margulis (8), that Darwinism as now understood is not what Charles Darwin actually wrote and believed. Darwinists see evolution as a line of ascent, a ladder or an escalator, a tendency ever onwards and upwards. Darwin’s image of natural selection was that of a bush, which allows for evolution (not a word he used) also to be sideways or downwards.

Mary Midgley proposes, as indicated in her own words in box 2, below, that those of us who have been brought up and educated in the Western convention are in thrall to the notion of inevitable progress. This is a dangerous notion, most of all in periods of trouble, like now. Thus, we are all surely now well aware that life on earth is under threat, as population soars, climate changes, living and natural resources dwindle, the linked food, fuel and finance crises cause chaos and mayhem, and with

all this, the authority of governments dwindles and drains away, as we know, and politicians gain reputations as futile or venal, as we know.

She believes that our apparent state of collective shock or even paralysis, faced with our fearful future, is actually disbelief: we still think that ‘things are getting better’, imagining that evolution teaches us so. This theory was invented and developed not by Darwin himself, but by Herbert Spencer and other rampant ‘neo-Darwinists’ committed to the notion of ‘red in tooth and claw’ competition, such that the ‘fittest’ – savage ruthless individuals (and corporations) – would triumph – rightfully – while inferior people (and races) would be ‘weeded out’ – rightly. There is a straight line from here to ‘Gordon Gekko’ in the movie *Wall Street* declaring ‘Greed is good’.

Thus the spiral *New Nutrition* icon. This signifies that things may get better and more organised – synergy – or may get worse and disintegrate – entropy. The idea that the living world – and the human race – always ‘evolves’ to get better, is a false myth. We continually return to whence we came. In good times this is shown by cyclical progress ever wider and wiser. In bad times the experience is that of a vortex, circling inwards, going down the drain – one of depression and despair.

After Box 2 I take a break from this brainy stuff, with two more ‘What I believe’ items. Then I return to Mary Midgley and her meaning for us now.

Box 2

Mary Midgley on evolution

This is an extract of the interview with Mary Midgley by Sheila Heti_1-3).

There are two ways in which the idea of evolution has been misused. One is the optimistic way which says it’s all getting better and better – that evolution is a sort of escalator which can take us anywhere. ...If we believe this, it produces a belief in progress, which means that whatever we do is better than whatever there was before, and we only want more of it. But the idea that growth – for instance, economic growth – is natural and required, is a mythical idea. It can’t be right. Things do not grow indefinitely; they grow until they’re big enough. Imagery is terribly important, you see.

Neo-Darwinism is a creation myth. It’s one of the stories which different cultures have, to explain why things are as they are by saying how they were before. The other main misunderstanding is that which says that the universe is run by hostile competition between individuals. This is also not Darwin. Herbert Spencer picked it up from the laissez-faire economics of the day which said that all you need for progress is savage competition. The idea was that if you had enough savage competition, eventually things would come right.

But this is a fantasy about how life was made, because organisms cooperate constantly. The little bits in our cells were originally separate organisms which settled down to work together. If you don’t have an enormous amount of cooperation of that kind, you can’t have organisms at all. And the sort of “competition” by which they get ahead very often has nothing to do with fighting anything else, but finding a new place. You find a new food source, or you start photosynthesis, or something of that sort.

Box 3

Mary Midgley on science

This is an extract from Kenan Malik's review of Science and Poetry (3,4).

Whereas the pre-scientific world viewed the universe as full of purpose and desire, the scientific revolution 'disenchanted' nature, transforming it into an inert, mindless entity. Humans, however, are not disenchanted creatures, possessing as we do both purpose and agency. We are, as Midgley puts it, both 'earthly organisms, animals like others operating within a physical pattern' and 'agents, active beings who not only can but must choose what to do.'

The relationship between humans as physically determined beings, and humans as moral agents, is one of the most difficult problems for scientists and philosophers. But denying one or other aspect of our humanness is not a way of solving the problem. That, however, is just what many scientists in effect do. 'Traditional materialism', Midgley observes, 'asks us to believe in a world of objects without subjects, and – since we ourselves are subjects, being asked to do the believing – that proposal makes no sense.'

