**Midgley, myopia, and metaphilosophy**

*Wartime Quartet, Durham, 9/6/23*

1. **Preliminaries**.

Abiding theme of Midgley’s work is opposition to kinds of **myopic** **thinking** – ‘to resist crude, oversimplified doctrines that continually narrow our options’ (OM 120):

* **motivational** (i) selection of ‘targets’ and (ii) patterns of appreciation / praise
* **methodological** characteristic strategies and ‘ways of thinking’
* **aspirational** appreciation of ‘many-sidedness’ and ‘unity’ of human life

Anti-myopia central to Midgley’s conception of philosophy as ‘the art of connecting things’ (WWN 227) – expansive and integrative – ‘mapping the complex world’ (WPF 44ff).

1. **Myopia.**

**Myopia**: an artificially limited, confined perception and understanding of a given topic or even of the whole world (cf. everyday senses – ‘blinkered’, ‘narrowminded).

Dimensions:

* **narrowness** lack of salient kinds of *breadth*
* **shallowness** lack of salient kinds of *depth*

Myopia limits (i) the *range* and *kinds* of epistemic possibilities a person can experience and (ii) their ways of responding to those possibilities (eg aggressively adversarial philosophers).

Comments on myopia:

1. comes in different *kinds* and *degrees*
2. can be a feature of *individuals*, *collectives*, *institutions*

Caveats: narrowness and shallowness are not *always* bad – depends on *motivations* and *effects* and they can in specific cases be *useful* – ‘effective moral reformers almost necessarily are one-sided’ (SS 135).

Qualifications:

1. resisting myopia requires *work* – and certain *kinds* of work
2. can be encouraged by certain theoretical doctrines – eg scientism as myopia (Kidd)
3. some kinds of myopia are encouraged by entrenched features of our world (Midgley on invidious ‘myths we live by’ – eg ideologies of hyper-individualism)
4. being myopic has many attractions and cognitive and social functions

Midgley’s constant references to ‘the lure of Reduction’ – our inability to accept ‘the world simply is not simple’ (M xiii, 39) – a double-headed dogmatism about ‘intellectual schemes’ (ER 175ff). Philosophy – done well – should help us resist these ‘lures’ (cf. Murdoch).

Anti-myopia is also a Quartet theme – see Lipscombe and MacCumhaill and Wiseman

1. **Myopia and animals.**

Myopia as a theme is more tractable with specific cases: **animal ethics**. Midgley’s aspiration to ‘remove the barriers … erected against concern for animals’ (A 144).

Cooper distinguishes two interconnected themes:

* *epistemological* rejection of behaviourism, ‘ritual scepticism’
* *ethical* rejection of mainstream approaches in animal ethics (util, status)

1. **Behaviourism/scepticism.**

Core idea: ‘the subjective feelings [and mental life] of animals are … quite hidden from us, cannot concern us, and may not even exist’ (A 115).

Several kinds of mutually-reinforcing myopia – including:

* *empirically narrow* – animals in labs, ‘wells of despair’, all highly circumscribed environments that bear little or no resemblance to actual environments (A 115).
* *hermeneutically narrow* – understanding animals as ‘predictive success’, excluding deeper senses of what it means to *understand* the worlds of animals**.**

Such myopia sustained by a ‘ritual scepticism’ that is ‘artificial, hollow’ (SW 157), occluding a wider range of experiences of and engagements with animals, in a wider range of contexts or environments, and forsakes deeper kinds of understanding (cf. James 38-64)

Diagnosing the myopia: thin conceptions of animals as ‘automata’, scientistic fixation on certain kinds of explanation, derogation of wider range of sources (cf. Hearne’s *Adam’s Task*).

1. **Moral status theories.**

Core idea: mistreatment of animals reflects failures to recognise the moral status or rights of animals – involving, eg, failures to recognise morally salient features of animals (eg sentience).

Several kinds of mutually-reinforcing myopia – including:

* *morally narrow* – concepts such as inequality and discrimination now ‘monopolise attention’ and occlude (i) virtues – ‘mercy and compassion’ and (ii) vices – ‘greed, meanness, envy, cowardice, sloth’ (A 50).
* *explanatorily narrow* – mistreatment of animals explained in terms of cognitive and rational failures (WF 21)
* *anthropologically shallow* – ‘sweeping generalisations’ about relations to animals, obscuring complex realities of ‘multi-species communities’ (SW 161 – McElwain).

Diagnosing the myopia: unthinking transposition of concepts of liberal morality, zealous emphasis on rationality, squeamishness about subjectivity and emotion. More interesting, too, (a) self-serving concealment of range and role of vices in our treatment of animals (Cooper on misanthropy) and (b) encouragement of optimistic ‘expanding moral circle’ stories (A 110).

1. **Breadth and depth.**

Midgley was a skilled diagnostician and critic of varieties of myopic thinking – about animals, science, evolution, the self, our relation to the natural environment – and the psychological and cultural and historical dimensions of all this (cf. Murdoch on ‘Freud and Marx’).

Positive epistemic values opposed to myopia are **depth** and **breadth** – each visible and admirable in several aspects of Midgley’s character and practice:

1. appreciation of ‘myths’ and ‘imaginative visions’
2. cooperative engagements with wider disciplines and communities (ethology, Gaians)
3. congenial conception of good philosophising as a social activity
4. an historical and anthropological sensibility
5. a critical perspective on the current condition of philosophy as a discipline

Certain kinds of depth and broadmindedness are not always facilitated and rewarded by our disciplinary structures, and academic philosophy is not immune to ‘tribal narrowness’ (SP 118) and ‘arbitrary narrowmindedness’ (ER 115).

We should continue Midgley’s efforts to ‘shift aside the various barriers that surround the small garden that is allowed to count as Philosophy’ (WWN 225):

‘What great philosophers do for us is not to hand out such an all-purpose system. It is to light up and clarify some special aspect of life, to supply conceptual tools which will do a certain necessary kind of work. Wide though that area of work may be, it is never the whole, and all ideas lose their proper power when they are used out of their appropriate context. That is why one great philosopher does not necessarily displace another, why there is room for all of them and a great many more whom we do not have yet’ (M 223)

Ian James Kidd

University of Nottingham

[www.ianjameskidd.weebly.com](http://www.ianjameskidd.weebly.com)

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**Works by Midgley:**

A *Animals and Why They Matter*

ER *Evolution as a Religion*

M *The Myths We Live By*

OM *The Owl of Minerva*

SP *Science and Poetry*

SS *Science and the Self*

SW ‘Should We Let Them Go?’ in Francine Dolins (ed.), *Attitudes to Animals*

WF ‘Why Farm Animals Matter’ in Marion Stamp Dawkins and Roland Bonney

(eds.), *The Future of Animal Farming*

WPF *What is Philosophy For?*

WWN ‘Which Way Next?’ in Ian James Kidd and Elizabeth McKinnell (eds.) *Science and the Self*

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