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Mary Midgley's *Beast and man: the roots of human nature* (1978): a re-appraisal

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In the words of Iris Murdoch, Mary Midgley's *Beast and Man* built "an urgently needed bridge between science and philosophy".[1] While science and philosophy have never been entirely remote, Murdoch was right to observe the achievement of her friend, Midgley, in drawing a new and insightful connection between these disciplines. A bridge, more specifically, between scientific investigations into human and animal behaviour, and philosophical enquiries into the concept of human nature. A moral philosopher by trade, Midgley imbues the neo-Aristotelian understanding of man as a 'rational animal' with the *many* traits (she argues) we share with our diverse earthly neighbours – nonhuman animals.

In the 1980s, Midgley's bridge received attention owing to a boom of interest in a new kind of scientific enquiry into human nature – the study of certain aspects of human behaviour practiced under the name of 'sociobiology'. Sociobiology was particularly concerned with the *social* aspects of behaviour in humans and animals, as revealed by certain *biological* aspects of species (including their ecology and evolutionary history). Midgley's *Beast and Man,* at the time, offered an alternative to a purely biological account of human social behaviour, which in many cases, was being used as a guide to our ethical and moral behaviour. In an early review of *Beast and Man* for the *London Review of Books,* Stuart Hampshire credits "Mrs Midgley" with

> [stepping] into the controversy surrounding these large claims [concerning the nature of ethics] as a judicious and temperate sceptic, rejecting the extravagant confusions of the sociobiologists, but agreeing that the study of animal behaviour has produced results which have some interesting implications for morality
> (Hampshire, *Human Nature*, 1)

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[1]Murdoch's review was written on the back cover of the first edition of *Beast and Man* in 1978.

While *Beast and Man* was noticed by philosophers engaged in scientific debates about morality (such as Peter Singer), its potential to contribute a robust and novel concept of human nature in ethics went largely overlooked within moral philosophy.[2] What's more, Midgley claims that attention within the "noisy clash" of the sociobiology debate served only to "distort my message, distracting the reader from what I had meant to be the central topic" (*The Owl of Minerva*, 191). In this re-appraisal, I want to re-centre the reader's attention to what Midgley describes as the "core of the book" (*Beast and Man*, xxii). In particular, I want to draw out Midgley's important *philosophical* aim, namely, to clarify the concept of human nature as a kind of animal nature. In the course of this appraisal, I will also make remarks about the appropriate sub-discipline of reception for *Beast and Man* within philosophy specifically – once the diluting effects of the sociobiology have been addressed.

1. "Urgent and fashionable" sociobiology

It is first worth considering why *Beast and Man* gained traction within debates about sociobiology in the 1980s. One possible explanation is that Midgley spoke in terms the sociobiologist recognized; her at-times witty prose lacked philosophical jargon, aiding her entry into the interdisciplinary conversation. Midgley also grappled with the same central question as sociobiologists, namely *what is the nature of man?* She even shared with them an answer (in part) – *the nature of man can be studied by biology*.

Where Midgley found fault was with an all-encompassing nature of the biological solution offered by the sociobiologist. A famous instance of this was Edward Wilson's *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975), in which he defined sociobiology as "the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behaviour" (*Sociobiology,* 4). It was indeed systematic. Wilson accounted for all forms of human social behaviour (e.g. altruism, aggression, kinship etc.) by appeal to genes, evolution, and other biological processes. He argued that like other animals, humans are genetically determined by their nature as a kind of fleshy, earthly creature. In short, faced with the question 'nature or nurture?', Wilson chose 'nature'. Incidentally, this is the point of departure for Midgley.

In *Beast and Man,* Midgley covered much of the same ground as Wilson did in *Sociobiology*. Her subject matter was human nature conceived as earthly and biological (among other things) and instructed by scientific investigation (among other things). In particular, Midgley and Wilson shared an enthusiasm for ethology – the close scientific study of animals' behaviour in their natural environment. However, Midgley offered a different conceptual framework to

[2]Singer cites *Beast and Man* in the opening remarks of his book *The Expanding Circle: Ethics and Sociobiology*.

Wilson and argued that Wilson did not use the correct concepts to suit his subject "matter" (Midgley, *Beast and Man*, 87). Midgley argued that,

> Edward Wilson, though he wants the study of people to be linked with that of other species quite as much as I do, wishes to turn the resulting subject into a 'science' in the exclusive sense
>
> (*Beast and Man*, 87).

