

Book Review

Can't We Make Moral Judgements?

by Mary Midgley

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Mary Midgley's short and somewhat convoluted book is a critical examination of the problem of scepticism as it relates to moral judgment. This is a problem that academic moral philosophers have long been interested in, but the current climate in advanced Western societies has given this investigation a new urgency. The breakdown of traditional sources of moral guidance and the experience of moral conflict and diversity have left many in contemporary society confused and uncertain about the validity of passing moral judgment on the acts and characters of others. Social critics across a broad spectrum perceive a loss of interest in, or of seriousness about, moral issues, and they trace this to a fashionable relativism and subjectivism about moral values. Against this background, a book like Midgley's is a welcome reminder that serious argument about moral topics is both possible and necessary.

Midgley clarifies her concern early on by distinguishing between two kinds of scepticism, the "enquiring" and the "dogmatic" (p. 3). The former refers to the salutary habit of asking questions about popularly held beliefs and withholding agreement with particular moral positions until some rational grounding has been provided for them. The second is more far-reaching and destructive of our moral practices, and this is the type of scepticism that engages

Midgley's attention throughout the book. For what the dogmatic sceptic claims is that there is "no rational way to answer" (p. 3) moral questions, no way to argue sensibly and systematically for or against any moral judgments whatsoever. (It should be noted that there are philosophers – e.g., Harman and Mackie – who profess forms of moral scepticism that go beyond the "enquiring," but that do not deny a role for reason and argument in ethics.) Elsewhere, Midgley characterizes this extreme scepticism as a denial of the possibility of moral *knowledge*.

Midgley explores the roots of the sceptical challenge in some detail. She traces the development of the Western ideal of freedom of the individual, and shows how, in its modern incarnation, it has come to exalt the solitary, self-reliant individual and to disparage dependency on and responsibility for others. Protecting the individual in his solitude is a zone of privacy, and individuals are commonly thought to be immune from moral criticism for whatever is done within the protected sphere. Actions in the public sphere, by contrast, are generally agreed to be appropriate candidates for censure, but it is the censure of law or custom, not morality. Against this, Midgley responds that the idea of a private sphere itself presupposes widely shared moral judgments. That is, the statement that some conduct falls within the private sphere reflects the prior judgment that it is either not wrong, or not wrong in such a way as to warrant interference by others. There is thus no ante-

cedently fixed notion of "the private" that blocks moral judgment of individual conduct.

Midgley also examines the pronouncements of those she labels subjectivists, philosophers like Nietzsche, Sartre, and Ayn Rand, who urge their readers to eschew external sources of moral guidance and create their own moral values. In fact, she argues, these philosophers turn out not to be the radical sceptics that a cursory reading of their work would suggest. Theirs is actually a "moralistic kind of subjectivism" (p. 96), not a sweeping critique of moral judgment as such, but a more limited repudiation of what they regard as particular false values and self-deceptive habits of mind.

Sometimes, Midgley observes, the expression of a general scepticism about moral judgment is only an exaggerated way of warning us about the dangers of being judgmental and self-righteous. Thus, a certain hesitation before judging the practices of cultures that are remote from or alien to our own is well-advised, since there may be real obstacles standing in the way of our understanding the meaning those practices have within those cultures. But this sound advice, Midgley tells us, is very different from the thesis of relativism, either in its simple form, which asserts that "the existing principles of other cultures *are valid in those cultures*" (p. 76), or in its apparently more plausible sceptical form, which holds that "nobody can say anything valid about moral questions in cultures other than their own" (p. 77). Indeed, relativism should be rejected because people tend to assume that "at a profound level the human race is in some way one" (p. 85). How, or whether, a universal morality can be grounded in what people suppose to be a common human nature is a question that Midgley does not pause to examine.

Untenable though relativism might be, Midgley believes that it serves a useful purpose in underscoring the essentially public or communal aspect of morality. The notion of an entirely private morality is

senseless, she argues at several places in the book, because moral judgment utilizes linguistic and conceptual categories supplied by the larger society. Society provides the background that invests our moral judgments with meaning, and "without this background, we could not speak or think coherently on such subjects at all" (p. 42). But this conceptual argument, it should be noted, would not provide a basis for moral criticism of social practices. For example, it would not support the claim that a society which fails to promote acts of positive assistance for persons in need is morally deficient.

