MARY MIDGLEY AND THE MIXED COMMUNITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS
AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

By

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To my family
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This dissertation approaches ethics through the work of twentieth century moral philosopher Mary Midgley. I analyze and interpret Midgley’s influential concept of the mixed community at length and trace its impact on environmental ethics and religious studies. I argue that Midgley represents a shift away from liberal individualist animal ethics and simple ecological holism toward a sophisticated form of relational and holistic ethics grounded in an evolutionary model of kinship and community, a model supported by a constellation of ideas and concepts that run throughout Midgley’s writings.

Midgley’s concept of the mixed community is valuable in environmental ethics and religious studies for a number of reasons. One reason is that it ultimately challenges the position that environmental and animal ethics are incompatible due to their theoretical and practical frameworks. Another reason is that it offers an approach to animal ethics that is not based in deontology or consequentialism, but rather on social and evolutionary grounds. This all combines with her invaluable critique of rationalism in ethical theory and animal ethics. Her critique and constructive concepts, especially the concept of mixed community, in turn offer special value in approaching environmental and animal ethics from the starting point of human nature in our social and ecological
I argue that Midgley’s system is an alternative and pragmatic approach to addressing a number of ethical issues, most significantly in understanding the complexity and relationality of a variety of issues that “matter” in our value systems. After examining the meaning and value of the mixed community and the accuracy of its use in environmental ethics and religious studies, I test the findings of this study in an interview with Mary Midgley. I then place the results and implications of the interview in dialogue with my conclusions.
I was first introduced to the work of Mary Midgley as a graduate student at Vanderbilt University in Victor Anderson’s course on Religion and Science. The book was *Beast and Man*, a volume that I have since read numerous times. I cannot overstate the impact that this book had on me. I was captivated by the way that Midgley wrote and how she seamlessly and persuasively integrated various disciplines, arguments, and ideas, especially in relation to animals and the natural world. Most of all, what she wrote simply made sense to me, which was important at the time. Her approach was balanced, nuanced, sophisticated, well-reasoned, and relevant, which was a breath of fresh air in midst of graduate school readings that ranged from dull and irrelevant to extreme and absurd. She introduced me to a way of talking about science, philosophy, and ethics that I had never before seen. I hung on every word as she meandered through her trademark arguments, slowly circling her reductionist opponents before suddenly swooping in for the kill. This invigorated my perspective on graduate study as I was becoming disenchanted with the relevance of textual studies.

Soon after reading Midgley and finishing the course, I changed my major to ethics, especially the intersection of four broad areas: religion, philosophy, ethics, and science. This was a dramatic shift from textual studies, but I realized that these areas were what really interested me. I left Greek behind in favor of anything that dealt with nature and ethics, eventually focusing on environmental ethics. After years of exposure to countless theorists and ideas, my fanaticism for Midgley has leveled out and become more balanced, but my fondness and appreciation for her remains. She is a major influence on my work and thought, and this is why she is the focus of my dissertation.
The purpose of this dissertation is to convey her importance and relevance not only to my work, but also to the fields in which I am primarily engaged, religious studies and philosophy, and essentially to show why she matters.

I began this study very broadly, mainly in an effort to trace some of Midgley’s most important ideas and concepts and illustrate their relevance and value to religious studies and philosophy. As I progressed, I realized the scope and breadth of her thought and publications were simply too vast for this project, and the focus needed to be narrowed. I revised and narrowed down the topic by placing Midgley’s work in the context of my central emphasis, philosophical and religious environmental ethics. Soon after it became clear that the mixed community was a concept that was due for an in-depth analysis and interpretation, both because of the value of the concept itself and its relevance and use in environmental ethics.

Focusing on a single idea or concept in Midgley’s work, in this case the mixed community, fortunately carries with it the reward of providing a window into the wider unity of her thought. This project can then be seen as zooming in to one particular concept, a cluster of ideas and arguments, which is connected to a constellation or network of supporting concepts, ideas, and arguments throughout Midgley’s writings. Therefore, in analyzing and interpreting the mixed community and its significance, I am also presenting its connection with the whole of her work. This dynamic and holistic approach to Midgley is fitting as it reflects her emphasis on the interplay of parts and wholes. No single aspect of her work can be understood apart from her overarching ideas and goals, and this bigger picture cannot be grasped without zooming in to the constituent parts. This study highlights the mixed community.
With this in mind, I take a three tier approach to analyzing and interpreting the concept of the mixed community: the concept, its foundations, and its wider support. I argue that these three levels of meaning constitute the full meaning of the mixed community. The first level is in the core elements of the mixed community, most directly in the human ability to sympathize with and understand the subjectivity of animals, which is grounded in a common historical and evolutionary kinship and background that makes human-animal relationality and community possible, natural, and morally significant. The second level is in the foundational framework for the mixed community that is found throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*, which primarily consists of a systematic criticism of the barriers to animal ethics, mainly the rationalist moral tradition, as well as reiterations of the core elements of the mixed community. The third level is the wider support and context of these ideas that are present in Midgley’s work during the time that her concept of the mixed community arose, including such emphases as the significance of humans as animals and the unity of human nature. All three levels can be seen as fully constituting the meaning and message of her concept of the mixed community.

The first level of meaning is in the core elements of the mixed community. Midgley’s initial coinage of the term “the mixed community” occurs in what I call “the mixed community section” of *Animals and Why They Matter*. I argue that the mixed community section begins with her discussion of species in Chapter 9 and continues throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 10 is the climax of this conceptual discussion, and Chapters 11-12 are focused on reiterating and clarifying some of the core conceptual issues involved in the mixed community. This four chapter section of
the book is where Midgley develops the innermost structure and core of the mixed community. In a close reading of these chapters, with an emphasis on Chapter 10, I examine and interpret her concept of the mixed community.

Midgley begins this section by discussing species and the species barrier, arguing that those who both marginalize and exaggerate the species barrier are equally off the mark. These positions are represented by those arguing against “speciesism” and behaviorist skeptics respectively, each of whom she confronts. Midgley, in countering Peter Singer, argues that the species barrier is real and significant and therefore necessary for properly understanding and respecting each species and each animal. She holds that the species barrier, however, is also semi-permeable, allowing for animals of various species, including humans, to impressively interact and live together. Humans especially possess the ability to understand and relate to animal subjectivity through a shared evolutionary history and kinship, especially with the social animals that we have domesticated. Midgley outlines how humans are able to form special bonds with animals through our sympathy, neoteny, and common sociality among other traits. Humans are in turn part of a historical mixed community with animals that is founded on shared evolutionary kinship and sociality and made possible by human sympathy and the ability to understand other animals. In the mixed community, morality is relational and holistic rather than deontological or Utilitarian, making it an alternative to leading approaches to animal ethics.

Midgley devotes a significant portion of *Animals and Why They Matter* to supporting the concept of mixed community against skeptical claims that we cannot understand animal subjectivity, a key ability that makes the mixed community possible.
This position inherent in behaviorism systematically rules out what Midgley argues we have understood for a long time, which is that we share consciousness, subjectivity, and sociality with animals on a graded spectrum. She believes that proper examination of these phenomena through the field of ethology and related research can allow us to more fully grasp the significance and potential of these relationships between humans and animals in the mixed community. This is possible because she believes the charge of anthropomorphism is not a major threat to the mixed community, since our language arose in the context of a co-evolutionary setting alongside animals. Therefore our language reflects many of the motives, moods, and emotions that we share with other animals, making our language an appropriate way to describe them.

In the second level of analysis, I examine the foundational framework that Midgley lays for the concept of the mixed community throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*. In addition to the core of the concept, this foundation sets the mixed community apart as an alternative to deontological and Utilitarian approaches to animal ethics and wider ethical theory. Midgley dismantles the barriers that stand between more constructive understandings of animal ethics through a systematic critique of rationalism and moral philosophy. Here she also significantly lays out her ideas of social and ecological claims, which address priorities, conflicts, and values in our mixed and ecological communities. In this process, she clarifies misconceptions in theoretical and practical thought on the “animal question” while constructing new and more helpful perspectives on the issue, which ultimately culminates in the concept of the mixed community.
In laying the foundation for the mixed community, Midgley adds backing to her arguments on animal subjectivity, relationality, consciousness, community, and sociality while systematically dismantling the major historical and contemporary obstacles to theoretical and practical progress on the animal question. These barriers include such unhelpful concepts such as “lifeboat ethics,” rights, duties, equality, justice, the social contract, the dualism between reason and emotion, misconceptions of the limits of human morality and community, and others while drawing attention to the connection between animal issues and correlated oppression. Ultimately, in the process of undermining these categories of morality, Midgley critiques major issues not only in animal ethics, but in philosophy and ethics on a broader scale, adding to the arguments against rationalist morality. This foundational framework not only supports the mixed community, but is ultimately part of the concept of the mixed community.

In the third level of analysis of the mixed community I present Midgley’s wider support for the concept. Here I further explore the meaning and message of the mixed community by relating it to her wider works during the period in which Animals and Why They Matter was written from 1979 to 1985. I argue that her main theoretical emphases on human nature, morality, and science directly support her concept of the mixed community. In this I contextualize the mixed community within the larger structure of her thought. I examine these works through the lens of the mixed community, illustrating the relevant features that are most supportive of the concept such as the unity of human nature, the role of science, humans as animals, and value in social and ecological claims among others. This is valuable not only for understanding and contextualizing the mixed community, but also for drawing out the wider importance and significance of
Mary Midgley by addressing some of the most pressing ideas and concepts in the traditions of philosophy and religious studies. In this, I bring together a number of Midgley’s most noteworthy concepts and ideas, illustrating how the mixed community is supported by and situated in the wider scope and unity of her work.

Midgley supports the unity of human nature by challenging the dualisms that have fragmented our conceptions of ourselves: culture/nature, reason/emotion, human/animal, individual/ecological. In this unity, value and the means of appraising it comes through understanding humans in mixed and ecological communities, living within a biosphere and alongside of other humans and other animals. Moral deliberation in this setting is not always easy as a number of claims of individuals and wholes of various species must be weighed and considered in relation to social and ecological wholes. Many have grossly oversimplified this process of moral deliberation by fragmenting human nature and quarreling about who can or cannot have claims on us. Midgley resists this by challenging us to confront the difficult questions related to human nature in our individual, mixed, social, and ecological contexts. All of this comes together in what I stress as the unity of her work, which supports and reflects the mixed community, and constitutes the third level of support and meaning for the concept.

In analyzing these three levels of meaning in the mixed community, I seek to clarify its parameters and value. In the process, I highlight the salient and relevant components of Midgley’s work in relation to environmental ethics and religious studies. From here I analyze how theorists have interpreted and utilized Midgley’s concepts, especially the mixed community, in their own work in environmental ethics and religious
studies. Therefore, in this study, I not only elucidate why Midgley’s concept is valuable and should be used, but also how it has been used in these fields.

The mixed community is important in addressing some of the key issues in environmental ethics, such as the problems of the individual and the whole, domestic and wild animals, and human-animal sociality among others. Since the publication of *Animals and Why They Matter*, a number of environmental ethicists have utilized Midgley’s concept of the mixed community for diverse purposes in their own theories in addressing these issues. I trace Midgley’s impact on environmental ethics, especially through the concept of the mixed community, highlighting the uses of Midgley’s thought in the work of Baird Callicott, Eugene Hargrove, Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère, Ted Benton, and Michael Leahy. Though various other environmental and animal ethicists provide passing references to the mixed community, usually through a paragraph illustrating Midgley’s importance, I focus on the most extensive and important uses of Midgley and the mixed community. Through a combination of Midgley’s work in *Beast and Man* and *Animals and Why They Matter*, a diverse range of environmental ethicists and others have utilized Mary Midgley, some better than others, but all with good reasons.

The most visible use of Midgley’s work is in Baird Callicott’s unified theory of environmental ethics that seeks to bridge environmental and animal ethics through the mixed community. This use of Midgley is flawed, and Eugene Hargrove draws attention to the inconsistencies between Callicott and Midgley’s metaphysics. This is compounded with Callicott’s exaggeration of the division between domestic and wild,
which he places in the mixed and biotic communities respectively, to suit his purposes in constructing a theoretically unified and holistic environmental ethic.

Because of Callicott’s importance to the field and the importance of this debate, I argue that Midgley’s impact on environmental ethics therefore cannot be overstated. This importance can also be seen in the work of Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère and Ted Benton, each of whom draws on significant aspects of Midgley and the mixed community. Larrère and Larrère construct a contract-based view of the mixed community, which, though a creative use of her concept, would be criticized by Midgley as too grounded in problematic rationalist morality. Additionally, they perpetuate Callicott’s stark division between domestic and wild animals. Benton, on the other hand, is a staunch opponent of the rationalist tradition and suitably allies with Midgley in constructing a naturalistic and holistic portrayal of humans as animals in a socially and ecologically embedded context, the result of which is a positive and powerful synthesis of radical social theory and Midgley’s thought. In drawing such attention, Midgley of course is not without her critics. Michael Leahy is the foremost critic of her work, though the majority of his critiques are either more flattering than damning or without legitimate foundation. In the end, I argue that Midgley has much to offer environmental ethicists who seek serious and well-formulated answers to the long overlooked problem of the animal question.

I continue to trace Midgley’s impact in environmental ethics, but this time through the lens of ecologically-focused religious studies. I especially focus on the concept of the mixed community, highlighting the usages of Midgley’s thought in the work of James Gustafson, Lisa Sideris, Anna Peterson, and the criticism of Gary Comstock. I again
focus on most extensive and important uses of Midgley and the mixed community in this section with two goals: to draw attention to Midgley’s reception and impact in religious studies, and also to highlight the work of these ecological religion scholars and ethicists and their value to environmental ethics.

I argue that Mary Midgley is a significant theoretical ally for ecologically-focused religion scholars and ethicists. James Gustafson, a major figure in theological ethics, was the first to pick up on this valuable resource soon after the publication of *Beast and Man*, which he relied on heavily in formulating an embedded portrayal of human nature in a theocentric perspective. Additionally, he later recognizes the importance of the mixed community in *A Sense of the Divine*, and Midgley’s influence is apparent in this work as well, contributing to his unified understanding of the human place in nature. Lisa Sideris also relies heavily on Midgley as well as Gustafson and the land ethicists. She especially draws on the mixed community, utilizing it in her comprehensive naturalized ethic, though she also perpetuates Callicott’s bifurcated stance toward domestic and wild animals. In another stream of religious studies, Anna Peterson utilizes Midgley’s works in constructing a picture of human nature and ethics that is as complex and nuanced as Midgley’s. Gary Comstock, however, in criticizing Midgley and Callicott, identifies an issue in the mixed community through his reading of Callicott, which is that meat-eating and a number of other practical issues can be read into or out of the mixed community. Though Midgley does not condone this, I discuss the implications of this criticism.

I then go straight to the source, Mary Midgley. The pinnacle of this study is the magnificent interview I was fortunate to conduct with Midgley, and it was a great honor
interviewing Midgley at her home in Newcastle, England. We had extensive conversations on a number of issues in religion, philosophy, and science. The main purpose of the interview was to place the findings of this dissertation up against Midgley’s current thought on the mixed community, to ascertain her present perspective on the concept, and to discover where environmental ethics and religious studies should go from here with regards to the mixed community. In the concluding chapter, I reiterate the findings and implications of this study and place them in dialogue with the interview. My hope is that this dissertation faithfully conveys the intricate complexity and elegant brilliance of Midgley’s work, especially in the concept of the mixed community and its value in environmental ethics and religious studies.
CHAPTER 2
THE MIXED COMMUNITY PART I: THE CONCEPT

I begin this investigation into the meaning and message of Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community with its initial usage and discussion in what I delineate as “the mixed community section” of *Animals and Why They Matter*. I argue that the mixed community section begins with her discussion of species in Chapter 9: “The Significance of Species” and continues throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 10: “The Mixed Community” is the climax of this conceptual discussion, and Chapters 11-12: “What is Anthropomorphism?” and “The Subjectivity and Consciousness of Animals” are focused on reiterating and clarifying some of the core conceptual issues involved in the mixed community. This four chapter section of the book is where Midgley develops the innermost structure and core of the mixed community. In a close reading of these chapters, with an emphasis on Chapter 10, I examine and interpret her concept of humans as part of a historical and theoretical mixed community with animals that is founded on shared evolutionary kinship and sociality and made possible by human sympathy and the ability to understand other animals.

**The Significance of Species**

Mary Midgley’s elucidation of the concept of the mixed community is spurred by her discussion of the significance of species. She takes aim at Peter Singer’s famous position on “speciesism” as a prejudicial position that humans hold toward animals, a position which is so unjust as to be a “prejudice comparable to racism.”

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2 Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, 97. She quotes Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 9 on speciesism: “To avoid speciesism, we must allow that beings which are similar in all relevant aspects have a similar right to life—and mere membership of our own biological
questions (1) whether the species-boundary is truly of such little importance and (2) if speciesism is an appropriate accusation in light of the existence of human-animal relationships and communities. Ultimately, in transitioning to her discussion of the mixed community, she claims that the significance of species and the species barrier is routinely misrepresented in two extremes: it is underemphasized by Peter Singer in his stance on speciesism and overemphasized by behaviorists and others that seek a rigid species barrier.

**Speciesism**

She first looks at the comparison of speciesism to racism, noting that, to be parallel cases, these terms must not only refer to similar injustices, but must also invoke similar distinctions and inconsistencies. Midgley holds that racism and speciesism may possess similar superficial characteristics, but the deeper parallel falls apart at the species boundary. “Race in humans,” she claims, “is not a significant grouping at all, but species in animals certainly is. It is never true that, in order to know how to treat a human being, you must first find out what race he belongs to…But with an animal, to know the species is absolutely essential.”

Like the abstract collective categorization of “animals,” she points out that each “species” must be particular rather than a flattened out generalization. For example, a zoo-keeper must know which animal is arriving at the zoo in order to arrange the appropriate habitat, food, water, and other vital needs that vary by species. She points out that when the animal arrives at the zoo, it could be any number of species, from hyena to shark, each of which requires special living

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3 Ibid., 98.
conditions, and even closely related species can have very different needs. She pointedly expands on the serious mistake of comparing race and species: “To liken a trivial human grouping such as race to this enormous, inconceivably varied range of possibilities is to indulge in what revolutionaries call ‘patronizing’ thinking—a failure to recognize the scale of difference between others and oneself. Overlooking somebody’s race is entirely sensible.” She continues, “Overlooking their species is a supercilious insult...we are not just disembodied intellects, but beings of particular kinds, and to ignore our particular qualities and capacities is insolent. This applies, not only to species, but also to age, sex and culture, though the point is not so extreme and glaring in these cases.”

Midgley claims that racism, much like equality, is a confused term that is lazily used as a catch all for a variety of purposes. In its most simple of definitions, it is “the offence of treating somebody—for whatever reasons—in a way determined by race, not by individual qualities or needs.” However, this simple definition would mean that reverse discrimination would also be a form of racism. This could raise questions about justified racism and whether there is a hierarchy of offences in distinguishing people by race. In this, the sharp point of racism loses its power to accuse and expose the real injustices. Additionally, racism is not simply a face-value discrimination based solely on race, but also a historical matter loaded with assumptions and other prejudices such as class and religion. She is scathingly critical of the wide range of disparate uses of the term, insisting that its confusion cannot help in our relations with animals: “Racism itself

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4 Ibid., 99.
5 Ibid.
is an ill-formed, spineless, impenetrably obscure concept, scarcely capable of doing its own work, and quite unfit to generate a family of descendants which can be useful elsewhere."²⁶ Throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*, Midgley’s emphasis is on clarifying loaded and often confused terms such as racism and speciesism that are inadequate in approaching animal ethics.

