



## *Antiscientism* in Mary Midgley (1919–2018)

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A guiding concern of Mary Midgley was antiscientism, defined broadly in terms of inflated conceptions of the nature, scope, and value of the sciences. Across books such as *Science as Salvation*, *Evolution as a Religion*, and *Science and Poetry*, her method was to take an emerging or contemporary instance of scientism and to subject it to critical investigation. Such critical work ought to be particularist, starting from specific, local cases and only extending into more general analyses as and when necessary. It should also be carefully informed by history and by close attention to science itself, as with Midgley's researches in evolutionary theory, ethology, and ecology. Although there is a general 'spirit' or 'attitude' to many forms of scientism, our critical work is best done at the level of its specific instantiations - such as the sociobiology of the 1970s or the reductionist physics of the 1990s (Midgley 2011: 22).

Underlying Midgley's antiscientism is clearly a deep respect for the sciences, coupled to an equal appreciation for other disciplines, traditions, and ways of thinking. Science, philosophy, theology, poetry, literature, emotions, everyday experience, common sense, the imagination - all of these have their roles within the living and understanding of human life. Some deserve to be the lead voice on certain topics, while others will be ensemble efforts, with Midgley's favourite example being human nature, whose complexity requires the contributions of many ways of thinking.

The purpose of Midgley's anti-scientism was not to impugn science, but rather to enable us to better appreciate the complexities of its history and nature, so that we can better understand and direct its activities for the human good. Scientistic myth-busting is an important task for any philosophy that respects science, which acknowledges its complexly mixed theoretical, empirical, practical, social and historical dimensions, and aspires to 'do justice to this complexity' (Midgley 2001: 85).

A contribution of philosophising about science and scientism, of the sort Midgley practiced, was to honour the point that 'the arguments for our own faiths, including faith in science itself, lie outside science' (Midgley 2002: 23). Scientism corrupts our understanding and appreciation of science, thus constitutes a distorted sort of faith that that we do better without.

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### **Keywords:**

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