Midgley appears to understand this in her chapters on "individualism, solitude and privacy" and "morality and harm," but her discussion is confusing. She continues to refer to the communal nature of morals, but she fails to alert the reader to the fact that her criticism of extreme individualism is actually based on a different construal of the relationship between individual and society. The criticism proceeds not from a general point about meaning, but rather from a view about "the mutual dependence in which we all quite rightly live with those around us" (p. 59).

On the issue of moral knowledge, Midgley does not hold that moral judgments are factual in the paradigm sense afforded by natural science, but she attempts to elaborate and defend an account of moral knowledge that is broadly of a piece with her account of scientific knowledge. She rejects the classical foundationalist view of Descartes, according to which belief is justified when it is self-evidently true or derived from self-evident truths, as "an over-ambitious search for perfectly secure knowledge" that ends "in a paralysing disillusion" (p. 130). Understanding this, she claims, should make us more receptive to the possibility of genuine moral knowledge, for while the quest for absolutely certain foundations is obviously futile in morality, it is no less futile in science as well. The correct account of knowledge in both areas is a coherentist one.

Midgley's brief discussion of a coherentist approach to moral justification is one of the more interesting parts of her book. "What supports value-judgements," she argues, "is their relation to the whole of life" (p. 138). Some moral beliefs derive their clout from the relatively central position they occupy in the fabric of our moral experience: "they are woven into everything we do, and cannot be changed without bringing society itself to a standstill" (p. 139). Others are more peripheral in the sense that they are alterable without calling into question the bulk of our moral attitudes and principles. In any case, Midgley observes, no moral belief, however deeply implicated in our moral lives, is immune to revision, and a radical shift away from our initial convictions is possible, at least over an extended period of time. Readers familiar with Rawls's use of the notion of "reflective equilibrium" may find it a way fruitfully to develop Midgley's suggestive remarks.

In the penultimate chapter of her book, Midgley offers a different sort of response to the moral sceptic. "It is of special interest to notice," she says, "how unavoidable it is that we should pass judgements on ourselves" (p. 150). The argument here is a complex one that links the making of such judgments to the possession of a sense of one's own identity through time. The authority of morality, according to Midgley, is rooted in a psychological fact about us, in the fact that it is "deeply distressing to us to live shapelessly, incoherently, discontinuously, meaninglessly – to live without standards" (p. 153). Whatever the merits of moral scepticism as an abstract philosophical position, then, it fails to take into account certain fundamental facts about human psychological makeup. But it is not clear whether this argument succeeds. The moral sceptic, as Midgley describes him, believes that it is not possible to justify on rational grounds the conviction that any particular form of conduct is really any better than any other. It does not seem to

follow from this, however, that the sceptic cannot have deeply felt and abiding moral convictions about various matters. What Midgley needs to show is why belief in the rational defensibility of one's moral convictions is necessary for the possession of a sense of one's continuity through time.

If features of human psychology are taken as basic and the adequacy of the moral sceptic's position is to be assessed in terms of its compatibility with them, then this would seem to have important implications for Midgley's coherentist account of moral justification. The suggestion, in other words, is that the possibilities of revision of our moral beliefs are likewise constrained by our possession of certain psychological characteristics. Some revisions, while possible in an abstract sense, might not fall within the range of the naturalistic possibilities, and so be unavailable to us. Midgley does not explicitly connect up her coherentist account with her anti-sceptical naturalistic argument in this way, but she might very well agree with the point.

Midgley's book ranges over a wide array of topics in an engaging manner that is refreshingly free of technical philosophical jargon. If the test of a good introduction to philosophy is whether it excites interest in the subject and stimulates further reading, then her book should get high marks. But readers with a background in philosophy will likely be disappointed with the brevity and occasional abstruseness of her treatment of difficult issues, and they may be put off by the book's freewheeling and unsystematic style.

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