By "exclusive sense", Midgley is referring to the strictly biological sense which, she argues, sacrifices investigation of anything *internal* or psychological – like a given creature's purpose or motive. On Midgley's view, human nature is a cluster of things; we are biological, but we are also cultural, creative, and conflicted creatures with many motives and emotions that are inaccessible from a purely biological viewpoint (for Midgley, nature versus nurture is a false dichotomy). Hence, here and in her wider methodology, Midgley argues that human nature is a complex subject matter, and our investigation must therefore take on complex forms. The central philosophical mistake in sociobiology, then, was an attempt to "cannibalize" all modes of investigation into human nature into a reductive biological method (*Beast and Man,* Introduction to 2nd Edition, ii).

Notably, the original manuscript of *Beast and Man,* submitted to Cornell University Press in 1975, made no mention of the sociobiology debate whatsoever. It was only upon the editor's request that Midgley "put in the sociobiology" (a word she admits was then "quite new to me"), that she read Wilson's book (*The Owl of Minerva*, 191). In the following years, Midgley dutifully added three chapters to the final thesis (found in Part II of the book, *Art and Science in Psychology*). Later reflecting on the reception of *Beast and Man*, she remarked that,

> My book undoubtedly sold better because it dealt directly with this urgent and fashionable topic [of sociobiology.] […] But the need to follow up points that had interested Wilson still seemed to distort my message, distracting the reader from what I had meant to be the central topic
>
> (*Beast and Man*, 191).

If Midgley's critique of sociobiology was a "distraction", we might wonder what her central topic *was*. In her memoir, *The Owl of Minerva* (2005), Midgley later clarified this, stating that in *Beast and Man,* she was "trying to bring back the notion of human nature itself […] well developed in our tradition by philosophers such as Aristotle and Bishop Butler […] as an essential tool, not only for thinking about morals but more generally for a reasonably balanced view of the world" (*The Owl of Minerva,* 192). The novelty of Midgley's approach to human nature as a "tool" was its *synthesis*. She took what many great philosophers have to say about the concept and connected it with empirical insights from other disciplines (e.g. ethology, zoology, anthropology etc.). While this project no doubt involved discrediting misuses of the

term 'human nature' by thinkers like Wilson, to view this as the main contribution of the book would be a disservice to Midgley. In what remains, I explore the Midgleyan concept of human nature found in Part VI of *Beast and Man, "*Marks of Man" – which Midgley described as the "trunk out of which all my various later ideas have branched" (*The Owl of Minerva*, 192).

2. Midgley on human (animal) nature

Beast and Man is not a book of straightforward natural science. Rather than examining the natural origins of human's ethical behaviour, Midgley advances recommendations for ethical theories by informing them of important facts about human nature and our status as animals. In doing so Midgley rules out those ethical theories that are based on incorrect understandings of human nature as revealed by the various sciences. In this sense, she provides some recommendations for what ethicists should focus on as the 'roots' of the human capacity for ethics, given our nature as a kind of animal.

In Part VI, beginning with the chapter "Speech and Other Excellences", Midgley defends an account of human nature by a two-fold argument. First, she collapses a conceptual distinction between 'humans' and 'animals' (or 'man' versus 'beast') found prevalent in the history of ethics. Within this tradition, the various capacities offered as potential human exceptions from other animals – language-use, culture, or rationality – are debunked. For example, Midgley is critical of traditionally Aristotelian attempts to define human nature by classification according to their *genus* and *differentia*. In particular, she argues that the definition of man as a 'rational' (*differentia*) and 'animal' (*genus*) is erroneous due to over-simplification. Any tactic of classification according to singular excellence or function, such as rationality, argues Midgley, reduces those "possibilities open to humanity" and "obscures our truly characteristic richness and versatility" (*Beast and Man*, xiii).