In pursuing such a view of humanness, scientists and philosophers distort human life in two ways. First they reduce mind to matter. Such a monist view, Midgley argues, is as wrong as the dualist view of mind and body as separate. She says: 'The words mind and body do not name two separate kinds of stuff, nor two forms of a single stuff. The word "mind" is there to indicate something quite different – namely ourselves as subjects, beings who mind about things.'

The second way in which scientists and philosophers distort human life is by treating human beings as social atoms. It is a view that sees humans 'at the deepest level... not as social animals but as essentially solitary entities.' [This] is not a scientific viewpoint, but a philosophical and political assumption arising from an individualistic view of human life. And it is an unconvincing assumption, for what characterises human life is not just that we are individual agents, but that we are social beings.

Why do so many scientists and philosophers distort human life in this fashion? Because they have come to believe, in the words of Richard Dawkins, that 'science is the only way we know to understand the real world.' It's a view that confuses the physical world with the 'real' world. Toothache, Midgley points out, 'is as real as teeth' and 'debt is as real as the house that was bought with it.' The real world contains 'electrons and elections, apples and colours, toothaches and money and dreams.' Different conceptual entities require different explanations. Science is insufficient to explain the human world.

Mary Midgley. Science

Where the bee sucks, there heal we



Própolis used by bees as glue in hives; what it looks like in its dried raw state; how it is now usually packaged for sale in ‘health food’ shops as a throat spray

Here is my second riff developed from Mary Midgley’s thinking, this time on why science may not work well even in its own domain (1-4). It’s one of those stories which may make you at first think ‘mildly interesting, but what does this have to do with nutrition?’ Patience, please! All good riffs circle back to a point!

It’s also about what is maybe my last chance to make money, which I may already have missed. Própolis. Be gentle with me, for you are reading a column by a man who long ago turned down the offer of a share in the Rolling Stones made by their then manager Georgio Gomelsky; who with three phone calls could have had a point in the world rights in *Johnny Cash at San Quentin*; and who for a week had the inside track on buying the controlling interest in Filofax, then based in a back street in Finsbury with just one retail outlet. Yes, dear reader, I could have been a multi-millionaire, instead of what I am, a columnist for the journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association.

Here is the story. Some years ago, after coming to live in Brazil, I might have gone into business to market própolis, pictured above, of which Brazil is with the US and China one of the three leading producers. True, it’s an established trade, with something like 200-300 tonnes being exported, notably to Japan. But the production and the price of própolis on the internet and in ‘health food’ shops throughout the world have rocketed in the last few years, as I knew they would. Some people say that when banks go bust, get into property. My good advice was to get into própolis. Plus I think I know how to promote it. But I did not. Bah! Fool that I was!

What it is

So what is própolis? When I have carried some out of Brazil and recommended its healing powers to chums in the UK, they behave in much the same way. They hold the little bottle (see above, right) as if it a bomb, can’t read the label (in Portuguese), and say ‘thank you very much, I will try it’ in that ‘once he’s gone I will bin it’ tone.

People brought up in 'developed market economies' are trained to buy and use medicine after prescription by physicians or as sold by licensed pharmacists. True, as mentioned, you can get própolis in many 'health food' shops, but most (not all) of my friends and colleagues in the UK are corralled by allopathy, and would not be seen in a 'funny food' shop. Besides, there are rolling media stories some headed 'Bad Science' about the terrible horrible deadly toxic qualities of 'natural medicine'. Hence the handling of the little bottles I proffer as if they contain cyanide.

Própolis is a product made by bees. Yes, like honey, or let's say more like beeswax, because it is usually seen as a by-product of apiculture. In the glossary of *The Origin of Species* Charles Darwin describes própolis as 'a resinous material gathered by the Hive-Bees from the opening buds of various trees' (see above, centre). Bees use it as a glue to seal their hives (above, left). Its practical purpose becomes more apparent with wild bees, who construct the entire structure of their nests. To quote a report published by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.. "These resins are used by worker bees to line the inside of nest cavities and all brood combs, repair combs, seal small cracks in the hive, reduce the size of hive entrances, seal off inside the hive any dead animals or insects which are too large to be carried out, and to mix small quantities of própolis with wax to seal brood cells'.

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