



## MARY MIDGLEY

[MORAL PHILOSOPHER]

“THE SHAPE OF OUR IMAGINATION DETERMINES  
THE KIND OF SCIENTIFIC THEORIES WE CAN HOLD.”

Misconceptions:

*Darwinism as savage competition*

*Consciousness as epiphenomenon*

*Humans as machines*

**M**ary Midgley lives in a small cottagelike house several hours outside of London in Newcastle upon Tyne, a university town where she was previously a senior lecturer in philosophy (she's now retired), and where she wrote her influential books of moral philosophy. She published her first book, *Beast and Man*, in 1978, when she was fifty-six. This was followed by eleven others, including *Wickedness* (1984), *Evolution as a Religion* (1985), *Science and Poetry* (2001), and a memoir, *The Owl of Minerva* (2005). Recently, Routledge has been re-releasing her major works and has compiled a companion volume, edited by one of her sons: *The Essential Mary Midgley*. *The Financial Times* praised her work as “commonsense philosophy of the highest order,” and she was characterized in the *Guardian* as “the most frightening philosopher in the country... the foremost

scourge of scientific pretension.”

In recent years, she has found herself engaged in fierce public battles with Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, over what she deems to be their ideological approach to the story of evolution. When I visited, she was working on a pamphlet for teachers in British schools, to help explain the evolution v. creationism debate.

Midgley is a tall, formidable woman. I arrived at her home by train at four in the afternoon, and though I would be staying overnight, she requested that we begin the interview immediately. We spoke for an hour and a half, after which she grew tired. Then she cooked us a vegetarian dinner. When I followed her into the kitchen and asked if I could help her with the preparations, she remarked, very drily, “It's no use being helped.” —Sheila Heti

## I. MYTHMAKING

THE BELIEVER: I want to talk a bit about evolution as the reigning creation myth of our time, and how it affects our idea about what a person is, and what life is. In your book *Evolution as a Religion*, you criticize some scientists for attributing to Darwin's theory of evolution certain things which shouldn't be attributed to it.

MARY MIDGLEY: Well, I think it's a matter of getting the story right and not misusing it, and 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, and we should go along with it—that evolution is a sort of escalator which can take us anywhere. This was Lamarck's and Herbert Spencer's view—it was *not* Darwin's, but people think that Darwin proved it. He did not. But 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. This can't be right, because things do not grow indefinitely in nature; they grow until they're big enough. Imagery is terribly important, you see. But Darwin didn't even use the word *evolution* when he was first formulating his theory. Did you know that?

BLVR: Yes, I read that in one of your books.

MM: And people think this is Darwinism, and that it's a great scientific discovery. What it is is *myth*, and if one says it's a creation myth, I suppose it is, in the sense that it's one of the stories which different cultures have to explain why things are, by saying how they were before.

The other main misunderstanding is the one 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, but finding a new place. You find a new food source, or you start photosynthesis, or something of that sort.

BLVR: Richard Dawkins is somebody you often criticize for going too far.

MM: Well, I *do* find it surprising that Dawkins, for instance, quotes Tennyson at the beginning of *The Selfish Gene*. "Nature red in tooth and claw" sums up our understanding of natural selection admirably," says Dawkins. Well, it doesn't! That story about bloody-mindedness is one terribly one-sided story among many that might be told, and one shouldn't be enslaved to any such story. There are plenty of other ways you could talk, and the metaphors that are being used are powerful metaphors of a nasty kind and are quite arbitrary. They have a very strong effect.

BLVR: So when you look at human nature, you find it much more complex than just this one myth. What would you say is your view of human nature, as connected with a story or a myth or a structure?

MM: I mean, it is equally misleading to treat people as wholly cooperative. I don't know that anybody quite does that—but we do have a variety of different motives. Freud's simplification was to say we think of nothing but sex, so to speak. With Hobbes it's all about power. These things are always one-sided. But it does seem to be very unfortunate if a one-sided story acquires the authority of science. Because science is meant to be impartial, isn't it? Scientists as such aren't necessarily impartial, but ideology is boiling out of books that get sold as science, because the book is supposed to be a scientific book, whereas the person is really acting as a

guru or a prophet who should be judged on the merit of his prophecies.

BLVR: You have said that many scientists don't even realize they're doing the work of mythmakers.

