‘Removing the Barriers’: Mary Midgley on Concern for Animals

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Abstract
This paper focuses on Mary Midgley’s influential discussions, over more than thirty years, of the relationship between human beings and animals, in particular on her concern to ‘remove the barriers’ that stand in the way of proper understanding and treatment of animals. These barriers, she demonstrates, have been erected by animal science, epistemology and mainstream moral philosophy alike. In each case, she argues, our attitudes to animals are warped by approaches that are at once excessively abstract, over-theoretical and guilty of a collective hubris on the part of humankind. In keeping with Midgley’s own position, it is argued in this paper that, to remove these barriers, what is required is not yet another theory of how and why animals matter, but attention to actual engagements with animals and to the moral failings or vices that distort people’s relationships with them.

1. Introduction

‘We are animals’.[1,2] ‘No human has ever been anything but an animal’.[3] These two remarks are, respectively, from the beginning of Mary Midgley first book, *Beast and Man*, published in 1978, and the start of the last paper she wrote on animals thirty-four years later. They serve as bookends, as it were, to the many writings in-between that indicate Midgley’s abiding interest in the relationship between human beings and non-human animals. These writings

[1] References are to the following writings of Mary Midgley: *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (BM) (London: Methuen, 1980); *Animals and Why They Matter* (AWM) (London: Penguin, 1983); ‘Persons and Non-Persons’ (PN), in P. Singer (ed.), *In Defence of Animals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 52–63; ‘Should We Let Them Go?’ (SW), in F. Dolins (ed.), *Attitudes to Animals: Views in Animal Welfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152–63; ‘Why Farm Animals Matter’ (WF), in M. Dawkins and R. Bonney (eds.), *The Future of Animals Farming: Renewing the Ancient Contract* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 21–32; ‘On Being an Anthrozoon: How Unique Are We?’ (OBA), *Minding Nature* 5 (2012), 1–16.

[2] Op. cit. note 1, BM, xiii.

[3] Op. cit. note 1, OBA, 1.

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ranged widely over a great variety of topics. These range from such general philosophical questions as 'Why do animals matter?' and 'Are animals persons?' to specific issues of animal welfare – those raised by factory farming, for example, or by the confinement of animals in zoos.

Midgley's attention to questions surrounding animals was not incidental to, or hived off from, her wider philosophical concerns. Indeed, it will become apparent in this paper, I hope, that her criticisms of various distorted views about animals are of a piece both with her powerful rejection of scientism and other 'myths we live by', and with her repeated lament for the atrophy in the modern world of wonder and a sense of cosmic humility.

The clarity and forcefulness of Midgley's writings on animals have ensured their considerable influence, both in the world of animal welfare and upon many philosophers, myself included, whose thinking about animals has been decisively shaped by these writings. The environmental philosopher, J. Baird Callicott, for example, refers to Midgley's 'marvellous insight' into the ways humans and animals form 'communities' together, and to the promise this insight offers for a rapprochement between the typically individualistic aims of 'animal liberation' and the more holistic ones of environmental ethics.[4]

Despite such testimonies to Midgley's influence, however, she has not been cited and discussed in the professional literature of animal ethics with anything approaching the frequency of some other contemporary philosophers, such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan. The reason for this, as I intend to demonstrate, is that she critically distances herself from the mainstream or orthodox approaches adopted by such authors.

I shall be focusing on two themes that are central in Midgley's writings on animals, each of them belonging to her abiding ambition to 'remove the barriers' that, as she sees it, have been 'erected against concern for animals'.[5] The first theme is an epistemological one, relating to the understanding of animal lives. It consists of a critique of behaviourism, 'ritual scepticism' and other refusals to accept that many animals indubitably enjoy a rich subjective life that we are able at least partly to understand. The second theme is an ethical one, and takes the form of a rejection of what deserve to be called 'mainstream' approaches in animal ethics, including utilitarianism and moral theories in which the central notions are rights, justice and equality.

