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According to The Guardian, Midgley is 'the foremost scourge of scientific pretentions in this country; someone whose wit is admired even by those who fee she sometimes oversteps the mark'. This book examines how science comes to be used as a substitute for religion and points out how badly that role distorts it. Her argument is flawlessly insightful: a punch, compelling, lively indictment of these misuses of science. Both the book and its author are true classics of our time.

Evolution as a Religion (Routledge Classics) Details

Date	:	Published March 31st 2002 by Routledge (first published 1985)
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From Reader Review Evolution as a Religion (Routledge Classics) for online ebook

Joseph Sverker says

A very interesting book with many valid points. I would like to see the response from the sociobiologists. Somewhat dense in her style which makes it difficult to follow her line of thought at times.

Elin Star says

I only didn't give it 5 stars because I found it almost too reasonable - I think I lack the philosophic mind...

But her lucid exposition and refusal to get pulled in to either side of the debate is admirable.

And some of her phrases: 'It is easier to get rid of gods than demons..' yes indeed it is.

Gavin says

The title gives an extremely misleading idea; you'd think it was a standard ignorant *tu quoque* work of romantic theism. But it isn't.

Instead she traces how easy it is for scientists (including acknowledged lucid greats like Wilson, Tegmark) to slip into philosophy and end up committing howlers.

Ryan says

I read this book as a sort of challenge to myself. This book doesn't so much challenge Evolution as a scientific principle, but all the social hoo-hah that gets built up around it. As a person who is never quite sure what to make of how Evolution gets used, but tends to side with the scientists in most battles of this kind, the book seemed provocative in all the right ways. Midgley is also the apparent philosophical adversary of Richard Dawkins, and I was intrigued to hear why.

All in all, I enjoyed the book. Midgley's arguments are pretty straightforward and sensible. Her problem is really with how Evolution gets filtered through the other sciences into popular culture, leading to a large set of assumed consequences and explanations that Darwin never made the slightest claim about. Midgley's reasoning as to why this happens in the academy and our larger society ring true to me, and I agree with her assertion that we need to really reassess these points of view, as they often separate us from the planet we inhabit and basically rob us of our essential humanity.

Richard Newton says

This is not a book about science or even really about evolution, it is about the use of scientific thinking in non scientific ways. (If you doubt Midgeley's acceptance of evolution see the quote at the start of the book - it is actually dedicated to Darwin). Reading this in 2012, some of the references seem old and with one or two major exceptions are not books that I think have a significant influence now. It might be helpful to have newer references, but the flaws and habits Midgeley criticises are evident in many modern scientific texts. You can be a proactive supporter of science, whilst still being critical of the language and thinking of some scientists. I give the book 5 stars as it was good to read and thought provoking - surely the signs of a good book?

Monica Perez says

This is one of the books I found in the bibliography of Michael Crichton's Next. Good philosophy and I liked it until she put her politics in at the end. Basically, her point is, science is treading on the domain of religion to its peril.

Chris Lynch says

How could I resist a book with such an inflamatory title!?

The first thing to make quite clear is that Mary Midgley isn't in any way, shape or form launching an attack on science here, nor is she making the claim that science, in itself, is a form of religious belief like any other. Nor is her viewpoint one that insists we surrender all notions of objective reality, and that science is merely a politicised or socially contextualised narrative or dialogue that we accept or reject according to our fancy. I wanted to start this review by banishing these notions because the title of this book seems at first glance an invitation to assume one of the above. It's an invitation that many reviewers have not been slow to take up, but they are misguided in so doing. Even the person who wrote the cover notes for the book makes this error, stating that Midgley 'examines how science comes to function as a substitute for religion, and then exposes it as nothing more than a magnificent sham'. This is very unfortunate because it is patently what she does *not* do, and is selling the book to the wrong audience.

So what is this book actually about?

Religious fundamentalists commit their worst errors when they lay claim to factual knowledge about matters that properly lie within the realm of scientific enquiry, e.g. the age of the earth or the origin of species. However, what is less widely recognised, is that scientists too are sometimes prone to overstep the mark and go beyond the boundaries of purely empirical science, telling us that such and such a scientific truth about the behaviour of particles and molecules infers some philosophical truth about our own moral nature and the meaning of our existence. These statements do not actually follow from the science, and do not stand up to rigorous scrutiny - rather, they might be taken as an emotional reaction by the scientist in response to their findings, or at best metaphors to assist the reader's understanding; but being made by scientists, and appearing alongside the science, they are perceived by the unwary (or over-eager) reader as carrying the same degree of empirically-supported authority. Later, long after the science itself is forgotten, the clumsy pop philosophising remains in the public mind as if it were some truth that has been scientifically proven.