MM: Yes, I think so! And it's very unfortunate. The education of scientists, particularly in English-speaking countries, tends to be very specialized. They haven't had philosophy or history in their background. If you are specialized, you have a simple idea of truth as correspondence with facts—but big concepts don't correspond directly with facts. They are ways of *assembling* facts. What has often happened is scientists who are scrupulous in the main body of their work, when they get to the last chapter, they have a holiday, you see.

BLVR: And the debate in America between what they call intelligent design or creationism and evolution—could that exist if evolution wasn't a central faith among atheists?

MM: That's right—it could not be seen as the opposite of religion unless it was seen as something of the same kind. I think it's really very, very unfortunate what's gone on. I really hadn't taken in how strongly American Protestantism had been cut off from the rest of thought. I mean, all these unfortunate early immigrants had a very hard time. They could have taken very little with them to America except their Bibles. They couldn't take most of their culture. They just had to leave it behind. A lot of them had been members of Protestant sects, and were persecuted, and their Bible was what they were living by. So when—long before Darwin—people began to be told that the facts were otherwise, they couldn't take it in. It was not tolerable. And they got into the habit of simply saying, "That's what the smart alecks in the town think, the people like the lawyers who did us out of our field." They got into the habit of regarding it as another tribe's doctrines, so at the end of the nineteenth century they had formulated this fundamentalist doctrine which hadn't ever been said before—that all of the

Bible was true. I mean, people before that *did* assume that the ancient history in the Bible was true, because they hadn't anything else to compete with it, but as time went on, people gradually got used to the thought that it wasn't literally true, and it didn't have to be. But they didn't get used to that in the hinterland of the United States.

The confrontation now is terribly hard, but it does seem to me that this Dawkins business makes it much harder. And Daniel Dennett is doing it too—simply saying religion is rubbish, it's been disproved, it's time we got out, you know. But you've got to try and understand where people are and make it possible for them to take things in, and it's very hard. There's so much politics behind it right now. But the idea that science is the only book—that it will supply the meaning of life—

BLVR: Right, and I mean, the meaning of life—typically human life is, and humans are, explained to us through the arts. It's not in science, it's not in—

MM: No, no. I mean, big scientific theories do bear on the central meaning of life, but to get factual accuracy in the details of science hasn't got a lot to do with that.

BLVR: What does science tell us about the meaning of life? Has it told us anything definite about the meaning of life?

MM: It shows you the sort of order in which you live, doesn't it? I don't feel that it's a total waste of time. Curiosity, obviously, is a human attribute, and people often *do* spontaneously wonder, Why is that frog green? or something of that kind, and they find the answer and they think, Ah, this is satisfying. So it's something about finding an order where you previously didn't. This makes the world seem a little more akin to you, a little less alien. It's not a matter of vast metaphysical truths, but there's a continuity between science and the big questions about life. I mean, Copernicus—it's quite interesting to think, Is life different now that we know we're not in the middle? Well, yes, it is, but of course that's not just science, that's also philosophy.

BLVR: I'm curious—I haven't noticed in your writings whether or not you have a feeling for there being such a thing as a God in the world.

MM: Well, I'm rather puzzled about this. I should explain that my father was a parson and I was brought up in an Anglican background. I always thought this stuff was all right, but I could never get any impression of God *being there*. I think it is very puzzling that some do and some don't have this kind of experience, and I'm prepared to believe that the world is big enough for both. I mean, it seems to me if there is anything out there, it's much too big for us to be able to think about it clearly. But I think God obviously is a *terribly* important human concept and human experience, and it is ludicrous to try to amputate it as if it was some kind of tumor. The visions of the imagination are a crucial and real part of human life, and what is operating there is real. What's your situation about all this?

BLVR: I don't know. I mean, I don't believe—

MM: You were brought up without it now.

BLVR: I was brought up to think that anybody who believed in God was an idiot.

MM: Yes, yes, that's the way to start, I think.

## II. POWER FANTASIES

BLVR: There's this thing people do—which is to compare humans with machines—and you've written that the only reason we can plausibly do this is because we're animistic. We look at computers and invest them with human qualities, and we can't see them as completely impersonal—and if we *could* see them as they are, we wouldn't be drawing these analogies. I wonder why you think people like to use this metaphor of the human being a sort of computer.

MM: Well, there are two ways of looking at it, aren't there? First, for a very long time there has been a

romanticizing of machines. And the suggestion is quite often made that the world will be a much better place when these things take over, because they're much more sensible than us. You'll see these solemn arguments to prove that computers will shortly succeed us, and it seems a point on which people don't think very clearly, because their imaginations get excited. So machines become a kind of magic which will remedy the ills of human culture, and the fantasy is that the mess humans make can be avoided once these robots get here. And *we're* wonderful because we can make these things, which are going to be greater than us.