[4] J. Baird Callicott, 'Animal liberation and environmental ethics: back together again', *Between the Species* 4 (1988), 163–9.

[5] Op. cit. note 1, AWM, 144.

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I speak of there being two themes in Midgley's writings, but it is important, I shall argue, to recognise how closely connected they are for her. Both behaviourism and its relatives and mainstream moral theories are made possible and encouraged by similar mind-sets, and it is these that must be exposed and rejected if progress is to be made in our understanding and treatment of animals.

2. Are human beings animals?

Before turning to these two themes, however, I want to respond to the worry some people might have that, in highlighting these themes, I am ignoring what they might regard as the paramount claim that Midgley makes in her writings on animals. This is the claim, encountered in the two remarks of hers with which I began, that human beings *are* – or are not 'anything but' – animals. In responding to this worry, I am, in effect, registering one of the very few points on which I disagree with Midgley.

In my judgement, the question of whether humans are animals is best left aside. Coolly regarded the question is a dull one. In one obvious sense, human beings are indeed a kind of animal. They ingest food, they metabolise, they move themselves around, and so on. They have the kinds of properties, that is, that biologists identify when distinguishing animals from vegetables. But, in an equally obvious sense, human beings are not animals. This is the familiar sense, as it is defined in the OED, of being 'a brute or beast, as distinguished from man'. Clearly, too, it is this second sense that is operative in many, perhaps most, ordinary conversational contexts. If I tell you that there are some animals in my neighbours' garden, then you'll immediately judge that I was not speaking literally – but jokingly, perhaps insultingly – when you realise I am referring to the neighbours' children.

'Humans are (just) animals!' is, in effect, a slogan, and the only question is whether it is a good one. It is surely wrong to suppose, as many champions of it do, that by endorsing the slogan one indicates that our differences from animals are vastly outweighed by our similarities to them. Peter Hacker begins his book, *Human Nature*, with the words 'Human beings are animals …', but immediately adds the qualification '… with a distinctive range of abilities'.[6] His book then focuses on just these distinctive abilities, including

[6] Peter Hacker *Human Nature: The Categorial Framework* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 1.

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cognitive and linguistic ones, and argues that the differences between us and any other animals are, in fact, much greater than many scientists and philosophers imagine.

It is a mistake, too, to suppose, as its champions usually do, that the slogan must register and inspire a tender moral concern for animals in a way that the counter slogan, the denial that humans are animals, cannot. Social Darwinists thought that, as just one species of animal among others, humankind was engaged in a red in tooth and claw struggle for survival and supremacy with other species. Nothing tender-hearted here. Conversely, The Buddha and St Francis of Assisi emphatically denied that human beings are just a kind of animal, but are rightly esteemed for their compassion for animals.

Probably, we are better off without any slogans and counter slogans here. But if someone is wedded to the claim that human beings are (just) animals, then he or she should not be blinded to the salient and deep differences that exist between people and (other) animals. An important reason for being alert to these differences is that some uniquely human capacities need to be emphasised in any proper appraisal of our treatment of animals – the capacities, for example, for hubris, wilful ignorance, hardness of heart, vanity, self-deception, and the recreational enjoyment of killing other creatures.

To be sure, these are not distinctive aspects of humankind that Mary Midgley pastes over. On the contrary, as we shall see, she constantly reminds us of them. But this, it seems to me, is despite, and not because of, her insistence that humans are nothing but animals. So let's return, with slogans set aside, to what I identified as the main themes in her writings on animals.