Midgley is (in)famous for having taken Richard Dawkins to task over his selfish gene metaphor, which is attended to in this book. This is the subject of a long-running personal feud between them. Midgley was a bit ungracious towards Dawkins in the early stages of this debate, and I have to agree with Dawkins himself that

she was perhaps aiming at the wrong target - the people she should more rightly have taken to task were those who ignored Dawkin's own warnings about taking his metaphor of gene 'Selfishness' too literally or extending conclusions about gene behaviour to make overly rigid inferences about human nature. Had she done so, she and Dawkins would have found themselves on the same side of the argument.

Midgley has since apologised for her 'intemperate' remarks; and for his part, Dawkins has admitted that the genetic metaphor of 'Selfishness' might indeed have been a poor choice which has engendered a great deal of misunderstanding amongst laymen who, unable to grasp the full sophistication of his account of gene behaviour, have crudely quote-mined him to support their own social and political viewpoints.

In the latest edition of The Selfish Gene, Dawkins goes to considerable lengths to explain that gene 'selfishness' does not dirctly translate into a behavioural imperative, nor does it even imply that selfish individualism is the best survival strategy - it's just the best one that our stupid genes, mere molecules lacking any conscious foresight or ablity to cooperate, can muster. I think that Midgley's criticisms, albeit a little unfairly directed at Dawkins personally, went some way towards him realising the importance of clarifying these things. Nevertheless, a certain frostiness lingers between them, and needless to say, Midgley is something of a bête noire in the eyes of Dawkins' occasionally rabid fanbase for daring to criticise their idol.

However, Dawkins' regrettable choice of metaphors actually pales in comparison with many of Midgeley's other (and far more legitimate) targets, some of whose writings resemble nothing so much as Vincent Prince's deranged rant at the beginning of Alice Cooper's 'Black Widow'. An example: Evolutionary biologist Michael Ghiselin (whose primary area of research is sea slugs, which clearly qualifies him to comment on the behaviour of all living organisms) writes - "...given a full chance to act in his own interest, nothing but expediency will restrain [every organism] from brutalising, from maiming, from murdering - his brother, his mate, his parent or his child. Scratch an 'altruist' and watch a 'hypocrite' bleed".

There are many more examples of this sort given in the book where scientists suddenly ditch their sobriety and calm, methodical skepticism and make a leap from the hard facts of their narrowly-focussed research to some startling generalisation, moral judgement, wild prediction or statement of pure fantasy with the same degree of implied certainty with which Newton states his laws of motion. Midgley demonstrates that this use of science as a soap-box for a quick bit of moral or metaphysical sermonising is not confined to biologists, with physicists also occasionally unable to resist the lure.

Midgley isn't averse to people having opinions about morality or the meaning of life, of course, and she takes the opportunity to espouse a few views of her own. Her complaint is about the illusion of scientific endorsement that's been granted to some very ham-fisted philosophical musings which haven't been clearly marked as such.

Coming from a scientific background myself, I welcome Midgley's comments. There are too many people these days who believe that science can do no wrong and that any criticism of scientists is somehow 'anti-science', but who fail to realise that what science says and what scientists say are not always the same thing. And contrary to the charges of her critics I found nothing in the book that gave me an impression that Mary Midgley is anti-science or that she doesn't understand how science works. Unfortunately, these accusations seem to be the knee-jerk reaction of a group of self-appointed defenders of science who want to lump anybody who criticises Richard Dawkins in with the Young Earth Creationists.

As well as disentangling opinion from actual science in scientific writings, Midgley also demonstrates how these opinions map onto elements commonly found in religious belief systems, both optimistic and fatalistic in nature (pointing out along the way that not all religions incorporate the monotheistic creator figure of middle eastern tradition). And thus, these bits of scientist-endorsed pop philosophy seep into the public consciousness and form the stuff of a new mythology. Hence - Evolution as a Religion.

Maddy says

Important criticisms of Darwinists and eugenicists from the perspective of a philosopher. Midgley is wonderful to read.

A.J. Jr. says

One of the smartest people on the planet!