Then there is the other side, where you think of *people* as machines, which behaviorist psychologists very much like to do, and you have only to engineer the machine a little bit differently and society will be greatly improved. That's a different angle, isn't it?

BLVR: Yes.

MM: I suppose they're both power fantasies. I like Frankenstein and I like good science fiction, because it picks on something which is worth saying about how life is. But when people who are merely being sensational want to get an excitement out of this relation, I don't attempt to care for it. Certainly it's an area where all kinds of plots and plans emerge. I regard it on the whole with gloom, though.

BLVR: I wanted to bring that up, because in *Evolution as a Religion* you write that "most properties are affected by many genes; most genes affect many properties." You talk about how people imagine that we can sort of tinker with our DNA—we can just take genes and replace them with other genes—but that this is a misunderstanding of how genes work.

MM: Yes, there *is* the temptation to regard human beings as one more machine in the garage, which you can sort out by suitable tools. It's perfectly clear that what led people to first suggest the idea of genetic engineering is the thought that people could be made like cars and could be altered easily and conveniently. This is simply false. When people suggest this, they are exag-

generating their power and exaggerating their knowledge. Science obviously has made progress by thinking of human beings as assemblies of parts in this sort of way, which is fine as long as scientists don't overdo it and become unrealistic.

BLVR: In what way have they become unrealistic?

MM: Well, for example, the hope of dealing with mental illness entirely by physical means, which psychiatrists have been *very* dedicated to. The idea that consciousness is just an epiphenomenon, something floating on the top, and that you can always get it right by suitable drugs is *wrong*. I remember hearing a psychiatrist here saying what a sad thing it was that Virginia Woolf couldn't have suitable pills, for she would have got straight quite easily. It's obviously much easier and less disturbing to the people who have to do the work to think that there's a physical process they have to carry out, and if they haven't found the solution yet, they soon will and everything will be quite all right, than it is to enter imaginatively into the state of the people who are in trouble. I think people are frightened of considering feelings and letting their imaginations loose on what's going on inside. They find it much less frightening to get out the spanners. So it's a very understandable kind of illusion, but it really is a piece of gratuitous metaphysics, this idea that consciousness is just an effect and never a cause.

BLVR: What would you say to the person who said that if only we had the right pills, Virginia Woolf could have been saved?

MM: Well, it's assuming that depression is something like maybe TB, a physical illness which can be totally cured by a physical remedy, and that would seem to be extremely unrealistic. Of course, sometimes anti-depressants do cure things completely or even partially, but so many illnesses have both mental and physical sides. It's pretty clear that indigestion and asthma are partly mental things, because those who have any of these kinds of complaints know generally well that they get worse when one is worried. And there's no reason why that should not be so, because consciousness is *not* just an epiphenomenon.

It has been medical orthodoxy for the past century that consciousness *could* affect anything physical. If you find a mathematician who's working on a problem, it would be rather odd to say that the thoughts that he thinks don't actually affect how his hand moves. I mean, this is all fairly simple, isn't it, but it has been sort of systematically ignored.

BLVR: You've written about atomism and Lucretius, and you say people wouldn't have done the explorations they did had the image not first appeared in poetic and philosophical writings.

MM: This is the thing that struck me as extremely interesting, because I was reading this scientist who said that poetry was a waste of time—and it just struck me that the atomic theory, which is now fundamental to science, came in the first place from the Greek atomists who were philosophers, and it came via Lucretius, whose poetry is so impressive, you know? He was indeed very much admired and read in the Renaissance, when people began to build the atomic theory. The shape of our imagination determines the kind of scientific theories we can hold, doesn't it? And our imagination is exercised in all kinds of ways in ordinary life, but literature is its stamping ground.

BLVR: You use the word *imagination* a lot in your writing—you give it a lot of weight. But I don't feel the general use of the word *imagination* gives it much importance.

MM: No, you're quite right. I do it deliberately because of that. If one thinks what's imaginary is not real, so to speak, or if by *imagination* one just means having fantasies about something, that wouldn't do. But Coleridge and Wordsworth got this right for us, didn't they? They said there's a fancy, which is just for fun, and the imagination which *works*. It is the form in which our feelings go through to our thoughts—"emotion recollected in tranquillity." You can't, as it were, use raw feeling directly. It's got to be processed and brought into relation with the rest of your life and made into thought, and then it will come out. ★