

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

Mary Midgley famously compares philosophy to plumbing. In both cases we are dealing with complex systems that underlie the everyday life of a community, and in both cases we often fail to notice their existence until things start to smell a bit fishy. Philosophy, like plumbing, is performed by particular people at particular times, and it is liable to be done in a way that suits the needs of those people and those whom they serve. I employ Mary Midgley's philosophy and biography to explore the importance of a diversity of voices for academic philosophy, and for society as a whole.

1. Birth and Death

Mary Midgley died just a few weeks before the birth of my son. While she lived to a very good age, I was saddened that the two of them wouldn't occupy the world at the same time, with 99 years between them. I was grateful, however, that she had left us with a final book, *What is Philosophy For?*, which was written in tiny lucid chapters that could be read while I fed my baby. The closeness of these events led me to consider the nature of birth and death, and our vulnerability and interdependence as human animals. I hope that what follows will reflect some of that. I shall draw on some themes in Midgley's work, as well as some pertinent aspects of her life, to consider why it is important that women (and mothers in particular) should be able to work in philosophy, and briefly discuss what conditions are required for this to be practical.

2. Aristotle and Maggots

Bertrand Russell, with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, remarked that 'Aristotle maintained that women have fewer teeth than men; although he was twice married, it never occurred to him to verify this statement by examining his wives' mouths'.¹ Contrary to what

¹ Bertrand Russell, *The Impact of Science on Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 9

Russell implies, Aristotle was, in general, a great believer in empirical observation as a way of discovering truths about the world. Of course, no empirical investigator works in isolation. In order to know things, we can go out and look, but this is not always possible. We also need to rely upon the observations of others. In contemporary science this usually takes the form of reading the results of experiments in trusted scientific journals. The matter of trust is very important here: which sources do we trust? Furthermore, to which do we even pay attention in the first place? Clearly this is at least as big a question in our time as it was in Aristotle's, where increasingly, different groups of people seem to occupy different worlds, and the question of who to trust becomes very significant. Here Aristotle cast his net wider than many of his contemporaries, taking seriously the observations of farmers and fishermen in order to discover things about the workings of the natural world.²

In addition to his mistaken beliefs about male and female dentistry, Aristotle maintained that maggots spontaneously generated from an admixture of water with putrifying matter. The mixture separated into sweet and putrified elements: the sweet elements became animals, such as maggots, and the putrified elements are the residue of the process and return to the earth.³ Looking at the workings of any household compost bin can show us how Aristotle could easily have come to a conclusion along these lines. The fact that the eggs of flies and other insects are far too small to see in any detail with the naked eye makes it still more forgivable that Aristotle would have thought what he did, in a time before microscopes.

However, I like to imagine an alternative version of this story in which Aristotle arrived at the truth of the matter. In my version, just as Aristotle went out and spoke to the fishermen and farmers about the animals that they encountered, he spoke to those involved in food storage and preparation – women and slaves – about the practices that they used to complete their everyday tasks. He would, in this version, have been told that raw meat must be covered, especially in summer, and that if this was not done, maggots would be the unwanted guests at the dinner party. Perhaps Aristotle's interlocutors would have known that they were doing this to keep the flies out, or perhaps the fact that cloth was sometimes used as a covering, or that it was especially important to take these measures in the

² See, for example, Armand Marie Leroi, *The Lagoon: How Aristotle Invented Science*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

³ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A.L. Peck, (London : Heinemann, Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard U P, 1963), book I.

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

warmer drier months would have led Aristotle to realise that water coming into contact with the meat was not the sole cause of the problem.