Midgley maintains that racism is actually a grouping of several ideas: “The term *racism* combines unthinkably three quite distinct ideas—the triviality of the distinction drawn, group selfishness, and the perpetuation of an existing power hierarchy.”⁷ Her point is that racism is not a parallel to speciesism because the first idea, the triviality of the distinction drawn, is widely off the mark—the species line is not trivial and is very important. This is where the parallel falls apart, though the other two ideas in claims of racism, group selfishness and the perpetuation of an existing power hierarchy, are very much on point regarding human-animal relations. Midgley maintains that these are the issues that are really important in human-animal relations, and that the charge of speciesism obscures the real issues that are at hand in the matter, issues that are the intended targets or “jobs” of such terms as justice, bias, self-interest, exploitation, and oppression: “What cannot be done is to pile all these jobs into a single package and label it with a single word, such as racism or one of its derivatives.”⁸

Midgley is concerned that recognition of difference is often mistakenly equated with prejudice, in this case the “seductively simple” banner of speciesism. Difference in

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²⁶ *Ibid.* Midgley reiterates that her critique of “racism” is not “to make any criticism at all of the cause for which it has been used.”


a multitude of cases is paramount in maintaining respect and dignity for the groups involved, and ignoring these differences can encourage pressure for assimilation and homogeneity. Beliefs are also not always prejudicial in favoring difference, for example when a parent favors his or her child. She stresses: “The special interest which parents feel in their own children is not a prejudice, nor is the tendency which most of us would show to rescue in a fire or other emergency, those closest to us sooner than strangers. These habits of thought and action are not unfair, though they can probably be called discriminatory.”

Likewise, differentiating between species is key in respecting their value and meeting their needs.

Here Midgley recognizes that our discrimination and recognition of difference is because we are beings that naturally form bonds, not abstract entities. These distinguishing bonds push against Singer’s leveling out of value not only between human and animal, but between human and human, which cannot simply be calculated or compared arithmetically in a consequentialist formula. Some bonds and claims truly are stronger than others for legitimate and natural reasons, and Midgley maintains that these are indeed impacted by the species boundary in some degree. She reiterates that the challenge and “business” of morality is to constantly evaluate and engage this tension between special bonds and justice more broadly to others. The business of the mixed community in these cases is to recognize similarity and difference in dealing with animals of diverse species in mixed species communities.

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9 Ibid., 102.
Mixed Species

For Midgley, distinguishing and discriminating special relationships are important factors in prioritizing values and claims in morality. These factors are so also important contributions to species bonding, of which Midgley reminds her readers: “The natural preference for one’s own species does exist. It is not, like race-prejudice, a product of culture. It is found in all human cultures, and in cases of real competition it tends to operate very strongly.”\(^{10}\) Species preference is not a value judgment, but rather a “deep emotional tendency, in us as in other creatures, to attend first to those around us who are like those who brought us up, and to take much less notice of others.”\(^{11}\) All animals are imprinted with species preferences from a young age, as this may very well be the difference between eating and being eaten—being around and preferring one’s species is vital for social animals and humans, for Midgley, are no exception. Therefore in contrast to Singer and others claiming speciesism, it is important for her to distinguish that the species barrier is real and important, and that it should not be downplayed or marginalized in an abstract and unnatural value judgment.

Thus Midgley reiterates that the species barrier is real, important, and not to be marginalized. However, it also should not be over exaggerated, for the species-bond is not a guarantee of peace and unity within a species, and there is often much competition, conflict, and exclusion therein. Further, and more significantly, she suggests that, though species loyalty is a strong natural instinct, it is not exclusive and impermeable to other species. Social animals such as donkeys and goats are

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 104.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 106.
uncomfortable when grazing alone, but are quite at ease when members of other grazing species are introduced. Though bonds such as these may not often be visible or especially interactive, they are real and significant. Various species live together in relative peace and even happy companionship, from wild herds of grazing animals in the African Savannah, to the strange bonds between horses and cats in a stable, to the heartwarming adoptions of baby ducks by domestic dogs. These bonds cannot be downplayed, and they grow in complexity with the sociality of the animals involved, which manifests in the bonds that humans can and do have with animals. In this final challenge to speciesism, Midgley casts doubt on the idea that we can even discern a morally restrictive species boundary and unveils her concept of the mixed community: “Claims are of different kinds. Those on behalf of one’s own community certainly are strong, but they are not the only strong kind. And the species-barrier, as we now find, is not even accepted in the same form by all human communities. But also, more important than this, all the communities are themselves multi-species ones.”¹² Far from being speciesist, humans are generally very adept at integrating animals into a human-animal mixed community. Positions that either overstate or marginalize the species barrier here are equally off the mark. In Midgley’s defense against speciesism, she challenges these hard line extremes on the species barrier, favoring a division that is permeable and hard to isolate in both social and moral terms, and in the process initiates a sustained discussion of her valuable concept of the mixed community.

¹² Ibid., 111.
The Mixed Community

Building on her discussion of species in the previous chapter, Midgley claims that speciesism is a difficult charge to make not only because the species barrier is real, but because of how integrated animals are within human society, especially in the historical sense of “the mixed community.” This community is built upon and sustained by unique human faculties, which she highlights: “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. Perhaps we should take this peculiar human talent more seriously and try to understand its workings.”

Midgley certainly takes this talent seriously, as it is a key aspect of what makes mixed human and animal communities possible. She reiterates that human communities both past and present have included animals in very significant and intimate ways. These communities have especially involved a symbiotic relationship with dogs, as well as other invaluable relationships with an eclectic mix of species from elephants to weasels to reindeer. The varied uses for this wide range of species have been extremely diverse: food, clothing, transportation, security, labor, companionship and so on for as many necessities as human communities have possessed. Because of these assorted uses, one may assume that humans have always viewed animals as machines, or, in a Kantian sense, as objects or things rather than subjects or persons. However, if this were the case, humans never would have been able to domesticate the animals in the first place. Midgley states rather that these animals became tame not just

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\[Ibid.\]
because of fear, but because they were able to “form individual bonds with those who
tamed them by coming to understand the social signals addressed to them. They
learned to obey human beings personally. They were able to do this, not only because
the people taming them were social beings, but because they themselves were so as
well.”14 This shared social nature of humans and other animals enables a certain level
of understanding and response that makes the mixed community a historical fixture.

The social nature of animals is vitally important for the mixed community, as it
would not be possible otherwise. These social animals “have transferred to human
beings the trust and docility which, in a wild state, they would have developed toward
their parents, and in adult life toward the leaders of their pack or herd.”15 Thus, it is
nearly impossible to domesticate non-social animals and very difficult to domesticate
low-sociality animals, such as wild cats. Midgley clarifies that it is not because of
intelligence level that non-social animals are difficult or impossible to domesticate, but
because “they simply do not have the innate capacity to respond to social signals in
their own species, and therefore cannot reach those which come from outside.”16 She
finds the situation of cat domestication curious, as even the young of wild cats are very
difficult to domesticate. All domestic cats descended from a small group of Egyptian
cats, and do not seem to have been domesticated until around 1600 BCE, which is
comparatively late domestication in relation to other household animals. She muses that
there may have been some type of mutation around this time that allowed for the

14 Ibid., 112.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
sudden shift to sociability and domesticity (or the possibility thereof). However, cats are still notoriously not as sociable as dogs.

Each animal species is unique and different, so the sociality and nature of each of these species is to be approached and understood in its own special way. Animals react differently to training based on their physique, sociality, mood, and so forth, and are handled accordingly as unique animals, not as uniform machines. Even species that have similar physiques and characteristics, such as horses, mules, and donkeys possess different species-specific needs and demands that must be understood by their human companions. Midgley points out that this signifies the basic human understanding that various animal species are indeed unique and different not just physically but mentally. We perceive this through our sympathy and common sociality with other animals and in turn we recognize that there is something essential to “being” a horse, mule, or donkey. This social understanding of various species is grounded in sympathetic evolutionary bonds that allow special relationships with other species, both positively and negatively.

**Exploitation Requires Sympathy**

Sympathy is significant for Midgley’s argument because, despite behaviorist challenges, the traditional treatment of animals includes the caveat that “exploitation requires sympathy,” an understanding that is assumed, implied, and unfortunately often practiced in the history of the mixed community. As she pointedly illustrates, “If we ask an Indian farmer whether he supposes that the ox which he is beating can feel, he is likely to answer, ‘Certainly it can, otherwise why would I bother?’”  

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17 Ibid., 113.
harm, humans display this sympathetic understanding of animals at both the species and the individual level. For example, a horse rider not only needs to understand horses in general, but also the particularities of each horse. “A skilled horseman,” she writes, “needs to respond to his horse as an individual, to follow the workings of its feelings, to use his imagination in understanding how things are likely to affect it, what frightens it and what attracts it, as much as someone who wants to control human beings needs to do the same thing.”\textsuperscript{18} However, though animals are often addressed personally by name, which assumes and affirms their subjectivity, Midgley notes that they are not completely “persons,” since that word signifies \textit{Homo sapiens}.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, animals are much closer to persons than machines for Midgley: “They are animals, a category which, for purposes of having a point of view belongs, not with things, but with people.”\textsuperscript{20} Though animals may not be “persons” in the strictest sense of the word, as members of the mixed community, they are certainly subjects, not objects.

Midgley argues that human-animal subjectivity, sympathy, and shared sociality all point toward “a direct capacity in man for attending to, and to some extent understanding, the moods and reactions of other species.”\textsuperscript{21} However, this can be greatly limited by human callousness or cruelty for a number of reasons, such as ignoring their pain or intentionally causing pain. Midgley stresses that cruelty is intentional, and underlying this treatment is a belief in sentience and pain in others since

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} She says that the Trinity is an exception to the term “persons” only referring to \textit{Homo Sapiens}.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 114.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
“there is very little comfort in working off ill-temper on a cushion.”\footnote{Ibid.} She stresses that cruelty toward animals “does not mean that they are taken not to be conscious. Belief in their sentience is essential even for exploiting them successfully.”\footnote{Ibid.} Her point here is that, much like in human interactions, aberrant behavior by cruel and callous people is likely to occur, and this is because cruelty is generally intentional and founded on the belief in the subjectivity of others. In the case of human cruelty, Midgley says that “our natural caprice is constantly disciplined by the deliberate interference of morality,” but in relation to animals, “this restraint is usually much less active; caprice has much freer play.”\footnote{Ibid.} Abuse and cruelty to animals is an unfortunate result of the human ability to understand the “inner” as well as the “outer” states of animals, something that behaviorism dismisses as impossible.

**The Implausibility of Scepticism**

The ability to understand animals, for Midgley, evidences “strongly against the Behaviourist idea that the subjective feelings of animals are all, equally, quite hidden from us, cannot concern us and may well not even exist.”\footnote{Ibid., 115.} Certain behaviorists and other skeptical critics maintain that it is anthropomorphic to assume we can know these feelings. Midgley is quick to point out that the history of domestication is likely not based on the mistaken assumption that we can understand something about animal feelings in relation to our own: “Straight away I want to point out how odd it would be if those who, over many centuries, have depended on working with animals, turned out to have been
relying on a sentimental and pointless error in doing so, an error which could be corrected at a stroke by metaphysicians who may never have encountered those animals at all.”

To illustrate her point, Midgley draws on the case of Sri Lankan mahouts, who treat the single elephant they train something like a human colleague. The mahouts are correct when they assume to know the basic everyday feelings of the elephants such as pleasure, fright, tiredness and suspicion; they are only incorrect when “they misinterpret some outlying aspects of elephant behavior by relying on a human pattern which is inappropriate.” Similarly, dog-handlers often speak in anthropomorphic terms about the emotions of their dogs, but this is not inappropriate if it is accurate, and the difference between the species does not vitiate this language. Rather, 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 (and between humans, which some behaviorists deny). Midgley wishes to remove the stigma of anthropomorphic language altogether: “The charge of ‘anthropomorphism’ as a general objection to attributing any feelings to animals, rather than to attribute the wrong feelings, is probably a red herring.” At the theoretical and empirical level, there is no real impenetrable barrier preventing humans from understanding animal subjectivity. This is also true in the linguistic sense, as

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26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. The mahouts live in life-long one-to-one relations with their elephants, and each is treated “not like a tractor, but like a basically benevolent if often tiresome uncle.” She bluntly writes that, if the mahouts were not highly skilled at understanding the emotions of their elephants, “they would not only be out of business, they would often simply be dead.”

28 Ibid., 116.
human language and description of subjective states arose in the co-evolutionary setting of the mixed community. The domestication of animals and the place of pets in society could only be possible if humans were able to form real and accurate subjective relationships with these species.

**What Are Pets? and The Flexibility of Parent-Child Behaviour**

Midgley touches briefly on the topic of pets, noting that, though excessive cruelty can characterize some human-animal relationships, there often exist loving bonds of affection rather than exploitation in human-animal relationships. Her example is from the Hebrew Bible, citing the story of Uriah the Hittite. Nathan the prophet chastises David for sleeping with Bathsheba in a parable about a man and his cherished ewe lamb. The man raises and cares for the lamb explicitly as a child alongside his children because it is all he has in the world. David is then outraged when the lamb is eventually killed for a feast. When Nathan informs David that Uriah is the man and Bathsheba is the lamb, David feels intense remorse. What is interesting to Midgley is not the parallel to David, but David’s reaction—dismay and horror—to the slaughter of the lamb. Rather than contemptuously agree that the poor man’s lamb should have been slaughtered, he is outraged that the man lost the deep bond and relationship with his pet. The lamb was as his child and to David the relationship seemed perfectly natural. For Midgley, this signifies that human-pet relationships are not extravagant, modern day fetishes, but historical practices that were understood and experienced in ancient Israel, from the poorest to the king.  

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29 Midgley quotes from 2 Samuel 12:3 to illustrate the lamb’s membership in the family: “The poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up; and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own morsel, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was to him as a daughter.”
Midgley anticipates that the example of the poor man and the lamb is likely to lead to the “crude Kantian question, ‘but are lambs people or things?’” She calls this a “hopeless” way to understand the example, and contends that our “conceptual maps” must be revised in order to grasp adaptability and flexibility of bonds and parent-child behavior. In order to understand the human-pet relationship, we must look at why it is so easy for the young of social animals to adapt to and live with or alongside other animals. The lamb was a creature that needed love, and its adoption by the man filled that role in both directions, human and animal. This, Midgley says, is not fetishism but a natural sympathetic response to the young of a species, a capacity that is displayed by a number of species toward their own young, and even the young of other species at times. Midgley explores the curious example of how, even in the wild, and especially in controlled situations, animals of different species exhibit the strange behavior of adoption. Animals have a fascinating ability to detect the young of other species, which Midgley thinks could be mysterious or chemical, but is likely due to play-signals. We share this interesting behavior, which is why the young of various species can be identified and even adopted. She writes that “play-signals penetrate the species-barrier with perfect ease,” and when “the message does get across, its power in producing fellowship is astonishing.” Midgley here presents the striking imagery of the species-barrier as a tall but permeable fence in the context of a “mixed human community”:

None of the creatures present is getting a really exclusive imprinting. Accordingly, the species-barrier there, 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

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30 Ibid., 117.
31 Ibid.
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.\(^{32}\)

Midgley’s claim is that human are so immersed in the mixed community that it contributes to social imprinting from a young age, presumably in both humans and other species.

**The Child’s Quest for Variety, Neoteny, and Extended Sympathy**

Midgley believes that most humans are imprinted by animal sociality at a young age, and those who do not receive it seek it out. She contends that we crave animal contact from our youth because “animals, like song and dance, are an innate taste.”\(^{33}\) This is especially seen in the childhood obsession with animal contact, and it is generally expected to be so, even by those who think that love of animals is something that people must eventually grow out of to become adults. Midgley identifies the feeling behind this as the mistaken notion that animals are “practice material for the immature, because they are in effect nothing but simplified models of human beings.”\(^{34}\) She criticizes this because animals are actually very different from humans, recalling her discussion of species, and also because contact with animals is a lifelong asset, or something that contributes to a “full human life.” However, our relationships with animals cannot be seen as a replacement for relationships and experiences with people. Bonds with animals work alongside our bonds with people, as was the case with the poor man

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 118.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
and his ewe in Nathan’s story for David, and this sociality with other humans and animals is what constitutes the mixed community. Love for animals cannot replace love for humans, but neither does it distract from that love. Rather, it strengthens it, and Midgley likens love to a special substance that need not be hindered by the species-barrier: “One sort of love does not need to block another, because love, like compassion, is not a rare fluid to be economized, but a capacity which grows by use.”

Love, in a certain sense, is something that is unmediated in children, and a marked characteristic, along with curiosity, of neoteny, which is a key component of the mixed community.

Midgley puts forward that much of our capacity and desire to overcome the species-barrier is largely because of two reasons: security and neoteny. Our relative security from childhood allows us a measure of freedom to venture forth and explore the animal world in ways that other species cannot. The “more profound reason” is our neoteny, which means that humans “prolong certain infantile characteristics into maturity, develop them and continue to profit by them as adults.” Neotenous traits such as imitating, singing, dancing, and so on are especially prevalent throughout human life. Neotenous sympathy and curiosity instill us with an “eager reaching-out to surrounding life and to every striking aspect of the physical world, which in other species belongs only to infancy,” and “persists in human beings much longer, and may be present throughout their lives.”

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35 Ibid., 119.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
This “insatiability of interest” toward nonhuman nature is something that must be cherished rather than dismiss as childish or immature. Midgley emphasizes that the position that encourages people to quickly leave childishness behind in pursuit of greater, more mature aims often leaves behind important human values: “The trouble about it [the maturity position] is that those who take it have often included among the ‘childish things’ on the rubbish-pile matters absolutely central to life.”\textsuperscript{38} For Midgley, the child inside of us is an important and enduring human quality, and “the capacity for widely extended sympathy, for social horizons not limited to one’s familiar group, is certainly part of this childish spontaneity.”\textsuperscript{39} This expanded sympathy through our neotenous characteristics is an important trait that aids in enabling the mixed community across the species-barrier. “It is also the window,” she writes, “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.”\textsuperscript{40}

A further feature of neoteny is the way that it manifests in the relation to the natural world in which the mixed community is nestled. Natural curiosity stemming from neoteny draws humans very much into a wider appreciation of the ecological features and systems of nature and compliments our connection to the whole natural world. “It

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 120. This position is characterized by the apostle Paul from I Corinthians 13:11, which she quotes: “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I understood as a child; but when I became a man, I put aside childish things.”

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 120-1.
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.” This reflects our evolutionary roots alongside other species in the natural world, and is part of the reason that we are drawn to and feel connected with nature.

**Evolutionary Considerations**

Evolutionarily speaking, it is not surprising for Midgley that we have this “wider power of sympathy” at the theoretical level. On the practical, empirical level, this also makes sense as the interaction and survival of species implicitly rests on the ability to read the moods and intentions of other species. In addition to intentional forms of communication between species, there are also a number of unintentional signals and communications between species that have certain underlying moods, which Midgley addresses: “For hunting, and also for avoiding danger from predators and other threatening creatures, it is vitally necessary to recognize fear, anger, suspicion, territorial outrage and a dozen other moods.” Humans can often interpret these intentional and unintentional signs from animals such as fleeing birds because of these practical reasons, but also because of deep evolutionary connections, which is vital to the mixed community. “The local is able to interpret these,” Midgley writes, “partly of course by sheer experience, but also (as we shall shortly see) probably because human neurological processes have not diverged far enough from those of the birds to make sympathetic interpretation impossible or even difficult. To get rid of that similarity,

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41 Ibid., 120.
42 Ibid., 122.
physical changes would be needed, and they would apparently be disadvantageous.”

