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## The Mixed Community

### Gregory S. McElwain

Mary Midgley opens her first book, *Beast and Man*, with the oft-quoted line: 'We are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals' (BM xxxiii).<sup>1</sup> This simple yet vital premise is central to her work, and has important implications on our moral thinking. We are embodied social animals navigating a morally complex world fraught with conflicting values and claims. We also share a social and ecological context with a multitude of non-human animals. For Midgley, this context and connection with animals and the natural world is often overlooked and neglected, though it should ultimately hold an important place in our discussions of ethics and animals. The concept of 'the mixed community', which Midgley elucidates in her 1983 book, *Animals and Why They Matter*, is an especially valuable description of this context and connection with animals. The modest focus of this essay is to draw out the meaning of this rich concept and highlight its value and relevance to animal ethics.

### Moral concern, reason, and emotion

In order to understand Midgley's conception of the mixed community, we must first take a brief look at her critique of animal ethics discourse in the early 1980s. When Midgley wrote *Animals and Why They Matter*, animal ethics had emerged as a burgeoning new field of philosophy, and animals were receiving more attention in ethical theory. This attention ranged from inclusion to dismissal of animals from the 'lifeboat' of our moral concern, represented most notably by theorists such as Peter Singer (1977) and R.G. Frey (1980) respectively, though animals were still regularly ignored or overlooked in general. Midgley joined this philosophical conversation, as she often does, to set a few things straight, and to help us *think* more clearly about animals in our moral deliberations. As such, much of *Animals and Why They Matter* is relatively 'destructive' – as she puts it – with the purpose of critiquing and dismantling inconsistent, incoherent, and misguided thinking about animals. In what follows, I will briefly characterize this critique before going on to focus on the more constructive elements of the mixed community concept.

In her systematic critique of rationalism in moral philosophy, Midgley targets misconceptions in theoretical and practical thought on the 'animal question'. This critique is primarily directed toward those who oppose or dismiss animal ethics, either relatively or absolutely. *Absolute dismissal* is the attitude – exemplified for instance by Descartes and Spinoza, among others – that rejects animal claims outright: as creatures both metaphysically and functionally equivalent to machines, animals command no special moral importance, either theoretically or practically. This position is most often assumed and arguments for it are rarely made – it is simply taken to be *obvious* that animals do not matter. *Relative dismissal* positions, instead, 'merely give [animals] a very low priority', and animals are more of a distraction that 'must come at the end of the queue, after all human needs have been met' (A 13). This is where much of the Western philosophical tradition has found itself – not booting animals out of the moral lifeboat absolutely, but rather relegating them to the lower end of the moral spectrum. Ultimately, Midgley argues that these positions neglect the care, compassion, and relations that we are capable of and often do extend toward others, including other species (see Cooper, this volume).

The question of animals in the Western philosophical tradition has a long and colorful past that generally leans toward human exceptionalism. Though certain thinkers such as Voltaire and

Jeremy Bentham offered oppositional views to the dominant streams of human exaltation over animals, reason came to be trumpeted as the banner under which moral considerability was granted. And since animals were not considered rational, their moral worth was dismissed: animals simply did not matter. Reason, much like the soul, gradually became the mark of moral agents (and perhaps moral patients as well), which inevitably lent to the extreme Cartesian position of animals as mere automata or machines (for additional background on the Western perception of animals in classical, late antique, and modern philosophy see Clark 2011 and Garrett 2011). Midgley understands this excessive glorification of reason as a carryover from the Enlightenment project to elevate reason and science over ‘irrational prejudices’. This emphasis certainly served an important purpose at the time, but exaggerations such as this should be reevaluated or even disposed of when they are no longer helpful or begin to do harm. She takes aim at this ‘hyper-rationalism’, and argues that it must be challenged due to the subjugated status it has placed on animals (and, in many cases, certain humans).