Kevin K says

This book identifies a number of quasi-religious belief systems which derive credibility from their association with science and evolution:

1) Social Darwinism
2) The "Superman" (in Nietzsche's sense), which today appears in forms like Transhumanism and the Singularity
3) The unstoppable ascent of human technical progress (what Midgley calls the "Escalator Fallacy")

These are all fascinating doctrines, and Midgely is right to draw the comparison with religion. Items 2) and 3) in particular are classic examples of "letting God in through the backdoor" of evolution. Unfortunately, this is a skimpy, poorly focused book that doesn't do justice to the subject it attempts to cover.

Michael says

(I don't own a Kindle; I bought the paperback version of the book...)

Will Napier says

Midgley is a pleasure to read. Her turn of phrase is amusing and engaging. Her perspective seems very sane. The claim is that evolution is not just a parsimonious theory about origins and life, but that it functions as a metaphor, indeed a myth (in its neutral sense), that can take on a life of its own. Midgley's method of giving the thumbs down is to use amusingly gentle words such as 'odd' and 'curious' for the tendency of some scientists to become so excited about their findings in their particular area, that they fall for the 'hubris' of thinking that their idea is capable (now or one day) of explaining everything. Midgley is careful to exonerate Darwin from this programme, as he was all too aware of these dangers, and explicitly distanced himself from the word 'evolution' and the idea of some kind of inexorable upward progress (Lamarck's ladder), and Spencer's vision of the 'survival of the fittest'. The language and approach of E O Wilson and sociobiology is given scathing treatment with a refutation of the idea that (in the words of Ghiselin) "scratch an 'altruist' and watch a 'hypocrite' bleed"'.

Many celebrated writers are interrogated. Dawkins' notorious over-metaphorising the idea of 'selfishness' in a gene is seen as implying a naïve 'bean-bag genetics', an 'animistic' personification of the gene, describing 'competition' emotively as a deliberate project, and what Midgley considers a sleight of hand in transfering the 'selfishness' of genes to humans: 'we are born selfish'. Monod's imagining of the absurdity (his view) of humans as alone in a godless universe is shown to be one mythic choice amongst other, more positive possibilities (eg a sense of oneness). Russell's 'logical atomism' in which there are only isolated truths is seen as an unnecessary reaction to the mystical holism of Hegel's scheme, and answered with Wittgenstein's observation that particulars do not always precede generalities.

As someone who lived for many years as a devout Christian believer, I was engaged by her discussion of what constitutes a 'religious' approach to 'awe, reverence and mystery' (ch 13). Inspiring quotations are given from Dostoevsky, James, and Russell about a sense of destiny, submission, purpose and humility in the face of the vastness of our ignorance that religion enables (but in Russell includes every 'deeply serious view of the world and human destiny'). This attitude is contrasted with the optimism of those such as E O Wilson, and Crick, who consider that the major part of the scientific programme is graspable in the forseeable future.

An appeal is made to reconcile 'right' and 'left' perspectives on life to replace the 'vs' with 'and' in 'reason vs feeling/emotion' or 'physical science vs the humanities'. Kipling's quotation is amusingly apt here:

Something I owe to the soil that grew-
More to the life that fed -
But most to Allah Who gave me two
Separate sides to my head

I would go without shirt of shoes
Friends, tobacco or bread
Sooner than for an instant lose
Either side of my head

In this spirit, the specialisation in science is seen to require a broader education as compensation, lest scientists compensate by over-applying the results of their particular work, or by finding themselves ill-equipped for the moral, ethical, aesthetic and cultural aspects of a full human life.

Favourite quotation:

"Meaning is connection, so it can always be removed from a pattern by cutting it up into sufficiently small pieces" (p 96)

This is a precursor to a much fuller treatment of 'greedy reductionism' and 'atomism' given in 'The Myths We Live By', a book I would recommend in preference to the earlier book of this review, alongside 'Science and Religion' in which Midgley discusses the need for a reconcilliation between science and artistic ways of knowing. Those two books render this one a strictly unnecessary but highly enjoyable supererogation.

John David says

For at least a century, the compatibility of science and religion seems to keep popping up as a perennial question demanding our renewed attention. Prevalent among pretty much all non-scientists and even the vast majority of practicing scientists is the rather naïve idea that science is an objective set of facts that have come about through a purely positivistic, empirical search for knowledge about the universe. With this view often

comes its corollaries, like the idea that science is an activity which is totally divorced from other stories and mythologies that we weave about ourselves, wholly objective and cut off from religious or mythological assumptions we have about human nature. In this book, Mary Midgley – always the ideological shit-stirrer when it comes to the sacred cows of science – wants to argue that science is actually much more complicated than this.