In other words, to evolve to the point that our bond is severed from the rest of the animals would be evolutionarily maladaptive and dangerous. Quite to the contrary, Midgley maintains that this kinship is what makes the mixed community possible.

Midgley argues that what is more likely is that this bond is still strong enough to hold our sympathy and understanding of other animals at a high level, which is in turn accompanied by our special position in animal kingdom. “Evolutionarily speaking, then,” she muses, “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.”

This for Midgley is more representative of our special abilities than a mandate or license for human exceptionalism that more anthropocentric interpretations advocate.

**The Stigma of Savagery**

Midgley identifies these feelings of exceptionalism and superiority not only in human-animals relationships, but also in the colonial mentality of domination in European culture. This logic of domination is indicative of the interwoven oppressions of “inferior” cultures and other species. She closes out the mixed community chapter by claiming that many who object to interspecies sympathy, care, and communication do not do so because of behaviorist skepticism or similar arguments, but because these

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43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
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.”  

“Advanced” European civilization is thought to have moved beyond human preoccupation with animals. Midgley 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.”  

“Primitive” cultures likewise have been castigated for their close association with animals and attribution of subjectivity to them, as well as for such beliefs as reincarnation. However, the main issue here is not that the local knowledge of animals is misguided. To the contrary, Midgley understands that this knowledge is often more accurate that modern science. “In fact,” points out, “ethological investigation, once it was vigorously set on foot this century, has shown that Western urban thought was (not surprisingly) often even more ill-informed than local superstition on many such questions, and that it had consistently attributed to animals a vastly less complex set of thoughts and feelings, and a much smaller range of knowledge and power, than they actually possessed.”  

Midgley claims that the real objection is not in the factuality of the animal knowledge, but rather in the morality and maturity of the issue. “From this point of view,” she writes, “the criticism made against both primitives and children is not that they are ignorant—that they credit animals with feelings which they actually do not 

45 Ibid.  
46 Ibid.  
47 Ibid., 123.
have—but that they are frivolous, are occupying themselves with something unimportant.” This reflects the anti-neotenous, pro-maturity perspective that advocates a system of morality that continually limits rather than expands the boundaries of moral considerability, much like the hyper-rationalist tradition that Midgley constantly critiques in setting the foundation for the mixed community.

The Mixed Community

In the mixed community chapter of *Animals and Why They Matter*, Midgley delineates the core structure of her concept of the mixed community. At its core the mixed community is the readily apparent concept of community in the historical and evolutionary sense—humans and animals, especially domestic animals, live and belong together. Spatially and temporally, conceptually and historically, the mixed community and its members must be thought of in relationship to each other. These relationships are made possible by certain shared traits in humans and other animals, and most significantly through the human capacity to understand and sympathize with animals. Contrary to skeptical claims, humans are quite capable of understanding both the inner and outer states of others, human and animal. This is not universal, as this bond is more readily accessible in social animals.

As such, human culture has developed with and alongside other animals, resulting in a number of special relationships with other species. Among these special relationships is the significant and peculiar phenomenon of pets, which stems from the fascinating ability of social animals, including humans, to adopt and adapt to other species from a young age. In this, human children are excellent representations of

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48 Ibid., 124.
unmediated bonding and interaction with other species. Humans in fact are ultimately imprinted from a young age by other species as much as humans imprint other animals. This two-way social imprinting contributes to the special mutual shaping that exists between species in the mixed community. Neoteny is likely a key factor in this lifelong bond and shared empathy with other animals, and these childlike characteristics are not to be dismissed as immature, but rather seen as special values that contribute to a fuller and richer human life. Much like the chauvinism and exceptionalism exhibited by European colonialism, dated and iniquitous ideas of animals, children, and primitivism must be relinquished in favor of stances that take seriously our shared sympathy and kinship with animals. Ultimately, the mixed community is comprised at its core of all these special historical and biological circumstances and faculties that gave rise to our shared social world, especially our extraordinary ability to attend to and understand the subjectivity of other species through a shared evolutionary history and sociality.

**Anthropomorphism**

Once Midgley reaches the climax of the mixed community concept, she spends the remainder of the book expanding on and clarifying some of the ideas that compose it, especially the challenges of anthropomorphism and animal subjectivity. First, Midgley finds it vital to oppose the facile claims of anthropomorphism, mainly the ones that some skeptics promote that claim that our language about animals is inappropriate because it anthropomorphizes animals, and that we cannot know what animals are thinking or feeling. Midgley takes a co-evolutionary approach to this, placing our language about animals parallel to our language about humans:

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 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.\footnote{Ibid.}

Anthropomorphizing language, for Midgley, is not only an appropriate way to refer to animal behavior on many occasions, but it is also justified in light of human-animal coevolution, and a cornerstone of the mixed community. Midgley investigates the roots of “anthropomorphism,” which “may be the only example of a notion invented solely for God, and then transferred unchanged to refer to animals…This sense was the only one the word had until about a century ago, when it was somewhat suddenly extended to cover the attribution of some human qualities to non-human animals.”\footnote{Ibid., 125. She mentions the “anthromporphite heresy,” an early Christian heresy of giving God any shape at all, as an example of the fear to ascribe human qualities to an unknowable deity.} She traces the skeptical argument against anthropomorphizing: “Our idea of x (in this case God) is made up of elements drawn from human life: But x is not human: Therefore the idea is only a mirror and tells us nothing about x.”\footnote{Ibid., 127.} Midgley points out that one of the main flaws with this reasoning is the thought that what makes up the elements of human life can never be extended. If this were the case, we would never be able to understand anything new. She rather surmises that we must apply the concepts we have at hand to make new discoveries comprehensible. While she affirms the skeptical argument that we cannot ever know anything completely, she stresses that we can readily extend our knowledge of human life to a number of areas, such as animal subjectivity, relating our experiences to new data in a search to approximate new
meanings or understandings. All of our ideas are in human terms, and to say that something is unknowable, such as God, simply because it is not human, is an unreasonable position.

Midgley suggests that anthropomorphizing is often confused with humanizing, which is the actual mistake: “The real and serious fault of groundlessly attributing unsuitable human qualities to these beings from mere force of habit is better described as humanizing (‘Representing as human’).”\(^{52}\) Scientists and others are often timid or embarrassed in using anthropomorphic language not because it is inaccurate, but because of their philosophical anthropocentrism and fear of humanizing animals. “Embarrassment about the use of such words” she claims, “is not scientific. It is metaphysical. The words arouse suspicion, not because they are useless, but because of a philosophical view about what they might commit us to. And that view is mistaken.”\(^{53}\) As an example, she quotes G.H. Lewes, who wrote that “we speak with large latitude of anthropomorphism when we speak of the ‘vision’ of these animals (molluscs)” and “as we are just now looking with scientific seriousness at our animals, we will discard all anthropomorphic interpretations, such as point to ‘alarm.’”\(^{54}\) Midgley reiterates that these examples are not stretches of anthropomorphism at all and are appropriate since the right language is being used. They are not humanizing as Lewes seems to think, but actual descriptions of natural states that these animals share with humans.

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\(^{52}\) Ibid., 128.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 129.

This fear of and antagonism toward anthropomorphism is especially common to behaviorism, which at times even extends this extreme skepticism to humans, saying that we cannot know what goes on inside others and can only observe behavior. Midgley undermines this skepticism by showing how we can know about someone’s anger or pain because these are “not the names of small private sensations at all, but refer to much larger slices of life and conduct, which include both public and private aspects.” Emotions are personal but also public, and these shared experiences are why we have words for them. There are whole ranges of inner and outer symptoms of thoughts and emotions, and while we may be skeptical that outer expressions are always honest, extreme skepticism is unwarranted in light of human experience. “A moderate skepticism,” she validates, “which points out that we are often over-confident, or indicates particular mistakes, is very welcome. But full-scale sceptical Behaviourism is not content with this; it insists that we can know nothing of each other’s subjective experience.” Though this extreme behavioristic skepticism has held little traction in the realm of human relations, it has generated much support in relation to animals, and is a major instigator of antagonism against anthropomorphic language. Midgley holds that our pattern recognition of such states as anger and fear are part of our innate capacity to understand subjective states, and that this sentimental understanding does not stop at the species-barrier in the mixed community.

55 Ibid., 130.
56 Ibid., 131.
Animal Subjectivity and Consciousness

Midgley attacks the negative skeptical position that declares only what we cannot say about animals, a view that often leads to sweeping statements about the differences between humans and animals and invokes mechanistic descriptions of animals. She rather wishes to approach the topic more positively and asks: “Granted the similarities between nervous systems, and also between many of the ways in which animals interact and the ways in which humans do, and granted also that humans often interact with animals successfully, how wide a difference in their basic social faculties does it make sense to posit?” Midgley maintains that we can talk of the subjective states of animals very much for the same reasons that we can do so in humans—a range of observable patterns that can be recognized, noticeable similarity between nervous systems, and a history of successful interaction built on this recognition of subjectivity. At a minimum, she holds that there must be a very strong reason to refuse toattribute subjectivity to animals.

It is important for Midgley that we relinquish conversations of consciousness in the abstract sense as something that comes into and animates the bodies of humans and (possibly) animals. Humans generally operate under the assumption that the collection of neurological properties that constitute humans and animals grants them subjectivity, and we are very successful in interactions with humans, dogs, horses, and other animals based on this assumption. 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 jettison the ability to say

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57 Ibid., 134.
anything positive about animals. Midgley categorizes this reluctance to pursue the consciousness and subjectivity of animals under the “Principle of Parsimony,” which “dictates that, of two explanations which explain equally well, we should choose the simpler one,” though this version of Occam’s Razor “does not dictate that we should choose an explanation which does not explain rather than one which does. Nor does the more general tendency to deny that things exist necessarily make for simplicity.”

Midgley thinks that, rather than the seductive simplicity of ignorance, we need “a conceptual scheme which works—which draws together the facts of experience so that we can interpret them consistently as a whole, and which is fertile in further relevant predictions.”

Midgley proposes that ethology is a more appropriate and realistic approach to animal studies in this manner, and she tentatively suggests that behaviorism has fortunately lost traction in some areas “simply because in so many fields it vetoes usable explanations without providing better ones to replace them…the habit of rejecting on principle all the most obvious sources of information has increasingly come to look eccentric.”

She champions how ethology fights against the “ritual skepticism” of behaviorism by integrating concepts and language that have long been appropriate for studying animals:

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58 Ibid., 135.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 136. Midgley lampoons “purely external descriptions of behaviour”: “‘Head drops by 7cm., ears by 3 cm., tail by 21 cm., fur on back contracts’ etc. are never going to make sense to the listener unless he receives a sudden flash of contraband enlightenment, leading him to exclaim: ‘Oh I see—what you mean is that it’s frightened. It is cowering because it has seen the predator.’ After this flash, however, he is able to make all sorts of further useful predictions. He now ‘knows what is happening.’ His previous method forbade him ever to do so.”
Early in this century, however, zoologists began to reverse this trend by seriously taking up the study of animal behaviour—ethology. They invented methods which formalized that study, methods which aimed to incorporate some of their skills inherited from both naturalists and from shepherds, hunters and the like, whose trained powers of observation have always been their livelihood, while adding modern scientific precautions against superstition and over-interpretation. In this work, they found it entirely natural and necessary to use the regular vocabulary already employed to describe human motive. This (as I have suggested) is not surprising, seeing that it had in any case been invented for use on animals as well as humans. This vocabulary did not crack or prove unsuitable under the strain of more methodical observation. There was no need—as there was for instance in the case of chemistry—to invent an entire new set of words.\(^\text{61}\)

She relates this to the tempered optimism of early pioneers of ethology such as Konrad Lorenz and Nikolaas Tinbergen that paved the way for modern animal studies by forgoing lazy assumptions about the subjective states of animals and developing thorough forms of analysis through a number of sources of information. Midgley uses a metaphor from the animal world to liken the emerging groundswell of resistance to Behaviorist psychology. “There are times when psychologists,” she begins, “like penguins, can be seen crowding to the edge of an intellectual ice-floe, hungry for the nutritious facts swimming about below, but hesitating to dive until somebody else has tried it and escaped being eaten.” She then highlights innovators such as Donald Griffin and Nicky Humphrey that took the plunge: “On such occasions several enterprising birds often seem to splash in almost simultaneously. I shall not try to judge who first managed it on this occasion, by ignoring the tabus and bringing back words like consciousness, introspection, subjectivity, self-knowledge, mental imagery, sympathy, imagination, and dream into obviously reputable scientific use.”\(^\text{62}\)

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 136-7.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 138.
As a result of these bold advances in animal studies, there has been a growing recognition of the continuity of evolution in social animals, which is crucial to the mixed community. Social animals must be able to understand the outer and inner states of those around them in order to learn about the world and survive. Midgley advocates the idea that the continuity between human and other social animals is strong enough for us to understand animal subjectivity in the mixed community. “Over animals,” she writes, “the attribution of emotions is not an extension built out from a language completely formed, but a way of thinking which certainly goes back beyond the formation of language, since non-human animals of different species can understand each other.”\textsuperscript{63} This capacity for understanding is in opposition to the stigma of anthropomorphism and part of what makes the mixed community possible and natural.

The Concept of the Mixed Community

In countering Peter Singer’s claim of speciesism, Mary Midgley embarks on a discussion of species and the species barrier, arguing that those who both marginalize and exaggerate the species barrier are equally off the mark. This is the beginning of the mixed community section of \textit{Animals and Why They Matter}, which continues for the remainder of the book. For Midgley, the species barrier is real and significant and therefore necessary for properly understanding and respecting each species and each animal.

The species-barrier, however, is also semi-permeable, allowing for animals of various species, including humans, to impressively interact and live together. Humans especially possess the ability to understand and relate to animal subjectivity through a

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 142.
shared evolutionary history and kinship. Midgley outlines how humans are able to form special bonds with social animals through our neotenous sympathy with animals among other special traits in the mixed community chapter, the climax of the mixed community section of *Animals and Why They Matter*. She spends the remainder of the book supporting the mixed community against skeptical claims that we cannot understand animal subjectivity. This dogmatic and ritualistic position inherent in behaviorism systematically rules out what humans have understood for a long time, which is that we share consciousness, subjectivity, and sociality with animals to an observable extent. Only proper examination of these phenomena through the field of ethology and related research can allow us to more fully grasp the significance and potential of these relationships between humans and animals in the mixed community.

This look at the innermost structure of the mixed community gives us a glimpse into the core of the Midgley’s concept, which she sketches in the mixed community section, or the final four chapters of *Animals and Why They Matter*. These core elements are supported and made possible by a theoretical framework that stretches throughout the book, which is primarily in Midgley’s systematic deconstruction of the barriers to animal ethics. This is what I will analyze in the next chapter.
 CHAPTER 3  
THE MIXED COMMUNITY PART II: FOUNDATIONS

In the preceding chapter, I provided an analysis and interpretation of the mixed community in its core structure and innermost constitutive elements. These elements are primarily, though not exclusively, displayed in the human ability to sympathize with and understand the very real subjectivity of animals, which is grounded in a common historical and evolutionary kinship and background that makes a human-animal community possible, natural, and morally significant. This chapter examines the important and necessary foundations and framework of the concept of the mixed community found throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*. This rich work contains a masterful critique of the barriers that stand between more constructive understandings of animal ethics and Midgley’s conception of the mixed community. In this chapter, I analyze and interpret the foundations of the mixed community that Midgley lays through a systematic critique of rationalism and moral philosophy, in both animal ethics and wider ethical theory. In this process, Midgley cleaves large holes through the barriers and misconceptions of theoretical and practical thought on animal ethics while also constructing new and more helpful perspectives on the animal question, which ultimately culminates in the concept of the mixed community.

**Getting Animals and the Mixed Community in Focus**

Mary Midgley commonly brings the wider problems of philosophy into conversation with the topic at hand, be it morality or science or poetry, and she does this prominently in *Animals and Why They Matter*, calling the topic of animals “much bigger than it may seem.”¹ She sees the heart of the conversation about animals as

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involving such core themes in philosophy as equality, reason and emotion, the social contract, language, human development, and the human position in the universe. Further, when animal issues are raised, the same philosophical traditions that are invoked inevitably must be challenged on their correlated inequities to women, minorities, and other non-human beings.\(^2\) Therefore in *Animals and Why They Matter*, as in her work more broadly, she addresses a specific topic while contextualizing it within the greater picture and problems of moral philosophy.

In the context of these inequities, she defines the animal question as a “neglected question,” and one that is difficult to fit into our existing ethical systems. Answers to the animal question “tend to be dismissed rather than met, to be stigmatized wholesale as perverse, sentimental, emotive, childish, impractical, superstitious, insincere—somehow not solid.”\(^3\) However, the animal question still does not go away and illustrates the quagmire that arises when we are confronted with a moral issue that muddies the waters of routine and “collides violently with practice.” She maintains that animal ethics mandates a form of morality that challenges common practice, yet to be effective this challenge cannot be too extreme because ethical ideals that are too impractical are wasted, and Midgley is always concerned with the practical. On the other hand, ideals must be bold enough to demand attention and practice. Midgley underscores this tension between idealism and pragmatism as one that must be scrutinized and honestly addressed in order to find balanced and enduring answers to

\(^2\) Midgley clarifies her reference to non-human beings, specifically “animals,” as “animals of other species than man,” drawing attention to her work from Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, [1979] 1995) and other volumes where she firmly establishes that “human beings are themselves animals,” a straightforward and balanced position that generated significant attention during the nature-nurture debate in the 1970s. Ibid.

\(^3\) Ibid., 9.
the animal question (or any other moral problem). The creative scrutiny and discussion of moral ideals and practices not only lends answers to the animal question, but also to issues that are at the root of everyday morality. Therefore, her systematic examination and critique of the core barriers to animal ethics and the mixed community covers a range of problems that are endemic to Western philosophy, making this work relevant to a number of areas in theoretical and applied ethics.

**Theoretical and Practical Necessity**

The question of animals in the Western philosophical tradition has a long and colorful past that generally leans toward human exceptionalism. Though certain religious thinkers such as St. Francis and Enlightenment 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 jettisoned. "If animals are irrational," Midgley summarizes, "and value and dignity depend entirely on reason, animals cannot matter." ⁴

Reason, much like the soul, gradually became the mark of moral agents, which inevitably lent to the extreme Cartesian position of animals as mere automata or machines. Midgley challenges this idea in contemporary culture, claiming that it cannot be consistently held because it "requires some awkward intellectual gymnastics." ⁵ The first problem is that we know much more about animal brains and nervous systems than Descartes and his contemporaries, making it less tenable to separate the physical and

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⁴ Ibid., 11. Other examples of benevolent Enlightenment thinkers are Michel de Montaigne, Thomas Paine, and John Stuart Mill.

⁵ Ibid.
mental lives of humans and animals. The second problem is that Descartes’ position on humanity placed reason on a pedestal to the extent that the intellect became all that mattered, making intellect and reason the only allowable factors in moral deliberation. Midgley cites other rationalist moral philosophers such as Plato and Spinoza as including an emotive element in their moral process, undermining the Cartesian idea that reason be the only deciding factor in moral deliberation in the rationalist tradition. She claims that this excessive glorification of reason is a carryover from the Enlightenment project to elevate reason and science over “irrational prejudices,” and that exaggerations such as these must be disposed of when they are no longer helpful and begin to do harm. Midgley asserts that this carryover of Enlightenment thinking is not readily acceptable today on theoretical or practical grounds and must be challenged due to the subjugated status it has placed on animals in morality, which is a major barrier to the mixed community.