3. Animals and epistemology

When I sketched those two themes earlier, I indicated that, for Midgley, they are closely related. Each of her critical targets – epistemological and ethical – exhibits, in her view, the same general defects. They are both, for a start, overly theoretical and abstract, the products of a failure of attention to the actual engagements people have with animals in real life. Second, they are both guilty of hubris, of an unwarranted elevation of humankind over other species. Midgley was well aware of the connection between her two themes. It is through engaging with animals that we can 'grasp more fully how their lives work', and doing so also and 'inevitably

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gives us a sense of fellowship with them' – an acquaintance that is not only incompatible with hubris but inspires further engagement with animals and hence deeper understanding of them.[7]

Let's begin with the epistemological theme – with, that is, Midgley's criticisms of the behaviourist or sceptical 'idea that the subjective feelings [and mental life, more generally] of animals are … quite hidden from us, cannot concern us and may not even exist'.[8] In two ways, she argues, this idea betrays a surfeit of theorising and a corresponding deficit of common sense realism. First, the idea typically relies on loading ordinary concepts – including those of understanding, belief, hope, and concept itself – with theoretical baggage that they do not carry in everyday talk and practice. Midgley singles out for special criticism the insistence that no creature can count as believing or hoping for anything unless it can give linguistic expression to the belief or hope.[9] From this insistence, together with a suitably demanding notion of what counts as language, it follows that animals cannot believe or hope – or at any rate, that we can have no good reason to think they do.

Midgley's response to this idea is blunt. 'Neither with dog nor human do we need words to reveal to us what expressive and interpretative capacities far older and far deeper than words make clear immediately'.[10] Put differently, the abilities of humans and animals alike both to express and to recognise beliefs, hopes and many other ingredients of mental life predate and are presupposed by the use of a psychological vocabulary. More generally, she argues that the application of everyday mental concepts is determined not by theoretical accounts of, say, understanding or emotion, but in and through practices of engagement with people or animals.

Second, Midgley argues that the scepticism of behaviourists and their cousins towards the mental life of animals is a 'ritual scepticism' – an 'artificial', 'hollow' and 'unreal' one to which no more than lip-service can be paid.[11] It is not a stance that people who actually engage with animals – vets, trainers and the like – can genuinely adopt. She points out that even ethologists and biologists, like Nikolaas Tinbergen, who seem to feel obliged to proclaim a ritual scepticism in the prefaces to their books soon put it aside when they get down to recording their experiences of and with animals.

[7] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 14.
[8] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 115.
[9] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 57.
[10] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 59.
[11] Op. cit. note 1, SW 157–9.

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This scepticism, Midgley continues, is not only incompatible with what people who live with animals surely know, for example that cutting off the tail of a puppy hurts it. It is incompatible as well with any skilful intercourse with animals. A sceptical mahout who decided that it was a matter of mere speculation whether his elephant could really be angry, suspicious, pleased or excited would soon either be out of a job or dead.[12] Attributing subjectivity to animals – seeing their behaviour as, for instance, manifesting emotions and understanding – is a precondition of intelligent practical dealings with them. Proclamations of scepticism are possible only for detached observers for whom the movements, gestures, cries and faces of animals – or, indeed, of men and women – are 'data' from which it is problematic to infer to the presence of emotions, moods, beliefs and so on. By contrast, for the vet, the pet owner, the dog trainer – for people, that is, whose lives are spent in the company of animals – the thought that there is anything problematic here is an idle one.

Midgley has another, and morally-charged, criticism of behaviourism and its cousins. In her judgement, they betray a kind of collective hubris on the part of humankind. They both feed and feed *on* a sense of a human uniqueness and separation from the rest of life on earth that places us far above the animals. This is a sense that, for some people, may in itself be gratifying, serving to boost their self-image. But it serves as well to help 'establish that we have a right to exploit other creatures'[13], and to encourage a perception of them as 'things' or 'products' for human use.[14]

There are, of course, striking examples from the history of religion of the elevation of human beings over all other creatures. They alone are made in the image of God, we hear, or are the very purpose of His creation, or are uniquely capable of liberation from the cycle of rebirth – and so on. But Midgley's focus is on a more modern form of hubris. Science, as she sees it, has inherited the hubris of religion, to the degree indeed that, as she notes with some irony, such champions of the sciences as Auguste Comte and Julian Huxley actually commandeer the term 'religious' to express the unbounded enthusiasm they want to arouse in us for the scientific enterprise.

