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Review Of "Science And Poetry" By M. Midgley

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Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry*
Science and Poetry by Mary. Midgley,
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interested and instrumentally rational. This deemphasizes the ability of Lockean persons to recognize and be moved by the natural law, and so by rights claims originating in the moral equality and independence of each. Levine is not mistaken about the Hobbesian elements in Locke, but, by downplaying differences, he makes Locke's political theory seem not only more Hobbesian but also more coherent and less open to charges of inconsistency or contradiction than in fact it may be. This is a general concern to keep in mind, and to mark for students, when reading the essays.

A particularly welcome feature of these essays is Levine's readiness to use the insights of one author to suggest remedies for potential failings in another. He thus draws enlightening connections between the views of apparent opponents and helps us to see that elements seemingly essential to a view may in fact be modified or discarded without violence to its spirit. Valuable in this regard is the appendix to chapter 4 (on Mill) considering Marcuse's "Repressive Tolerance." On Levine's reading, Marcuse here advocates limits on free speech that are based on essentially Millian convictions. Although he shares much with Mill, says Levine, Marcuse advocates these seemingly anti-Millian limitations because he is concerned with the highly imperfect world in which we live rather than the ideal circumstances Mill assumed (a marketplace of ideas with free entry and exit and consumers who are fully competent judges). Similarly noteworthy is Levine's advocacy of liberal supplementation of Marx and Rousseau. This is essential, he suggests, to guard against state tyranny in any progress toward the ideals they envision.

In sum, Levine's collection would be a fine supplement to an advanced survey course in modern political philosophy. It would also provide particularly valuable insights for nonspecialists preparing to teach such a course.

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Midgley, Mary. *Science and Poetry*.

New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. ix+230. \$35.00 (cloth); \$14.95 (paper).

Like her earlier books, Mary Midgley's *Science and Poetry* takes on Big Issues with panache, style, and wit. Her many admirers find her that rare philosopher whose writings not only bear on what matters to them but whose writings contain a minimum of jargon. Her detractors—especially sociobiologists—find her writings hectoring and antiscience. That she sometimes comes across as a scold seems undeniable. That she is antiscience, however, misses the mark: she is not antiscience, but antiscientism. That is, she opposes the vaulting ambition of science to be omniscient, the only arbiter of what is reasonable and rational, that which philosophy and poetry should humbly celebrate.

Science and Poetry is a sprawling book. Not everything in it will seem of immediate interest to some readers of this journal, but it does hang together in a loose, discursive way, so that no one is likely to regret having taken the entire journey with Midgley. True, those looking for tight, analytic arguments set down in a highly organized, progressive way will find the book annoying,

but Midgley's book is a good reminder that there is more than one way of doing good philosophy.

Midgley's central thesis is that detailed thought depends logically, epistemologically, causally, morally, and inspirationally on entirely nondetailed visions: "Every thought system has at its core a guiding myth—not a myth in the sense of a lie but of an imaginative vision, a picture which does indeed 'express its appeal to the deepest needs of our nature'" (p. 200; quoting E. O. Wilson). She tries to understand how such imaginative visions work and, more particularly, "to grasp the part which atomistic [and Cartesian] visions have played in shaping our own culture" (p. 7). Thus the title of her book.

Midgley has a keen eye for myths, metaphors, turns of phrase, and evocative terms. Why, for example, are nonscientists often described as "laymen"? Doesn't that suggest that scientists are priests, and that those of us who aren't scientists should show the kind of deference and obedience due priests? And, she points out, many suffer from "physics-envy," which has as bad effects on our general understanding of rational inquiry as the other kind of envy has on the relations between the sexes.

Half of Midgley's work is, therefore, destructive: to show how the atomistic and Cartesian vision—both of which were proper for their times—now distort our understanding of the world, including especially our moral and cultural world. The Epicureans, for example, wished to displace religion with atomistic science—and thereby make everyone happier. Now if religion is narrowly enough understood as consisting entirely of "mindless anxiety, bad cosmology, and human sacrifice" (p. 31), this imaginative vision can liberate us. So, too, with Descartes's split of mind from body. This also liberated the new science from the dead hand of scholasticism while, at the same time, insulating freedom, responsibility, morality, and religion from a thoroughly mechanistic understanding of the world.

