LIKE ALL GOOD VISIONARIES, Mary Midgley has a habit of seeing the significance of things before the rest of us. At a time when ethical theory was still firmly entrenched behind human lines, she wrote Animals and Why They Matter: A Journey Around the Species Barrier, joining Peter Singer in taking seriously the idea that ethical obligations extend beyond our own species. Moreover, Midgley has addressed more theoretical tasks, such as unravelling the implications for conventional Western approaches to ethics and trying to track down the intellectual confusions that lead to a denial of inter-species ethics.

Unusually for a professional philosopher, she constantly returns to the wider context, addressing questions such as the place of humans and their activities (including, crucially, science) in the general scheme of things, and in particular the relationship between humans and the environment.

Seeing things in their context has enabled her to show that apparently conflicting positions are in fact complementary aspects of a wider whole; and that these positions can and should be reconciled. She has argued in this way against the polarisation of animal welfare and environmental concerns which, tragically, have frequently been understood as presenting a need to take sides.

Another example is found in Beast and Man. Here, Midgley uses a wider focus to reveal the ways in which philosophers have typically taken an excessively abstract approach to the human mind, hence obscuring important features of the way it functions. She shows us instead the human mind in its evolutionary context and, in the process, forges a reconciliation between reason and emotion, and emphasises the importance of imagination in our reasoning processes. 

And she argues powerfully in recent books
against the alleged opposition between science and myth, and science and spirituality.

In all these cases it is a mistake to be bullied into the position of having to treat these as either/or choices. This, she argues, is ‘intellectual tribalism’, where one perspective or dimension of an issue is taken to be the whole story and is then ranged in battle against other perspectives. This mistake can only be noticed when the wider context is brought into focus. Once this is done bridge-building and reconciliations are possible, and this in turn has tremendously constructive implications, both practical and theoretical.

Mary Midgley graduated from Oxford in Philosophy and Ancient History in 1942. She was a civil servant and a teacher during the war, married in 1950 and moved to Newcastle, where she focused on reviewing books and starting a family. In 1963 she took up a lecturing position in the philosophy department at Newcastle University. After ‘retiring’ in 1980, Midgley stayed in Newcastle and continues to work with great success as one of a very rare breed—a freelance philosopher.

When James Lovelock’s book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* was first published in 1979, it was widely considered to lie somewhere between fantasy, lunacy and, worst of all, spirituality. Midgley read it and immediately saw that it made sense. In *Science and Poetry* and in the Demos pamphlet *Gaia: The Next Big Idea* she argues that this way of looking at life on Earth can provide a much needed prompt and source for challenging some of the assumptions behind the practice of contemporary science. More generally, it can inspire us to rethink some of our broadest patterns of thought.

This brings us to the most literal sense in which Midgley is a visionary. She is a person who works with visions. Her writing consistently offers us a vivid understanding of the ways in which our intellectual frameworks and patterns of thinking affect the way we live and act. We live our entire lives against the background of a guiding vision or worldview. This has immense implications for how we behave, think and live. But it is often an unnoticed part of the background to our lives; and so, too, are the problems within it. Bringing to the surface any given vision and patiently opening it out to critical scrutiny is thus a crucial precursor to change—and is the point at which philosophy becomes truly political, in the broadest and most constructive sense.

In the context of environmental and social justice issues, the need for new mental models is as crucial as new technology. Western societies still struggle with corrosive forms of social atomism and individualism that militate against sustained and concerted effort to deal with collective human problems, for example, hunger, at a global level.

Helping us rethink these visions is perhaps Midgley’s most crucial contribution. Here, she draws on Gaia theory as a key source, giving us the conceptual wherewithal to adapt our background vision in ways that will not only be more truthful but will afford profound understanding of our environmental problems—and inspire us to act. The Earth is not a lifeless jumble but an immense complexity of interrelated systems. And we are not independent from this living whole but deeply immersed in it. We are part of ecological systems and not apart from them. Once this simple truth is truly understood—emotionally as well as intellectually, with imagination as well as with reason—then our reasons for taking care of the environment as an overriding priority become utterly and compellingly clear.

Midgley’s work of re-evaluating our background visions reveals philosophy’s potential as a radical activity, affording us the much needed ability to rethink our economic, social and political institutions when they become problematic as well as the very patterns of thought that have led to these institutions and particular ways of life in the first place. ‘Thinking about thinking’ is thus a profoundly radical activity when approached in this way.

Tragically, however, liberating philosophy’s full potential often requires extracting it from its commonest setting—academic institutions—where it can, like all subjects, become excessively specialised and far removed from practical problems in the real world. Midgley’s philosophy is not about abstraction and playing intellectually beautiful but largely irrelevant games. It is about wisdom, and it is about change. And it is absolutely necessary.

Kate Rawles