

clients, and to hopefully help the client make sense of them in turn. Without always quite knowing how, or why, and without always having the answers. That is something that is made explicit in an existential way of working. It seems to me that this explicitness diffuses the myth of the perfect therapist.

I wish Marie Adams had included a practical chapter on how therapists become self-aware and in particular how they care for themselves. There are hazards and risks to being a therapist, such as seeing too many clients, having little work-life balance, risks of burn-out or secondary trauma, the lonely existence of private practice to name a few. There are some things that help balance things; already named are supervision, personal therapy and self-reflection time, but also for example CPD, holidays and breaks, keeping asking questions about the nature of being human and the nature of life, play and having fun, nurturing a connection to our physical world, keeping contact to a social life.

Most of the times I experience my work as a therapist and the encounters with my clients as immensely rewarding. But in equal measures I have times where it can be quite energy consuming and challenging, and it is in those times I sometimes wish I had a more formed explicit narrative within me and between colleagues to help ride out these moments. In particular in my case the challenges of balancing work with a busy family life with children. After reading this book I am not so much surprised with what troubles therapists, least so that they are troubled, but more intrigued as ever with how therapists understand and deal with life events happening alongside their professional practice. I would recommend this book to both trainees and trained therapists, but perhaps to training institutions in particular, where these issues raised in the book would usefully be given a more explicit place in the training.

Sara Angelini

Are you an illusion? (Heretics)

Mary Midgley. (2014). London: Routledge.

Mary Midgley is an English moral philosopher known for her work on science, ethics and animal rights. Her Wikipedia entry continues ‘Midgley strongly opposes reductionism and scientism, and any attempts to make science a substitute for the humanities—a role for which it is, she argues, wholly inadequate... [she is considered] the UK’s foremost scourge of scientific pretension’.

This, Midgley’s latest book, is published under the Heretics label for good reason - it is a broadside against what she sees as the nonsense that self is an illusion and we are machines driven mindlessly to act by our brain chemistry. You may not agree with her but she offers an ‘impassioned defence of the importance of our own thoughts, feelings and experiences’

(back cover) and a necessary corrective against a fashionable notion that is worth exploring and challenging since it matters greatly whether and how much we can author our lives and make conscious choices.

To begin with the ending. She arrives at the conclusion that while we are indeed divided selves we are nonetheless ‘for central purposes, more one thing than two’ (p 135) so not brain rather than mind and not ‘either / or’. She says we are not a single whole self but rather a continual effort at integration of our different ways of making sense of what’s out there, our histories and our internal clashes between motives, values, loyalties etc so that integration is normal business for us even though it is often bothersome and sometimes leads us into therapeutic dialogue.

She discusses the history of ideas and various culprits, from Pythagoras and Plato to the present that have led us to thinking we are figments of our imagination including : dualism, modernism, scientism, behaviourism, materialism, over specialisation (so big topics are nobody’s focus and concern) and loss of confidence in common sense – the earth did indeed turn out not to be flat but we shouldn’t therefore credulously accept all scientific theories that seem counter intuitive. We mustn’t stop believing in ourselves and our experience just because we are baffled and demoralised by science. Sometimes it is ‘bad science’. Being in her nineties she is well qualified to put scientific fashions in broader context having seen several rise and fall during her lifetime; about this she is both informative and dryly witty.

*There was a faith-healer of Deal
Who said, ‘Although pain isn’t real,
If I sit on a pin
And it punctures my skin,
I dislike what I fancy I feel’.*

She invokes and skewers several proponents of the self as illusion, illuminating the flaws in their thinking. Her targets include amongst others: Lewis Wolpert for suggesting if something fits with common sense it is unlikely to be science; Francis Crick for saying our emotions, memories, ambitions and sense of self are ‘in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve-cells.’ (p 5); and Benjamin Libet whose experiments have been taken to disprove free will yet who is ‘recorded to have said that although there is no free will, perhaps there is free won’t’ (p 107). She is not against science but is concerned it sometimes overreaches itself, particularly where problems of philosophy have been reduced to matters of physical science.

*Thus the brain cells are conceived as pushing levers, that
from outside, compel the mind to write $E = mc^2$, rather than
the mind working it out for itself*

(p 104)

She reckons Descartes was correct to say you can't be mistaken if you aren't there in the first place, someone is being deluded. When we describe ourselves as machines we are using a metaphor, 'living things aren't machines; no one made them' whereas 'real machines ... need real minds to design them' (p 145). Something that she says was very clear to Aristotle.

Her central argument is that there is confusion over different levels of perception and explanation where one level claims to trump the other as with brain vs mind when really they are different aspects of the same thing requiring understanding via different disciplines and tools. She gives the example of seeing a table as a solid object on which you can safely put your mug vs the atomic physicist's view that it is made up of a few atoms and a lot of empty space. This doesn't stop us believing we can put things on it. Similarly we cannot proceed without believing in ourselves and she doubts the self-denying scientists (whom she likens to Pythagorean mystics that need bringing down to earth) try to do so.

Among the casualties of 'selficide' Midgley includes Marx, Freud, Jung and Nietzsche. Things may not be this bad however! I doubt many people engaged in existential analysis question that the self is real in any meaningful sense otherwise what would it mean to practise therapy with clients who are no longer seen as subjects with integrity and free will? And what would we say of the therapist in this case?! In mental health, medication which acts on the brain has its place alongside therapists who are working with the subject's mind. As therapists we know, what Midgley points out, that minds can affect brains as well as vice versa.

Many of the points Midgley makes, make sense to me. Although our freedom is limited, a central idea in existential therapy is that it is possible to make sense of our lives and become reconciled and happier with how things really are, without becoming demoralised. I can't imagine practicing therapy on any other basis. Like Midgley who is an advocate of common sense as an important consideration in philosophical argument, I refuse to believe that this review is being written by my brain cells instead of an integrated me, myself and I. As with so many of life's important questions 'self' is mainly a matter of belief.

Like other conscious creatures we usually take action because we want to... no one who watches seagulls swooping and rising is likely... to think that they are only taking the exact amount of exercise they need... to keep in optimal health. And the same goes for human children (p 77)

Diana Pringle