A further element in Midgley’s critique is her examination of abstract, rationalist categories of morality—duty, rights, equality, justice, and contract thinking among others—and their efficacy in dealing with animals. An exhaustive summary of this critique is beyond the scope of this essay, though its main features are clear enough. Midgley demonstrates the inconsistencies in these approaches and how they can be misleading in their usage. These categories, often stemming from technical legal contexts, are generally focused on one particularly narrow area of morality, and cannot be seen to cover the whole, as they are often represented or assumed to do. Her further tactic here is to show that there are usually additional assumptions that lie behind the intellectual gymnastics required to construct such narrow and restrictive grounds for moral worth. She highlights the complexity that is left out of these formulations, including the assumptions of worth and value that are sometimes implicit in the positions themselves. In the end, it is better to rephrase our discussions of morality because the current parameters are too limiting to be useful:

Whenever the spotlight picks out a particular moral area like this [rights] as central, things outside it tend to glide unnoticed into the shadows and be forgotten. Terminology, developed for central purposes, becomes unable to express them clearly. In such cases, philosophy must not just record and follow the usage of current theories. It must also be their critic (A 63).

Reliance on these rationalist categories of morality distracts from rather than enriches animal discourse, and ‘notions like equality, rights and even justice tend to imprison our attention in the area which has now become familiar’ (A 83).

This critique of hyper-rationalism should not, however, be taken as anti-rationalism. For Midgley, reason is crucial to moral thinking and should not be jettisoned. She is critical of those who one-sidedly exaggerate the primacy of reason to the neglect of other important variables in human life and morality, including emotions. Emotions for Midgley are comprised of a ‘whole range of our feelings, motives, and sympathies’ that support and invigorate our moral faculties and contribute to ‘well-grounded belief on important subjects’: they are, in other words, ‘the power-house which keeps the whole lot going’ (A 35). Our moral concerns and what we care about are very naturally accompanied by feelings – of alarm, disgust, love, joy, worry, and so on – and reflect our sense of the seriousness of the cases, deeply connecting us to what matters in our lives. However, this does not mean, as certain Emotivist theories claim, that morality is

nothing but an expression of our emotions. ‘The Emotivist’s mistake’, she explains, ‘is in supposing that it [morality] requires nothing else; in trying to detach such feelings from the thoughts that properly belong to them’ (A 35). Though emotion can be an ugly ‘buzz word’, it need not be, and is not for Midgley, for whom the ‘real fault must lie not in the presence of feeling, but in the absence of thought, or in the unsuitability of feeling to thought’ (A 35). Rationalists tend to reject feelings as reactive physical states rather than embrace the interwoven nature of reason and emotion. For Midgley, these two areas work together in a complementary way as part of the same process.

### **The mixed community concept**

While Midgley’s critique runs throughout the book, a more constructive portion is spurred by her examination of species and the species-barrier, arguing that both those who marginalize and those who exaggerate the latter are both equally off the mark. These positions are represented by those leveling the charge of ‘speciesism’ and behaviourist scepticism respectively, each of whom she confronts. In response to those who cast human exceptionalism as speciesism, she argues that the species-barrier is real and significant, and awareness of it is ultimately essential to properly understanding and respecting each species and each individual animal. To do otherwise is to engage in a form of ‘patronizing thinking’ which flattens out the integrity and distinctions of different animals. Discriminating and distinguishing between animals is not then prejudicial, but rather an important necessity in appreciating value. This homogenization of beings and bodies is characteristic of rationalist thought for Midgley, which tends to overlook that ‘we are not just disembodied intellects, but beings of particular kinds’ (A 99). Moreover, the drive toward leveled inter-species egalitarianism tends to downplay the important place of the intra-species bonds and our relationships as social beings. The challenge and concern of morality is to constantly evaluate and engage this tension between special bonds and justice more broadly to others without eliminating much of what really matters to us in the process.