In place of the human versus animal distinction, Midgley posits a non-homogenous category of 'animal' which includes a rich variety of species, including the human animal. This is the second fold of Midgley's argument in Part VI, summarized by first line of *Beast and Man*, "[w]e are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals" (*Beast and Man*, xiii). To bolster this claim, Midgley demonstrates that we stand to better understand human nature by comparing – and not just contrasting – it with the natures of other animals. She finds that the traditional philosophical understanding of human nature is impoverished by a lack of context. Context, that is, gathered from the natural (non-human) world of which we are a part. "Looking at other species enables us to put something human in a wider context that explains it" hence, "comparisons with [other species] have always been, and must be, crucial to our view of ourselves" (*Beast and Man*, 314, xiii). Many of the possibilities revealed by a "wider context" are capacities that we share with

some nonhuman animals, including our emotional, affectionate, instinctive, and social capacities. For this reason, *Beast and Man* is rich in its appeal to ethological studies drawn from the work of famous ethologists and zoologists like Jane Goodall, Konrad Lorenz, and Niko Tinbergen.

The resulting picture of human nature is a complex cluster of properties which together form a distinctive and organized whole. As Midgley puts it, "the nature of a species […] consists in a certain range of powers and tendencies, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern" (*Beast and Man*, 58). Though it is not in Midgleyan spirit to offer an exhaustive account of the properties that make up human nature, some of the natural properties she includes in *Beast and Man* are "forming families" and "our strong and special affection for our children", "[l]oyalty and friendship", alongside "space around one, or sexual activity" (*Beast and Man*, 76-77). Humans "want deep and lasting relationships […] And because these are often difficult, we 'bind ourselves' in all sorts of ways to go through with whatever we have started" (*Beast and Man*, 320).

Each species' nature is distinct, but this does not exclude the possibility of shared or overlapping goods, on Midgley's view. "What is special about each creature is not a single unique quality but a rich and complex arrangement of powers and qualities, *some of which it will certainly share with its neighbours"* she tells us (*Beast and Man*, 206, emphasis mine). While Midgley does not endorse the Aristotelian method of *genus-differentia* classification of man as essentially a rational animal, the idea of properties overlapping between species is a familiar one in Aristotle's zoological works.[3] For example, in the *Generation of Animals,* Aristotle argues that many species of nonhuman animal display loving, caring feelings for the young, including the desire to train them. Many animals are also social or "gregarious" including bees and cranes (*History of Animals, I.1*, 488a7).[4] Likewise, Midgley posits overlapping interspecies traits. Her concept draws on ethological study emphasizing, for example, the importance of care for the young in all kinds of animals, and the importance of training "[…] by having ones who do something about the next generation" (*Beast and Man*, 92).

Furthermore, in Part VI of *Beast and Man* Midgley does not deny that the various properties of human animals proposed (e.g. by Aristotle) as our 'excellence' or 'function' are important to our species' nature; her point is rather that these things alone neither define nor separate our species from the rest.[5] In Midgley's words, "the various things that have been proposed as *differentia* for man – conceptual thought or reason, language, culture, self-consciousness, tool-using, productivity, laughter, a sense of the future, and

[3]Which typically include *History of Animals* (*HA*), *Generation of Animals* (*GA*), *Movement of Animals* (*DM*), *Parts of Animals* (PA). D. Balme 1987; D. M. Balme 1977; 1992; D. M. Balme and Gotthelf 2002.
[4]Henceforth, HA.
[5]This idea is examined and challenged by Ian Ground in his paper "Minding Animals".

all the rest – form part of such a cluster, but none of them can monopolize it or freeze it into finality" (*Beast and Man*, 206).

While this Midgleyan move represents another decisive break from the tradition which has tended to emphasize the rational parts of human nature, it does not exclude her from endorsing a brand of Aristotelianism in *Beast and Man.* In Midgley's words, "[Aristotle] stands as the biologist among philosophers – indeed as the inventor of the biological attitude […] this is beyond praise [and] his method in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is exactly the one I am trying to follow here" (*Beast and Man*, 262, fn 1). As I noted previously, this is not the kind of 'exclusive' use of biology we find employed by the sociobiologist, but rather a biology used in tandem with other modes of enquiry which best revealed the complex subject of human and animal nature.