For Midgley, this 'anthropolatry' or human 'self-worship' – this faith in the humankind as the culmination of evolution and masters of the universe who, as J.D. Bernal anticipated, will turn the stars into 'efficient heat-machines' – represents an 'absurd over-estimate

[12] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 115.
[13] Op. cit. note 1, OBA 10.
[14] Op. cit. note 1, WF 12.

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of human separateness and superiority'.[15] It is an exaggeration that behaviourism and its allies exploit and reinforce. For how better to relegate the beasts than to insist that, even if they are possessed of some feelings and intelligence, their mental or subjective life is meagre and impoverished? This is a relegation that serves, in turn, to justify what would otherwise seem to be cruel treatment of animals.

It is no accident, Midgley argues, that it is in technologically and scientifically informed practices involving animals – animal experimentation, genetic engineering of farm animals, and so on – that we most frequently encounter the many 'distancing devices' that people employ to disguise, perhaps from themselves, the reality and import of these practices. It is much easier, she implies, to run a battery farm or work in an animal research laboratory if you think of a chicken as 'a very efficient converting machine' or of a rat as 'a standardised biological research tool'[16]. And, as Michel de Montaigne for one would agree, it is only a vainglorious, hubristic species that could describe other creatures in these terms.

4. Animals and ethics

The second main theme I identified in Mary Midgley's writings on animals is her rejection of what she and I call the 'mainstream' approach in modern animal ethics. The following, I suggest, is a recognisable sketch of the dominant, mainstream approach in animal ethics that is shared by various well-subscribed theories – utilitarian and rights-based ones included:-

> 'How animals should be treated and regarded depends on their possession of 'moral status' or 'moral considerability'. For them to possess this, animals must have features that are identical or relevantly similar to those in virtue of which we human beings have moral status or considerability. They must, for example, be sentient and capable of pleasure and pain, or be at least relatively autonomous 'subjects of a life', or be parties to an implicit social contract – and so on. Failure of moral regard for animals if they really have such features, as many of them surely do, is a violation of principles of equality, justice and indeed reason. The failure would constitute a form of discrimination, manifesting a

[15] Op. cit. note 1, OBA 10, 12.
[16] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 80.

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'speciesist' attitude comparable to racist or ageist ones that ignore the moral status of certain human beings.'

The central idea here is often explained and supported with the help of the image of an 'expanding moral circle'. Moral regard, the story goes, begins at home, as it were – with one's family and friends. But people are compelled by logic to extend this regard to any other beings who are relevantly similar to family and friends. And gradually it has been extended. Historically, it may have taken a long time for the circle to expand so as to include all human beings and not just one's fellow tribesmen, say, or people of the same race as oneself. And it may yet take a long time for animals to be brought securely within the circumference of the circle. The circle's expansion is, in effect, a history of the power of reason: for it marks the gradual appreciation that it is irrational to regard this or that irrelevant difference between different groups of people, or between human beings and other creatures, as a ground for withholding moral regard.

Midgley is not, of course, 'against' moral theory if, by this, is simply meant philosophical reflection on moral concepts, or on 'the rules and principles, standards and ideals, that emerge' in our efforts to 'guide ourselves through the jungle of the human condition'.[17] But there is a kind of moral theorising that takes the form of producing 'highly abstract theories' and 'sweeping generalisations', and this, she thinks, 'gives philosophy a bad name, and rightly so'.[18] For Midgley, crucially, mainstream moral theories in animal ethics of the kind sketched earlier are of precisely this kind.

Bluntly put, the abstractions of mainstream theories betray a lack of realism and a failure of proper attention to the contexts, facts and details of our complex relationships with animals. (Her charge, here, is parallel, of course, to her epistemological complaint against behaviourism and related attitudes.) This lack of realism is perfectly illustrated, for Midgley, by the image of the expanding moral circle that I described above, an image constantly invoked by mainstream animal ethicists. Far from regard for animals being a very late and still emerging episode in the history of moral development, all societies have always been, to a greater or lesser degree, 'mixed' or 'multi-species' ones in which at least some – often, very many – animals have been regarded as fellow members of human communities to which duties of care and decency of treatment are owed.

