

Philosophy in Review



Kieran Setiya. "Midlife: A Philosophical Guide."

Thomas Klikauer et Norman Simms

Volume 40, numéro 2, mai 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069831ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069831ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Klikauer, T. & Simms, N. (2020). Compte rendu de [Kieran Setiya. "Midlife: A Philosophical Guide."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 40(2), 79–81.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1069831ar>

Copyright © Thomas Klikauer, Norman Simms, 2020



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Kieran Setiya. *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton University Press 2018. 200 pp. \$22.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780691173931); \$14.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780691183282).

Kieran Setiya's book *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* claims to be one man's report on a personal journey around the event of midlife. Despite stating, 'It is a work of applied philosophy' (3), only half of the book is in any way philosophical, that is, an attempt to apply systematic method and analysis to the crisis supposedly experienced by modern, urbanized people, mostly in the west. The other half is a personal diary. Setiya says, 'My approach is not historical' (3) even though the entire book is filled with history. History features in two ways: firstly, the book is the personal history (otherwise known as autobiography) of a man seemingly bothered with a professional-occupational choice between becoming a philosopher, a medical doctor, or a poet. Secondly, the book reaches deep into the history of philosophy as various classical texts are referred to, or rather a few generalizations are made and a number of vague statements are quoted. It is rather unusual—even for a would-be or so-called philosopher—to start a book with so many contradictions. Setiya's a-historical book starts with 'the earliest text I have found [on midlife is from] around 2000 BCE: a dialogue between a world-weary man and his soul' (9).

This sets the tone of the book. It also makes us wonder where he draws the boundaries of 'philosophy'—which in popular parlance usually means only 'my opinions, attitudes or platitudinous recitation of fatuous truisms.'

Setiya claims that 'midlife crisis was born in 1965' (10) and 'by 1980, the idea of the midlife crisis was thriving' (13). He might have started with Dante's opening of the first book of the *Divine Comedy*, 'In the middle of our life's journey, I found myself in a dark wood.' To a scholar familiar with world traditions of this sort, the 'middle of life' is not the same as a 'mid-life crisis,' but rather someone caught between the affairs of this world and the onset of death, or forced to make decisions about how to deal with the eternal verities of sin and virtue, mortality, and immortality.

What Setiya is talking about is something more banal and superficial: a twentieth-century and middle-class phenomenon, not something that forms part of the historical development of human thought. Setiya states that 'just 26 per cent of those over forty reported having had a midlife crisis' (15). In other words, 74% of all middle aged men do not have a midlife crisis even though all have a midlife which seems to be around the 40⁺ mark. This assumes that the historical life-span of human beings would be around eighty years, and not the actual experienced historical realities of most people, most places, who lived to about 50 or 60, if they were not cut down by disease, injury, war or disaster, such as famine or volcanic eruption. Not so very long ago, for instance, child mortality rates were past 50%.

So whether real physical or existential crisis or not, 'the key to happiness ... is managing one's perceptions' (21). The word 'happiness' remains a key term for utilitarian philosophy as developed in the mid-nineteenth century and remains utterly vague, unless quantified by the accumulation of good, usually luxury items and property, but his book refrains from a deeper engagement with utilitarianism. Meanwhile, midlife might indeed be one of the typical '#firstworldproblems' (27). But midlife is, and perhaps should be, more than just 'managing one's perceptions' (21). We are tempted to replace his word perception with illusion or delusion.

Quoting a philosophical classic, that is someone who lived more than a generation ago, 'like [John Stuart] Mill ... a crucial condition of happiness is caring about things other than oneself' (34). Perhaps even more sense-making is another observation, namely, 'there is no reason to think Mill ever had doubts about the final value of meeting human needs. One aim of social reform is to reduce

the scale of human suffering' (37). Neither taking utilitarianism's 'no harm' notion nor Kant's distinction between 'what is' (human suffering) and 'what ought to be' (no human suffering), Setiya never develops the book into a philosophically grounded work. A thoroughly philosophical perspective is just not taken up. Instead, the book remains at the surface: 'Aristotle [and] Plato [who] nicknamed him, playfully, nous, which means mind or intellect' (42). More often than not, Setiya remains at the level of storytelling—or, may we suggest, greeting card clichés.

