



# PHILOSOPHICAL PLUMBING

Level 3 Philosophical Plumbing worksheet

Difficulty: ■■■  
Vocabulary: Use a dictionary to check any words you don't know.

We are in the middle of a global emergency caused by Covid-19.

## ACTIVITY 1

What do you think are the main things that are needed to end the emergency, and to stop it happening again?

There's a good chance that many of the things you have listed will be to do with science, technology, and medicine.

But what if some emergencies need us to think differently?

The philosopher Mary Midgley said that a lot of the emergencies and problems we face have their roots in bad ways of thinking. To change the ways that we think, we need to do some philosophy. She argued that philosophy is like plumbing.



*“Plumbing and philosophy are both activities that arise because elaborate cultures like ours have, beneath their surface, a fairly complex system which is usually unnoticed, but which sometimes goes wrong. In both cases, this can have serious consequences.”*

(Mary Midgley, 'Philosophical Plumbing')

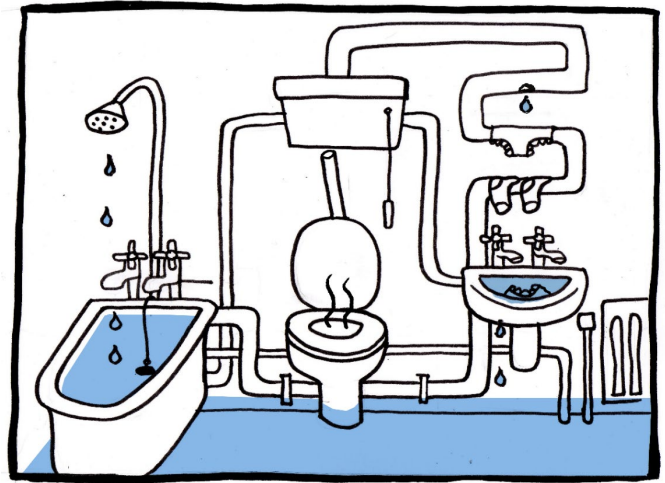
It may take a while for you to notice when something goes wrong with the plumbing in your house. The water may flow more slowly, there might be a small drip or a slightly odd smell. But if left untreated a small leak or a slight blockage can cause enormous amounts of damage. Midgley thought that the same thing was true of the ways that we think. We don't notice blockages and breaks most of the time, until they start causing problems in our lives and our thought no longer flows properly or gets stuck.

### **How might our ways of thinking go wrong?**

You will be able to think of times where your thinking went wrong and you got really stuck. Maybe there was something your teacher said that you couldn't understand, or you were trying to learn a new language or instrument and just couldn't go on. How did you feel?

When our thinking goes wrong and we don't know what to do, we can feel confused or angry, and make bad decisions.

Often the problem is a mistake (like a blocked pipe) or a gap in our knowledge (like a disconnected pipe). A good teacher will help you by correcting your mistake (getting rid of the blockage) or teaching you something new (connecting the pipes). Sometimes it turns out you've been approaching a problem the wrong way.



## **ACTIVITY 2**




**Write about a time when your thinking got blocked or broken.  
How did you feel? Who or what helped you?**

Mary thought that sometimes whole groups of humans go wrong in their thinking together! This happens when they all make the same big mistake. Philosophical plumbers have to work hard to solve these problems.

### ACTIVITY 3

Be a philosophical plumber.

Here are 3 ideas that Midgley thought are causing blockages today.

Sometimes people think...	Midgley thinks...	What do you think?
<p>... that the earth is a jumble of 'resources' for human beings to use as they please.</p> 	<p>... this makes people willing to damage the environment for their own gain and blocks them from caring for the planet.</p>	
<p>... that science can answer any question and solve any problem.</p> 	<p>... although science is important, this mistake blocks us from seeing how much we need other kinds of knowledge too, and from realising that we might put science to uses that harm people and animals.</p>	
<p>...that the individual is the only thing that counts, and that we can be completely independent and self-reliant.</p> 	<p>... this mistake blocks us from recognising how much we need each other, and means that we allow others to suffer.</p>	

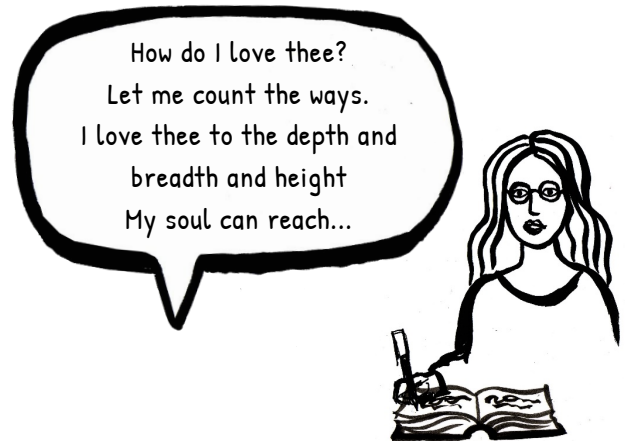
What skills do you need to be a philosophical plumber?

