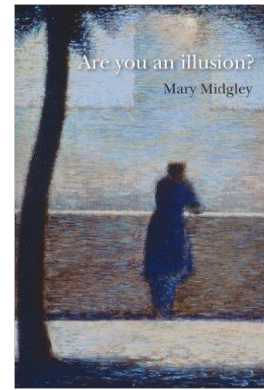


Mary Midgley

Are You an Illusion?

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Preface – the book ‘flows from my increasing exasperation at the current tendency of many well-qualified scholars to claim, apparently in the name of science, that they believe themselves, and indeed their readers, not to exist, selves having apparently been replaced by arrangements of brain cells.’ Perhaps this is a necessary pillar of their faith in science, a prop for the certainty we so badly need in a disordered world?

Introduction – are we losing ourselves?

A remarkable gap has opened up between common sense and today’s scientific orthodoxy, centrally about the idea that science has shown that our inner selves are mere illusions. It seems we do not exist. This is contrary to direct human perceptions. If new suggestions cannot be understood in ways which fit the general human vision, then we should suspect that there is something wrong.

Science is not composed of ready-made facts. People who formulate those facts have to use assumptions – patterns of expectation within which they select, arrange, shape and classify their data, since these can at first seem very confused.

Crick: ‘You, your joys and sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and your free-will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve-cells and their attendant molecules’. This worldview is not science but scientism, a glorification of science. Physical science is not a supreme champion outclassing history or philosophy; it does not need to be flattered by being supposed to be universal.

1. Changing relations to the cosmos

Science is not immutable; it suffers its own earthquakes – eg Newton and gravity, Darwin and evolution. The old division between matter and spirit no longer seemed satisfactory, and a new organising force was needed to replace God – natural selection stepped in. Questions about subjectivity, though, arose only in the C20th, when behavioural psychologists decided that consciousness must be banished from academic consideration because it is unscientific. The mind-body problem is now solved by removing the mind...

How much of what there is can physical science render intelligible, measurable? Is mind a component of nature, or an add-on? Natural selection is inadequate to explain creation; there is a real mystery about that – natural selection is like a filter applied to coffee; it may govern the taste but you still need the coffee to start with.

2. Sciencephobia and its sources

What is it that frightens people so much about Science? The question is now not, do you believe in God, but do you believe in yourself? But it does not come easily to believe, as Crick recognises, that I am the detailed behaviour of a set of nerve cells; that the human brain is a machine and that all our actions result from activity within it. You are being tricked into believing in your self; the self is simply a useful illusion, scientists cry. Really? It seems that the language used in the physical sciences trumps that of everyday life – it’s superior, closer to reality. It alone can tell the truth.

How did we get here? Partly by scientists’ reliance on atomization – finding the meaning of things by breaking them down into their smallest components. It’s a great tool for discovering the structure of physical matter – but not the right tool for investigating identity. Thought does not come in units, any more than the Thames does. Physicists talk about ‘the ultimate building blocks of reality’ – which ends up meaning ‘nothing is real except the physical objects that are described by the natural sciences.’ Science is believed to deal only in proven facts, so its verdicts are taken to be final. Many people believe in it as others believe in God. And yet

behind the proven facts there are always hidden assumptions. The materialist credo rules that thoughts (being immaterial) cannot cause events – and yet we know that they do.

3. Transcendent numbers – Pythagoras and Plato

The respect for physics and mathematics which so moved Newton et alia came originally from Pythagoras, who declared in the 6th BC that ‘all is number.’ But he started from a different place – music, harmony, and the need to live within that which governs the universe. It was a religious perspective. Plato centred his thinking on this contrast between the shifting things of the material world and the timeless truths of the ideal world. This was eventually incorporated into the Christian distinction between earth and heaven.

4. What explanation is

Neuroscience is identifying which parts of the brain ‘light up’ for what; and the discovery of mirror neurons which enable us to understand one another without words is fascinating. But it’s as if we didn’t know these things until science proved them. Objects do need subjects – our subjective experiences are every bit as necessary as brain cells. Einstein needed not just his brain cells, but a whole conscious background to a problem. We cannot divide mind and body.