3. Rationality, integration and ethics

In Chapter 11 of *Beast and Man* (still within Part VI), Midgley accounts for the place of rationality within human nature. As I noted above, she primarily seeks to recognize the importance of rationality *within* the web of other non-rational human natural powers and capacities, such that our rationality cannot be independent from our animality. In her most precise discussion of the concept, Midgley argues that "[t]here are […] two distinct elements in rationality: cleverness and integration" (*Beast and Man*, 262). By cleverness Midgley means "calculating power, the sort of thing that can be measured by intelligence tests" (*Beast and Man*, 260). Cleverness is a kind of means-to-an-end reasoning, enabling a creature to solve a specific problem in a particular situation. Integration, on the other hand, involves a wider perspective, it involves "having a character, acting as a whole, having a firm and effective priority system" (*Beast and Man*, 260). In short, integration involves grasping what is good *all-things-considered,* from the point of view of a species' nature.

To be rational then, Midgley argues, a creature needs both elements of cleverness and integration. Describing an action as 'clever' does not entail that it is a rational action, nor does it imply that cleverness is an excellence without qualification. An action that is purely clever lacks a connection to the whole life of the being in question, and hence cannot tell us about the *good* for that being, on Midgley's view. An artificial intelligence can effectively work through premise-based arguments, or complete highly technical mathematical formulas, but it would not be described as 'rational' according to Midgley, insofar as its action is isolated from a broader consideration of appropriate context, reasons, and character. Hence, Midgley argues that integration *is a necessary condition of cleverness*.

Midgley's account of integration can be likened to Aristotle's distinction between phronesis and cleverness. Phronesis, like integration, involves specifying the ends, including what the good life for the human (or animal, in

Midgley) consists in, while also working out what to do in a particular situation. Cleverness, by contrast, is instrumental, or means-to-end reasoning. In Aristotle's words,

> [t]here is a capacity, called cleverness, which is such as to be able to do the actions that tends to promote whatever goal is assumed and to achieve it. If then, the goal is fine, cleverness is praiseworthy, and if the goal is base, cleverness is unscrupulousness; hence both intelligent and unscrupulous people are called clever
>
> (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI.13, 1144b24-9).

Midgley gives a recognizably Aristotelian ethic in her account of human integration by specifying that each person has a responsibility to rationalize the kinds of needs, wants, and desires placed upon them by their nature (and their upbringing). In this sense, human nature operates via integration to provide a guide to the good life as the kind of being that we are, while in turn also guiding us within the specifics of a particular case. It is interesting to note that for neither Aristotle nor Midgley is phronesis/integration a capacity exclusive to the human animal. Midgley again comes close to Aristotle in claiming that some nonhuman animals are also capable of integration. Indeed, according to Aristotle each animals has its own phronesis – but humans are the most 'phronimos' animal.

4. Ethical naturalism and Aristotle's biology

If sociobiology was not Midgley's primary audience for *Beast and Man*, then what was? Undoubtably Midgley's answer would not be singular. Her book was interdisciplinary, and this is exactly how she wanted it to be read. Having re-centred the reader's focus to a Midgleyan account of human nature, I now want to suggest one plausible avenue for Midgley's reception: meta-ethical debates in ethical naturalism.[6] In particular, Midgley's contribution to ongoing contemporary discussions, which began in the 1980s, about the concept of human nature and its relevance to ethics. Such conversations were engaged in by many of Midgley's contemporaries and interlocutors – in particular, Philippa Foot, Michael Thompson, Elisabeth Anscombe, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alastair MacIntyre.[7]

Foot's book *Natural Goodness* (2001) was seminal in the development of Neo-Aristotelian naturalism. In it she argues that the word 'good', used in judgements of ethical or practical normativity, has a shared grammar with

[6]For methodological reasons, Midgley never explicitly calls herself a naturalist, she only ever describing herself as a "pluralist" (sourced in personal correspondence with Gregory McElwain).

[7]Elisabeth Anscombe's paper '"Modern" Moral Philosophy' (1958) is largely credited with inspiring the Neo-Aristotelian focus on human nature and objectivity in ethics. Seminal Neo-Aristotelian texts of Foot, MacIntyre, and Hursthouse were all published within two years of one another – MacIntyre's *On Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* (1999), and Foot's *Natural Goodness* (2001).

judgements of natural normativity. As such, flourishing and defect in the lives of plants and non-human animals (e.g. this sunflower has lush green leaves and is therefore flourishing as a sunflower), are analogous to judgement of evaluative or ethical goodness and defect in human animals (e.g. this human is kind, patient, and courageous, and is therefore flourishing as a human). It is notable that Foot's meta-ethical view was explicitly non-empirical; Foot wanted to set up a *grammar* of goodness, using only our pre-empirical, common-sense assessments of living things. Though Midgley also sets up a grammar of goodness, her empiricism – particularly her use of ethology – places her closer to the work of MacIntyre who, like Midgley, used animal study to draw comparisons between humans and nonhuman animals.