While Russell thought that it should have occurred to Aristotle to open his wife's mouth and count her teeth, it didn't seem to occur to *Russell* that Aristotle could have ascertained the number of his wife's teeth by *asking* her. Aristotle might also, I speculate, have discovered revealing things about the natural world by paying heed to the observations of the women and slaves involved in food storage and preparation. However, in spite of his many great qualities, Aristotle did not rate the views of women very highly, regarding them as lacking in many of the rational capacities and potential that were possessed by (some) men. His views on slaves are somewhat more complicated, but he certainly thought that some people were naturally suited to being slaves, and that they were not the types with whom one could have a reasonable level of intelligent discourse.⁴

This little story is not designed to reject Aristotle in a wholesale way, or to ignore the fact that he thought in the same way as many of his contemporaries (we would not expect him to be a feminist) but rather to illustrate the dangers of ignoring or marginalising certain groups. By failing to take whole groups of people seriously, we are in danger of losing valuable insights that are particular to their ways of life, and in so doing, of falling into serious error.

3. Philosophical Plumbing

What I have said so far pertains to the natural sciences, but what of philosophy? A critic might maintain that rational thought has no gender, as well as no race, disability, age, sexuality, and so on. Surely, the critic might say, we are concerned with pure thought, with the connections between ideas, and not with the material circumstances or contingencies of everyday life. A philosopher, *qua* philosopher, has no particular identity in these senses. According to this model of thought, a philosopher's gender, and other aspects of her specific identity, is rather like a coat that she hangs up when she gets into the office in the morning, and puts on again once the day's philosophising is done.

Midgley can help us here. In her article 'Philosophical Plumbing', she argues that philosophy is not a mere set of timeless abstractions,

⁴ See Catherine Rowett, *Dumb Beasts and Dead Philosophers*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), 128–132.

but rather a practice that is rooted in practical concerns that arise in particular circumstances. Ideas crop up at specific times in history because they are needed to address concrete problems.⁵ Philosophy, like plumbing, is a complex network that is vital to the life of any complex society, but which is rarely noticed until things start to go wrong. At that point, someone needs to take up the floorboards and have a bit of a tinker. Something that we might also draw from this is that if philosophy addresses practical concerns, it will be the kinds of practical concerns that are noticed by the types of people who do philosophy. Thus if philosophy is dominated by particular types of people, it will address the problems that affect those people, and deal with them in ways that are liable to suit those groups.

Some may be concerned that if we think that people will philosophise differently depending on their place in society, this will lead us to the conclusion that there is no such thing as truth, and that everything is relative to the individual. But the point is not that the truth will be different for different people, but that living in different ways can lead us to ask different questions, or to look at the same questions from different angles. It is rather like Midgley's metaphor of one aquarium with many windows, which she uses to emphasise the importance of conversations between different disciplines.⁶ We can never have a top-down picture of everything, but by paying attention to a range of perspectives, we can get a more nuanced view. One such perspective is that of the new parent, and their attempts to see the world through the eyes of their child.

4. Babies and philosophy

In her first book, *Beast and Man*, Midgley says that 'We are not just rather like animals, we *are* animals'.⁷ There is nothing that will make you consider your animal (and more specifically mammalian) nature more than having a small pink grunting pre-linguistic creature squirming at your breast and crying out for milk. Any small human baby is striking in his or her animality. At the same time, we look at our children, and recognise ourselves in them, both in specific

⁵ Mary Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing', in *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing*, (London: Routledge, 1996) 1–14.

⁶ Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, (London: Routledge, 2001) 141.

⁷ Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, (London: Methuen and co., 1980) xiii.

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

resemblances, in the connections we have with them, and the sociality that is present from the moment of their births. We are struck by this at the same time that we are struck by the baby's animality. This is a visceral feeling, rather than an intellectual exercise that puts the baby into a pre-determined category. This leads to a similarly visceral experience of our own animality. Of course, this reveals just as much about how we think about animals as it reveals about the way that we see the baby.

In Western culture at least, there is a deep-rooted historical tendency to see a sharp dividing line between what is rational, cultural, and freely chosen, and what is instinctive, natural, and entirely deterministic.⁸ Humans are put in the first of these boxes, and animals in the second. Many of the experiences of new parents put a lot of this into doubt, as we see complex and seamless transitions between our choices and our instincts. The baby cries, and we find ourselves out of bed with the bedside lamp on before we are even properly awake. The baby himself seems in many ways like a creature of instinct: for example, a newborn baby, placed on his mother's torso, will crawl around moving his head from side to side until he finds the breast through sense of smell.