Beyond the philosophical and theoretical need to address the animal question, there is a more practical need, which is the growing public interest and access to animals and animal studies in popular culture and media. Since the Enlightenment, laws were passed and strides were made in animal welfare that were absorbed into everyday morality and awareness. Eventually this increase in awareness combined with a growing fascination with animals through scientific television shows and an associated increase in scientific inquiry and dissemination. Midgley explains how this curiosity, which is a key aspect of the mixed community, has contributed to increased understanding and awareness of animals: “Some dim conception of splendours and miseries hitherto undreamt of, of the vast range of sentient life, of the richness and
complexity found in even the simplest creatures, has started to penetrate even to the least imaginative.” She continues, “For the first time in civilized history, people who were interested in animals because they wanted to understand them, rather than just to eat or yoke or shoot or stuff them, have been able to advance that understanding by scientific means, and to convey some of it to the inquisitive public.”

Midgley appreciates the ethological effort to discover the meaning of animal behavior and emotional structure, which has illuminated the continuity between humans and animals, a realization that can ultimately instill in us a sense of fellowship and kinship with animals, an important factor in the mixed community. For Midgley, this growing interest and awareness of animals and their relation to us through the mixed community represents a practical necessity to investigate and remove the theoretical and practical barriers to animal ethics.

**Absolute and Relative Dismissal of Animals**

Midgley makes a distinction between “absolute dismissal” and “relative dismissal” of the moral claims of animals. Absolute dismissal is the Cartesian position that rejects “animal claims as just nonsensical, like claims on behalf of stones.” Relative dismissal or “low priority” positions “merely give them 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.” Relative “dismissers” do not dismiss animal claims universally, as do absolute dismissers, but their view is based on a misunderstanding, “since many claims on behalf of animals do not compete with real human needs at all, and therefore do not

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6 Ibid., 13.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
Midgley is concerned with clarifying and correcting the misconceptions related to each of these types of dismissals and points out that members of the mixed community should not be dismissed in either fashion.

In order to convey the distinction between absolute and relative dismissers, Midgley recounts the story of a nineteenth century British hunter, R. Gordon Cumming. In this example Cumming, while on an expedition, shoots an elephant in the leg then has refreshments under a tree while the incapacitated animal suffers. Eventually, he methodically shoots the elephant in different spots until he fatally wounds it in an experiment to find the most vulnerable points. Midgley claims that, for absolute dismissers, “there is nothing wrong with Cummings’s conduct at all, and could not be whatever further refinements he might have added, so long as they damaged nobody but the elephant.”\textsuperscript{10} Perhaps the only real damage that such behavior would have for absolute dismissers is in a Kantian sense, of making the person inclined toward callous treatment of human beings, or possibly inflated pride as a result of killing such a challenging foe. However, if they did take this position, they are implicitly holding to the idea that the elephant is conscious and “an opponent—a being like themselves in having its own emotions and interests,” which “seems only to arise if the two kinds of case [animal and human callousness] are seen as essentially similar, even if different in degree.”\textsuperscript{11} She maintains that absolute dismissals of animal claims are “oftener

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 16.
\end{flushleft}
professed than held,” and that recognizing the agency and consciousness of the
elephant tends to “involve thinking that it has some value in itself, that it matters.”\textsuperscript{12}

Midgley surmises that even those who dismiss animal claims would likely draw a
line on how long one can torture an elephant before it becomes morbid, demonstrating
that their dismissal is only “partial and relative.” Though she thinks that absolute
dismissal does exist and is a major problem, she believes that most are rather relative
dismissers that “fall back on it [absolute dismissal] occasionally, viewing it as a safe
logical refuge in awkward cases.”\textsuperscript{13} The absolute dismissal arguments are generally
weak because they are formulated to justify a position that is rarely questioned and is
grounded in self-interest, leading to ethical outcomes that most would not support. “In
short,” she summarizes, “the arguments for absolute dismissal are an incubus, a dead
weight on our thinking, which should be studied because we need to get rid of it, and
which distorts our ideas on many subjects apparently remote from the present one.”\textsuperscript{14}

Midgley subverts absolute and relative dismissal while highlighting “the dilemma which
arises in a culture habituated to ignoring the interests of animals, when a Darwinian and
humanitarian perspective is introduced, which shows them as important in their own
right.”\textsuperscript{15} However, in order to delineate her Darwinian perspective and lay the theoretical
foundations for the mixed community, she must systematically examine, critique, and
clarify the philosophical barriers to animal ethics in the prevailing rationalist tradition of
morality.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 17-18.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 18.
Midgley takes aim at portrayals of competition grounded in the “lifeboat model” of ethics, a hypothetical thought experiment that adjudicates between claims of various subjects in light of limited resources. For many, animals are too distant from our moral concern, and the animal question is: “Must we really acknowledge all our long-lost cousins and heave them into the humanitarian lifeboat, which is already foundering under the human race?” However, the extreme views that claim all or nothing answers, that the boat is too full to take on any animals or that the boat must expand to take on all animals “share a common fault of unreality and excessive abstraction, a fault which vitiates their views of human life before we ever reach the question of animals.”

Midgley argues that efforts to create abstract models of our moral relationship to animals (or humans) limit the complexity of our social capacities “within our own species and outside it,” which “can and must extend outside our own species, but they do so with a difference.” “Animals,” she reiterates, “are not just ‘animals.’ They are elephants or amoebae, locusts or fish or deer,” and “we can no more think sensibly about our duties to animals-in-general than to human-beings in general.” For Midgley, this abstract thinking is unhelpful in moral deliberation, and is a barrier to understanding our relationship with other species in the mixed community.

Midgley holds that the primary flaw of applying lifeboat ethics to animals is in setting up a false dilemma based on competition and economics in which all species are

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16 Ibid., 19.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 26.
competing for limited resources. The responses to the dilemma are usually characterized by absolute inclusion or absolute dismissal of animals, with absolute or near absolute dismissal of animals being the most common strategy. She is critical of the disingenuous usage of the lifeboat in these cases to draw a firm line between humans and animals, even though the same model is often used “not to protect, but to attack, the claims of those crowds of needy, distant human beings whom it here seems to champion against animals. In fact—to come to the point at once—this model is an inadequate one for most of the situations where it is applied to human affairs.”

Her main point is that we do not often find ourselves in lifeboats, and models that eliminate creativity, intelligence, justice, generosity, and other key human traits lead to bad faith. The subjects in the boat become “possible beneficiaries” or competitors for resources, stripping them of the best human qualities and capacities and reducing them to the lowest denominator of crude economics while factoring out such issues as relationality and subjectivity, which are key factors in the mixed community.

Not only are we rarely on lifeboats, but Midgley points out that we rarely find ourselves in any analogous competition with animals in any real sense. Misconceptions of competition between humans and animals are often grounded in the idea that “cut-throat competition between species is the law of evolution,” which, Midgley stresses, “is false, and the reading of such pop-gun fantasies into evolutionary theory is a serious error.” She locates this error in the thought that competition is primarily between species when it is in fact within a species that competition is greatest. Further, though

\[20\] Ibid., 20.

\[21\] Ibid., 24.
competition between species does exist, she acknowledges that it “is not the basic law of life,” and “we are incurably members of one another” rather than isolated rational subjects.\textsuperscript{22} The relationship between species is often one of mutual dependence in an ecosystemic sense where each part needs the other in order to maintain the whole system. This is not, however, to suggest that species are always harmonious in a world lacking violence, but rather that nature is not always red in tooth and claw. Her understanding of human-animal relationality in mixed and ecological communities then is one characterized by both conflict and cooperation, and neither should be overemphasized to a fault.

\textbf{Nearness, Relationality, and Moral Claims in the Mixed Community}

Subjectivity and relationality are important issues in Midgley’s discussion of nearness, a criterion for morality that she thinks is often misused. She writes that “this principle of nearness of kinship has been used to defend a wide variety of behaviour which can loosely be called selfish, from dismissal of animals now under discussion through various forms of political narrowness right up to egoism proper, which admits no claims except one’s own.”\textsuperscript{23} In other words, nearness can be used to include or exclude, to allow or disallow anyone or anything into the moral radar, and Midgley wishes to nuance this in the mixed community.

Rather than dismiss nearness due to its wide-ranging misuse, Midgley 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

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Nearness is a major factor in our moral relations, from self to family to friends 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.” She argues that the “Good Samaritan” recognized the stranger’s injury as a claim against the nearness principle. In other words, nearness is helpful for certain decisions, but should not become too habitual or inflexible so as to become dogmatic and exclusionary. Midgley stresses that it would be muddled to say that one would not prefer to rescue those nearest to them in some type of life or death scenario (though these are rare much like lifeboats), but, generally speaking, nearness in relation to both humans and animals can be overstressed since competition is often overblown and because there are claims from the “outer circles” that are more pressing than some of the claims of nearness.

Diagramming moral nearness or distance in concentric circles, Midgley contends, is very popular and something of a reaction to the despair caused by lifeboat thinking. It is a oversimplified way to distinguish who and what is worth our concern and where the lines are drawn. Efforts to do so, however, always fail, no matter how few or many circles are in the diagrams. A starting point for these diagrams could be a simple “Us” as the middle circle with “Them” as the outer circle, but this raises the question of who is included in “Us”? The next step is then to distinguish “Me” as the innermost circle or measure with “Them” as the outer circle. Inevitably, measures must then be taken to

\[24\] Ibid.

\[25\] Ibid., 22-23.
distinguish “Them,” and the list of concentric circles increases in number, including
“Me,” “Family,” “Personal friends,” “Age-group,” “Colleagues,” “Tribe or race,” “Social
class,” “Nation,” “Species,” and “The biosphere.” This moral extensionism can continue
on to absurd lengths of minutia and distinctions, but Midgley stresses that the order and
magnitude of these circles and claims are never truly representative of the dynamic
moral landscape in which we operate and encourages a fragmented view of morality.
The problem of most significance for the mixed community in these diagrams and
systems is that animals are often neglected and marginalized.

Midgley concludes that no simple diagram or system of ethics can adequately
help us fully understand moral dilemmas. “There is obviously no simple formula,” she
writes, “for determining priority among these distinct kinds of claim, and moral
philosophies like Utilitarianism which try to make the job look simple can only deceive
us.”26 Rather, different cultures and individuals work out maps or constellations of
dynamic, overlapping shapes and sizes, “but they do not necessarily fix priorities,
because relatively isolated claims must sometimes prevail, when they are very strong,
over weaker ones which come nearer to the center of the web because they have been
institutionalized.”27 Animals then are firmly located on this moral map because they
make special claims on us by being under the care and impact of humans in the mixed
community.

Midgley stresses that animals deserve moral concern and compassion from
humans in the mixed community somewhat in the sense that the injured stranger did

26 Ibid., 30.
27 Ibid.
from the Good Samaritan: to not offer compassion because it is being saved for the inner realms of the concentric circles of moral obligation would be callous and immoral. Midgley famously underscores that 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.”

She highlights that the most effective humanitarian reformers have used this power of compassion widely for humans and animals alike, and that “such people have always resisted the despair which gives rise to lifeboat thinking; this is how they have achieved things which, in their times, appeared entirely impossible.” In the context of the mixed community, compassion, emotion, and reason must come to bear on moral claims and deliberations.

Reason and Emotion

Midgley acknowledges that simple models of morality built on concentric circles that divides “us” from “them” are still common, and are especially prevalent in discussions on animals in the claim that “concern for them beyond a certain limit—and in particular concern for animals—is not serious because it is purely a matter of emotion.” She calls this “the stigma of emotion,” and urges that we need to clarify this stigma “because the relation between emotion and reason is a very central crux of our

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28 Ibid., 31.

29 Ibid., 32. Among these reformers she lists Voltaire, William Wilberforce, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and George Bernard Shaw.

30 Ibid.
lives.”\textsuperscript{31} These complementary aspects of morality are also vital in understanding the mixed community.

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.”\textsuperscript{32} They are, in other words, “the power-house which keeps the whole lot going.”\textsuperscript{33} Strong feelings are not only commonly correlated moral issues, they are often imperative because of the seriousness of the cases.

However, this does not mean, as emotivist theories claim, that morality is nothing but an expression of our emotions. “The Emotivist’s mistake,” she critiques, “is in supposing that it requires nothing else; in trying to detach such feelings from the thoughts that properly belong to them.”\textsuperscript{34} Though emotion can be an ugly “buzz word,” emotion is not the problem for Midgley. “The real fault must lie,” she stresses, “not in the presence of feeling, but in the absence of thought, or in the unsuitability of feeling to thought.”\textsuperscript{35}

Midgley points out that emotion can be a troublesome buzz word not only in moral theory, but in derogatory everyday usage: “‘I am convinced—you are excited—he is getting emotional.’”\textsuperscript{36} Further, “emotive” is also a buzz word in how it often involves trying to produce or reproduce the same emotion in other people. However, Midgley does not think it is necessarily a problem at its core because the effort to change

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
feelings is necessary to change any belief. As an example she illustrates how a scientist can try to direct a colleague into correcting a mistake in his or her research by trying to “rouse his suspicions on the matter, to make him unhappy about the error, to weaken his confidence in it, to rouse his curiosity about an alternative suggestion and eventually to induce a confident acceptance of it.”\(^\text{37}\) This reflects her emphasis on acknowledging subjectivity in science. The problem for Midgley is rather “in attempting such enterprises for the wrong reasons and by the wrong methods, rather than to argue honestly and openly about the issues.”\(^\text{38}\)

Animal issues in this context are appropriately correlated with strong feelings. Midgley notes that even the strongest feelings are not wrong; they are to be expected, but they must be appropriate and balanced with thought. “There is however another misleading idea” she warns, “which distorts both the charge of emotion and that of emotiveness, namely, an impression that strong feeling is in itself more objectionable than calm feeling, and that states of indifference, involving no feeling, would really be the best of all…Here again, what really matters is surely not (apart from extremes) the strength of the emotion, but its suitability.”\(^\text{39}\)

Midgley analyzes multiple case studies in order to draw out what is being said when concern for animals is written off as emotional, emotive, or sentimental.\(^\text{40}\) One

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 36.

\(^{39}\) Ibid.

\(^{40}\) The first case example is a news article regarding the conditions of battery chickens. It claims that the subject is an emotive one with rounds of emotional ammunition. Some people are sympathetic to birds that cannot raise their wings or scratch, while others instead accept the benefit of factory farms. The second case example is a defense from a researcher that amputated the forelimbs of mice to study their grooming development. The scientist talks of the oppositional dualities of rationality and sensitivity, and writes that, though this emotional expression is important, the rational importance of the research takes
claim is that of ignorance, stating that, if people had all the information, they would not
be so emotional about the issues. Another claim is one of insincerity, that the feelings
behind animal issues are not strong or persistent enough to warrant consideration.
Midgley rejects these claims as misguided and lacking evidence: the claim of ignorance
is contradictory because more knowledge of animal issues will likely lead to more, not
less concern, and the claim of insincerity is more of a vacuous effort to shift the
conversation from the dispute to the disputers. What these claims are unsuccessfully
trying to do is to question the appropriateness of emotions in animal issues.

Midgley holds that these efforts only further expose the extreme rationalist
assumption that reason alone determines morality and that concern for animals is
emotional and only a matter of feeling. The other extreme is the emotivist claim that
emotions alone determine morality, but both are missing the mark, and she advises that
“we have to do justice to both feeling and thought. This means considering them
together, and as aspects of the same process.” Rationalists tend to reject feelings as a
reactive physical state rather than embrace the interwoven nature of reason and
emotion. This, for Midgley, is unacceptable: “It will not do, therefore, to keep the two
things separate…Sensitivity requires rationality to complete it, and vice versa. There is
no siding onto which emotions can be shunted so as not to impinge on thought.” She
continues, “It is not possible to keep two parallel independent systems of values—one
aesthetic or emotional and the other rational or moral—and prevent their ever

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41 Ibid., 42.
meeting.” These two areas work together, though sometimes issues arise in priority of values, and comparing and relating these values is the “central business of morality.” In the mixed community, moral consideration of animals is not just unfounded and irrational emotive fancy, but a balanced expression of both reason and emotion, something that rationalist morality denies.

**Critique of Rationalist Morality**

Midgley analyzes the rationalist tradition in order to expose and critique arguments of absolute dismissal that stand in the way of constructive answers to the animal question. Her main targets are Descartes and Spinoza, but she acknowledges that critiquing their arguments is challenging because “the most drastic and convinced excluders are also those least interested in arguing for their position. They find it obvious.” These dismissers exclude animals because of their absence in or conflict with the foundations of their rationalism. For Descartes, it stems from his understanding of human consciousness and personal identity, which is readily grasped by his readers. Spinoza’s causes for dismissal are less apparent at first, but stem from his view of sympathy and emotions such as pity. Midgley writes, “He thinks pity in general an evil, first, because it is a feeling, and right actions ought to be produced by thought, second, because pity is painful, and it is the business of each to seek his own pleasure as a mark of his own good.” She underscores that this is not only an unfortunate reason to

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42 Ibid., 43-44.
43 Ibid., 44.
44 Ibid., 45. Midgley notes that Spinoza, being more concerned with ethics, practiced what he preached as an excluder and is said to have found spiders and let them fight or put insects on spider’s webs while laughing with delight.
45 Ibid., 46.
exclude animals from ethics, but it is also “bizarre and incompatible with a reasonable view of our relations with people,” and declares that “Spinozan rationalists must buy it, but the rest of us may well not want to.”

Rather than look simply at the rationalists that absolutely dismiss animals from moral consideration, Midgley draws attention to dissenting voices such as Montaigne and Leibniz. She compares the ambivalence of rationalism to ambivalence in science: “On its negative, destructive side it can be extremely savage, writing off at a stroke whatever falls outside the scope of reason. But, on its constructive side, it may find reason at work everywhere. Examination of this range is needed before the knife can properly fall.” For example, Leibniz is opposed to the mind-matter dualism in Descartes and Spinoza and stresses the continuity between the various forms of consciousness. “His reason for mentioning animals” she writes, “was usually to show them as life-forms differing from people only in degree.”

Midgley reiterates her point that even traditions and thinkers that are considered to absolutely dismiss animals can usually be found instead to be relative dismissers at worst or even potential allies in some cases. The reason for this is a confusion of what these writers are actually addressing: “These arguments are usually verbal rather than...

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46 Ibid.

47 Montaigne argues against cruelty to animals and Midgley thinks that Descartes is likely responding to Montaigne is his dismissal.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid. Like Spinoza, Leibniz was said to have practiced what he preached as well, having “never killed a fly, however much it inconvenienced him, because he thought it would be a misdeed to destroy so ingenious a mechanism.” Kant also said that he “used a tiny worm for purposes of observation, and then carefully replaced it with its leaf on the tree, so that it should not come to harm through any act of his. He would have been sorry—a natural feeling for a humane man—to destroy such a creature for no reason.” Quoting from Immanuel Kant, Lectures on Ethics (London: Methuen, 1930), 240.
moral, and they are hardly even meant as direct treatments of the animal issue. They are normally outlying parts of discussions about the exact meaning of rights, justice, duty, and the rest. They come in briefly, and illustratively, as if the position of animals itself were something already well understood, to clarify some important point about the treatment of humans." She continues, “More important, the authors—though primarily occupied with what is to go on inside their boundaries—commonly remark in passing that much of what falls outside will still, in some sense, be serious moral business…Justice, rights, duties or whatever do not cover the whole area of grave human concern.” These arguments are more about restricting and specifying specific social or legal terms and concepts. Midgley uses terms such as “claims” or “scruples” in order to avoid such loaded and troublesome concepts as justice, duties, and rights, each of which she proceeds to undermine and break down as confused barriers to the concept of the mixed community.

