Mary Midgley on Metaethics

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 Metaethics: an overview

Overall, Mary Midgley was critical of the direction that moral philosophy had taken in the first half of the twentieth century. She argued that philosophers had become overly concerned with discussing the meaning of moral language and had put themselves in a position where they could not hold reasoned ethical views about human life. For her, this had a lot to do with the view that ethics had to be either a matter of reason or a matter of emotion. In fact, she argued, it was both, and we should not view reason and emotion as entirely distinct and conflicting forces. Once we understand that reason and emotion are deeply entangled, this undermines theories like emotivism, which argue that because morality involves the expression of feeling, it cannot be subject to rational enquiry.

Moore and the Naturalistic Fallacy

Philosophers have always asked questions about the nature of the good, why we should be moral, and so on, but meta-ethics as a largely linguistic pursuit only emerged as a separate discipline from the rest of moral philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century. During this period, philosophers became increasingly interested in language use.

In his *Principia Ethica* (1903). G.E. Moore developed the naturalistic fallacy. The idea of this is that moral statements cannot be defined in terms of natural statements.

Earlier philosophers had simply defined 'good' and other moral terms in relation to non-moral natural properties (for example, Bentham defined 'good' as whatever maximises pleasure).

Moore argued that pretty much every philosopher before him had made a fundamental error: they were confusing questions about which *things* were good (e.g. pleasure) with questions about what the word 'good' *meant*.

This idea can sometimes be difficult to convey to students in the classroom. One analogy that I like to use is with ordering food in a pub or restaurant. You might ask "What are the specials?" Usually, you might be handed a specials menu, or pointed to a blackboard with a list of dishes. Your question has been interpreted as meaning "Which dishes are on the specials menu today?" but imagine that you are a visitor with English as a second language: you know what is on the specials board, but you do not know what is meant by calling those dishes 'the specials'.

Moore argued that while we can say that some natural properties are good in the first sense (i.e. they are on the list of good things), that doesn't tell us anything about what we *mean* by the word 'good'.

We can say that it is good to maximise pleasure, but not that 'good' and 'maximising pleasure' mean the same thing.

Natural properties and moral properties are, he argues, totally different sorts of thing, and can't be defined in terms of each other. Natural properties like pleasure may be among the things that are good, but they don't tell us anything about what 'good' means.

Logical Positivism

Another huge influence on moral philosophy in the twentieth century came from the Vienna Circle and logical positivism. (this is also relevant to the topic of 'religious language' on some A-level syllabi)

Logical positivism was a movement that originated in Vienna in the 1920s (its early proponents are a group of scientists, philosophers, and mathematicians known as the 'Vienna Circle')

Its central claim is that scientific knowledge is the only kind of factual knowledge we can have about the world. We can also, according to logical positivists, have knowledge about analytic truths (e.g. 'No bachelors are married') but these tell us things about our concepts, and not about the world.

Any statements that cannot be tested empirically, and which are not analytic truths, are not the sorts of things that can be true or false. Such statements are said to lack 'cognitive content', or to fail to 'express propositions'. These are both ways of saying that they are not meaningful statements.

If I say "It is raining", there are ways that the world could be that would make that true or false. Logical positivists claim that this cannot be the case with statements which cannot be tested scientifically.

The emergence of noncognitivism

To summarise what we've just seen:

> (A) Moore said that moral statements could not be understood in terms of natural statements (i.e. the sorts of things that we can prove or disprove through science)
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> (B) The Logical Positivists claimed that statements which could not be tested through science (and which were not analytic truths) were not meaningful (i.e. could not be true or false).

If we accept both these positions, we have to conclude that (unless they are analytic truths) moral statements cannot be true or false.

The position that moral statements cannot be true or false is known as noncognitivism, and A.J. Ayer's emotivism is a version of noncognitivism. This is because noncognitivism is a view about what moral statements are not (i.e. the sort of thing that can be true or false) and emotivism is a view about what they actually are.

Ayer argued that although moral statements often resemble factual statements in their grammatical structure, they are actually the expression of emotion.

This is different from saying that they are a statement about our emotions. For example, if I say, "I like wine", that is true or false (either I like wine, or I am lying, or I have forgotten what wine tastes like or something). On the other hand, if I take a sip of wine, smile, and say "mmmmmmmmmmm wine!" that can't be true or false, because it is an expression of emotion, rather than a statement about it (compare saying "it is true that I like wine" with saying "it is

true that mmmmmmmmmmm wine!" The first makes sense, and the second looks like nonsense.)

NOTE: an expanded version of this material on noncognitivism, together with a simple map of noncognitivist theories, can be found at www.dur.ac.uk/resources/forteachers/Liz_Metaethicsteachersfactsheet.docx

Midgley's Objections

This may have seemed like a lengthy preamble to Midgley's views, but it was necessary because Midgley poses a challenge to noncognitivist theories, and especially emotivism, on a number of fronts.

Firstly, she criticised the idea of a simplistic separation of facts and values. She argued that we tend to label as 'fact' those things of which we feel certain and confident, while 'value' is used to describe areas where there is persistent disagreement or uncertainty. In reality, there is a continual interplay between fact and value: facts, even in their most rigorous scientific form, never arrive in the form of pure raw data. They are always filtered and processed through our conceptual schemes. Without such schemes we would be unable to say anything intelligible at all. These conceptual schemes are, whether we realise it or not, shaped and coloured by our values.

A second challenge that Midgley poses is the idea of a rigid split between thinking and feeling, as though the two have nothing to do with one another. In her book *Wisdom, Information, and Wonder*, she uses an example from Bertrand Russell's memoirs. Russell recounts how he was out cycling one day and came to the realisation that he no longer loved his wife. For him this was a simple immutable thing, as Midgley puts it "exactly as someone might discover that they have a flat tyre, although they had no idea till that moment that its pressure was even lessening and can then be presented with its flatness as a simple datum, beyond their power to alter." (p. 157). Here, she argues, Russell is being disingenuous about how feelings work. They are not bare unalterable phenomena, and they have a lot to do with how we think. When faced with the realisation of something about our own feelings about someone, we can then consider the situation, think about our motives and our views of that person: are we thinking about them fairly? What has happened in our lives that has caused the change of feeling? Is there something that we can change? Often through careful consideration and a restructuring of our thought, our

feelings can then be shifted. Feelings influence our patterns of thought, and they are also changed when our thinking changes.

So, what does this mean for doctrines like emotivism? Midgley suggests that Ayer was right to emphasise the importance of emotion in our moral lives, but he was wrong both to do this to the exclusion of everything else, and to think that our emotions have nothing to do with our rationality. Morality, she argues is very much about both of these things working together. This also ties in with Midgley's views on the naturalistic fallacy: if we challenge the idea that fact and value are radically separate, then the idea that some things (facts) can be discovered through rational or empirical enquiry, where other things (values) are just an expression of emotion, cannot be maintained. In fact, if Midgley is right about the extent to which our values shape the conceptual schemes that we use to make sense of the world, then things like scientific enquiry would be under threat from emotivism.

Further Reading

Mary Midgley, *Wisdom, Information and Wonder*, chapters 14-16.