In chapter three on 'missing out' (54ff.), Setiya appears to say that life is a sheer endless chain of a choice between 'treading in A for a choice between B and C' (70). Life seemingly centres on discussing the personal problem of having to decide to engage with 'poetry, medicine, or philosophy' (71). In contrast to Setiya's notion, human life might be a little bit more than being defined by a simple three-way 'A-B-C' choice. And human life might also not be defined by the infamous prisoner dilemma constructing all too often rather irrational choices. Reducing human life and midlife to a three-way A-B-C choice eliminates, for example, what sociology calls the 'agency-structure' problem. Karl Marx has alluded to virtually the same philosophical problem when saying 'men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please.' By contrast, Setiya claims that life and midlife is a matter of 'make it as you please' – pick A or B or C.

On an even more philosophical note, all this also raises the question of 'are we free?' Many philosophers and among them Derk Pereboom have answered this key question with *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). The question of 'free will' may be more than just a 'question of the month' (philosophynow.org, 2009). Perhaps the real question is not even whether there is free will or not. Is there a 'will' at all that can challenge the determining factors of biology, history or neuroscience? If the real question is to have the philosophical problem of free will discussed, or at least mentioned, in a book entitled 'a philosophical guide,' then we search in vain for any sense of this question having been debated in subtle and extended form over many generations. This comes above the absence of a debate on what is now called personhood existing somewhere between agency and structure. These terms are relatively recently neologistic coinages and probably will fade away.

In other words, life and midlife for that matter is not merely a problem of 'mistakes, misfortunes, failures: choices you should' (77) as Setiya says. This remains so even when 'no one makes it to midlife' (101), when contemplating with 'Epicurus [that one has] no second chance' (107), and that 'we are textbook casualties of the midlife crisis' (128). With Schopenhauer (130ff), Setiya's book doesn't get any better. If anything, things get a lot worse, as Schopenhauer's 'world as will' may turn out to be not much more than a passing hallucination. Finally, life can never get better when 'You ... completely accept what is' (152).

After insisting throughout the book that the three-way choice is midlife's key issue (whenever this occurs: between the onset of maturity, which now means after an extended adolescence that can go on until one is in his or her forties, and thus almost ready to leave home, and the beginnings of senility and mental obsolescence which may begin with the first heart attack, bowel cancer or onset of Alzheimer's disease at age fifty), while eliminating even the possibility that there is also a structure (work, capitalism, families, communities, our environmental, etc.) that impacts life and midlife, Setiya concludes with 'don't be fooled by the allure of choices' (156). OK, we answer, we will do our best: after all it may be getting harder to choose between MacDonald's, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC when it comes to fine dining.

The author's defeatism becomes even clearer when he emphasizes the dictum: 'To eradicate useless suffering is a noble aim, but it speaks to needs we would be better off without' (159). Firstly, eradicating suffering is certainly much more than just a 'noble aim.' It might be really noble if it

meant eliminating other people's ills, humiliations and vulnerabilities—their lack of choices. Secondly, the world would most certainly be better off by 'ending suffering.' But suffering what? Not being able to fly first class and having to be stuffed like a sardine into Economy? Having to sit in the sludge of urban traffic for hours twice a day?

Even during one's midlife period, ending suffering remains a sense-making act, if the situation warrants. The Argentinian Mexican philosopher Enrique Domingo Dussel Ambrosini's 'liberation ethics' based on his experience under dictatorship and exile, like Primo Levi's autobiographical account of his time in a Nazi concentration camp, *If This is a Man* (Orion Press, 1959), speaks of suffering in a real and substantial sense, not the fluffy nonsense found in popular magazines. These and similar authors, knew what suffering was all about in a way our dear author does not even dream of. There are military, political and economic crises that don't yield to the individual will; and there are historical events, like the Holocaust, that deprive one of the luxury of any choice whatsoever. Kieran Setiya closes with 'I am still working on my midlife crisis' (160). As one finishes reading the book one gets disturbingly close to its hollow centre. In conclusion, this is the kind of book that gives philosophy a bad name.

Thomas Klikauer, Western Sydney University
Norman Simms, University of Waikato