These natural instinctive behaviours are what often leads women and babies to be regarded as somewhat 'other', occupying the sphere of nature far more than cultural civilised man, who is therefore regarded as more properly free. This logic has traditionally been used as an attempt to justify the dominance of the masculine over the feminine, as well as the exploitation of the natural world: women and nature lack reason, and must therefore be dominated, and can be exploited for the ends of civilised man. Children too are considered to be a woman's responsibility, and women therefore serve as a kind of buffer that prevent men from getting too close for comfort to their animal beginnings: women thus sit halfway between civilisation and nature. The same logic is at play in the colonial notion of 'savage' races of people.

But if we see our natural animal responses as a threat to our freedom in this way, we might do well to interrogate the notion of freedom that is in play. If we see women and babies as entirely governed by our biological makeup, whether we talk in terms of evolution, genes, or hormones, we ought to come to the conclusion that *no* human being is truly free. In *Heart and Mind*, Mary Midgley discusses the idea of being free and being indeterminate. As is often the case, she uses a

⁸ See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, (London: Routledge, 1993).

Liz Mckinnell

striking metaphor to describe our intellectual inheritance. She talks about the various bits and pieces that we have lying around in our conceptual kitchen, which don't come to light until we give the place a proper spring clean.

I want to take a look inside that elegant green jar at the end of the top shelf, marked Freedom.

If we look in that jar on the communal shelf today, we shall find the extremely strange idea that to be free is to be indeterminate, that our having an innate constitution would destroy our freedom. Repeatedly of late, defenders of freedom have attacked scientists who were producing evidence that something in our emotional or intellectual capacities was inherited. ... They hold that these suggestions about our innate constitution simply have to be false – because, if they were true, they would make us slaves...

...I want to say that those who think they are defending freedom in this way have radically misunderstood it, and can only do it harm. The point is just this. Neither freedom nor equality demands that we should really be blank paper at birth, completely indeterminate beings. What this would be like is not easy to see, but it would certainly not be a state compatible with freedom. An indeterminate being cannot be a free one.

To be free, you have to have an original constitution. Freedom is the chance to develop what you have in you to be – your talents, your capacities, your natural feelings.⁹

Our freedom exists because we have particular constitutions, and is a product of our nature rather than a way of overcoming it. This is not to say that newborn babies come into the world free, in the sense that you and I are free, as freedom is a multivarious concept.

Take something as simple as the decision to get some rest. Although many of us suffer from insomnia from time to time, we generally know when we are tired, and will take steps to remedy it. This is not the case with tiny babies: any parent knows very well that even when the baby is utterly exhausted, it takes a great deal of work to get them to sleep. They need help from adults to do even this most basic of things. Part of the reason for this is that they do not know how they are feeling. It takes the help of those around them to gradually develop a sense of when they are tired, along with when they are

⁹ Mary Midgley, *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience*, (London: Routledge, 1983), 39–40.

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

happy, sad, and so on. We instinctively mirror the facial expressions of our babies, and it is through this that they start to get a better sense of their own inner life.¹⁰ It is only once this understanding develops to a certain extent that they can really be said to have freedom in certain senses of the word. If, for example, we understand freedom in terms of the ability to satisfy our desires, we might regard consciousness of our desires as a prerequisite. In another sense though, babies are incredibly free. If we follow Midgley in understanding freedom in terms of the chance to develop our capacities, talents, and feelings, we can witness babies developing these with a rapidity that adults could only dream of.