[17] Op. cit. note 1, BM 169.
[18] Op. cit. note 1, SW 161-2.

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Indeed, the further we go back – to, say, various totemic or nomadic societies – the greater tend to be the moral links and 'fellowship' between beast and man. In many of these societies, moreover, some animals were the subjects of a significantly greater moral regard than were some human beings. Duties might be owed, for example, to a tribe's totemic animal, such as a bear or eagle, that are not owed to people from a different tribe. The idea that the story of morality can be represented by 'concentric circles' that gradually grow outwards to include neighbours, women, slaves, foreigners and, eventually, animals, is a historical nonsense.[19]

This unrealistic image is encouraged by the tendency of mainstream theorists to wrench moral concepts like respect, dignity, rights and person from the actual contexts in which they obtain their sense and force and to turn them, instead, into abstractions. (The parallel with a similar tendency on the part of behaviourists, ritual sceptics and the like is again obvious.) The idea, for example, that all mammals – mammals as such – are in effect persons, possessed of dignity and rights, and thereby deserving of respect, would be unintelligible to hunter-gatherer peoples whose respect for, say, bears owes to their particular relationship to these animals. The idea would be equally alien to tribespeople who count as persons only those animals with whom they share a communal life, or to farmers whose dogs, horses and oxen have a dignity that is earned and manifested through the uncomplaining work they do, or indeed to pet owners whose pets have rights that other animals do not precisely through being their pets, creatures for whom they care and share their home with.[20]

Wrenched out of their real life contexts, moreover, talk of animal rights, dignity and the like is hollow, its implications for the treatment of animals entirely opaque. For example, 'the word *right* … cannot be salvaged for any clear, unambiguous use' once abstracted from concrete relationships between animals and people in actual societies.[21] The respect the hunter-gatherer has for the bears that share his environment is one that makes a difference to how he will act

[19] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 110-1. On the shortcomings of the expanding circle image, see James Serpell, *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), and Gregory S. McElwain, 'The Mixed Community', in I.J. Kidd and L. McKinnell (eds.), *Science and Self: Animals, Evolution, and Ethics: Essays in Honour of Mary Midgley* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 41–51.

[20] See op. cit. note 1, SW 160 on dignity, and AWM on pets.

[21] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 63.

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towards bears – honouring it in death, perhaps. But a respect that people are urged to have for *all* animals, despite there being a connection with only a tiny number of them, is idle. Are we supposed to honour every animal who dies?

The claim, central to mainstream animal ethics, that it is discriminatory and hence irrational *not* to extend moral regard to all creatures that are relevantly similar or equal to ourselves itself suffers from its excessive abstractness. 'The notion of equality', notes Midgley, 'is a tool for rectifying injustices within a group', whose members count as equals, and 'not for widening that group'.[22] It is useless, therefore, to invoke the notion in support of treating certain animals as we treat human beings in the absence of a practical consensus that they are the equals of the latter.

More generally, the question of what counts as a 'relevant' similarity between humans and animals, or between some animals and others, cannot be separated from what, in practice, people *do* regard as relevant. The hunter-gatherer who extends to wolves the regard he has long had for bears isn't noticing some hitherto unnoticed similarity – in intelligence, say, or the capacity to feel pain – between wolves and bears. Rather, he is bringing wolves into the same sphere of practices and attitudes already occupied by bears. Wolves, one might say, now have a place, similar to that of bears, in the hunter-gatherer's form of life.

