

Mr Chancellor,

It is axiomatic that most philosophers tend to publish their most significant contributions before the age of forty. Exceptions are few. Scouring the records back to the 17th Century reveals that Thomas Hobbes' first extant work appeared when he was forty-two, while his masterpiece, *Leviathan*, was published when he was sixty-three. A generation later, John Locke produced his own masterpiece, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, at the tender age of fifty-eight, and published his last work at sixty-three. In comparison to Mary Midgley, however, both Hobbes and Locke seem like precocious talents who quickly turned into early quitters; for Mary Midgley's first book appeared when she was fifty-eight, and thirty years later she is still publishing, with fourteen books and more than eighty journal papers to her name. She enjoys immense respect within her discipline, and is also one of its foremost public exponents. *The Times Literary Supplement* hailed her as "one of the sharpest critical pens in the West" – an accolade which makes one wonder where all the sharp critics in the East are hiding!

Another commentator described Mary as "perhaps the most frightening philosopher in the country". Let's explore this charge for a moment. The juxtaposition of the words "frightening" and "philosopher" evokes for me an image of dense text, replete with unpronounceable nouns and utterly obscure verbs. Mary Midgley's work is nothing like this: you may dip at random into any of her books and read with full comprehension. This is

not because she focuses on simple issues; far from it. Mary's works address some of the thorniest problems of our age:

- The roots of human nature, our place in the animal kingdom, and the ethical issues surrounding our mistreatment of other animals
- The estrangement of modern academic philosophy from the question of the meaning of life; a question which most of us ask sooner or later
- The cult of the supposed omnipotence of science; in other words the simplistic and arrogant assertion that science can answer all of life's questions and solve all of society's problems
- The riches inherent in a diversity of world views, and the crucial role of imagination in reconciling observations with concepts and values
- The urgent importance of taking seriously the lessons arising from James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, which is essentially the prophetic warning of our age concerning the damage we are doing to this planet.

Mary Midgley elucidates all of these issues with great clarity. So why is she regarded as a "frightening" philosopher? The answer is simple. Think of the King's new set of clothes, with Mary playing the part of the youthful voice in the crowd, pointing out the embarrassing absence of regal garments. The part of the 'King' in this scenario is adopted at various times by one of a gaggle of 'celebrity scientists', who unhesitatingly dispense ostensibly authoritative opinions on matters outside their sphere of learning. It's hard to feel sorry for these bully boys of the so-called "popular science" bookshelves, who get ever so petulant when Mary points out their flagrant disregard for the philosophy of science, or their Humpty-Dumpty-like tendency to redefine the meanings of words while they speak. If it is indeed "frightening" that

such feeble thinking should be exposed for what it is, then I'd argue we could do with being frightened a lot more often.

But enough of the pundits – what do Mary's friends and colleagues say of her? The following adjectives come up again and again: brave, calm, caring, energetic, hospitable, immediate, loyal, liberated, lucid, sincere, spirited ... wonderful. Her late husband Geoff was her perfect foil: excitable, frenetic and exuberant. Mary and Geoff married in 1950, just after he had secured a Lectureship in Philosophy at this University. With the arrival of their three sons over the next few years, Mary found little time to build on her own formidable Oxford education, which had been somewhat attenuated by the exigencies of World War II. As the boys grew more manageable, Mary found part-time work writing book reviews – a pursuit which further expanded her amazingly wide reading record. It also led to her discovery by the broadcast media, who appreciated Mary's wisdom and her gift for vivid metaphors and passionate delivery. After many years of teaching in the Newcastle Philosophy Department, Mary formally retired in 1980. It is just as well she did retire then, or she'd never have had the time for the busyness which then ensued: in demand worldwide by academia and the media, whilst maintaining breathtaking productivity in print.

Shortly after Mary left the Philosophy Department, cuts in government funding began to bite, and the departmental staff spent most of the '80s fighting a losing battle against closure. Much of the stress of this fell on Geoff, who gallantly took on further duties as the staff numbers dwindled, consciously striving to save young colleagues from neglecting

their own career development by drowning in the management of decline. In losing the Philosophy Department this University also lost Geoff's particularly human approach to academic study, which was more conversational than purely instructional. To use Yeats' familiar image, Geoff and Mary saw education as "lighting a fire, not filling a bucket".

This spirit survived the closure of the Philosophy Department in at least two ways:

- Firstly, the legendary hospitality of the Midgley household, which had always been experienced as an open house by staff and students of the Department, continued to flourish, and gave rise to APIS. This is a lively discussion group, for which Mary lays on the tea, and where she often poses the first question after each presentation.

- Secondly, Professor Milan Jaros and other scientists on campus had become concerned at the increasing narrowness of the training given to science and engineering students. To counteract this, they launched an initiative known as "engaged learning", in which the assumptions, motives and social impacts of scientific work are examined, alongside the technical topics. Since 1999, this engaged learning approach has provided the basis for a very successful BA degree programme entitled "Philosophical Studies: Knowledge and Human Interests". More than 150 students are currently registered on this programme. The thirst for honest reflection on the construction and use of scientific thought is clearly alive and well amongst the younger generation.

Mary Midgley has shown extraordinary loyalty to Newcastle. When she could easily have relocated to warmer climes, and perhaps more rarefied

academic ambiences, she has stayed here, braving the North Sea for the occasional swim, and adding lustre to our City and University by selflessly sharing with us the riches of her intelligence, charm, honesty and valour. Aristotle said that “In all things of Nature there is something of the marvellous”. For being a truly marvellous force of Nature in our midst I now ask you, Mr Chancellor, to bestow on Mary Midgley the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, honoris causa.

**Citation by Professor Paul Younger**