



Scientism in Mary Midgley (1919–2018)

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Mary Midgley did not offer a single definition of scientism, nor develop a standard set of criticisms. Rather, she developed a general account of scientism, a view she was to criticise. According to Midgley, some forms of scientism introduce conceptual confusions, as in talk of “selfish genes”, or dramatic claims about selves being “illusions”, or exaggerated doctrines of hyper-individualism that downplay our being social creatures. Some forms of scientism are manifestations of very deep historical and cultural tendencies, rooted in “myths” – not false stories, but “imaginative visions”, which lend shape and significance to our projects, concerns, and ambitions (Midgley 2011: 1). Such myths are essential to human life, she argued, including to the sciences. The myths surrounding science are apt to bewitch us into excess since its cognitive and practical accomplishments are so dazzling; for that reason, we are vulnerable to develop a “general veneration for the idea of science”, which is apt to become scientistic when it becomes cut off from “any real understanding of its methods” (Midgley 2002: 31).

Examples of scientistic myths include images of science as immaculately rational, methodologically unified, isolated from social and political values, etc. Failing to attend to the myths will tend to lead us astray, especially if the myths are bad ones, out of kilter with our current needs—the myth of the selfish gene, for instance, emphasises our “separateness from the world around us.” Other myths, like that of Gaia, encourage our “profound dependence on it” (SP: 16). Midgley’s aims were to restore our appreciation of the importance of myths to science and then to subject some of the dominant myths of our times to critical scrutiny (see “*antis scientism*”). The ultimate aim was not to make science myth-free, but to make sure the myths at work are those best suited to our current needs and problems.

Scientism wrongly supposes that scientific methods are suited to all things – Midgley argued that scientism often involves inappropriately applying scientific concepts and methods. Evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and physics are useful and important enough, without their needing to be assigned the role of answering all of our questions, across all domains.

Midgley shows that scientism does science an injustice—by wrongly assigning to it

exclusive responsibility for problems and issues that are properly the work of some other disciplines, and unfairly making its esteem contingent on its successful discharge of duties that fall well beyond its proper domain.

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