The species-barrier then is real, important, and should not be marginalized. But nor should it be exaggerated, and Midgley’s discussion of why this is the case is where she develops the core of the mixed community concept. The species-barrier, however real and important, is also semi-permeable, allowing for animals of various species, including humans, to impressively interact and live together. ‘All human communities have involved animals’, she observes, and it is ‘one of the special powers and graces of our species not to ignore others, but to draw in, domesticate and live with a great variety of other creatures. No other animal does so on anything like so large a scale’ (A 111 and 112). Such domestication was achieved largely because animals were able to ‘form individual bonds with those who tamed them’, by understanding social signals, learning to obey particular persons, and so on. Taming was possible, continues Midgley, ‘not only because the people taming them were social beings, but because they themselves were so as well’ (A 112). This shared sociality and connection between humans and other animals is the foundation that makes the mixed community a historical fixture.

Though animals may not be ‘persons’ in the strictest sense of the word, as members of the mixed community, they are certainly fellow subjects, not objects (see P for Midgley’s exploration of the concept of personhood). Our inter-subjectivity, sympathy, empathy, and shared sociality with animals all highlight ‘a direct capacity in man for attending to, and to some extent understanding, the moods and reactions of other species’ (A 114). Our positive relations (which she focuses on) confirm this, but so do our negative ones – for instance, cruelty indicates a belief in sentience and pain in others, since ‘there is very little comfort in working off ill-

temper on a cushion' (A 114). Cruelty toward animals, then, involves an implicit acceptance, not a denial, of their consciousness: for belief in animal sentience is 'essential ... for exploiting them successfully' – in fact, 'exploitation *requires* sympathy' (A 114 and 116). Abuse and cruelty to animals then is an unfortunate result of the very real human ability to understand the 'inner' as well as the 'outer' states of animals – something which behaviourism dismisses as impossible – coupled with the tendency to devalue or disregard these states.

This ability to understand animals, for Midgley, rebuts the behaviourist insistence that the 'subjective' feelings of animals are 'quite hidden from us, cannot concern us and may well not even exist' (A 115). We can, however, talk of the subjective states of animals very much for the same reasons that we can do so in humans – a range of observable behavioural patterns that can be recognized, noticeable similarity between nervous systems, and a history of successful interactions built on this recognition of subjectivity. This capacity for reading human and animal subjectivity is not always perfectly accurate, and sometimes it fails completely, but the imperfection of this capacity is not a strong enough reason to reject the ability to say anything positive about animals. Here the charge of 'anthropomorphism' is quickly made if any attribution of human emotions is transferred onto animals. If things are understood in the context of the mixed community, however, anthropomorphism is only wrong when it *improperly* describes the emotion or feeling; otherwise it is completely appropriate to refer to corresponding emotions between humans and animals in this language. Midgley wishes to remove the stigma of anthropomorphic language altogether as a red herring:

This attack assumes that human language is invented in the first place not only *by* humans, but exclusively *about* humans—to describe them and them alone. Any use of it to describe any other being would then be an 'extension'—a leap out into the unknown. But if language has, from the start, arisen in a mixed human-animal community and has been adapted to describe all beings whose moods etc. might be of general importance and interest, then that is the proper use of the concepts from the start, and no leap is needed (A 124).

Anthropomorphizing language then is a defensible way to refer to animal behaviour on many occasions and appropriate in light of human-animal coevolution.

In this context, in which our very language is reflective of our co-existence with animals, most of us are imprinted by inter-species sociality from a young age, and those who do not receive it seek it out. We crave animal contact from our youth because 'animals, like song and dance, are an innate taste' (A 118). Bonds with animals work alongside our bonds with people as part of a full human life – and such loving sociality, with both humans *and* animals, is what gives rise to the mixed community. Midgley paints a lively image of this mixed-species world:

Accordingly, the species-barrier, imposing though it may look, is rather like one of those tall wire fences whose impressiveness is confined to their upper reaches. To an adult in formal dress, engaged in his official statesmanly interactions, the fence is an insuperable barrier. Down below, where it is full of holes, it presents no obstacle at all. The young of *Homo sapiens*, like those of the other species present, scurry through it all the time. Since all human beings start life as children, this has the quite important consequence that hardly any of us, at heart, sees the social world as an exclusively human one (A 118).