As babies develop, exercising their freedom and developing the capacity for new kinds of freedom, this happens *in virtue* of them being biological animals with certain natural characteristics, and not in spite of this. Significantly, it also happens in virtue of them being the type of animals who naturally exist in communities with other animals of the same species, who can reflect their personalities back to them to allow them to develop a sense of independent selfhood. Additionally, while babies may not be able to recognise their own desires, they are extremely good at having those desires satisfied by those who care for them. If we follow Midgley, as I believe we should, human freedom should not be set in opposition (as it so often has been) to our biology, our emotions, and our communal nature, but rather these things are vital building blocks for our freedom.

5. The ego and the world

Here we come to another aspect of philosophical thought that babies might lead us to rethink – the idea of the individual and their relationship with a community. A great deal of enlightenment thought takes the individual as the starting point for making discoveries about the world. We begin with the self at the centre, and work outwards towards things like the physical world, animals, and other minds.

In some respects babies turn this on its head. Right from birth, babies are intrigued by the world around them. My son, born by

¹⁰ See Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kuhl, *How Babies Think*, (London: Orion Books, 1999) and Alison Gopnik, *The Philosophical Baby: What Children's Minds Tell Us about Truth, Love, and the Meaning of Life*, (London: The Bodley Head, 2009).

emergency caesarean section, emerged wide-eyed into the operating theatre, taking such an acute interest in this new bright and busy world that I suspected that he might be inspired to enter the medical profession when he grows up. However, now at the much more mature age of fifteen weeks, it will still be at least a year before he is able to recognise himself in the mirror.¹¹

We often think of babies as self-centred, but this is because they simply don't have a clear sense of themselves as separate from the world that they are so busy exploring. This is part of why a baby's life seems to be full of high drama: when he has a tummy ache, the whole universe is infused with tummy ache – a tragedy by anyone's standards. It is only much later that babies begin to realise that other people are separate from themselves in any significant sense. Recent work in developmental psychology has shown this to be true in a variety of ways. For example, consider this experiment conducted by the psychologist Alison Gopnik and her colleagues:

By the time babies are about one-and-a-half-years old, they start to understand the nature of these differences between people and to be fascinated by them. Again we can demonstrate this systematically. Alison [Gopnik] and one of her students, Betty Repacholi, showed babies two bowls of food, one full of delicious Goldfish crackers and one full of raw broccoli. All the babies, even in Berkeley, preferred the crackers. Then Betty tasted each bowl of food. She made a delighted face and said, "Yum" to one food and made a disgusted face and said, "Yuck" to the other. Then she put both bowls of food near the babies, held out her hand, and said, "Could you give me some?"

When Betty indicated that she loved the crackers and hated the broccoli, the babies, of course, gave her the crackers. But what if she did the opposite and said that the broccoli was yummy and the crackers were yucky? This presented the babies with one of those cases where our attitude toward the object is different from theirs, where we want one thing and they want something else. Fourteen-month-olds, still with their innocent assumption that we all want the same thing, gives us the crackers. But the wiser ... eighteen-month-olds give us the broccoli, even though they themselves despise it. These tiny children, barely able to talk, have already learned an extremely important thing about

¹¹ Op. cit. note 10, and Charles Fernyhough, *The Baby in the Mirror: A Child's World from One to Three*, (London: Granta Books, 2009).

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

people. They've learned that people have desires and that those desires may be different and may even conflict.¹²

This experiment tells us about the development of the knowledge that other people's desires may differ from our own. Other research has shown us that similar things are true about the knowledge that other people can perceive different objects, depending on their location in a room. Babies start out assuming that others can see exactly what they can see, and it is only later that they develop the idea that they can see things that are hidden from others.

This does not tell us that babies are unaware of the existence of other people, so much as it tells us that the babies are unaware that they have a separate self. Individuality is an end goal, rather than the starting point for enquiry. Relationships, with parents, wider family, and other people that babies encounter in their day to day lives, arrive almost from birth (and in some cases even beforehand). Individuality is a lot further down the line.