Invocation of allegedly relevant similarities is liable, too, to be idle in any attempt to modify people's ways of treating and regarding animals. There is little point in insisting that sentience, say, is a relevant similarity between beast and man to people who just don't see that, say, a mouse's susceptibility to pain has any significance – like the scientist, mentioned by Midgley, who, on being asked whether sentient animals should 'count at all' morally, replied no, 'why should they?'.[23] People whose forms of life have no place for moral concern for certain animals – mice, chickens, moles, snakes, or whatever – will greet the information that they have intelligence and feeling with a 'So what?', a shrug of the shoulders.

Midgley notes another reason why appeals to some very general similarity, like 'sensibility' and 'complexity of life', between people and animals are liable to be idle and leave the implications for practice obscure. The locust's sensibility and complexity are presumably less than the dog's, but there are a lot more locusts than dogs. With her tongue at least half in her cheek, she asks if the locust's 'joint

[22] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 67.
[23] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 10.

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sensibility [should] outweigh that of a dog, or even the small human settlement' the insects are 'about to overwhelm'.[24] Instead of worrying about these and other unprofitable questions that mainstream moral theorising helps to generate, the focus should be on our practical relationships with animals and 'within the limits of what we can know and can try to do'.[25]

5. Hubris

There's a second kind of charge, a moral one, against mainstream theories that may be found in Midgley's writings, even if it is never made entirely explicit.The charge is parallel to the second criticism she made of behaviourism and related epistemological positions. Mainstream moral theories, she implies, reflect and encourage the collective hubris of humankind.

This may sound a strange, even perverse charge to bring against moral theorists who, typically, are 'on the side' of the animals, who genuinely want to extend the compass of moral concern so as to include animals and, like Midgley, to 'remove barriers'. The trouble, as Midgley sees it, with their approach is that, by focusing on the extension of rights and respect to animals – on, in effect, combatting irrational discrimination – issues of justice now 'monopolise attention'. What lies outside the sphere of justice therefore gets 'neglected'. Virtues like 'mercy and compassion', for example, 'begin to seem like mere matters of taste', desirable no doubt but, in comparison with attention to rights and justice, not central or entirely 'serious' components of a commitment to an enlightened morality.[26]

If mercy and compassion are marginalised or neglected by mainstream theorists, so too are the vices 'opposite to these virtues', such as harshness and cruelty.[27] And it is at this point that the charge of hubris enters in. The effect of the mainstream approach is to paint an unwarrantedly rosy picture of humankind. For, on this approach, the wrongfulness of our treatment of animals is a failure of information or of reason and consistency. It is due either to ignorance, a failure to note and recognise the relevant similarities between animals and ourselves, or to a failure to realise that these similarities entail the extension of moral regard to animals.

[24] Op. cit. note 1, SW 159.
[25] Op. cit. note 1, SW 159.
[26] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 50-1.
[27] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 50.

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Now this is a picture that unduly flatters human beings. Entirely left out of this picture, Midgley remarks, are human 'greed, meanness, envy, cowardice, sloth, ingratitude' and the rest of our vices, including 'in most people's opinion, one of the worst vices … cruelty'.[28] When all that gets 'lit up' by a moral theory are matters of injustice and discrimination, the impressively and depressingly large number of the remainder of our failings and vices remain out of sight and out of mind. And this, of course, suits us very nicely. Who wouldn't prefer to own up to deficiencies of knowledge or consistency than to admit to the catalogue of vices on Midgley's list? Instead of concentrating on confronting, for example, our meanness, vanity and brutality we can instead focus, more agreeably, on brushing up our logic. In this kind of self-exculpation of humankind, there is hubris and vanity. To the extent that mainstream ethics contributes to this self-exculpation, it is guilty of 'boosterishness', of helping to inflate our undeservedly high opinion of ourselves.[29]

6. Coda

With mainstream moral theorising in animal ethics rejected, what does Midgley want to replace it by? So entrenched in contemporary moral philosophy is the conviction that it can only proceed by way of constructing theories that, unsurprisingly, several commentators insist that Mary Midgley must herself be trying to replace mainstream theories by one of her own. Callicott, for instance, concedes that she does not 'elaborate a positive moral theory', but adds that she would surely 'if pressed … sketch a Humean ethical theory … grounded in feelings, not reason'.[30] Another writer claims that, despite her apparent denials, Midgley does have a theory of the 'moral status' of animals, albeit one that is 'grounded in *relationships* with people' rather than in intrinsic features of the animals themselves.[31]

It is true that Midgley that devotes considerable attention to the emotions that different people feel for different animals, and also to

[28] Op. cit. note 1, AWM 50.