In this world, love for animals does not replace love for humans, but it also does not distract from that love. Rather, it strengthens it, and she likens love to a special substance that need not be hindered by the species-barrier: the one ‘does not need to block another’, says Midgley, ‘because love, like compassion, is not a rare fluid to be economized, but a capacity which grows by use’ (A 119).

The curious human trait of ‘neoteny’ refers to the various ways that we can ‘prolong certain infantile characteristics into maturity, develop them and continue to profit by them as adults’, encouraging an ‘eager reaching-out to surrounding life and to every striking aspect of the physical world’ (A 119). Midgley explores how the child inside of us undergirds ‘the capacity for widely extended sympathy, for social horizons not limited to one’s familiar group, is certainly part of this childish spontaneity’ (A 120). This expanded sympathy through our neotenous characteristics is a trait that aids inter-species interaction:

It is also the window through which interest in creatures of other species enters our lives, both in childhood and—if we do not firmly close the window—in later life as well. It is one aspect of that openness to new impressions, that relative freedom from constraining innate programmes, which makes us culturally malleable and enables us, through pseudo-speciation, to accept and build such varied ways of life (A 120-1).

Moreover, this helps us in understanding our broader connection and kinship with the natural world. ‘It carries with it, too’, she expands, ‘that still wider curiosity, that capacity for interest in other, inanimate surrounding objects—plants and stones, stars, rocks and water—which extends our horizon beyond the social into the ecological, and makes us true citizens of the world’ (A 120). This reflects our roots alongside other species in the natural world, and is part of the reason that we are drawn to and feel connected with nature:

Evolutionarily speaking, then, it is likely that a species such as ours would find itself equipped for the position which some Old Testament texts give it, of steward and guardian, under God, placed over a range of creatures which he is in principle able to care for and understand, rather than in the one often imagined in science fiction, of an invader exploiting an entirely alien planet (A 122).

Such stewardship, it should be noted, is more representative of our special abilities than a mandate or license for simple human exceptionalism.

In wrapping up her conversation on the mixed community, Midgley once again illustrates the complexity and interconnection of our moral concepts and discourse. Here she identifies feelings of exceptionalism and superiority not only in human-animal relationships, but also in the colonial mentality of domination. This logic of domination is indicative of the interwoven oppressions of ‘inferior’ cultures and other species. Many who object to interspecies sympathy, empathy, care, and communication do not do so because of behaviourist scepticism or similar arguments, but because these things are undesirable to them and are equated with ‘primitives’ and children. These ‘civilized’ adults ‘recommend indifference to animals—and indeed to all non-human nature—as a condition of emotional maturity’ (A 122). ‘Advanced’ European civilization is thought to have moved beyond preoccupation with animals. She summarily challenges this, stating that ‘emotional maturity is not necessarily achieved by limiting one’s emotional commitments, nor by rejecting interests held in common with children. Increasing callousness is,

on the whole, rather a bad sign for it. Children and ‘primitives’ need not always be wrong’ (A 122). In addressing the colonial mindset, Midgley highlights the interconnected systems of domination that have led to exploitation and subordination of animals, along with women, children, nature, and indigenous cultures, which ecofeminist literature has since accentuated (see McKinnell, this volume and Warren 1990, for instance. See also Donovan and Adams 2007 for a collection focused on animals). Such dominating attitudes are explored in varying degrees in *Animals and Why They Matter*, illustrating her overriding position that animal discourse is connected to our broader discussion of morality, all of which must be regularly interrogated. This all, for Midgley, matters morally, and is routinely overlooked.