**Justice**

Midgley fittingly looks at David Hume and John Rawls in scrutinizing rationalist conceptions of justice. Though Hume claims that we should treat animals with “gentle usage,” he does not include animals in his notion of justice. This is because he is trying to narrow down justice to “a set of rules, chiefly concerning property, commonly accepted by consent among equals because of its great convenience, but not valid in situations where it ceases to be generally useful. Hume’s main aim is to stress that this kind of rule-system is only a means, and therefore a secondary part of morality.” And,

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50 Ibid., 47.

51 Ibid., 48. Hume calls justice an “artificial virtue.” Likewise “right” is a legal rather than moral term here.
importantly, “the reason for respecting morality at all is not rational necessity—which might be invoked as a separate ground of justice—but feeling…For Hume, therefore, exclusion from justice is by no means exclusion from morality.”

Rather morality stems from sentiment and feelings, which are natural virtues, as opposed to the artificial virtue of justice. Ultimately, though Hume omits animals from his narrow conception of justice, Bentham, Mill, and others who later drew on Hume were able to build on his wide-ranging notions of morality. “Altogether,” she writes, “Hume’s exclusion of animals from the sphere of justice leaves them well inside the area of serious concern and the Utilitarianism which stems from Hume has been, quite consistently, the main philosophic champion of their interests.”

Like Hume, Rawls’s conception of justice is one that pushes animals out of the equation. Midgley identifies the cause of this exclusion as a sort of moral tunnel vision. “If one concentrates one’s attention on justice,” she writes, “everything outside it begins to look slight and optional. The boundary of justice becomes that of morality itself. Duties like mercy and compassion then begin to seem like mere matters of taste, aesthetic preferences, luxuries, delightful and desirable no doubt in times of leisure, but not serious.” However, though Rawls focuses on justice to the extent that it neglects other virtues and much of the background for justice itself, he implores his readers to consider the variety of issues he is omitting, include that of animals and non-human nature. “Rawls (writing in 1971)” Midgley points out, “was rightly asking for philosophy to concern itself with a vast background which he saw as including, and indeed in some

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 49.
54 Ibid., 50.
sense dwarfing, not only his subject, but the whole of ethics. These inquiries are not easy, but since that time many people have been trying to make them.”55 For both Hume and Rawls, absence from a narrow, legal sense of justice does not mean absence from morality or the community. Unfortunately, those relying on justice in moral theorizing today often overlook this distinction when considering animals.

Duty

Midgley critiques another term that restricts who and what is in or out of morality: duty. Kant is the primary target here and she highlights the confusion that exists when he claims that the duties we have toward animals are really duties toward humans, or “near-duties.” “Is it possible,” Midgley asks, “to set up like this a class of near-duties, actions characteristic of humane men, which are not bounden duties, but merely training requirements, reminders to keep in practice?”56 Kant posits these near-duties to disallow the license to mistreat animals however one desires because of the impact it may have on treatment of humans (i.e., Cumming’s elephant story), but Midgley’s point is that these vague near-duties toward animals still appear to be binding in some way, even if they can be overridden by other duties. She writes that the Kantian preoccupation with limiting characteristics for duties highlights this tension between the need to acknowledge that animals should be properly treated and the inflexibility of

55 Ibid. Midgley quotes how Rawls acknowledges the limits of a theory of justice: “Not only are many aspects of morality left aside, but no account is given of right conduct in regard to animals and the rest of nature. A conception of justice is but one part of a moral view.” Quoting from John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 512.

56 Ibid., 52. Kant searches for a reason to treat animals humanely though they do not fit into his notion of duties. Midgley quotes again from Kant, Lectures on Ethics, 239: “So far as animals are concerned, we have no direct duties. Animals are not self-conscious, and are there merely as a means to an end. That end is man…If a man shoots his dog because the animals is no longer capable of service, he does not fail in his duty to the dog, for the dog cannot judge, but his act is inhuman and damages in himself that humanity which it is his duty to show towards mankind…He who is cruel to animals becomes hard also in his dealings with men” [Midgley's italics]. Ibid., 51.
these restrictive categories of moral worth: “If we narrow the notion of duty to cover only contracts between articulate equals, we are going to need some other word to express the binding element in our relations, not just to animals, but to the inarticulate and helpless generally—to children, defectives, lunatics and the old, and also people with whom we cannot communicate.”

The challenge of duty is magnified in everyday usage, which highlights the misleading confusion of the prescriptions of duties in moral worth and consideration. “In common speech,” she clarifies, “to say that we have not duty to animals (or anyone else) means that it does not matter how we treat them. It absolves us. It would be awkward and pedantic to say ‘this is just a verbal point—you are still bound to behave as you would if there was a duty.’ And to say ‘behave thus, or your character may be corrupted’ would not be convincing.” Rather, Midgley believes that it is more helpful to acknowledge differing duties toward the specific needs of animals based on their subjectivity and wants in the mixed community: “Animals do not want or need democratic institutions, but they do want and need not to be tormented.” She sides with R.M. Hare, agreeing that we do not have the same duties to all species, including humans, and distinguishing these duties and needs is a key facet of life in the mixed community.

57 Ibid., 52.
58 Ibid., 53.
59 Ibid., 54.
60 She cites Hare who, in illustrating the Golden Rule, says that “we recognize certain duties towards both men and animals, but certain others toward men only. [Self-government, for instance, is not owed to animals]…In all cases the principle is the same—am I prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of this man or animal, and capable of having only the experiences, desires etc. of him or it?” Ibid., 53, quoting from R.M. Hare, Freedom and Reason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 222-4.
Midgley next examines the “difficulties of rationalistic rigorism” found in language and attacks how “some philosophers have recently exaggerated the importance of language to such a point that they make all inter-species communication look impossible,” something which Midgley believes is rather quite possible and real in the mixed community.\textsuperscript{61} As an example, Midgley paraphrases R. G. Frey’s position: “Animals cannot have rights because they cannot have interests. They cannot have interests because they cannot have desires or emotions. They cannot have desires or emotions because they cannot have the thoughts required for them. And they cannot have those thoughts because they cannot speak.”\textsuperscript{62} However, she outlines that Frey’s claims are verbal and based on the terms used rather than on any reasoning or reflection on actual animal behavior. Further, the source of his terms, according to Midgley, is in the English law relating to property rights, which can only address humans. These property laws are very particular and based in the principle of mortmain, a law devised to prevent deceased people from owning property, which can hardly be seen as an authoritative source for relations with animals. Others have similarly adopted and applied interests in this restrictive and legal usage of the word in universal terms. “Thus,” Midgley writes, “unless elephants can show in words that they grasp what their interests are, can estimate their importance correctly and know what ought to be done about them, they have no interests, and therefore no rights.”\textsuperscript{63} For Midgley, this results

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 54.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 55.
from a misunderstanding of the role of linguistics and is an unfortunate outcome of misguided attempts to apply legal concepts to animals in the garb of linguistic philosophy.

Midgley does approve of the useful contributions of linguistic philosophy and the importance of language, which include “a special view about the role of language in making the world intelligible.”64 Humans seek and expect an order to the universe, and this order was often explained in relation to God or some sort of Kantian faculty that can “impose this order on the world in the process of observing it. Any disorderly elements simply could not reach us.”65 Later thinkers posited that this ordering faculty is actually language in a Wittgensteinian sense, where language verbalizes and shapes one’s “map” of the world. However, Midgley cautions that “it is not at all easy to work out in detail, particularly at the border-lines where what can be clearly said gives way to what cannot.”66

Midgley believes that the complexity of the border-line questions is what the later Wittgenstein concentrated on and, since we are the only species that uses verbal language, this is a real issue in addressing animals. This is especially challenging if language is the only marker and distinguisher in levels of intelligences in different species. She is firm in this case that we rather can know that species are intelligent in various degrees without verbal language, as with babies in our own species. Language in this case can magnify and increase intelligence, but it does not supersede the pre- and non-verbal communication that is shared by humans and animals alike. Thus, when

64 Ibid., 56.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
Wittgenstein speaks about hope in animals, it should be seen as an appropriate attribution of an emotion to animals, though it may not be as sophisticated a sense of hope as one that language can give humans: “The terms hope and hopeful,” she writes, “are in fact quite regularly used about animals, not just by idiots, but by careful and systematic observers of animal behaviour. They are not used out of sentimental projection, but because they are needed to describe one important sector of the normal range of moods displayed—a sector no less important in other animals than in man. Hope is surely on the same footing as fear.”67 The difficulty again lies in conceptual problems and attributing absolute differences between human and animals to a lack of traits on the part of animals rather than to shared degree or quality of difference.

Midgley reflects that animals would likely not survive if they did not have a working sense of the past and future, though it is true that humans have a much more enhanced version of this through language. To show that animals could not sense the past and future would require empirical scientific investigation rather the conceptual declarations based on the possession or lack of verbal and written language.

Midgley has several examples of a sense of the past and future. The first is a guide-dog that learned that a specific day of the week was the shopping day for her owner at specific stores. Likewise other animals such as feral cats are able to anticipate

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67 Here Midgley is referring to an oft-quoted section of Wittgenstein that is used to discount animal emotions, or at least the feeling of “hope.” Midgley argues that his extreme conclusion is false. She quotes from Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), Part II, §. i: “One can imagine an animal angry, frightened, unhappy, happy, startled. But hopeful? And why not? A dog believes his master is at the door. But can he also believe his master will come the day after tomorrow?—And what can he not do here?...Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life. (If a concept refers to a character in human handwriting, it has no application to beings that do not write.)” Midgley responds that the use of language can enrich and expand such concepts of hope, but this does not mean that animals are deprived of this in any sense if they do not speak. Her point is that it is a matter of degree rather than all-or-nothing. Ibid., 57.
events on specific days of the week rather than on a daily pattern. In nature, migrations, pregnancies, seasons and anticipation of the movement or predators and prey are necessary events that involve a sense or knowledge of the future, and “if they had not enough memory and anticipation of order to fit their plans into the probable train of events, with alterations for altered circumstances, they often could not survive.” Her point here again is that our common evolutionary heritage in the mixed community has not been severed. Because of this we can be certain that we share specific emotions and thoughts with animals, and that it is only a matter of degree that separates humans and animals in certain capacities. Language and other traits may widen the degree of difference, but this does not completely remove the connection.

Returning to Frey, Midgley again addresses the idea that animals cannot have these desires or emotions because they lack the necessary thought and self-reflection, which she thinks is “very odd, since these are just what animals are often accused of having too much of.” Though she thinks that the analysis being used by linguistic philosophers is wrong in this case, she thinks it makes an important point, which is that desire and emotion are not formless but involve thoughts as well. This, for Midgley, is certainly true and the mistake is in adding that language must be present to articulate these desires or emotions, which is often not even the case with humans as non-verbal communication often most accurately portrays emotions, and “we recognize this direct expression of emotion through conduct as more reliable than its expression through words, when the two conflict.” She develops an understanding of linguistic philosophy

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68 Ibid., 58.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 59.
that does not concern itself as much with the absolute conceptual differences between humans and animals as with the degree or range of difference in communicative faculties. In the least, what should be understood in the discussion of animal ethics is that “the architects of linguistic philosophy never intended their work to serve as a device for disproving that animals had rights—an issue which certainly did not occur to them.”

**Rights**

This leads to Midgley’s well-known discussion of “rights,” which she calls a “really desperate word” that “was in deep trouble long before animals were added to its worries.” Rights language has a dual usage both in a legal-political context and in morality. In the legal sense, it is appropriate that animals do not have rights to property, for example, but in the moral sense the term is not as clear, and this vagueness is part of what makes it so prolific. Confusion over what constitutes legal and moral rights is also related to use of the term “human rights,” a term which Midgley indicates “has also the extra disadvantage of seeming to pre-empt without discussion the whole subject of this book.” Much of the confusion stems from uncertainty on the relationship between the law and morality, and the ambiguity of rights can be quite erratic. “In its moral sense,” she writes, “it oscillates uncontrollably between applications which are too wide to resolve conflicts (‘the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’) and ones which are too narrow to be plausible (‘the basic human right to stay at home on Bank

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71 Ibid., 60.
72 Ibid., 61.
73 Ibid.
Midgley concludes that, in light of its ambiguous, erratic usage and its murky foundations, it is unhelpful to rely on rights language any longer. She holds that use of the word “rights” is more of a placeholder or reference to a value that is not being properly articulated. “In ordinary speech,” she writes, “as we noticed, to say that somebody has a certain right is a moral judgment; it means that something should be done about it, we ought to consider him. This implication is very strong and natural. Accordingly, to say that ‘animals do not have rights’ does not sound like a remark about the meaning of the word rights but one about animals—namely, the remark that one need not really consider them.” Rather than use such terms that are only reflective of faulty concepts, Midgley advises that 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 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.” Ultimately, when rights are stressed, it becomes entangled with vague concepts such as equality, which also overlooks animals and other important groups.

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74 Ibid., 63.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 64.
Midgley sees serious philosophical discussions about animals as recent trends spurred by the public exposure to animals in books and films, especially in the areas of human-animal likeness and the exposure the brutality of factory farming. In turn, much like the liberation movements of the 1960s, public awareness and concern about issues of natural rights and equality arose in the face of these stimuli. However, conceptions of equality are limited in scope and based in a history laden with rights and contract thinking, leading her to declare that “it may well be sensible to halt them for interpretation and replacement long before they reach the species-barrier.”

Much like rationalist terms such as justice, rights, and duty, Midgley’s position is that equality is not beneficial to animals in moral deliberation and must be replaced with more holistic and relational conceptions such as the mixed community.

According to Midgley, equality is most useful within groups, such as the ancient Athenians and Romans, and especially among the more privileged members of society: “The notion of equality is a tool for rectifying injustices within a group, not for widening that group or deciding how it ought to treat those outside it.”

This view and its corresponding egoism are similar in foundation to social contract thinking, and she looks at the two most prominent figures in this realm of political theory, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Hobbes’s contract is more extreme and reductionist due to the prevalence of wide-scale violence in the seventeenth-century, which led to “a simple, sweeping version of contract theory, aimed at getting rid of all those numerous

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77 Ibid., 67.
78 Ibid.
aspects of morality which he thought led to general destruction, and particularly self-
destruction. He took the original respect in which people were equal, \( x \), to be simply the
power to kill….For Hobbes, obligation simply is the fear of danger to one’s life if a
regulation is neglected.”¹⁷⁹

Later, other notions of the contract arose during more peaceful times as political
theorists realized that “people expect and owe to each other much more than life and
means to life—certainly more than not-killing—and also much more than justice, even if
justice is given a wider and more natural definition than Hobbes gives it.”¹⁸⁰ Simplistic
versions of the social contract do not reflect the complexity and peculiarities of human
behavior in their reductive formulas, and Midgley points out that humans are “much less
interested in just surviving than Hobbes suggested, less prudent, less clever, less far-
sighted, less single-minded, and much more interested in having the sort of life which
they think satisfactory while they do survive.”¹⁸¹

A more multifaceted contract approach that reflects this shift away from “the
outer darkness” stance of Hobbes can be found in Rousseau. Rather than envisioning
people as equal threats, he sees them as equally seeking independence in an effort to
return to a more peaceful state of nature, which “means simply that people—as they are
now—are potentially autonomous, capable of free choice, wanting it and needing to
have a say in their own destiny…‘man is born free’ means that people…are true
individuals who can live alone, and can therefore stand aside from it and criticize it.”¹⁸²

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¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 68.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.
¹⁸¹ Ibid.
¹⁸² Ibid.
However, Midgley contextualizes this contract thinking, noting that it is helpful for ousting unwanted rulers and initiating self-rule, but that it also excessively weighs down our notions of equality. She highlights how this relates to the “Paradox of One-Way Equality,” which is when “inequalities above one’s own level tend to be visible; those below it to be hidden.” As examples of this paradox she cites the imbalanced relationship between Black Power leaders and women, early women’s rights leaders and female servants, and the signers of U.S. Declaration of Independence and slaves. These groups overlooked and even perpetuated correlated injustices in their pursuit of “equality” for themselves. For Midgley, the shortcomings of equality, loaded with contract thinking and limited by its scope, seem to preempt any real extension of moral concern to animals.

The notion of equality is further distorted in a number of ways, especially in the historically related “problems” of women, slaves, race, and animals. Midgley notes that theorists who make great strides for equality in a particular group—usually men—put little thought into these other groups or, as in the case of Rousseau, present confounding and contradictory positions in relation to their well-reasoned thought in other areas. Midgley lambasts how Rousseau seems to turn into his opponents when he addresses women “in the tones of exactly that pig-ignorant old pillar of crusted prejudice whose arguments he so rightly exposed in the Social Contract.” Though he first describes women alongside men in an equally independent state of nature, he quickly relegates them to a life of passive submission, blissful ignorance, and trite vanity.

83 Ibid., 72.
84 Ibid., 74.
while being excluded from the social contract rights of men. Further, as evidence of the lack of extension of equality beyond a specific group (in this case male slaves), “a few pages later, he repeats almost verbatim parts of the libertarian manifesto of the *Contrat Social*, with its red-hot denunciation of slavery, and its promise that ‘every man in obeying the sovereign only obeys himself.’”\(^85\) For Midgley, contract thinking and egalitarianism are so loaded with contradictions and injustices at their core that they are impossible to extend to animals.

Midgley argues that this tension in Rousseau and others illustrates the pathology of egalitarianism (or the “emotional temptations infesting the subject”) and the difficulties associated with notions of equality. In Rousseau’s case, his strange life story and the “terror of more formidable ladies” certainly shaped his attitudes and the ambivalence of his egalitarianism. Rousseau was strangely dependent on others throughout his life, first as an orphan and servant and later under the support of patrons and especially patronesses, which intermixed with (and likely led to) his self-will and desire for independence. Midgley argues that this contributes to the wider tendency in Rousseau and others to not fully think through a topic because of personal reasons, sloppily presenting inconsistent and ill-conceived arguments that contradict the very equality they seek due to the ambivalences and neuroses of the “egalitarians” themselves.

Midgley insists that the irrational fear and resentment of women and other races are analogous to the animal question in this way: “Anyone who thinks it quite obvious that equality extends to, and stops exactly at, the species barrier should read the

\(^85\) Ibid., 76.
literature of women’s emancipation as well as that of colonialism.” This supposedly
self-evident line between what is and is not worthy of equality is further accentuated by
the symbolic meaning of women and animals because “the fear of women is a fear of
the impulses they arouse and the forces they stand for.” This, Midgley notes, is of
course in addition to the real and important political implications of extending privilege
and equality, which means relinquishing power.

Likewise animals are more symbol than reality at times, exposing the underlying
pathologies of their oppressors and creating a dual-symbolism that oscillates between
sinister and idealized, savage and sacred. This wide range of symbolism, from evil
beast to idyllic barnyard animal, can muddle the practical realism of animals in the
mixed community. Midgley writes, “Unless such pictures are brought together with their
contraries and with the facts, to form a more realistic whole, they only contribute to the
general confusion.” To further complicate the issue, as with all symbols, animal
symbolism can be adapted and changed to fit a number of cases and purposes. “Since
one cannot stop an animal being an animal,” she points out, “it seems to mean that we
will change the symbolism, thereby blinding ourselves to the independent
consciousness of the creature and changing our sentiments.”