[29] On 'boosterishness', see Alain de Botton's remarks in *Do Humankind's Best Days Lie Ahead?: Munk Debate* (London: OneWorld, 2015), 13.

[30] Op. cit. note 4, 165–6.

[31] David DeGrazia, *Animal Rights: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 29.

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the duties of care that come with certain relationships with animals, such as owning pets or raising them for meat. But it is a mistake, in my judgement, to construe any of this as indicating adherence to some moral theory. For Midgley, no theory is needed if by a theory is meant something that purports to give a general ground for why we should treat animals in some ways and not others. For her – as for the Buddha and (*pace* Callicott) David Hume – moral concern for animals is not *grounded* in anything. In particular, it is not grounded, as it is for mainstream theories, in an alleged moral status that animals possess. To be sure, a good person feels compassion and sympathy for animals that are suffering. But this feeling is not a *premise* from which to draw moral conclusions about how animals are to be treated. Again, good pet owners will properly care for their dogs and cats. But they do not do so because they think that animals as such are 'subjects of a life', beings that enjoy 'dignity', or anything else that, on the mainstream approach, is supposed to confer moral status on animals.

No syllogisms are required in order to judge how, in most cases, we should act towards an animal. 'Confronted with a flotilla of ducklings', writes Midgley, most people will just 'see' that things matter to animals and recognise without further ado that 'the way in which we treat these creatures matters' as well.[32] More generally, many of us simply 'see what we ought to be doing' in relation to animals and that there are many things we do to them that are 'glaringly and unmistakeably wrong'.[33] Some people, of course, do not see this, but in their case, no amount of insistence on the moral status of animals is going to be effective. Like the scientist quoted earlier, they just don't get that animals can matter.

The best way, for Midgley, of coming to 'see what we ought to be doing' to and for animals – to seeing that much of what we do is 'unmistakeably wrong' – is to recognise that all too often our behaviour manifests vices and human failings. Indeed, for her, what makes such treatment wrong is precisely that it does exemplify cruelty, greed, indifference and a depressingly large number of other failings. What is wrong with our treatment of animals is, one might say, *us*. Some of the most powerful passages in her writings on animals are those where Midgley draws attention to our refusal to admit to, or even discern, the vices that our treatment of animals betrays. To the list of vices I cited earlier, one could add those that serve to blind us to our failings, including themselves. They include self-deceit, bad

[32] Op. cit. note 1, WF 21.
[33] Op. cit. note 1, SW 159.

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faith, mindlessness, and the kind of ritual 'objectivity' displayed by animal experimenters and others who pretend to doubt the reality of animal suffering.[34] In this last example, we begin to see how Midgley's denunciation of so many of our practices towards animals is integrated into her wider critique of a civilisation in which science dictates the boundaries of knowledge and economic, technological imperatives determine what is worth doing and what is allowable in the process of doing it.

Mary Midgley was too generous a person to second Mark Twain's verdict that, 'of all the creatures that were made, man is the most detestable'.[35] But she would, I am confident, endorse Montaigne's judgement that man is 'the most blighted and frail of all creatures', and the one 'most given to [a] pride' that prevents him from appreciating this.[36] In this collective hubris she recognised what is, perhaps, the greatest of the barriers to be removed in the endeavour to promote concern for animals.

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[34] See David E. Cooper, *Animals and Misanthropy* (London: Routledge, 2018) on the vices and failings reflected in our treatment of animals.

[35] *What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1973).

[36] *The Complete Essays* (London: Penguin, 1991), 505.

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