As imaginative visions suitable to their time and problems, these two deserve our appreciation. But what so often happens is that we lose sight of their metaphorical, mythical, and poetic status and begin treating them as 'fact', as the way the world is. And this leads to myopia and distortion that has a direct effect on our understanding of freedom and responsibility. As in her *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom, and Morality* (London: Routledge, 1994), Midgley argues that the challenge to moral freedom and responsibility doesn't come from determinism—which she thinks is muddled anyway—but from fatalism, the view that we are passive victims since "it is all in our genes"—or some other scientific view, for example, behaviorism.

Even the renewed interest in consciousness reflects deep (and deeply flawed) fatalistic commitments. Suppose consciousness is epiphenomenal. In that case it isn't continuous with our natural evolutionary history and leads to fatalism because what goes on in consciousness doesn't matter. Alternatively, suppose consciousness is some kind of "extra ingredient" (David Chalmers) that needs to be accounted for "scientifically." In that case, it appears that we must hand over consciousness to physicists, chemists, and cognitive scientists.

I think Midgley is right to see either approach as a philosophical dead end and right to suggest that we need to understand consciousness adverbially. The difficulty, which recurs throughout the book, is that she doesn't follow through

with detailed arguments that would show, and not merely suggest, that this is the proper way to understand consciousness.

A similar problem arises in her lengthy defense of the Gaia Hypothesis, or the idea of life and the earth itself as a self-sustaining system. She describes it alternatively as a “useful idea” (p. 172), “the idea of our planet as *in some sense* a single organism” (p. 173, emphasis added), as a “myth, symbol” (p. 17), as “a living organism under the physicist’s or the biochemist’s definition” (p. 204, quoting James Lovelock), as functioning “in some way . . . as an organic whole” (p. 181), yet “not to be taken literally” (p. 183). And Midgley insists on viewing Gaia religiously, claiming that it (What? Earth as a living organism or as myth?) engenders a religious response, since lying behind our personification of Gaia (earth-goddess-like yet also organism-like) are sentiments of reverence, awe, wonder, and gratitude. Certainly the natural world fills us with awe and wonder; but reverence and gratitude? Should we stand in reverential awe as the lion pounces on the wildebeest, the tumor invades the brain? Be grateful? Perhaps, but Midgley never tells us exactly why—except that this imaginative vision counteracts sociobiological and mechanistic visions.

First, however, I don’t think Midgley is simply evoking Gaia as an imaginative vision, but as gospel: as something that she believes in as Christians believe in God. She is coy about this, but the tone is unmistakable: the language of gratefulness, especially, presses the question: Grateful to *whom*? And here is where Gaia as goddess really does supply a literal answer to that question. Second, that we will do better science and understand ourselves better, morally and otherwise, if we adopt a holistic perspective and not a reductive one seems absolutely correct. But Midgley has written enough books with this theme without producing the rigorous arguments needed to show its superiority, to show in detail what is wrong with those who find themselves in deep disagreement with her. It may not be Midgley’s particular gift to argue vigorously for her own imaginative, holistic perspective. Or perhaps she really does think that all we can do is set imaginative visions against one another in the hope that those who aren’t already committed will simply see the power of the ones she herself adopts.

Midgley is right that philosophy, generously understood, seeks connections. She also understands that rigorous, analytic argumentation isn’t the only way of doing philosophy, and it is admirable that she reminds us of that. It is another thing, however, to push aside, as dismissively as she does, the need to complement poetic imagination with detailed argument. This book—like so many of her others—is a wonderful place to start; it is a less desirable place to finish.

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Schönecker, Dieter, and Wood, Allen W. *Kants “Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten”*: Ein einführender Kommentar.

Paderborn: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002. Pp. 212. €9,90 (paper).

Libraries contain many shelves of books and articles devoted to the study of Kant’s ethics. Yet, aside from a 1962 German translation of H. J. Paton’s *The*