When G.E. Moore got from 'Here is one hand' to an external world, he had doubtless forgotten (as all of us do) that he, like my little boy, will once have spent weeks working hard, hopefully with the help of adoring adults, on discovering this thing that he now treats as a basic certainty.¹³ He will also have forgotten that, if he is anything like my son, the eventual discovery that he had hands would once have prevented him from sleeping, as every time he started drifting off in his cot, his hands would fly up and catch his attention, and he would be gripped with the sheer amazement of it all, excited to put his new discovery to practical use by waving and grabbing at things. What he will have experienced as something more akin to basic certainty at that point in his life would have been the smell of mother's milk and the sound of his parents' voices. Only through further exploration, aided by the comfort and security that these things afforded, could he begin to make the investigations that would culminate in knowing about his handedness.

Moore, I suspect, would have responded that a baby could not be certain of anything, or even have desires or beliefs, in the sense that is relevant to his common sense philosophy. Without the rudiments of language, he might have maintained that the baby is unable to think propositionally, and therefore cannot believe or know things in the relevant ways. This may be true so far as it goes, but this neglects

¹² Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kuhl, *How Babies Think*, (London: Orion Books, 1999), 36–7.

¹³ G.E. Moore, 'A Defence of Common Sense' in *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin, (London: Routledge, 1993).

the significant fact that the development of language is built on a foundation that is fundamentally embodied and interpersonal. My son began manipulating objects with a thumb and forefinger, and finding out that he can make different noises by moving his tongue around in his mouth, within an hour of each other. These discoveries are clearly connected, and both facilitated through play with a trusted adult. In this sense the knowledge of the parents, and/or other significant figures in one's life, can be understood as a more basic kind of knowledge than the knowledge of material objects, and even the knowledge of one's own body and mental states. We are interpersonal and social creatures before we can be anything else.

6. Attention

Many of these insights have only been formally demonstrated in developmental psychology in the last couple of decades. Before then, it was widely thought that babies barely thought or engaged with the world at all. They were simply thought to be crying blobs who weren't of much interest until they were a couple of years old. This belief was not held purely because of limitations in experimental techniques or technology, although videotape did play a role. It was more that, because it was assumed that nothing of interest happened at this stage, nobody thought that it was worth conducting the experiments in the first place. Babies were just not worth looking at.

Of course, the mothers of those babies have always thought that they were very much worth looking at, and indeed that they had capacities for thought that went well beyond what was maintained in traditional psychology, but this was written off as mere maternal sentimentality. However, this neglects the fact that those mothers had spent many hours of every day paying close attention to their child. What they noticed was borne out of the love that motivates them to pay this attention, but (as Midgley and her contemporary Iris Murdoch have observed) love and other emotions should not be pitted in opposition to rational enquiry and real discovery. This is what Gopnik and her colleagues have to say:

As more women became scientists and more male scientists began to take care of young babies, and as videotape technology became available, we began to pay more real attention to babies. That itself made the "crying carrot" picture look a lot less likely. People who take care of young babies usually believe that babies can think, but it was easy, at first, for scientists to dismiss those

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

intuitions (they were, after all, literally old wives' tales). It got a lot harder, though, when the scientist and the caregiver were the same person, and when you could back up your intuitions with videotaped proof. Old wives (and one old husband) are writing this book.¹⁴

The significant thing here is the notion of attention (something described so richly by Iris Murdoch) and where we think that attention should be directed. Science can allow us to discover truths about the world, but it does this differently depending on where and how it casts its gaze. This, in turn, is affected by other things that are going on in the life of the scientist, including their emotional life. This is a real case of what Murdoch calls 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality'.¹⁵