Midgley then returns to the conceptual difficulties within notions of equality. Her
point is that equality is a tool that is most useful for particular purposes for particular

86 Ibid., 77.
87 Ibid., 78.
88 Ibid., 79.
89 Ibid., 80. For example, certain research veterinarians have referred to animals as “standardized
biological research tools,” changing the terms used in the debate in order to deflect from the real subject.
groups of people, usually the privileged, and that using equality in the general sense is not very effective. Its power lies in its ability to be limited to specific groups aiming upward. Even when it is used in a general sense, it is still focused on the needs of a specific group that must be delineated off from others in order to gain the desired reward. Equality is a flexible tool in that it can be utilized for a number of groups, but Midgley states that “the notion is rigid, on the other hand, in absolutely implying a frontier. It allows of no degrees. Unlike the older ideas of charity, hierarchy, fatherhood, and chain of being, it has no place for relations to subordinate creatures. Thus, from the rights of man women are simply excluded by definition because they are not men.”

Likewise, “animals are flatly excluded from human rights, often just by definition of the term human. Those who notice that this is arbitrary often replace the term human by another, apparently more intelligible one, such as reason or self-consciousness.” As a result, animals, much like women or other oppressed groups, often become the “unnoticed background” in the efforts of the privileged to seek equality. Thus, in discussions of equality, animals are often placed under and against those pursuing equality in showing how the subjects of oppression are being “treated like animals,” the ultimate insult to human dignity, but “there is no argument leading from the fact that this is wrong treatment for humans to the proposition that it is right treatment for animals.” In the end, Midgley holds that equality can be useful for certain human groups, but has been harmful for animals and would not likely be helpful since “notions like equality,

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90 Ibid., 82.
91 Ibid., 82-83.
92 Ibid., 83.
rights and even justice tend to imprison our attention in the area which has now become familiar. “

Midgley believes it is important to reiterate the tenuous relationship of notions of equality with contract thinking. She delves more deeply in to her critique of the social contract, laying out two ways that the myth can be understood: the existing law and customs, or the unspoken agreement that underlies these laws and customs. The contract is further composed of two elements, reciprocity and speech, which are troublesome when it comes to equality. The first element, reciprocity is “the model of a literal, commercial contract—an agreement made between fully responsible, rational agents, solely to promote their mutual advantage.” Again, this is useful for ousting unlawful rulers, but cannot extend to all morally considerable subjects since many, such as children and animals, are unable to enter into these relationships in the sense required of the contract. Midgley is critical of any conceptions of relationships that are founded on legalist and rationalist ideas of morality and thus diminish the true relationality of the subjects involved, especially in the mixed community.

The second element, speech, is the means by which Hobbes’ contract is verified and maintained. He likewise uses this to disregard animals because they cannot verbalize their agreement with the contract. However, Midgley is quick to notice that speech is really a secondary feature in Hobbes’ contract because the tacit agreement and trust that underlies the contract is often unspoken and hidden. Further, speech can be used to cover up treacherous plans and schemes while at the same time

93 Ibid.
94 Ibid., 84.
disingenuously affirming the contract—in other words, people lie, and speech is not always the most trustworthy component of human interaction.

Midgley maintains that, in spite of Hobbes’s attempts to elevate speech, animals cannot even be completely excluded from the contract in its own terms: “What Hobbes means by ‘covenant’ (which is his word for contract) has actually nothing to do with words at all. It is the tacit trust and good-will which subjects pay to their accepted rulers, and Hobbes is merely insisting that they have good reason to pay it.”\(^95\) She relates this to examples of bonds within the mixed community: “Nothing that he says shows that this friendly trust differs in kind from that which unites sheep-dog and shepherd, or guide-dog and blind owner, nor from that between subordinate wolves and their leader. It is not produced only by danger, but is simply one aspect of the general trust and good-will which people, no less than wolves, naturally pay to those around them.”\(^96\) She then reiterates that “this basic trust cannot depend on language, since it is found in quite small babies, both towards their elders and toward each other, and between people who do not speak, or even do not know each other’s language.”\(^97\)

This leads Midgley to reassert her position that claims about language that exclude animals from moral concern are overstated: “These take fully articulate language—and, for choice, correctly printed language asserting propositions at that—as the norm of human communication. They are not much interested in exclamation, commands, slang, and casual chatter, and treat non-verbal communication as a

\(^95\) Ibid., 87.
\(^96\) Ibid.
\(^97\) Ibid.
negligible island of occasional exceptions in a sea of print.”\textsuperscript{98} Much like Temple Grandin and others have argued, Midgley draws out the importance of non-verbal communication and thought:

But a glance round shows the error of proportion. The sea of print—so overwhelming when one is afloat on it—is actually just a lake, surrounded by a vast hinterland of non-verbal communication. To look at it another way, what matters about people cannot be merely their ability to speak articulately. It must be what speech reveals, and what makes speech possible. Mere not speaking cannot therefore be enough to rule animals out of consideration.\textsuperscript{99}

Therefore, in the same way that babies or those who cannot speak or rationally think enter the contract, the “absence of agreement with animals cannot, even if it is real, give ground for absolute dismissal.”\textsuperscript{100} Contract thinking, Midgley concludes, along with notions of equality, ultimately limit and exclude more than they allow by championing the claims of certain groups while marginalizing or overlooking others, such as animals or women. Most significantly, it also overlooks the communication and bonds that are implicitly formed between members of the mixed community.

**Sentience, Claims, and Interests in the Mixed Community**

Midgley next looks at conceptions of equality and morality that actually seek to extend the moral boundary past the species barrier to the sentience barrier. Her primary example is the Utilitarianism initiated by Jeremy Bentham (and later Peter Singer) and the idea of shifting what is morally significant from the realm of human qualities such as reason or language to the capacity to suffer. She frames this discussion by quoting

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 113.


\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
Bentham’s famous line: “The question is not, Can they reason? nor Can they talk? but Can they suffer?”

She draws attention to two mistaken assumptions that can be made in viewing morality at the level of sentience. The first is the misconception “that the interests of all conscious beings would now have equal weight, leaving us with no way of choosing between the suffering of humans and locusts or dogs and tapeworms.” Rather, the capacity for suffering and pleasure, which increases with the complexity of the nervous system, is the priority system. The second misconception is “that, if concern extends to the boundary of sentience, it must necessarily stop there, making it impossible for us to care for such things as trees and forests, grasses, rivers and mountains.” Sentience, rather, leads to different kinds of needs and duties than ecological ones, analogous to membership in the mixed community.

Here Midgley significantly distinguishes social and ecological claims—social claims are those dealing with other conscious beings and the responses they invoke while ecological ones are those dealing with habitats and systems and the responses they invoke. She does not think that these claims are as much in conflict as some have made them out to be, mainly because the duties required by social and ecological claims are generally distinct and rarely in conflict. However, there are often serious conflicts. “This clash is,” she writes, “however, no more surprising than other clashes between different sorts of moral claims, and we have to deal with it in the same way,

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101 Ibid., 89, Midgley cites Jeremy Bentham, Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789), Ch. 17.
102 Ibid., 90.
103 Ibid.
namely, by working out the best system of priorities that we can manage, and not going out of our way to intensify them.\textsuperscript{104} Further, “we perceive and respond to consciousness in others in a special way. But as beings forming a small part of the fauna of this planet, we also exist in relation to that whole, and its fate cannot be a matter of moral indifference to us.”\textsuperscript{105}

Midgley argues that sentience draws special social claims in beings that have experiences and feelings much like our own, which implies sufficient enough shared reality to encourage the Golden Rule, to treat others as you wish them to treat you, which is a vital assumption of the mixed community. Forests draw differing ecological needs in that they do not involve this same level of shared experiences, though social and ecological claims may be very similar at times. She explains, “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.”\textsuperscript{106} In this, there is not necessarily a sharp distinction between social and ecological claims, or, between the mixed and ecological communities. 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.

Continuing on with Utilitarianism, Midgley highlights how “interests,” much like rationalist terms such as “rights” and “equality,” can lead to some confusion because “the word interest, like duty and right, is somewhat ambiguous, being fixed for some

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\item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 91.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
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purposes into legal formulations, and extended for others quite widely to miscellaneous cases.” She points out how Singer uses a more precise meaning of “interest” in how a conscious being “can mind what happens to it, which prefers some things to others, which can be pleased or pained, can suffer or enjoy.”107 The effort here is to, at a minimum, show that the Golden Rule can and should be applicable in the case of sentience and that there must be significant reasons for ignoring it. This, together with the Utilitarian principle of each counting for one and one alone, form a “safeguard which follows from being recognized as an independent centre of consciousness—as a being with its own interests, which must not be overlooked.”108

Midgley does not dismiss the Utilitarian effort to expand morality to animals, and she highlights its historical accomplishments: “The rise and success of Utilitarianism seems to be due to its having made a determined attempt, however clumsy, to challenge the philosophic tradition’s over-emphasis on intellect, and balance it by some attention to feeling.”109 However, though it has made great strides in animal welfare, she underscores that “philosophers have driven large vehicles through various gaps in Utilitarian argument, the most important of which from the practical standpoint is the narrowness imposed by its original hedonistic framework. Pain and pleasure are indeed very important for certain purposes, but they cannot possibly be the only things that matter in life.”110 Though she acknowledges these criticisms and the “general sense of unreality” in Singer, she thinks that he generally portrays the more nuanced and

107 Ibid., 92.
108 Ibid., 94.
109 Ibid., 95.
110 Ibid., 96.
beneficial side of Utilitarianism: "His suggestion about the importance of sentience rather than species seems well in tune with that humane, non-dogmatic and far from crazy core of Utilitarianism, the intelligent extension of sympathy, which has become part of our ordinary morality, and has done much to correct brutalities (such as widespread capital punishment) long tolerated, for various reasons, by both Christianity and rationalism."¹¹¹ An understanding of sentience, consciousness, and suffering are certainly aspects of Utilitarianism to be retained as vital to an understanding of animals as part of the mixed community. Midgley’s primary quarrel with Singer is rather in his charge of human speciesism against animals, which she criticizes in initiating the mixed community section of the book.

**Animals Matter**

Midgley acknowledges that she deals primarily with the negative, or what barriers need to be removed, in approaching the animal question in *Animals and Why They Matter*. She questions what happens when the barriers are removed and something more positive is left to be said and done about ethics in this realm. She recognizes two oppositional views on how to approach morality when the barriers are cleared: either (1) minimalism or (2) a position of openness characteristic of poets, scientists, and children.

Minimalism is related to the Principle of Parsimony and seeks “to examine every candidate for our attention sharply, and to consider everything worthless which has not been positively proved to be to our advantage.”¹¹² Minimalism is difficult to maintain even within the species barrier and is characterized by an atomistic view of humans and

¹¹¹ Ibid.
¹¹² Ibid., 144.
morality, as exemplified in contract thinking. It has its place in cutting through cumbersome traditions and structures that often hinder morality, but it also has the disadvantage of also casting off the great value that can also come from these traditions and structures, especially in case of religion and nature. She expands on these traditions: “Among them has been that sense of wonder, of awe at the vastness of Nature, and of humility at our own dependent and insignificant place in it, which we need if we are to function realistically as part of the biosphere where we belong.”

Midgley challenges that morality need be minimalist as we have many perspectives on seeing the world—for example, religious perspectives—at our disposal that allow our knowledge and value to cover many areas. She believes that, along with moral thinking, science can also be a conduit to seeing what can be of value, especially in relation to animals: “Science is not just an intellectual game, carried on among a set of human players. It is a genuine attempt to explore the universe. Among the parts of that universe which are within our reach, the other animal species which share our planet with us are a most significant party.” She continues, “They are not just there as a convenience for us, neither are they just an oppressed minority in human life. They are the group to which we belong. We are a small minority of them. It seems reasonable to suggest that we ought to take them seriously.”

This morality channeled through scientific understanding is important to all aspects of life in our ecosystems, and those with certain mindsets of openness can oppose minimalism. She expands on how poets, scientists, and children can help us in

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113 Ibid., 145.
114 Ibid.
viewing social and ecological claims: “When some portion of the biosphere is rather unpopular with the human race—a crocodile, a dandelion, a stony valley, a snowstorm, an odd-shaped flint—there are three sorts of human beings who are particularly likely to see point in it and befriend it. They are poets, scientists and children. Inside each of us, I suggest, representatives of all these groups may be found.” Midgley’s implores us to look within ourselves to these ways of seeing the world. She encourages us to resist the traditions that cast aside animals by claiming that they cannot really matter. To say that they do not matter is an affront to our community, the human and animal mixed community.

The Foundations of the Mixed Community

Mary Midgley’s concept of a historical and co-evolutionary human-animal mixed community rests on a rigorous foundation and framework that is characterized by a critique of morality, both within animal ethics and rationalist morality more broadly conceived. She affirms and continues to construct elements of the mixed community, such as subjectivity, relationality, consciousness, community, and sociality while systematically dismantling the major historical and contemporary obstacles to theoretical and practical progress on the animal question: unhelpful concepts such as rights, duties, equality, the dualism between reason and emotion, misconceptions of the limits of human morality and community, and others.

The ideas, concepts, and features in this chapter represent her clearing the foundation for the construction of the mixed community as delineated in the mixed community section of Animals and Why They Matter. This foundational framework not

115 Ibid.
only supports the mixed community, but is ultimately part of the concept of the mixed community. Moreover, these critiques, ideas, and elements reflect the broader scope of Midgley’s work on human nature and ethics throughout the period that *Animals and Why They Matter* was written. Thus, the mixed community is nestled within a wider constellation of ideas and themes that all contribute to Midgley’s most pressing interests and concerns: the unity of human nature and morality in relation to animals, the natural world, and science. The next chapter will contextualize the mixed community within Midgley’s work while detailing the themes and ideas that directly support her important concept of the mixed community.
Thus far, I have analyzed and interpreted Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community on two levels. The first level is in the core elements of the mixed community, most directly in the human ability to sympathize with and understand the subjectivity of animals, which is grounded in a common historical and evolutionary kinship and background that makes human-animal relationality and community possible, natural, and morally significant. The second level is the foundation and framework for the mixed community that is found throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*, which primarily consists of a systematic criticism of the barriers to animals ethics—both within animal ethics and wider ethical theory—as well as reiterations of the core elements of the mixed community. Both the core elements and the foundational framework come together to illustrate her overarching constructive concept of the mixed community.

This chapter examines the meaning and message of the mixed community by delving into Midgley’s wider works during the period in which *Animals and Why They Matter* was written from 1979 to 1985. Under the broad theoretical emphases of human nature, morality, and science, Midgley consistently presents ideas on these areas that directly support her concept of the mixed community and contextualize it within the larger structure of her thought. In this chapter I do not simply summarize these works, but present them through a fresh reading in the perspective of the mixed community, illustrating their salient features that are supportive of the mixed community such as the unity of human nature, the role of science, humans as animals, and social and ecological claims among others. This is valuable not only for understanding and contextualizing the mixed community, but also for drawing out the wider importance and
significance of Mary Midgley by addressing some of the most significant ideas and concepts in the traditions of philosophy and religious studies. In this, I bring together a number of Midgley’s most noteworthy concepts and ideas, illustrating how the mixed community is supported by and situated in the wider scope and unity of her work.

**Beast and Man: “We Are Animals”**

Midgley opens *Beast and Man* with her famous and oft-quoted line: “We are not just rather like animals; we are animals.”¹ This is the main thrust of this voluminous and influential work, a book that is situated within the long-standing debate on the essence of human nature—the controversial topic of whether humans are determined by nature or nurture, biological or social causes. At stake in this debate is not only the special place of humans in relation to nature, but also how to study and think about them. Midgley summarizes the debate, noting how “people have been strangely determined to take genetic and social explanations as alternatives instead of using them to complete each other.”²

Midgley’s answer to “nature or nurture?” is a resounding “Both!” This is not only because, in the broadest sense, society is a product of nature, but because human nature is simultaneously and complementarily shaped by both of these forces, which results in a range of instincts and behaviors that come together in myriad ways to constitute human nature. And since, as Midgley writes, we are animals, we should understand ourselves as firmly embedded in a social and natural context that is unique to our species, which is one species among many. And since animals are not machines

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¹ Midgley, *Beast and Man*, xxxiii.

² Ibid., xxxviii.
but quite like us, comparing humans and other animals can be a helpful way to understand our nature. “Man has his own nature,” she stresses, “not that of any other species. He cannot, therefore, be degraded by comparison, if it is careful and honest, because it will bring out his peculiarities, it will show what is unique about him as well as what is not.”

Beast and Man then seeks to understand what it means to be an animal in a world full of other animals, shedding light on and supporting some of the core and foundational elements of the mixed community.

**Nature and Nurture: Human Nature and Biology**

Understanding human nature for Midgley means first asking the question “have we a nature?” This question is answered by some by saying that we certainly have a biological nature that can be examined and critically compared with other animals, since we indeed are animals. In this perspective, human behavior can be explained in terms of instincts and motives that drive our thoughts and actions. On the other side, some say that humans are essentially born with a clean slate, that each person is a “Blank Paper,” and that all behavior is summarily impressed upon humans through social means. She roots blank paper theory in John Locke and more recently John Watson and his ideas of behaviorism, which say that we are born without knowledge or instincts, so all knowledge and behavior is impressed upon us after birth by social forces.

In the blank paper perspective, since humans are infinitely malleable and posses a unique “nature,” comparison with other animals is irrelevant and even demeaning. This is roughly a result of existentialist and libertarian thinking that strives to protect

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3 Ibid., xxxvii.

4 Midgley’s dedication reads: “TO MY SONS, with many thanks for making it so clear to me that the human infant is not blank paper.”
human freedom in the most extreme regards, so much so that placing any biological restrictions on humans eliminates freedom—this is the fear of fatalism. Further, there is a strong resistance to the injustices that have been wrought on humanity in the name of biology, which strike fear of oppression into the minds of many who think of eugenics and racial supremacy among other fanatical distortions of science. While these are legitimate concerns, Midgley writes that, regarding the fear of fatalism, what is needed is a better, more rounded and complex explanation of human nature that does not trumpet fatalistic and pessimistic accounts of biological determinism. Moreover, biological determinism is confused with fatalism, which she emphasizes it is not, since everything including culture stems from biology. Humans can only attain the freedom that many seek by fulfilling a particular nature specific to their species, otherwise there is nothing to attain in the pursuit of freedom. For Midgley, the fear of biology stems from distortions and misuses of science, not from science itself, and what is rather needed is a better, more reflective science, not the avoidance of it.

In light of these misconceptions and confusions over human nature and how to approach it, Midgley emphasizes that we need better concepts for describing human nature. It makes much sense to her that, since we are animals, the methods that are used to study and explain other animals may at least have some, and most likely plenty, of relevance to understanding human nature. This is not accomplished by reducing human motives to one driving force such as sex or power, but rather by looking at a whole range of motives and behaviors and understanding how they interact to comprise human nature. Only then can we begin to weigh and prioritize a system of values that takes into account social and ecological claims.
Midgley points out that we have discovered much about animals that sheds light on a more structured and less chaotic and dark understanding of animal life. Through the developments of ethology, “there follow various changes in our view of man, because that view has been built up on a supposed contrast between man and animals which was formed by seeing animals not as they were, but as projections of our own fears and desires.”  

