

Mary Midgley on Dualism and Materialism



Interviews with and articles about Mary Midgley often describe her as ‘fierce’, ‘combative’, or even ‘the most frightening philosopher in the country.’ She was probably all of these things, but she was also humane, imaginative, and very down to earth.

Midgley’s writing is accessible, infused with colourful metaphors, and covers a wide range of topics, including science and religion, dualism, animal ethics, and environmentalism. In some ways this makes her an ideal philosopher to cover in a school classroom, especially at a time when many teachers are doing more to include more women on the curriculum. However, her writing is also expansive, often covering many themes and topics in one piece. To discover Midgley’s views on a topic like dualism or metaethics, you often need to read a broad range of her works on different topics, some of which do not appear immediately relevant to the topic at hand. She is a million miles away from the neatly contained and highly focused articles which characterise a lot of twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy. This means that it can be difficult to summarise neatly and can make teaching her material a daunting task.

About these resources

The narrated slideshows in this series provide clear, brief summaries of Midgley's ideas on some key topics often taught in the classroom. They can be integrated into teaching or used as a basis for part of your own lesson planning.

Midgley on Dualism and Materialism

Midgley is a good philosopher to discuss when teaching dualism and materialism because she is highly critical of both positions, and neither is she an idealist. Her view might be regarded as a variety of dual aspect theory (the view that mind and body are two aspects of the same substance) or as a kind of naturalist who rejects the reductionist mechanistic picture of the natural world. In her work on animal ethics, she frequently emphasises the fact that human beings are animals and should not be understood as being separate from the rest of nature. However, she thinks that this natural world cannot be understood through the natural sciences alone.

Descartes' mistake, she argues, was to think of nature as operating like a machine, and then to separate off the things which could not easily be understood in the same way that we understand mechanical things. That leaves us with a radical separation between mind and matter, where matter is mechanical, and mind is not.

Although materialism is set in opposition to Cartesian dualism, she thinks that it accepts the way that the duality was set up in the first place. The result is that it simply denies the reality of (or underplays the importance of) the phenomena that Descartes associates with the mind, reducing everything, including thought and consciousness, to the same material mechanical model. Thus, she thinks that materialism denies half of what it is to be human.

Much of Midgley's work is about bringing these two sides together again. She argues that mind and matter are not two separate things, but two different perspectives on the same thing: the inner and the outer. In her view, it is useful to discover how the brain works through dissecting brains, doing scans, and so on, but that these ways of looking will tell you only a very limited amount about the subjective experiential aspects of our lives. To fully understand these aspects, we need to use things like music, art, and poetry.

It is only by bringing all these different resources together, from the natural sciences and the arts and humanities, that we can begin to fully understand what it is to be human. Since these are different perspectives on the same thing, and not on different Cartesian substances, we can look at how they connect, and good thinking integrates the two. In this way, her criticisms of dualism have a great deal to do with her more practical criticisms of the increasing emphasis on narrow specialisation in education and academia.

This is just one of the many ways that Midgley thinks that our ideas about dualism and materialism are of huge practical importance. For example, she thinks that Descartes' error has led to disastrous consequences for how we think about the natural environment. If we think of our minds as separate substances, we are regarding the most essential part of ourselves as separate from (and superior to) the natural world. If we follow the materialists, and think instead of everything on the material model, we are in danger of thinking of everything (perhaps even including people) as a mere bundle of resources that can be exploited.

While Midgley argues that our philosophical ideas can influence social and political action, she thinks that it can work in the other direction too. For example, in her early piece 'Rings and Books', Midgley argues that we are more liable to think along Cartesian lines if we take an individualistic approach to life and see ourselves as isolated agents. It is no accident, she thinks, that ideas like this came about in a world where philosophers were largely unmarried men.

Further Reading

You can read some of Midgley's views on mind and body in her article 'Souls, Bodies, Minds, and Planets' in *Philosophy Now* [philosophynow.org/issues/47/Souls Minds Bodies and Planets](http://philosophynow.org/issues/47/Souls_Minds_Bodies_and_Planets)

There are further thoughts on Descartes, in relation especially to isolation and individualism, in 'Rings and Books' www.womeninparenthesis.co.uk/rings-and-books-by-mary-midgley/