Some of the immediate reception of *Beast and Man* situated her within the revival of a focus on human nature of the kind found in the work of other Neo-Aristotelian Naturalists. The earliest example of philosophers associating Midgley with the development of a form of naturalism inspired by Aristotle is John Cottingham's paper "Neo-Naturalism and its Pitfalls". In 1983, Cottingham describes "the recent work of one of the most eloquent spokespersons for the new naturalism, Mary Midgley",

> In her recent and much acclaimed *Beast and Man* […] Midgley acknowledges her general debt to the Aristotelian approach […] An analysis is offered which focuses on certain human wants and needs; and conclusions are drawn about "the good for man". In undertaking such an enterprise, Midgley expressly states that "we can and must reason from facts to values"
>
> (Cottingham, *Neo-Naturalism Pitfalls*, 456).

Two years after Cottingham, Gordon Graham states,"[i]t is well known, I suppose, that Aristotelian biology, or rather the Aristotelian/biological approach to moral philosophy, is undergoing something of a revival. The best-known recent work of this sort is Mary Midgley's *Beast and Man*" (Graham, *Progress*, 339). Given that the renewal or revival of interest in Neo-Aristotelianism surged in the 1980s, and the decades surrounding it, these early references to Midgley place the publication of *Beast and Man,* in 1978, at the very beginning of this trend.[8]

The decades that follow saw Midgley fall almost completely out of discussions of naturalism and Aristotelianism in ethics. This is perhaps because people did not see *Beast and Man* for its contribution to philosophy, and instead as a piece of science – a view compounded by its reception in sociobiology debates.[9] This is evidenced by the reception of Midgley's

[8]As Julia Peters observes, it "[t]he 1970s, 80s and 90s were particularly productive decades for the development of neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics" (Peters, *Aristotelian Ethics in Contemporary Perspectiv*, 1).

[9]During this time, Midgley also engaged with topics seen to be outside of mainstream interests – such as environmental ethics and animal ethics. This may have contributed to her oversight from meta-ethics (e.g. if she was seen to be contributing to applied or practical ethics, instead of normative ethics).

philosophy at Cornell University Philosophy department. Following the publication of Midgley's paper "The Concept of Beastliness: Philosophy, Ethics and Animal Behaviour" (1973) in the journal *Philosophy,* Professor Max Black of Cornell invited Midgley to attend "some discussions about the meaning of the species barrier" held at Cornell's Science, Technology, and Society programme (Midgley, *The Owl of Minerva*, 191). Midgley recalls that Black's programme was a "very inclusive sort of science and philosophy organization. It was quite separate from the Cornell philosophy department who didn't wish to know about [her paper]" (laughter follows) (Midgley, *Life Story Interviews*, 61).

It does not seem far-fetched to suggest that the reaction of Cornell's Philosophy Department had something to do with the interdisciplinary nature of Midgley's paper, which provided the framework for *Beast and Man*. Her then-unconventional use of empirical and social science to illuminate moral philosophy allowed her novel bridge between disciplines to be overlooked. However, as I have proposed in this re-appraisal, this does not mean that Midgley's concept of human nature cannot provide genuinely philosophical insight into important areas of ethics.

Conclusion

Contrary to the climate of its early reception, *Beast and Man* had the potential to do much more than contribute to the ongoing sociobiology debate prevalent in the 1980s. It offers the reader an empirically-informed understanding of humans, resulting in a thoroughly anti-Cartesian approach to the human as a kind of animal, continuous with the world. What's more, Midgely prompts us to re-think our relationship with the natural world, suggesting that humans and animals are not as different as the history of philosophy has taught us.

What would *Beast and Man* look like without this intrusion of sociobiology? A republication of the text, including *only* those topics Midgley was truly concerned about, would provide an answer – and, as I have argued, would be a welcome addition to ongoing meta-ethical debates about human nature.

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