Mary Midgley thought that to be a good philosophical plumber, you need to have skills like those of a **lawyer**, so that you could argue your case.



She also thought that you need the skills of a **poet** or **artist**, because getting rid of bad ideas (blockages) often involves imagination and vision.

Lawyers and poets make use of language in different ways.



What are the different skills and abilities that lawyers and poets need to be good at what they do?

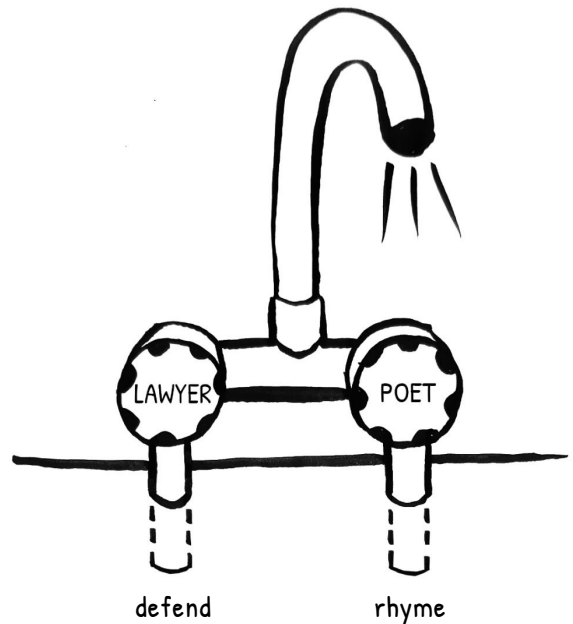
Maybe you could try acting out being first a lawyer and then a poet!

#### ACTIVITY 4

Here is a list of action words that describe what lawyers and poets do. Can you put them under the right tap? Some words might go under both.

defend	analyse	criticise	argue
demonstrate	conclude	hypothesise	predict
imagine	create	connect	symbolise
scrutinise	perform	alliterate	rhyme

Philosophical plumbers sometimes draw on the skills of the lawyer, sometimes the poet, sometimes both.



Can you add any words of your own?

Think now about different kinds of artists.  
Do you think that painters and musicians  
sometimes also need the skills of the lawyer?

Midgley thought that good philosophers also need  
both types of skills.

**ACTIVITY 5**




Which skills from Activity 4 do <u>you</u> have?
What makes <u>you</u> a good philosophical plumber?
What skills would you like to practise and improve?

**ACTIVITY 6**

**Be a Philosophical plumber!**

Think about the Global emergency caused by  
Covid-19. Remember that Mary thinks that bad  
ideas can result in emergencies and problems.

With this in mind, do you think any of the ideas  
from Activity 3 could be a factor in the Covid-19  
emergency?

Idea	How might this idea be a factor in the Covid-19 emergency?
 <p>Sometimes people think that the earth is a jumble of 'resources' that exist for human beings to use.</p>	
 <p>Sometimes people think that science can answer any question and solve any problem</p>	
 <p>Sometimes people think that the individual is the only thing that counts, and that we can be completely independent and self-reliant.</p>	

You have already used some of your skills of a lawyer **analyse, criticise** and **scrutinise** these ideas. The next job for the philosophical plumber is to fix the blockage that the bad idea is causing.

A philosophical plumber will use their skills of a lawyer to **argue** against bad ideas. They will use their poetic skills to **create** and **imagine** alternatives. They might use pictures, stories or metaphors. For example, Mary thinks that instead of imagining the world as a set of resources, we should picture it as a living goddess. You can learn more about this in the Gaia worksheet.

### ACTIVITY 7

Choose one of the ideas from Activity 6. Use your poetic skills to create an alternative idea that could help end the emergency, or make it less likely to happen again. You could share it as a poem, picture or story.

### CHALLENGE

Now you are a **philosophical plumber**. The global emergency caused by Covid-19 is not the only problem that we face. Pick another problem that is important to you, for example climate change, global poverty, racism, sexism.

Use the skills of a lawyer to **analyse, criticise** and **scrutinise** the ideas that have caused this problem. Use your poetic skills to **create** and **imagine** different ideas that could help solve the problem.



Did you enjoy learning about Mary Midgley's philosophy? Perhaps her ideas about 'Philosophical Plumbing' have inspired you to new ways of thinking and imagining?

If so, why not become a **Mary Midgley Young Poet!** For information about how to do so go to [notesfromabiscuittin.com/young-poets](https://notesfromabiscuittin.com/young-poets)