### **The mixed community and the wider world**

In much of her work, Midgley argues that values are organic and have to make sense in the context of our lives on this planet. Individuals cannot be abstracted apart from the wholes which they are part of, both socially and naturally, mixed and ecological. Elsewhere, in *Evolution as a Religion*, she similarly expresses this in an organic metaphor:

Of course, human beings are distinct individuals. But they are also tiny, integral parts of this planet—framed by it, owing everything to it, and adapted to a certain place among its creatures. Each can indeed change its life, but does not originally invent it. Each receives life in a family (as a petal does in a flower), in a country (as the flower does on the tree), and in the biosphere (as the tree does in the forest). Our environment gives us nearly everything we have (ER 169-170).

She expands this organic metaphor with a more detailed look at the relationship between the parts and the wider whole:

If, on the other hand, we use a biological or ‘organic’ model, we can talk also of a variety of asymmetrical relations found within a whole. Leaves relate not only to other leaves, but to fruit, twigs, branches, and the whole tree. People appear not only as individuals, but as members of their groups, families, tribes, species, ecosystems and biosphere, and have moral relations, as parts, to these various wholes (ER 178).

This is a helpful way of understanding the self in relation to others at the individual, social, and ecological levels in the mixed community. Any effort to explain our moral universe in terms that neglect these connections and relations—and their correlative emotions, sympathy, empathy, care, and compassion—simply is not comprehensive enough to understand the variety of claims and obligations that we have to others, including animals and nature. This holistic relationality stresses the interplay of parts and wholes and, importantly, does not exaggerate either to a fault.

Relational thinking should not, as can happen, over-exaggerate the principle of nearness or proximity, which can be used to dramatically limit one’s moral boundaries and even serve as a form as egoism (A 21). This said, Midgley does not dismiss *nearness*, but embraces the concept in the context of the mixed community because of its value and argues that ‘the proper way to treat it is to recognize nearness as a perfectly real and important factor in our psychology, and therefore in our morality, but to refuse to treat it as the sole or supreme one’ (A 21). Once again, the answer is not in the extremes, but in a balanced appraisal of the values at play. Nearness is a major factor in our moral relations, from self to family to friends, pets, and so on, but there are

other claims that can often outweigh those nearest to us. ‘The moral universe’, she writes, ‘is not just a system of concentric circles, in which inner claims must always prevail over outer ones’ (A 22-3).

No system of concentric circles or carefully detailed prescriptions can adequately help us fully understand and decide on difficult moral dilemmas. Those moral theories that aim to identify a ‘simple formula’ with which one can assess competing priority claims ‘make the job look simple’ and so ‘can only deceive us’ (A 30). We should work out maps or webs of dynamic, overlapping values and obligations, not to ‘fix priorities’, but as a mark of our recognition that ‘relatively isolated claims’ sometimes prevail – that our moral thinking ought to be adaptable and non-dogmatic (A 30). This runs counter to approaches that seek to pare down our moral concern, leaving us with a limited range of things to be concerned with in order to not spread out our obligations too thin. As Midgley puts it,

[Compassion] does not need to be treated hydraulically in this way, as a rare and irreplaceable fluid, usable only for exceptionally impressive cases. It is a habit or power of the mind, which grows and develops with use. Such powers (as is obvious in cases like intelligence) are magic fluids which increase with pouring. Effective users do not economize on them (A 31).

What develops for Midgley is a comprehensive approach to a wide array of complementary and interrelated ethical issues. Discussion of animals runs quite seamlessly into issues of gender, social justice, ecology, family, and politics: they all are tied together as things that matter to us and are central to our lives. These are the issues that factor into our values and decisions, and they are intricately related in the unity of human nature, another important theme in her work. The mixed community is a way of understanding the significant place of animals in our lives. Animals are indeed one of the many important ‘components’ of our ‘value systems’ – to use the language of much of modern ethics – that we constantly weigh and prioritize as we sift through the hectic and confusing array of conflicts we encounter. In this pragmatic approach to the variability of value systems, the parts relate to each other, priorities and values shift, social and ecological settings change, and the rules are constantly rewritten. There are no easy answers, and it seems that no single ethical system can account for the diversity and unpredictability of moral issues that arise in these worlds. Those that claim to do so, Midgley says, ultimately mislead us.