Rather than being an objective pursuit apart from other human interests, many forms of science actually show themselves to be closely tied up with grander stories that we tell ourselves which transcend the boundaries of normal science. To quote Midgley, "I had been struck for some time by certain remarkable prophetic and metaphysical passages that appeared suddenly in scientific books about evolution, often in their last chapters. Though these passages were detached from the official reasoning of the books, they seemed still to be presented as science. But they made startling suggestions about vast themes such as immortality, human destiny, and the meaning of life." Relating to evolution, Midgley is particularly critical of two popular trends: we can call them the Escalator Fallacy (the optimistic one) and the Meaningless Speck (the pessimistic one). The Escalator Fallacy, offered up in various forms by names as diverse as Herbert Spencer, Lamarck, and Karl Marx, says that so far evolution's highest and most profound achievement is the human being, and that over time, we will only grow in physical strength, intellect, creativity, awareness, etc. On the contrary, the idea of the Meaningless Speck, espoused by the likes of famous astrophysicist Steve Weinberg, holds that the more that we know about the universe, the more pointless it seems to become, but that science provides the soupcon of solace and consolation to keep us that "lifts human life a little above the level of face, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy." Needless to say, despite both of these ideas being expressed by many well-known scientists, neither of these conclusions are exactly what we would call "scientific." Rather, they are very much mythical ideas about our place in the universe that, if we're not careful, become imbricated in the practice of science itself, and therefore actually seem to become equivalent in truth-value to the claims of science.

Midgley is also critical of the conclusions that scientists often draw about life from a misguided understanding of evolutionary mechanics. For example, she rakes Richard Dawkins over the coals for coining the term "selfish gene," because she thinks it's silly to impute descriptors of animal behavior to long chains of sugars, phosphates, and bases. (Of course, it is not the selfishness of the gene that helps it survive at all, she argues, but rather that the gene creates an animal better-suited to its environment and therefore much more likely to pass that gene to consequent generations.) However when Dawkins imports the language of human intentionality, Midgley thinks he's promoting the "worship of competition. It is projecting a Thatcherite take on economics on to evolution. It's not an impartial scientific view; it's a political drama." (And by using the word "misguided" in the first sentence of this paragraph, I'm not so much suggesting that Dawkins has a misguided understanding of evolution – needless to say, I respect and value his opus of scientific work, not to mention his tireless work to popularize scientific ideas. But by using the adjective "selfish," he is consciously choosing language which makes it seem as if genes are thinking, breathing, cognizant things.)

She ends the book in much the same way that the books that she criticizes do, however – namely by concluding a far-overreaching generalization from the relatively small body of examples that she has considered. Because of the stories that scientists overlay on evolution (sociobiology is also considered in the book), she says that science is not really a realm that values logic, reasoning, and deduction more than any other epistemic pursuit, and that science is just "one more way of knowing," along with poetry or religion.

I'm sorry, but this simply will not do. Whereas orthodox religion has constantly been shoved further into the corner in light of scientific and technological advances, science continues to be the one self-correcting process that can render accurate, reliable information about the world. This is not to say that it or even its most advanced practitioners are without fault, nor are they ever able, by definition, to escape the subjectivity of their own minds. But to go from noticing that some scientists occasionally graft and interweave conclusions that can be considered non-scientific into popular explanations of their work to assuming that

therefore there can be nothing we can even begin to consider with a large degree of objectivity is the very definition of poisoning the well.

Because of the flawed nature of logical induction and human error, science has made and will continue to make many mistakes. But here's the kicker: science is self-correcting. Scientific ideas are never considered to be Truths (capital "T") as the truths of religion or the Truth and Beauty of Keats are. Scientific models that work are always provisional, and therefore always up for revision and sometimes complete and total overhaul if they fail, or become unable of explaining a particular phenomenon. Nothing remotely similar can be said to be the case for other methods of exploring the universe around us – especially religion.

Mary Midgley passed away last year on October 10, 2018 at the age of 99. Much of what she said angered and provoked the scientific establishment, and much of what she said I think is partially wrong or at least overstated. However, I've never failed to find at least a glimmer of something thought provoking in her work. She was the kind of person the world needs more of: a provocateur never afraid to ask hard questions and even throw the occasional grenade. Do yourself the honor of picking up something by her. Whatever it is will almost certainly challenge the way that you see and think about the world. In the past, I've reviewed Wickedness, her book on the nature of human morality. You can read it here: https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...