

575 **Review of Kieran Setiya's "Midlife: A Philosophical Guide"**

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Kieran Setiya. *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017. 200 pp.

I have just turned 34. From the outside my life seems pretty okay. Yet, something does not feel quite right. My achievements mean less to me than I thought they would. When I think about the future, anxiety is a familiar companion. Gone the idealism. Gone the sense that I can be whatever I want to be. Am I having a midlife crisis (already, at this tender age)? And if yes, what can I do about it?

Looking for insights, I was delighted to find that my potential ailment has recently been taken up by philosophy. This is due, among others, to the pioneering work of MIT professor Kieran Setiya. In *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* (marketed as a 'self-help book with a difference') Setiya analyses the midlife crisis and develops a number of suggestions about how to cope with it. The book is short and addressed to a general audience. Yet, in addition to finding helpful advice regarding their personal problems, academic philosophers' need for insightful analyses, arguments and distinctions is also well-served.

The book's first chapter provides a historical lesson. Having been introduced by psychoanalyst Elliott Jaques in 1965, the idea of the midlife crisis has become well-established in Western culture. Who hasn't heard jokes about or explanations in terms of such crises – about men (yes, typically men) who quit their well-paid jobs, start lusting after young women or buy expensive sports cars? Scientifically, Setiya's case for the midlife crisis as a distinct psychological condition is mainly based on recent studies in economics. These studies suggest that wellbeing is U-shaped. Being highest in young adulthood, it becomes low in middle-ages, and then again higher in old age.

576 What is the nature of this crisis in middle age? And how can it be alleviated? The distinctive feature of Setiya's book is its philosophical approach. Having been in the grips of a

midlife crisis himself, he first introspectively accesses and presents what it was like for him. In this way he comes up with five main symptoms. By analyzing the concepts and inferences that give rise to these symptoms, Setiya shows that they mostly result from irrationality. He then suggests more appropriate ways of thinking that are supposed to function as a remedy against the midlife crisis.

The first purported symptom of midlife crises is illustrated by the example of John Stuart Mill. Early in his life Mill suffered from depression. He realized that even if his plans for profound social reforms succeeded, this would not bring him any significant joy or happiness. In Setiya's view, such ruminations may be cured by revising or expanding one's goals. Mill was always admiringly aware that one ought to care for things other than oneself. Those who directly strive for happiness will not achieve it. What he only discovered later was that solving problems, overcoming obstacles, and satisfying needs cannot be all there is to life either. In addition, one must also find a place for existential value: for things that make life positively good (such as sports or spending time with friends; or, in Mill's case, appreciating poetry).

A second way in which midlife crises are said to manifest themselves is in the feeling of missing out. When we are young, life abounds with options. We may well have chosen a different profession, a different spouse or a different place to live. At some point in time we realize – again, painfully – that many alternatives are no longer available. One way of reconciling ourselves with this limitation is to bear in mind that it is actually the flipside of something good. Life offers so many incommensurable values that we cannot possibly realize all of them. In addition, Setiya also warns against exaggerating the value of having options, and against romanticizing youth (which is also characterized by a lack of sense of identity and orientation).

Regretting past mistakes, misfortunes and failures is Setiya's third symptom of midlife crises. Parents may ease this symptom by bearing in mind that the bad things that happened prior to the conception of their children were a necessary condition for these children's existence. They have thus enabled great value. The book also raises awareness for the fact that alternative personal histories may have unfolded far less smoothly than we are inclined to think. In a different profession, with a different spouse or in a different place I might well be worse off than I am now. Finally, Setiya urges us to consider the details of what makes our actual lives good. This will render it rational for us to prefer them over most abstract 'what if?' scenarios (on which we ought not to ponder too much).