We should not, then, simply plug animals into existing ethical systems that promise all the answers. We should see them in the complex context of our lives on this planet and how they are related to us, how they share this world with us. Ultimately, animals have always been part of human communities, and ‘things’ are not parts of communities. Though this wide-ranging community could seem a bit abstract, this conception is really more of a starting point, and this larger understanding of community can reduce down into smaller, concrete ones. We can then see ourselves as diverse, variegated, and mixed social and ecological communities that are intimately connected to the larger whole. There are broad ranges of relationships that we have with animals in this setting, and they do not necessarily stop at the traditional and often forced line between domestic and wild. Midgley would likely contend that varying contexts would make it difficult to discern this line even if we insisted upon it. Animals fall all along a domestic-wild spectrum based on context—dogs, feral cats, squirrels, deer, pigeons, elephants, snakes, chimpanzees, sheep, gerbils, whales, and so on. Differing relations and contexts determine where these animals land on the domestic-wild scale. The terms ‘domestic’ and ‘wild’ are not helpful as

essential categories that preordain the moral status of animals, which tends to occur in polarizing approaches to animal ethics between individualists and ecological holists (see Callicott 1980 and 1988 and Sagoff 1984. Hargrove 1992 explores this dynamic).

Midgley does focus on domestic animals in discussing the mixed community, but community, connection, empathy, and sympathy do not stop there. Her discussion of social and ecological claims in *Animals and Why They Matter* is helpful in understanding her distinctions. *Social claims* are those that we respond to in our social communities, claims on behalf of sentient members (she roughly equates ‘sentience’ to consciousness, acknowledging the complications therein). The claims of animals are not to be seen as the claims of machines or even the claims of equals, but as social claims of fellow community members. *Ecological claims* are those we respond to in our ecological communities, claims on behalf of non-sentient members. These include trees, forests, species, and the biosphere as a whole. We constantly weigh and prioritize these claims in our value systems, which is where we place ‘what matters to us’ in relation to everything else.

Social and ecological claims are both important and reflect our unique connection to the whole, which ‘cannot be a matter of moral indifference to us’ (A 91). Moreover, there is not always a sharp distinction between social and ecological claims, or between mixed and ecological communities: ‘Our duties to swarms of very small or distant animals, or to whole species, seem to be partly of the ecological sort, resembling in many ways our duty to plants, but they can also have a social element of response to consciousness’ (A 90). Rather, it is important to view both within a ranged value system of priorities and claims, in which the social and ecological sort are sometimes independent, sometimes continuous, and sometimes conflicting. Pragmatically navigating this moral terrain is more challenging than most ethical systems let on, and Midgley ensures that the complexity of these issues is not lost in animal discourse.

Midgley does not claim to have all of the answers – and she is adamant about that – but her thinking lends us practicality, relevance, complexity, and common sense, when abstract and alienating conceptions of moral worth risk going off-course. It is not necessarily that these systems have nothing to offer. Instead, it is more so what they leave out – or were leaving out in the early 1980s – in exaggerating their particular categories of morality: important elements of human life and morality such as community, relations, care, emotions, sympathy, and empathy. She also offers us a better set of questions than the ‘either/or’ approaches of liberal individualism or ecological holism in dealing with animals. The individual and the whole each matter for Midgley: the one does not trump the other, and there is more complexity involved. Ultimately, animals should quite simply be prioritized because they are our fellow beings in the mixed community. They matter to us.



## References

### *Works by Midgley*

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> References to Midgley's writings in the text are to *Animals and Why They Matter* (A), *Beast and Man* (BM), and *Evolution as a Religion* (ER).