Midgley points out how actual wolves are very different from the human portrayal of wolves. Though they are often depicted as brutish villains, they have a complex and familiar social system, composed of a number of structured behaviors that we admire (pair-bonding, loyalty, parental care): “Actual wolves, then, are not much like the folk-figure of the wolf, and the same is true for apes and other creatures. But it is the folk-figure that has been popular with philosophers. They have usually taken over the popular notion of lawless cruelty which underlies such terms as ‘brutal,’ ‘bestial,’ ‘beastly,’ ‘animal desires,’ and so on, and have used it, uncriticized, as a contrast to illuminate the nature of man.” She concludes, “Man has been mapped by reference to a landmark that is largely mythical.”

Midgley relates this animal symbolism to the “problem of evil” in humans, and its projection onto animal scapegoats: “Man has always been unwilling to admit his own ferocity, and has tried to deflect attention from it by making animals out to be more ferocious than they are.” This not only distorts animals, but serves as an obstacle to pursuing effective human-animal comparisons. Animals, in turn, are more often viewed symbolically, mostly negatively but at times positively, which typifies and idealizes

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5 Ibid., 24.
6 Ibid., 26.
7 Ibid., 30.
certain aspects of animal nature by distorting our view of the whole animal. Excessive positive or negative symbolism generally distracts from the subjectivity of the particular members in the mixed community.

With this awareness, Midgley argues that we can discover much about our commonalities and differences with animals and draw more attention to natural explanations and understandings of ourselves because of our shared evolutionary heritage in the mixed community. This is not to say that all explanations of humans must come from biology rather than from culture. Quite the contrary—biology helps us to understand culture as part of our nature: “We are naturally culture-building animals. But what we build into our cultures has to satisfy our natural patterns of motives.”\textsuperscript{8} Thus culture is natural and a fulfillment of certain aspects of human biological needs. Efforts to grossly separate the two as either/or explanations miss the fact that they are complementary aspects of human nature. She writes that “culture is natural,” and that it “has to come from somewhere, and there is no supernatural being called Society to impose it. Society is past and present people. And they do have natural motives for inventing the customs they do invent.”\textsuperscript{9} Summarizing the relationship between nature and culture, Midgley advocates an integrated and unified understanding of human nature: “He [man] comes half-finished. Man is innately programmed in such a way that he needs a culture to complete him. Culture is not an alternative or replacement for instinct, but its outgrowth and supplement.”\textsuperscript{10} She stresses a balance and unity in understanding human beings, and this must rest on the awareness that society is not an

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 28.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 274.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
alternative to biology but a requirement of it. Moreover, she reminds us that society is “not peculiar to humans.” This is especially significant because humans, as culture building animals, have the ability in the mixed community to integrate a wide variety of species into their lives.

In a more specific look at the biological roots of human nature, Midgley discusses her influential ideas of “open” and “closed” instincts in *Beast and Man*. In her scheme, an instinct can be thought of as a disposition or “set of causal properties.” “Closed instincts” are then seen as “behavior patterns fixed genetically in every detail, like the bees’ honey dance, some birdsong, and the nest-building pattern of weaver birds.”  

These instincts are universal and are displayed in animals raised in isolation from any social conditioning. In this sense, “genetic programming takes the pace of intelligence; learning is just maturation.” “Open instincts,” Midgley writes, “are programs with a gap. Parts of the behavior pattern are innately determined, but others are left to be filled in by experience,” such as the hunting patterns of cats. Here instincts leave a “gap” for experience, and is what many think of as social imprinting. These tendencies for certain behavior exhibit a range, “and the more complex, the more intelligent creatures become, the more they are programmed in this general way, rather than in full detail.”

For Midgley, most instincts can then be understood in the open or closed sense, and the particular ways in which these instincts come together and interact constitute the foundations of particular behaviors. Instincts such as aggression can be understood

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11 Ibid., 51.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
in this sense as innate tendencies that can, if strong enough and combined with other influences, result in violent outcomes; humans are not naturally aggressive, but rather they have the potential to be aggressive along with a number of other instincts. Open and closed instincts, however, are not easily compartmentalized, but “are extremes of a scale with many grades between.”¹⁵ Midgley reiterates that most objections to biological explanations of human nature have to do with closed instincts. Indeed, to say that humans are constituted completely by closed instincts would warrant the claim of reductionism. However, human nature is more complex than this and is mutually shaped by both biological and social forces through open and closed instincts. She summarizes the nature of any species as “a certain range of powers and tendencies, a repertoire, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern, though conditions after birth may vary the details quite a lot.”¹⁶ Understood in this manner, humans are placed alongside animals in sharing similar evolutionary roots for behavior in the mixed community.

**Science and the Study of Human Nature**

For Midgley, understanding this range of instincts and dispositions is then both a theoretical and an empirical issue, since they are displayed and varied in numerous instances and manifestations. In this way ethology, in studying particular behavior in particular settings, can be a model for understanding human behavior in a more effective manner than sociobiologists or behaviorists. She characterizes the ethologist as identifying what human (or other animal) nature consists of, not what it is. Midgley

¹⁵ Ibid., 53.
¹⁶ Ibid., 56.
paints a picture of the study and understanding of human nature as a complex and diversified art: “By an art I mean a set of skills, which can to some extent be handed down, but which depend much on individual power, insight, practice, and personality. They do not reduce to any set of basic laws, (though of course they include skill in understanding relevant scientific laws) or to any single basic method.” She continues, “Science cannot be defined by contrasting it with art. Practicing any science properly is an art. When we use the word *scientific* as an important compliment, we mean ‘what increases our understanding of the world.’”

Midgley’s approach to science takes into account a number of perspectives in a critical and self-reflective manner, and is in opposition to dogmatic and complacent forms of the discipline. In turn, a wider range of explanations are then possible for understanding humans and our world: “To become obsessed with a method for its own sake and try to use it where it is unsuitable is thoroughly unscientific. And the purpose of all *explanation* must be, ultimately, to illuminate the chaotic world with which we are actually surrounded. That is what we have to explain.” Correlated to a better understanding and explanation of humans in nature is our evolutionary history and kinship with other animals in the mixed community, something that it often abstracted or downplayed by certain explanations of human nature.

Midgley pushes for this broader understanding of science in the face of two dogmatic positions: physicalism and behaviorism. These positions hold to “the notion that motives must not be examined and explained as *motives*, but always reduced to

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17 Ibid., 84.
18 Ibid., 100.
something else.”¹⁹ For the physicalist, it is brain movements, and for the behaviorist it is outward movements, or behavior. Each of these distorts what it is describing in the extreme—physicalists only explain phenomenon in terms of inner processes while behaviorists only explain phenomenon in terms of outer processes, breaching Midgley’s admonitions against monolithic explanations of human nature and standing as barriers to the mixed community. She especially focuses on the behaviorist idea that we cannot know anything about the inner subjective states of humans or other animals. In this, they criticize talk of subjective states as unscientific. She writes, however, that “this is a confusion. It is not unscientific to talk about feelings. What is unscientific is being unduly influenced by them.”²⁰ She criticizes the idea that speaking about the subjective states of animals is anthropomorphizing, which she fights as a barrier to the mixed community: “In discussing the central importance of motives, I shall make no special distinction between man and other species, because I think the problem is the same for both. There is nothing anthropomorphic in speaking of the motivation of animals.” She continues, “It is anthropomorphic to call the lion the King of Beasts, but not to talk of him as moved, now by fear, now by curiosity, now by territorial anger. These are not the names of hypothetical inner states, but of major patterns in anyone’s life, the signs of which are regular and visible.”²¹

Midgley is critical of approaches that focus solely on the outward aspects of behavior, such as laughter, because they overlook the complex underlying subjective states and motives that initiate laughter in the first place and threaten what we can know

¹⁹ Ibid., 101.
²⁰ Ibid., 102.
²¹ Ibid.
about other animals in the mixed community. She reiterates that “there would certainly be trouble if we were forced to choose between describing outer actions and inner experience—if we could not have both. But we do have both. People have insides as well as outsides; they are subjects as well as objects. And the two aspects operate together. We need views on both to make sense of either. And, normally, both are included in all descriptions of behavior.” This is the case not only for humans, but for other animals as well, and is crucial in understanding either. This ability for humans to understand and sympathize with the inner subjective states of animals is a core element of the mixed community, and Midgley devotes a large part of the mixed community section of *Animals and Why They Matter* to defending it.

**Evolutionary Values and Claims**

Throughout *Beast and Man*, as in all of her work, Midgley is concerned with the implications of evolutionary theory and how this relates to the traditional ideas of human exceptionalism, a major obstacle to the mixed community. This relates not only to religious and rationalist traditions that attribute quasi-divine status to humans, but also to evolutionary accounts of human supremacy, which result from ideological distortions of science and values. She criticizes the concept of “up and down,” that there is an evolutionary ladder that humans are ascending “up” while leaving lesser animals “down” the ladder. This is based on the distortion of evolutionary theory that posits an intention in evolution, an aim that is primarily inclined toward selecting intelligence, specifically human intelligence. The ladder distortion is not only contrary to the theoretical foundations of natural selection, but is also evidenced in some of the most readily

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22 Ibid., 108.
observable outcomes of natural selection. She highlights that “the relations between survival and the qualities that we find admirable are far more complex” than we realize if we are looking for distinctive human qualities in evolutionary selection.\textsuperscript{23} For example, if we mistakenly look at natural selection as an evolutionary ladder with “higher” and “lower” beings, we will likely find that “man is not the supreme survivor,” that “not all nonsurvivors have been evidently ‘low,’” and that the “supreme survivors can be very ‘low’ indeed.”\textsuperscript{24}

Midgley argues that recent manifestations of the evolutionary ladder have continued the religious and philosophical privileging of human hierarchy: “They did not scrap the Great Chain of Being. Instead, they simply unhooked the top end from Heaven and slung it ahead into the Future. Its axis now was time. But its associations with value did not vanish.”\textsuperscript{25} Evolution was originally seen to run counter to the values of human supremacy in the religious sense. In the religious position, humans were created by God above the animals, and evolution seemingly denigrated this special position. However, once the religious position slackened its hold in science, Midgley believes, religious values then shifted onto science. Therefore, scientific valuing of humanity and human privilege took the place of religion in elevating humans with evolutionary theory—or rather, distortions of evolutionary theory—which it was once thought to denigrate. Midgley insists that this all relates to values: whether implicitly or explicitly, evolution in turn “has always carried some sort of assumptions about values.”\textsuperscript{26} This is

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\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 146.
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\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 147.
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\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 152.
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\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 149.
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important to Midgley because evolution and its corresponding values represent a large portion of her foundation for the mixed community concept.

Midgley highlights how valuing human intelligence or competitive society reflects strongly in distorted portrayals of evolutionary theory in Social Darwinism and other ideologically driven positions. These distortions not only fail to understand the mechanism of natural selection in relation to values, but also that our sources of value overlap with those of other species in the evolutionary sense of the mixed community. “We did not,” Midgley writes in a popular line, “personally and unassisted, invent every aspect of humanity. Much of it is drawn from a common source, and overlaps with dolphinity, beaverishness, and wolfhood.” At this point, she stresses Darwin’s metaphor of an evolutionary bush rather than a tree or ladder in understanding life and value:

First, it allows for the branches’ diverging. Second, since they all still grown on a common stock, it emphasizes their connection, their mutual dependence, their relevance to one another. Third, it shows up well the central fallacy of evolutionary ethics, which is to treat evolution as a straight progress in a single direction, and to imagine that, having quickly found the road, all we need to do is drive along it as fast as possible. Branches diverge and can curve to and fro quite sharply. And even the straightest branch must stop somewhere, or it will break.

Midgley relates this back to the concept of “man as measure,” the mistaken idea that natural value is found in certain human qualities. This undergirds extensionist animal ethics, a position that seeks to isolate human characteristics in other animals in order to extend rights to them because of their similarities to us. This, she claims, actually perpetuates our perceived superiority among other animals: “If man wants to set up a

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27 Ibid., 153.
28 Ibid., 154.
contest in resembling himself and award himself the prize, no one will quarrel with him.

But what does this mean? All he can do by these roundabout methods is perhaps to
assert a value-judgment about what matters most in human life.”29 Value in the mixed
community is rather relational and holistic in a prioritized and weighted system, not an
extension of rationalist morality.

Midgley underscores that, whether in relation to other people, other species, or the
biosphere, values must be seen in a more interrelated and holistic sense. This wider
understanding of ethics understands value as embedded in the context of life, not in an
abstract world of ideals. However, there is no simple system for distinguishing and
evaluating claims. She states that they must be seen in how they fit into the whole
picture and context of human and nonhuman life. Midgley stresses prioritizing in value
judgments, which comes through the complex interrelations of all values, not one
overriding measure: “We have many sorts of good because we have many wants. Yet
we have to make sense of them all somehow by a scheme of priorities. We get nowhere
by ignoring their complexity or by pretending to reduce them to one.”30 Here values
must be understood in their relationship to a system of values and priorities as part of a
wider network or whole, social and ecological: “Man needs to form part of a whole much
greater than himself, one in which other members excel him in innumerable ways. He is
adapted to live in one.”31 This reflects the relational holism of social and ecological
claims in the mixed community

29 Ibid., 157.
30 Ibid., 181.
31 Ibid., 346.
Midgley reiterates that values do not originate in some mystical source, but rather derive from our embeddedness in the natural world, which we share in a mixed species community. This means understanding that we were made for the natural world, not vice versa. “What we need,” she writes, “in order to feel at home in the world, is certainly not a belief that it was made for us. We are at home in this world because we were made for it. We have developed here, on this planet, and are adapted to live here.” A consequence of this is the recognition that, in turn, we share a common evolutionary heritage with all species that have adapted to this planet, which reflects our kinship with and continuity with the animal world and the biosphere. Counter to the position of human exceptionalism, our common evolutionary heritage and embedded nature is what makes a mixed human-animal community possible, natural, and morally significant.

Critique of Rationalist Exceptionalism

Returning to her criticism of the ladder or escalator view of human evolutionary superiority, Midgley works through and dismisses the hierarchical “marks of man” that are repeatedly used to distinguish us from the animals. She emphasizes that the phrase “distinguish man from the animals” has numerous mistakes built into it. First, the question should rather be: “what distinguishes man among the animals?” Second, this question assumes a tangible essence that will be the final answer in severing any continuity between humans and other animals. This essence is a seen as an ultimate, special quality that humans possess outside of all boundaries of animal nature instead of a collection of characteristics that are shared in various ranges throughout the animal world.

32 Ibid., 186.
Midgley notes that there have been plenty of qualities that were meant to have solved this mysterious point of discontinuity within ethical theory: reason, language, culture, self-consciousness, and so on, all of which she sees as barriers to the mixed community. These qualities are seen as frozen points rather than a cluster of dynamic points in a wide spectrum of shared animal traits. Questions of what distinguishes humans from animals are misled and reductive not only toward other animals, but also toward humans themselves: “To expect a single differentia is absurd. And it is not even effectively flattering to the species, since it obscures our truly characteristic richness and versatility.” The better question is to ask what distinguishes humans from “which animals” since we share characteristics with different animals in different ways. If looked at in this manner, traits such as reason and language must be reexamined in their constituent parts, which often underlie various aspects of animal life and behavior.

Regarding the diversity of language and communication, Midgley writes that language is not “a yes-or-no business, a hammer that you are holding or not holding, a single, indivisible, sacred heirloom guaranteeing supremacy.” She expands on this, identifying the various parts of communication that involve not only verbal, but non-verbal forms of interaction. They are, for Midgley, complementary aspects of the same process. This is exhibited in a wide spectrum in other animals, pointing toward physiological differences rather than essential ones. For example, she recounts how the chimpanzee Ameslan seemed to lack the ability to speak not because of lack of intellect, but rather because of a lack of the appropriate physiological connections.

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33 Ibid., 198.
34 Ibid., 217.
between the brain in the larynx that exists in humans. In this, verbal and non-verbal
communication are both intertwined parts of the same process, meaning that animals
possess certain aspects of the human trait we hold so dear. In other words, language,
along with other valued traits, “are not something opposed to our nature, but continuous
with and growing out of it.”35 This is shared to an extent with other animals, making
communication and understanding possible to a certain degree in the mixed community.

For Midgley, language and other traits grow out of a ranged system of instincts
that we share with other animals. We are in turn able to understand other animals
through nonverbal cues and sympathy in the mixed community. Midgley feels that this is
likely proven at the practical and the conceptual levels: “Whether, and how far,
interspecies communication works for feelings and motives is an empirical question. On
the whole, it does. That it does is not surprising given our evolutionary relationship, and
the fact that it could often be quite dangerous to misconstrue the behavior of creatures
outside one’s species, and quite convenient to read it.”36 Recognizing and
understanding these commonalities through the help of scientific study and practical
experience is a major factor in the concept of the mixed community.

In addition to language, reason is an important barrier that is placed between
humans and animals that Midgley wishes to remove. Reason, like language, is manifest
in gradations that range to and fro in human life as well as animal life. “Altogether,” she
writes, “in ordinary speech, ‘having reason’ or ‘being rational’ is not a yes-or-no
business like having a hammer. It is much more like having insight or energy or initiative

35 Ibid., 309.
36 Ibid., 337.
or imagination—things that can be possessed in varying degrees and also in very different forms.” Like communication, reason should not be considered a mystical quality that separates humans from animals, but rather a trait that is shared with other animals to some extent though more developed in humans.

Reason is not only a problematic category for distinguishing what duties we have to animals, but it is also a concept that weighs down moral discourse by insisting that rational faculties are contrasted with emotional sympathies in morality and life—the problem of reason versus emotion. Emotions and passions are associated with animal nature whereas reason is supposedly a faculty that control and subdues our animal natures. Midgely, in an oft-quoted line, combats this: “I want to get away from the essentially colonial picture (used by Blake) in which an imported governor, named Reason, imposes order on a chaotic alien tribe of Passions or Instincts…Instead of being colonial, I want to look at the continuity…I want to consider reason as growing out of and completing a natural balance of parts.” The order of the colonial picture is appealing in a morally difficult and confusing world, but Midgley advises that we should embrace this complexity through a system of priorities and values rather than flatten it out into oversimplified dualities. This forms a more integrated and continuous picture of human nature, as “the structure of feeling demands a corresponding structure of thought to complete it.” Bringing together reason and emotion not only completes the unity of human life and morality, but removes the stigma of the symbolic correlation of

37 Ibid., 205.
38 Ibid., 250.
39 Ibid., 270.
animals with emotions, a dualistic barrier that must be overcome within the mixed community.

**Beast and Man and the Mixed Community**

In *Beast and Man*, Mary Midgley presents her unified understanding of human nature that makes possible and directly supports her later concept of the mixed community. Humans are biological products of nature and culture that have an evolutionary kinship and heritage with other animals. We share a culture-building nature and heritage with other animals, which makes the mixed community possible and natural. As such, we must understand humans as and *alongside* animals in how they are to be studied and theorized through science and ethical theory. Along with other barriers to the mixed community such as language and the duality between reason and emotion, Midgley attacks behaviorist and skeptical challenges to the idea that we can understand the subjective states of animals. She rather reiterates that we can certainly understand these subjective states because we share this evolutionary and social heritage with other animals. These shared sentiments and sociality are morally important as embedded creatures in a mixed social and ecological world. This, most significantly, is because we ourselves are animals, the primary foundation that makes the mixed community conceivable and natural.