As we age we become increasingly aware of our mortality. The fourth manifestation of the midlife crisis is fear of death. Here philosophy is stretched to its limits. Setiya does not purport to show that this fear is wholly irrational. But there seem, nevertheless, to be ways of alleviating it. One of these ways involves bearing in mind that before our birth we were in a state of non-existence too. Although death deprives us of value, it is therefore no worse than what we have already been through (given that we consider past and future deprivations to be
577 equally bad). Moreover, at least to the extent that it is based on a desire to live forever, our fear of death actually turns out to be irrational. This is because, like the wish to be able to fly, such a desire cannot possibly be fulfilled.

Fifth and finally, Setiya characterizes the midlife crisis in terms of feelings of emptiness. These feelings are claimed to be due to a “[...] structural flaw in the pursuit of projects” (157) (following Arthur Schopenhauer). As long as we are working on a project we suffer from its incompleteness. But once we are done, things do not get better. We have lost what has given our life meaning and orientation. Setiya argues that the resulting feeling of emptiness can be mitigated by focusing more strongly on ‘atelic’ activities: activities that do not aim at some final state. For example, we could take a walk, spend time with friends or appreciate nature. By focusing on their process (e.g. doing philosophy) rather than their product (e.g. a completed book manuscript), even our engagement with projects can be given a healthy atelic touch. In Setiya’s view, mindfulness meditation is an effective training for achieving such a shift of focus.

This, then, is how the book characterizes and proposes to remedy the midlife crisis. Is it convincing? In answering this question we need to keep Setiya’s intentions in mind. *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* uses philosophy in the service of cognitive psychotherapy. In other words, it does not only attempt to develop strong arguments; it also and primarily wants people to be better off (as a result of considering these arguments). For non-philosophers, the bar seems to be set quite high. Several parts of Setiya’s reasoning may be too abstract, sophisticated or long-winded for them. If you are able and willing to follow the book, however, I believe that it really can make a difference.

Given the book’s shortness and target audience, philosophers will have an easy time pointing out limitations and unsubstantiated assumptions. For example, why did Setiya not address regret for mistakes that harmed others (Christopher Hamilton. “Midlife: A Philosophical Guide, by Kieran Setiya.” *Mind* [2018; forthcoming]) or incorporate lessons from existential philosophy? Within these constraints, however, most of Setiya’s arguments strike me as plausible; and especially his suggestions about how to revise our thinking. My

main worry mostly arises from the book's consideration of scientific and introspective evidence. After reading it I am still unsure whether there is such a thing as the midlife crisis at all; and if there is, whether this crisis is most appropriately characterized by the five symptoms that Setiya focuses on.

First, is the midlife crisis a real psychological condition? Above I explained that Setiya's main evidence for this claim derives from economic studies that suggest a U-curve in wellbeing. But this evidence is weak. In most studies wellbeing-drops in middle age are below 0.5 on a 7-point scale. This effect has been shown to be highly sensitive to a number of subtle methodological decisions. For example, plausible changes in control variables and models make it disappear completely (e.g. Paul Frijters and Tony Beatton. "The Mystery of the U-shaped Relationship Between Happiness and Age." *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 82/2-3: 525-542 [2012]). Some other studies have found that wellbeing remains stable across age (e.g. David G. Myers and Ed Diener. "Who is Happy?" *Psychological Science* 6/1: 10-19 [1995]) or that its U-shape is peculiar to developed countries in which the elderly are particularly well off (e.g. Angus Deaton. "Income, Health, and Well-Being Around the World: Evidence from the Gallup World Poll." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 22/2: 53-72 [2008]). Finally, the results of any such research are contingent on controversial philosophical assumptions (such as that wellbeing can be measured subjectively), and have been found to be strongly influenced by the particular wording of questions (Arthur A. Stone, Joseph E. Schwartz, Joan E. Broderick, and Angus Deaton. "A Snapshot of the Age Distribution of Psychological Well-Being in the United States." *PNAS* 107/22: 9985-9990 [2010]) (for a helpful over-view see Beatriz Fabiola López Ulloa, Valerie Møller, and Alfonso Sousa-Poza. "How Does Subjective Well-Being Evolve with Age? A Literature Review." *Journal of Population Ageing* 6/3: 227-246 [2013]).