7. Conclusion

I have said that paying close attention to babies can help us see long-standing philosophical problems in a new light. I am not committed to the Platonic idea that babies have access to some form of knowledge that we have forgotten, and that they have all these profound philosophical questions sorted out. Rather it is a question of having a different angle on a problem. Things that might seem obvious to seasoned philosophers can be less so for babies, and their obvious starting points are quite different. Being able to spend time with small children as they grow and learn can therefore afford a different perspective on these problems. Rather than asking how we get from the Cartesian ego to the external world, we might instead puzzle over how we can explain how individual selfhood can emerge from the fog of common human experience. Rather than asking how we can convince the egoist of the merits of altruism, we might wonder how and whether self-interest can be set in opposition to the common good. Rather than thinking about free will in opposition to our biological and emotional nature, we might consider how biology and emotions might shape our projects and enable us to pursue them freely. The deepest and most longstanding problems of philosophy can be seen in a different light when you have spent

¹⁴ Alison Gopnik, Andrew Meltzoff, and Patricia Kuhl, *How Babies Think*, (London: Orion Books, 1999), 144.

¹⁵ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (London: Routledge, 1970), 34.

many days and sleepless nights trying to help your child by understanding the way that they navigate the world.

This is why it matters that women are more easily able to pursue careers in academic philosophy while also raising families, and why men in philosophy are able to spend time paying close attention to their children. Of course, a child does not exist for the sake of being an object of philosophical contemplation, and these things matter for a good many other reasons too. My point is that it *does* matter from the point of view of philosophy as a discipline.

In our alternative history, Aristotle comes to understand the life cycle of maggots and flies by talking to the women and slaves who deal with food preparation. However, it is hard to see how this would have happened when their point of view was already disregarded, and their concerns seen as trivial. Perhaps a better alternative history would enable those who deal with food to gain the same recognition in philosophy as Aristotle and his contemporaries, and (just as importantly) for Aristotle to do his share of work in the kitchen.

So what, practically speaking, is to be done? The current typical career trajectory in academia is unsuited to people who are keen to have children, especially if they are women. The years in which we can have babies are typically spent on our PhDs, and then on a series of insecure contracts that offer no financial security, and move us around the country (or around the world) making it difficult to form supportive communities and putting strain on relationships.

Babies turn many of our philosophical questions on their heads. Midgley turned the structure of an academic career on its head, with respect to babies. There is, at present, a lot of social and financial pressure to establish oneself as an academic and gain some stability before having children. This is difficult, when the typical female new PhD graduate will have a decade or so left to have children naturally, and potentially (at least if she has Midgley's good health) another six decades in which she can write good philosophical work.

Mary Midgley started publishing in earnest in her late fifties after taking early retirement once her boys had grown up. When Tony Benn announced his retirement from the House of Commons at the age of 74, he said that he did so in order to devote more time to politics. Similarly, Midgley might be said to have left academia to devote more time to philosophy. However, the current climate in academic philosophy makes a career of this shape very difficult to achieve, and pretty much impossible for anyone who doesn't have an alternative source of financial support, as well as help with childcare and domestic chores. Serious effort is required in order to rethink the academic career structure so that young scholars are able to have families

Philosophical Plumbing in the Twenty-First Century

without fear of losing a roof over their heads, and without the constant pressure to publish world-leading articles at times when their priorities in life are very different.

More broadly, it is vital that anyone in academic philosophy has sufficient time to pay attention to the details of life outside of academia. Many early career academics find every waking moment taken up with their work, partly because the insecure job climate means that their responsibilities change year on year and need to be relearned from scratch. This can lead to a very cloistered environment in which people rarely read outside their fields, rarely socialise with people who do other jobs, and barely have time to notice the many details of everyday life that provide the impetus to do philosophical work in the first place.

This absence of free time, in academia as elsewhere, impacts on the possibility of having good open dialogue in the public sphere. We are all encouraged to rush home from our long hours at work, and spend the little time left on the basics of home life, before rushing back to work the following day. This robs us of the capacity to *notice* things about the things that matter in our own lives, and also of the capacity to listen and engage with a range of experiences. In principle, many scholars may believe that it is a good idea to listen to a broader range of voices, and to gain the wider range of insights that this would provide, but a working climate that militates against this is liable to make us blinkered, as well as contributing to the present mental health crisis that beleaguers university life.

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