That you should never say no to a gift from a right.
That one should keep one's words both soft and tender, because tomorrow I may have to eat them.
That a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your moods. It is a life threatening situation.
That when you harbour bitterness, happiness will dock in elsewhere.
That one should keep one's words both soft and tender, because tomorrow I may have to eat them.
That a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks.
That I can’t choose how I feel, but I can choose what I do about it.
That when your newly born grandchild holds your little finger in his little fist, you are hooked for life.
That everyone wants to live on top of the mountain, but all the happiness and growth occurs while you are climbing it.
That it is best to give advice in only two words: ‘You’ve made my day!’ makes my day.
That a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks.
That I can’t choose how I feel, but I can choose what I do about it.
That when you harbour bitterness, happiness will dock in elsewhere.
That one should keep one’s words both soft and tender, because tomorrow I may have to eat them.
That a smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks.
That I can’t choose how I feel, but I can choose what I do about it.
That when you harbour bitterness, happiness will dock in elsewhere.
are guided by visions that are inappropriate to the study we are engaged in.

One important vision or imaginative habit is atomism. It works well in natural sciences—for example, in physics and molecular genetics. Physical atomism is not a theory of physics: it is more like a presupposition concerning the ways in which theories of physics should be formed in order to make sense.

Social atomism is transferred to the social sciences, individualism results. In cultural studies atomism appears as the presupposition of “memes”—that is, a cultural object or belief that can be replicated, passed on, and evolve, and which seems to have a life of its own. Transfers of this kind are often thought of as attempts to prove that the studies concerned are genuinely scientific—that is, of the same stock as the natural sciences. So if social sciences are to be scientific, social atomism has to be presupposed; cultural studies deserve the name of science only if cultural atomism is presupposed; and so on.

Dualism, materialism, and reductionism are other visions or ways of imagining the world. Many more can be found in our thoughts and actions, and, of course, not only in academic life. They are unavoidable. There is no science without presuppositions of various kinds—for example, ontological, categorial, and methodological. Every scientific inquiry is relative to the point of view of one of its presuppositions and, when successful, it gives a true picture of a reality only in some aspect or other. The claim that one has covered the aspect of it as an object. The whole person is a subject, the latter the aspect of the whole as a subject, the latter the aspect of it as an object. The whole person belongs within a wider context of interlocking larger wholes, and ultimately of that living system we call the earth, with Gaia the earth goddess as its most expressive symbol.

How, in particular, should we talk about the relation between ourselves as subjects and as objects—between the first—and third person aspects of ourselves? What sort of beings do we—as a whole—now turn out to be?

According to Midgley, the key to understanding the unity of our lives is to understand ourselves as whole persons. Mind and body are two aspects of that whole, the former the aspect of the whole as a subject, the latter the aspect of it as an object. The whole person belongs within a wider context of interlocking larger wholes, and ultimately of that living system we call the earth, with Gaia the earth goddess as its most expressive symbol.

Many consequences follow from this radical holism. The weaknesses of individualism in social science are exposed effectively; new light is thrown on responsibilities, rights, and duties; freedom and determinism are re-articulated; the bridge between thought and feeling becomes visible; and the similarities and differences between science and poetry emerge—the similarities turn on the presence in both of visions or ways of imagining the world, the differences on a distinction between the manners of expressing those visions. The richness of the consequences lends strong support to the form of holism that generates them.

I conclude by observing that who, and what, somebody is or was may be considered to be different questions. The former, it is sometimes said—for example, by Arendt,—pertains to narrative identity, and we know the answer to it when we know the story of which the individual person concerned is the hero. Thus “emplotment”—that is, the property of being located in a narrative, is the key to individuality.

The question of what somebody is or was is answered in terms of attributes which the person concerned may share with other individuals. Midgley does not discuss narrative identity, but as far as I can see the notion is consistent with her treatment of personal identity.

Mary Midgley has written a thought provoking book. Her polemics and engagement in current debates, and her lucid and beautiful prose, make the book a source of absorbing intellectual interest and enjoyment.

1 Pörn

Reference

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