

Mary Midgley on The Problem of Evil



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 and religion

Although she came from a religious background (she was the daughter of a Church of England curate) Midgley herself was not a religious believer. However, she should not be included in the same camp as 'new atheist' thinkers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. In fact, she had a heated exchange with Dawkins over his reductionist approach to evolutionary biology and has been strongly critical of the view that science can solve the kinds of problems that religion sets out to answer.

Midgley's thoughts on the problem of evil are easier to locate than for many other topics that she has covered, most of them appearing in her 1984 book *Wickedness*. God does not feature very prominently even here, since she thinks that it is much more interesting to explore evil from a human perspective than a theological one. However, she makes some brief remarks on *why* the problem of evil is not her central focus, which may prove useful for classroom discussion. Her further exploration of what evil actually involves may also feed back into debates about how an omnibenevolent omnipotent God might permit such a thing to exist.

Why the problem of evil is not a problem for God

Rather than contemplating how or why God permits evil, Midgley argues that we are better off looking at the 'immediate sources of evil' – human beings. As she puts it, "To blame God for making us capable of wrongdoing is beside the point. Since we are capable of it, what we need is to understand it". This will seem intuitively unsatisfying to most people who are immersed in natural theology, and especially for those in the business of teaching it - after all, a student won't get very far in their A-level if they answer a question on the problem of evil by maintaining, as Midgley does, that it isn't a very important question, and then answering a different question instead. So how is Midgley's

view going to help us here? This becomes clearer when we look at her argument for disregarding the problem of evil.

Midgley argues that the way that the Problem of Evil is set up puts us in mind of a courtroom, where God is on one side, and the philosopher – his accuser – is on the other. The charges against the deity are read out, and then we debate his innocence or guilt. Midgley argues that this general approach to talking about God is unhelpful. There are two possibilities: either God exists, or he doesn't. If God exists, he is "bigger and more mysterious than a corrupt or stupid official", and if he does not exist, then there is nobody to take the position of the accused in our courtroom scene. Either way, this adversarial approach, which treats God like a powerful but potentially flawed human being, is inappropriate.

What is evil?

Having argued that evil should be looked at in terms of its human origins rather than divine ones, Midgley goes on to give a lengthy and detailed examination of the concept of wickedness, and its related concepts such as evil. There is too much of this to discuss in any detail here, but several strands may be of interest to anyone studying the problem of evil.

She explores the question of what gives rise to wrongdoing. One aspect of this that she discusses is the notion that all wrongdoing is the consequence of outside causes, such as a bad upbringing, or social and economic pressures. She suggests that we should not have to make a choice between social and individual causes for human behaviour. It is true that some outside influences can have a powerful effect on our characters and actions, but for this to be the case, we need to have the kind of constitution that makes this possible in the first place. Midgley argues that we are capable of vice because we are capable of virtue. We have the kind of makeup that makes us capable of doing the right thing, and sometimes this capacity goes wrong and leads to us doing the wrong thing. In this sense evil is a defect of the capacity to do good. This means that in order to understand evil, we must understand human nature, and not just the outside conditions that make wrongdoing more likely.

Moral evil and natural evil

This may be a useful way of framing things for classroom discussion of the Problem of Evil, since it raises the question of why God would have made us the way that we are. Notice that this is a slightly different question to the one of why God *permits* evil. If we think of evil as one of the ways that our natural human capacities can go wrong, then this narrows the gap between natural evil and moral evil. In fact, Midgley argues, on any sensible understanding, the doctrine of original sin is a view about natural evil.

Perhaps we might supply a Midgleyan version of the free will defence – that for humans to be capable of freely choosing good, they must have the kind of moral constitution that can go wrong in various ways. This might be compared to similar lines of thought about natural evil as it is more commonly understood – perhaps hurricanes and droughts (at least when they are not a consequence of human-made climate change - another blurring of moral and natural evil) are an inbuilt feature of any climatic system that can support life.

Evil as a negative

Another way that Midgley's thoughts might usefully feature in a discussion of the Problem of Evil is in her notion that evil is a defect or a lack, rather than a positive quality. Versions of this view can be found in the work of many philosophers, including Augustine. This view is sometimes thought to be more compatible with the existence of God, since on this account evil is not an actual thing that God created. Bertrand Russell famously rejected this idea, arguing that:

“the belief that, as a matter of fact, nothing that exists is evil, is one which no one would advocate except a metaphysician defending a theory. Pain and hatred and envy and cruelty are surely things that exist and are not merely the absence of their opposites; but the theory should hold that they are indistinguishable from the blank unconsciousness of an oyster. Indeed, it would seem that this whole theory has been advanced solely because of the unconscious bias in favour of optimism, and that its opposite is logically just as tenable. We might urge that evil consists in existence, and good in non-existence; that therefore the sum-total of existence is the worst thing there is, and that only non-existence is good. Indeed, Buddhism does seem to maintain some such view. It is

plain that this view is false; but logically it is no more absurd than its opposite.” (*The Elements of Ethics*)

Russell seems to be suggesting that evil is not a simple absence, because we feel it very strongly and definitely as a kind of presence in our lived experience. Midgley provides an answer to this, pointing out that other negatives can still be a very big deal for us. Darkness and cold, she points out, are negatives or absences, but they can still be very frightening, painful, and dangerous.

Further Reading

Mary Midgley, *Wickedness*, Oxford: Routledge, 1984, chapters 1 and 6.

Bertrand Russell, “The Elements of Ethics”, *Philosophical Essays*, 1910 section 2:10. Available at <http://fair-use.org/bertrand-russell/the-elements-of-ethics/art.10>