Suppose Setiya is right that our wellbeing hits bottom in middle age. Is this finding best explained by what he takes to be the midlife crisis (i.e. by the sense that this cannot be all there is; the feeling of missing out; regret for mistakes, failures and misfortunes; fear of death; and a feeling of emptiness)? Answering this question is exacerbated by a lack of conceptual clarity. For example, one is left wondering how many of the above symptoms need to be present, and to what extent, in order for persons to be justifiably diagnosed with midlife crises. Setiya also does not clearly specify what he understands by 'midlife'. In fact, his usage of the term seems too liberal. We are told that Camus suffered from a midlife crisis at the age of 30, and de Beauvoir at age 55 (which is still said to be 'in the heart of middle-age', suggesting that this age ranges even farther) (104).

The book involves several arguments for the above mentioned symptoms being most prevalent in middle age. But these arguments are very cursory and often depend on empirical assumptions that are not backed up by evidence. For instance, why should people be more afraid to die in middle age than in other periods of their lives? Here is Setiya's answer: "In middle age, the limited span of human life is no longer an abstraction. You know from the inside what a decade means; those that remain to you can be counted on one hand. That can be a source of angst" (105). Sure, one is tempted to reply, but would we not expect people in old age to be even more afraid, then? After all, they have witnessed *several* decades passing by, and are much closer to death knocking on their doors.

Note also that if there really is a U-curve of wellbeing it might be plausibly explained in terms other than that of midlife crises as well. Setiya himself approvingly cites a study in which zoo workers rated the wellbeing of great apes (Alexander Weiss, James E. King, Miho Inoue-Murayama, Tetsuro Matsuzawa, and Andrew. J. Oswald. "Evidence for a 'Midlife Crisis' in Great Apes Consistent with the U-shape in Human Well-Being." *PNAS* 109/49: 19949-19952 [2012]). Again, a slope in middle age emerged. This finding suggests that lifespan variation in wellbeing may (partly) have direct biological causes (rather than misguided thoughts about existential issues) (see also David Lykken, and Auke Tellegen. "Happiness is a Stochastic Phenomenon." *Psychological Science* 7/3: 473-485 [1996]). Several other plausible alternative explanations of the U-curve – ranging from stress to unmet aspirations – would have to be ruled out as well.

579 My point here is not that Setiya is wrong in suggesting a midlife crisis that typically manifests itself in one or more of the above five symptoms. In the end his experiences may well turn out to be representative (at least of some significant subset of the population, such as well off people in developed countries). I would rather like to draw attention to the fact that this claim can only be assessed by systematic empirical investigations. For example, experimental philosophers or psychologists could conduct studies that ask people at several points in life whether they have a sense that this cannot be all there is, a feeling of missing out, regret for mistakes, and so on; and experienced psychotherapists could report their perceptions about lifespan variations in these variables.

My own hunch is that Setiya's five symptoms are not (or at least not significantly) more prevalent at any particular period of adulthood. If this is right, then he should not have labelled his discussion as being about the 'midlife crisis'. Yet, it is important to note that this problem would take only little away from what makes his book so valuable. I take it to be highly plausible that almost all adults at almost all stages of their lives are prone to having

misconceptions about the intricate existential issues that *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* addresses. Setiya does an excellent job in revealing and correcting some of these misconceptions. His book may therefore be helpful to even more people than he thought. Moreover, it demonstrates how fruitfully contemporary analytic philosophy can inform cognitive psychotherapy (a link that deserves far more attention than it has so far received).

I started this review by lamenting my own personal crisis. Having read Setiya's book, I have become fairly certain that it is unconnected to my age. At its roots, however, I do find some of the very misconceptions that the book corrects (such as an underappreciation of the richness of life and an excessive focus on projects). By enabling me to tackle these misconceptions, to me the book has succeeded in making a real difference.