5. Why the idea of purpose won’t go away

Teleology (reasoning from purpose) has been cut out from scientific thought, because purpose now apparently has no place in nature. What’s it for? Only one answer allowed – its only function is self-perpetuation, of course. Organisms have been replaced by genes, which control them from within; they have succumbed to the onslaught of an overwhelming molecular reductionism (Goodwin). Result – the world is held to consist of objects without subjects, which makes no sense at all. Evolutionary biologists suggest that speech cannot be altruistic (it’s all about getting sex) – we derive all our motivations from the single stem of selfishness, or enlightened self-interest. Which, said Darwin, is radically mistaken, for we are an intrinsically sociable species – it’s all about group selection.

6. Is sexual selection natural?

The new imagery of the selfish gene suited the Thatcherite era. But problems began to emerge – eg genes themselves turn out to be cooperative. And what about the choices involved in selecting a mate, eg based on display, ornament? Darwin had highlighted these, but no one took any notice: could the tastes of hen pheasants really influence the design of future generations? It’s easier to ignore motive than explain it – and that’s what the behaviourists did. There is a kind of universal striving – even in the acorn, which does its best to get out of the darkness of the earth and grow up into air and light. Human consciousness is not the only model. Dawkins proclaims that ‘DNA neither cares nor knows. DNA just is.’ And then he adds, ‘And we dance to its music’ – odd, because of course you can’t produce music unless you have a purpose and are able to fulfil it.

7. The search for senselessness

It’s obvious that our planet is riddled with purpose; it’s full of organisms which steadily pursue their own characteristic ways of life. Darwin said he deserved to be called a Theist, for he felt that it was impossible to conceive of the immense and wonderful universe not having a First Cause, an intelligent mind, behind it. DNA won’t do instead. Nagel – ‘the possibility of the development of conscious organisms must have been built into the world from the beginning. It cannot be an accident.’ We are required to recognise intelligence (design) of some kind as a basic constituent of the universe, whatever we may then decide to think about a designer. And human design and purpose are part of the universal order on earth.

8. The beasts that perish

Our traditional dualism leads us into a mistaken concept of the nature of non-human animals, reducing them to beings that neither feel nor think. This is not based on fact, but on myth – background assumptions. It was

finally exploded by Konrad Lorenz. Our belief that we are detached from other animals, and from the earth that produced them, is an example of scientific superstition – an opinion maintained contrary to evidence, in order to suit an imaginative habit (a mechanistic vision of the world).

9. Free will, not just free won't

Materialists deny it. And yet we now know that minds can affect brains as well as brains affecting minds – thoughts can directly alter the state of brain cells. Aristotle postulated 4 kinds of causality: material, formal, efficient (what made it) and final (purpose).

10. How divided selves live

People who reject free will normally still expect to exercise it! And the agency who decides is not a brain but a whole person – in fact even the brain has two processes, details on the left, big picture on the right; and both are used in decision making. Descartes and his colleagues adopted dualism primarily in order not to disturb the religious worldview of the time. But dualism doesn't work – just think about soil, which is a mix of broken rock, pollen, fungal filaments, ciliate cysts, bacterial spores, nematodes and other microscopic animals (Margulis). We are totally dependent on and continuous with the earth around us. One motivation for the dualists was to get rid of magic as an explanation for the way things are – from alchemy to medicine. It was just one mythology triumphing over another. Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis was not disreputable, scientifically; but it was rejected nonetheless.

11. Hemispheres and holism

The two halves of the brain perceive the world in different ways. We are complicated beings!

12. The supernatural aspects of physics

How have we managed to drift into this dualism? Materialism has so many drawbacks – scientists are now even trying to eliminate time, which is apparently also an illusion, in order to leave only space. It's all becoming so ludicrous it can't last. We have discovered a good deal about what stuff human beings are made of, but there is no method by which we can take their thoughts to pieces in the same way. Maybe instead of exploring two different stuffs, we should use the image of one vast landscape, one which can be explored from various angles but not fully opened up from any one standpoint. Or by comparing sight and touch, different, complementary, each as real as the other.

It's interesting that dualism does not mention the term 'life' – for which we still have no definition.

Mechanistic thinking forgot that real machines need real minds to design them, and when we talk of any living being as a machine we are simply using a metaphor.

Conclusion – On being still here

All that we know, from any culture, about human behaviour shows that it can be understood only by reference to people's own thoughts, dreams, hopes, fears and other feelings. It's interesting to note that when Crick talks about a human being as no more than a vast assembly of nerve cells, he says 'you' – not him.