MARY MIDGLEY, "BRUTALITY AND SENTIMENTALITY," PHILOSOPHY 54, (JULY, 1979), PP. 385-389.

Mary Midgley s aim in "Brutality and Sentimentality" is to maintain that "the notion that it is sentimental to attribute feelings to animals is pretty confused, because it is a charge against the motives of the attributors, not really against what they say."1 Not unlike the argument in her Beast and Man (1978), Midgley's position here makes an epistemologically bold assumption: it is just as plausible for one to say that he or she can identify feelings in nonhuman animals as it is to attempt the same feat with other humans. If, as is generally accepted, one has warrant for inferring from one's own experience the feelings of other humans, then a like inference about the feelings of nonhuman animals also properly can be made.

Unfortunately, Midgley skirts some basic issues; as a result, she does not make a persuasive case. It must be recognized that a challenge to human-centered thinking is an important issue in philosophy and theology today; but for one to view the problem of "brutality" and "sentimentality" as an empirical one is to blur the distinction which obtains between activity and agency. Behavior can be observed and, at least in some ways, it can be measured empirically; but what would it mean to say that a "personality trait" is an empirical phenomenon capable of some kind of measurement?2 What kind of "evidence" could be provided for a determination of the nature of one's motives in acting either kindly or cruelly toward any creature? How can one determine whether and to what extent one "distorts" reality either by refusing to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward nonhuman creatures or by projecting a "brutal" image onto them?

Midgley's argument begs a fundamental question: how does one know that different modes of existence (e.g., a human and a wolf) have experiences which are closely enough related to warrant inferences of the sort Midgley wishes to make? It is one thing to say that "notions like fear, anger, pleasure, etc., were not invented in or for an exclusively human world....they grew up in a thoroughly public world inhabited by many species..."[3]; it is quite a different thing to conflate "notion" and "experience," and then to conclude from the above assertion about the publicity of fear, anger, and pleasure, that "species solipsism is no more convincing than the personal kind."[4] In order to make a convincing argument, Midgley must show decisively that her position does not "distort" reality; but, given the way she has decided to address this issue, it would seem that such a task is in principle impossible for her to realize. While Midgley's intentions are without doubt laudable, her approach to the problem of human-nonhuman relations cannot provide the results she seeks. Much more work remains to be done.

David G. Trickett
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[1] Midgley, "Brutality and Sentimentality," Philosophy 54, 209 (July, 1979), 385.

[2] Ibid., 387.

[3] Ibid., 386.

[4] Ibid., 386.