**Evolution as a Religion: Values and Science**

Midgley examines the sometimes precarious implications of scientific theories and their portrayals in *Evolution as a Religion*.\(^4\) In particular, she is concerned with distortions of evolutionary theory, both by scientists and non-scientists, which can

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broadly take on the characteristics of religion. In the process of identifying these distortions, Midgley investigates and discusses some of the core issues in philosophy of science and ethical theory: the role of science in society, the methods of science, the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity in scientists as persons, and ultimately the ethical issues that are be connected with science and its portrayals, especially religious usurpation. What results is a thorough analysis of science and ethics, the important means by which we understand, describe, and often prescribe how we are to live in the natural world and our mixed communities.

**The Practice of Science**

Midgley stresses that it is important to distinguish that scientific theories are not objective, neutral collections of ideas and fact. “The theory of evolution,” she points out, “is not just an inert piece of theoretical science. It is, and cannot help being, also a powerful folk-tale about human origins.”41 Midgley ascribes mythic status to evolution, saying that it can be seen as “the creation myth of our age. By telling us our origins it shapes our views of what we are. It influences not just our thought, but our feelings and actions too, in a way which goes far beyond its official function as a biological theory. To call it a myth does not of course mean it is a false story. It means that it has great symbolic power, which is independent of its truth.”42 Midgley highlights the significance of this power in how interpretations of evolution influence morality, which is certainly the case in her concept of the mixed community.

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41 Midgley, Evolution as a Religion, 1.

42 Ibid., 33.
Much like other creation stories, evolution is a narrative composed of “webs of symbolism” and poetic drama about our origins, which is “bound to engage our imagination, to shape our views of what we are now, and so to affect our lives.”\textsuperscript{43} In this we must understand that our theories and investigations in any subject are not detached and neutral, but greatly influenced by our lives. This can result in a number of representations and supposed implications of scientific theories, both positively and negatively. This is contrary to the prevailing conception of science in which motives do not interfere with the pure and impersonal nature of scientific research. However, as Midgley points out, it is unreasonable to think that motives and subjectivity do not influence science: “Facts are not gathered in a vacuum, but to fill gaps in a world-picture which already exists.”\textsuperscript{44} And, more strongly: “Merely to pile up information indiscriminately is an idiot’s task.”\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, those whose imaginations and world-pictures are based on a selfish and competitive model of life and society will ultimately portray this in their scientific dramas. This is where the good scientists are separated from the bad scientists for Midgley. Good scientists are also influenced by their motives and world-pictures, but they are more self-aware and reflective of this fact: “Like those who argue usefully on any other subject, they do their best work not by being neutral but by having strong preferences, being aware of them, criticizing them carefully, expressing them plainly and then leaving their readers to decide how far to share them.”\textsuperscript{46} For Midgley, we must understand that

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
symbolism is important and essential, not something to be thrown out as unscientific. It is inevitable, and the best way to deal with this is to be aware of this eventuality and take measures to create the most accurate portrayals of scientific research and theories. This is especially important in the mixed community with the topic of animals and evolution, which is often symbolically distorted in a number of ways, both positively and negatively. The practice of science must then, through the best possible methods, seek to portray the most accurate symbolisms and dramas when addressing our evolutionary heritage and relationship with animals in the mixed community.

Midgley contends that the most accurate theories and theorists must understand the drama and symbolism that underlies scientific inquiry. Facts are discovered within a preexisting world-picture and are organized therein; they are never without meaning. Therefore the dramas that become entangled with the facts can greatly distort scientific theories. Midgley feels that the only way that this can be avoided is to be aware of the dramas and discuss them in order to ascertain which of them are most consonant with the data. She highlights how Darwin, in his own investigations, was himself not immune to the drama of evolution. Rather, he was aware of the symbolism of his theory, and the result of his meticulous work was a balanced, inclusive, and ever-changing drama. One can find in Darwin a tension and dynamic interplay between an optimistic wonder at the profundity of nature and a pessimistic awareness of the wastefulness and cruelty of nature, each of which complemented and supplemented the other. “The destructive message of this book,” she writes, “is a somewhat dismal one. It concerns the sort of trouble which arises when, with writers less careful than Darwin, the dramas take
over…It involves being obsessed by a picture so colorful and striking that it numbs thought about the evidence required to support it.”

Evolutionary Distortions

The dramas that are most strikingly dangerous for Midgley are the two main distortions of Darwinian theory: the “escalator fallacy” and Social Darwinism. The escalator fallacy is “the idea that evolution is a steady, linear upward movement, a single inexorable process of improvement, leading (as a disciple of Herbert Spencer’s put it) ‘from gas to genius’ and beyond into some superhuman spiritual stratosphere.”

Acolytes of this distortion not only predict and hope for progress into the future, but strangely feel compelled to aid this progress through eugenics and genetic engineering, since the evolutionary process is inevitable and the outcome is desired. Where Darwin saw evolution as a bush, spreading widely with no significant upward or core movement, this distortion of science sees a rising ladder or escalator that is directed by evolutionary selection of intelligence, which ultimately will create the “Omega man,” or a quasi-divine new breed of human. This certainly mistakes the mechanism of Darwinian evolution, which does not select for intelligence and is also wasteful at times, not to mention selective of organisms that are quite unintelligent.

Midgley criticizes not only the conceptual aspects of intelligence selection in evolution, but also the arbitrary standards of intelligence. This comes to bear not only on how some see the “direction” of evolution, and also on the practical implications of “aiding” evolution through genetic engineering. Abstract intelligence, which is thought of

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48 Ibid., 7. This is based very strongly on Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s ideas of the progress of evolution, so she at times terms it the “Lamarckian Escalator.”
in some vague sense of IQ, does not take into account the wide array and kinds of intelligence that exist: “Do we want Supereinstein, Supernietzsche, Superbeethoven, Superconfucious, Superdarwin, Superbuddha, Supernapoleon, or some sort of highest common factor (designed by a committee) between these and all other human eminences? How are the superwomen to be fitted in?” Further, she writes that, “like other powers, it is just an added danger in bad hands. And clever people, simply as such, unfortunately do not show the slightest tendency to be either less wicked or less weak than stupid ones.” Another problem related to intelligence-centered genetic engineering is in the actual understanding of genes. These studies cannot not be carried out in a long enough time frame to guarantee their results and efficacy, and they are based on dated concepts of genetics that view genes as isolated objects with on/off switches, suggesting that they can just tweak various negative and positive genes, thereby making better people. Genes, rather, are complicated and interrelated, and to alter one is to alter many. In the end, even if intelligence were the end of evolution, which Midgley adamantly says it is not, it would be impossible to aid in this process of selection.

At the heart of the escalator fallacy is essentially the idea of human selection. Midgley criticizes this position, especially in how it centers on unfounded anthropocentrism, which revolves around a groundless emphasis on intelligence. Ultimately the escalator fallacy takes existing problematic anthropocentric visions of utopia and places on top of them unscientific notions of evolutionary theory coupled with

49 Ibid., 42.
50 Ibid.
dangerous delusions of grandeur and the possibilities of genetic engineering. An unfortunate outcome of this is the supposed gradual ascendancy of humanity beyond the animal world, severing our evolutionary bonds and kinship with other animals and abstracting us from a world of mixed and ecological communities.

The second major distortion of evolutionary theory, Social Darwinism, is the idea “that life has been scientifically proved to be essentially competitive, in some sense which exposes all social feeling as somehow mere humbug and illusion.”\textsuperscript{51} Phrases such as “survival of the fittest” and “nature red in tooth and claw” are illustrative of the exaggeration of competition in this portrayal of evolution. Darwin did not use the phrase “survival of the fittest”; it was coined by Herbert Spencer. This is most often used “to describe an individualistic law showing such things as co-operation, love and altruism to be unreal, a law which (somewhat mysteriously) both demands and predicts that they should always give way to self-interest.”\textsuperscript{52} Sociobiologists and others have long wondered how altruism could arise in such a competitive and egoistic world. This is seen in Richard Dawkins’s work on selfish genes, in which he attributes selfishness to genes and then extends this selfishness to the whole organism. Midgley criticizes this and other representations of nature as purely selfish, and especially critiques the move from the genetic to the organismic level.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Midgley quotes Dawkins on the bold claims that genes are selfish and that this extends to the whole organism, making it an imperative of society to suppress our natural egoism. She does not exaggerate his dramatic portrayal: “Alternatively organisms themselves are seen as being genuinely altruistic, but being so only as the dupes of their genes, which appear as the real agents, egoists behind the scenes organizing the performance. Thus Richard Dawkins in \textit{The Selfish Gene}: ‘The argument of this book is that we, and all other animals, are machines created by our genes. Like successful Chicago gangsters, our genes have survived, in some cases for millions of years, in a highly competitive world. This entitles us to expect certain qualities in our genes. I shall argue that a predominant quality to be expected in a
Whether at the genetic or individual level, Social Darwinists tout egoism as the driving force in society and claim that any altruistic actions must be understood in terms of self-interest. This reductive fatalism, with roots in Hobbesian contract thinking, is in contrast to what Midgley sees as more realistic portrayals of evolution. Though conflict and competition are real and important factors in evolution, this does not eliminate the possibility of a natural development of altruism and other non-egoistic portrayals of human nature. She simply states that, “All that is needed is to say that altruistic tendencies must be compatible with gene promotion, that is they must not prevent it.”

With this Darwinian understanding, Midgley highlights important motives and instincts, such as kinship bonds and parental care. These drives are so vital and so strong that they, along with a mixture of other motives and instincts, can extend beyond the parent-child relationship to others, including other species, which is vital to the mixed community. Contrary to contract or egoistic thinking, this is not a calculation of self-benefit and danger, but a fairly natural behavior. This is but one way that altruism can be explained, and her emphasis is on the premise that, though conflict is real, altruism must also be seen as a real feature of the natural world, not simply an illusory outcome of egoism. The corresponding instincts and sentiments in social animals toward cooperation are just as strong and reasons why the mixed community is a natural phenomenon.

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54 Ibid., 149.
To Midgley, these distortions of evolutionary theory represent cosmic optimism and cosmic pessimism respectively, and they are not mutually exclusive distortions: “Since both of these moods are common, theory-builders often oscillate between them rather casually, and produce views which owe something to both. Unluckily, this is not the same thing as the synthesis which Darwin attempted. It can merely give us the worst of both worlds.” Both are unfounded, unwarranted, and based on unfortunate distortions and misrepresentations of Darwinian theory: “While still using official scientific language about this theme [evolution], they are quite contrary to currently accepted scientific doctrines about it…They are powerfully emotive and sustaining. They are so shaped as to provide their adherents with a lively faith which can be an important element in the meaning of their lives.” She continues, “Though they do not contain what for our culture are the central marks of religion—belief in a personal deity and the explicit worship that goes with it—they seem to have grown up in response to the needs which form some part of the group to which those giving rise to the religious belong.”

Midgley supposes that “melodramas” such as these not only take on characteristics of religion, but also stand in the way of some people’s acceptance the theory of evolution, since they are such fantastical portrayals. These distortions have led to all sorts of disturbing injustices that scare people away from biological understandings of human nature. Against this, Midgley reiterates, “It is the myths, not real biological theory, which have associated our evolutionary origins with injustice and

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55 Ibid., 8.
56 Ibid., 155-6.
oppression. That is why it is so important to expose them.” These distortions not only stand in the way of widespread acceptance of evolutionary theory, but also advocate outlandish portrayals of our evolutionary roots and history, the proper understanding of which is an important cornerstone of the mixed community.

**Science and Religion**

Midgley wonders why the question “do science and religion compete?” leads to an affirmative answer in most cases. She roots it in the Victorian struggle between Bishop Wilberforce and T.H. Huxley and the evolution debate that was embodied by these figures. This was a time in which some saw evolution as “immoral and inhuman” while others saw religion and “notions of morality and humanity as anti-scientific and obscurantist.” At stake for Wilberforce was human exceptionalism, and at stake for Huxley was the primacy of science in explanatory power and as a discipline unto itself. For Huxley, Wilberforce represented everything that he opposed by Wilberforce’s challenging evolutionary theory and by also being an amateur scientist. Huxley sought a proper discipline for science in which one was specially trained, not a field in which anyone with high status and a curiosity for naturalism could make public claims about science. In the end, Midgley muses, we know much less about this Victorian conflict between science and religion than we think we do, both in documented evidence and in the political and personal factors motivating these figures that have come to typologically represent the inherent division between these areas. Both the ideas and

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57 Ibid., 10.

58 Ibid., 11.
the figures became grossly exaggerated and distorted by later theorists seeking to maintain a conflicting picture between science and religion.

Midgley does put forward, however, that there is something behind this story, which is that two areas can only clash when they compete. This works for both science and religion; when either area seeks to colonize the realms of both religion and science, “bad religion is being answered by bad science.” She highlights creationism as a form of “bad religion” that attempts to colonize and explain both religion and science. Christians who better understand literature and metaphor, in her opinion, are less likely to rely on a literal biblical creation account. Therefore Midgley tentatively accepts the concept that religion and science address differing areas of existence, those of meaning and facts respectively. She lists a number of qualities that can shed light on the distinction between religion and science. Her goal does not seem to be to completely divide them, but to show that there are affinities and differences between the two can lead to distortions of each, since they are closely intertwined at times. Midgley highlights the standard of common practice and speech as one way that we group together certain beliefs and practices as religion, as well as other factors such as symbolic force and power, which hold enough sway in one’s life to shape and move a person. Moreover, she stresses the idea of faith as an important characteristic of religion: “It is rather the sense of having one’s place within a whole greater than oneself, one whose larger aims so enclose one’s own and give them point that sacrifice for it may be entirely proper.”

A number of areas can fall under this type of faith: faith in science, humanity,

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59 Ibid., 15.
60 Ibid., 16.
democracy, medicine, etc. She identifies faith then as the seedbed of certain religious forms that joins with a constellation of other motives, dispositions, and practices based in biological and social factors.

For Midgley, it is important to contextualize religion and value systems. “[W]hen we investigate,” she states, “[t]he claims of this or that faith or ideology, then, we do not do so in a vacuum. We need to consider its relation to the other central interests, institutions and belief-systems among which it operates, and relate its claim to theirs. The work is inescapably vast.” More specifically on the biological aspects, she comments on how a collection of human features come together to create a diverse variety of religious practices and beliefs: “Religion, like other complex human concerns, seems to be built up of a wide set of natural tendencies which can be variously combined, so that it itself varies enormously in character according to the way in which we relate them.” This representation resists simple definitions of religion, and she consistently nuances her interpretations of religion and science.

Midgley continually qualifies and deconstructs her naturalistic definition of religion and science in an effort to not oversimplify the two areas, but this is the rough foundation for her analysis. As such, she summarizes how meaning and fact work together: “Meaning is perhaps best thought of as the way in which facts connect to form what I have called world-pictures—that is the underlying system of thought by which we order our experience...The more closely any particular fact is linked to this center, and the more light it throws on the interconnections of the whole, the more meaning,

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61 Ibid., 24.
62 Ibid., 34-5.
significance or importance it has.” 63 Ultimately, a major distinction of religion in relation to world-pictures is that “they are, not accidentally but by their very nature, dominant creeds, explicit faiths by which people live and to which they try to convert others. They tend to alter the world.” 64 She identifies Marxism and evolution as two secular faiths in this sense, stressing the point that it is not very simple—whatever the artificial definition or division—to completely identify what is and what is not a religion in contemporary society. In the case of evolution, she notices that “a surprising number of the elements which used to belong to traditional religion have regrouped themselves under the heading of science, mainly around the concept of evolution.” 65 An unfortunate consequence that is often tied to this is the aim of scientists and other worshippers to not only eliminate religion, but also, quite confusedly, to take over the place of religion in society.

**Facts and Values**

Midgley highlights that it is important to not oversimplify or overlook the connection between facts and values, especially in the relationship between religion and science. Facts and values do not exist independently, but are connected in an intimate way that stems from our embeddedness in nature and the mixed community. “Our history and biology,” she writes, “which locate us here, ensure that by the time we are called upon to do any valuing the facts of this planet have plenty of meaning for us. They fall within a system. Through it, we do our moral thinking.” 66 This is important not

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63 Ibid., 15.
64 Ibid., 18.
65 Ibid., 34.
66 Ibid., 20.
only for understanding the relationship between the facts and values that overlap in religion and morality, but also for understanding scientific research, and the idea that “science is not just a formless mass of experimental data; it is a system of thought in which they are ranged, a system which connects with the rest of our thinking.”

It is only in this context that science can fully understand the variety of personal and social inputs that shape scientific theories and discussions. It is also important to understand the role of subjectivity in science because those who proceed as though subjectivity has no place in science ultimately can fall victim to pseudoscientific or antiscientific ideas:

Officially the business is taken to be simple—the establishment of ‘objective’ facts which look the same to everybody. Attitudes must be irrelevant to it. Background presuppositions are therefore much less discussed than they used to be, and what discussion there is tends to be negative—devoted to excluding borderline areas from science. The effect is to leave many of today’s physical scientists rather unpractised in general thinking, and therefore somewhat naïve and undefended against superstitions which dress themselves up as science.

Here she especially reiterates that Creationism “cuts no ice at all with humanists and social scientists. Nobody trained to think historically is in any danger of taking it seriously, least of all theologians. It makes its academic converts among chemists and physicists—sometimes, alarmingly enough, even among biologists.”

She thinks that the division between “social” and “physical” scientists is often a division between awareness of subjectivity, both in their subjects and in themselves.

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67 Ibid., 19.
68 Ibid., 27.
69 Ibid.
While the censoring of subjective factors in research certainly has good intentions, it is never fully possible for Midgley. She highlights how, in trying to rule out subjectivity in scientific studies of human behavior, there was, paradoxically, not only a refusal to acknowledge personal biases, but also strange dismissal of the ability to understand subjectivity in others in behaviorist psychology, a position that Midgley constantly battles against as an absurd barrier to the mixed community. This dogmatic form of skepticism that denies any ability to know the subjective states of others is contrary to Midgley’s point that we share an evolutionary history with animals that enables understanding and social bonds in the mixed community.

**Human Nature and the Natural World**

Central to Midgley’s position throughout the *Evolution as a Religion* is her stress on a more unified understanding of human nature, which is foundational to her view of both science and morality as well as the human place in nature the mixed community. She highlights how science is not only placed over and against religion, but is part of a wider set of antitheses that seek to divide and fragment human nature. There are various levels of dualisms or antitheses that isolate science and its constituent factors in a battle against “inferior” forms of inquiry, for example science versus faith, objectivity versus subjectivity, and reason versus emotion. In some cases, these dualisms are helpful in combating faulty forms of understanding (science versus error, science versus wish-fulfillment, etc.). However, very often these dualisms should rather be seen as polarities that holistically complement each other and work together in an interrelated fashion rather than against each other. She writes, “They describe pairs of complimentary elements in life and thought, both members of which are equally necessary, and indeed could scarcely be identified except in relation to each other as
parts of the whole. We no longer want the truculent little ‘v.’ to divide them. They go very well together, and crusaders must avoid trying to set them at loggerheads.”

Midgely notes how modern physics and neuroscience break down these divisions between the ways in which the world and the human brain operate, challenging what is privileged as given in both in the sciences and human life while locating humans in a dynamic natural world.

Throughout *Evolution as a Religion*, Midgley fights against social contract and Social Darwinist understandings of egoism and individualism. She reminds the readers that individuals cannot be abstracted apart from the wholes that they are part of, both socially and naturally, mixed and ecological. She expresses this in an organic metaphor to illustrate: “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.” She continues, “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.”

Midgley develops this organic metaphor again in a more detailed look at the relationship between the parts and the 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,

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70 Ibid., 117.

71 Ibid., 169-70.
families, tribes, species, ecosystems and biosphere, and have moral relations, as parts, to these various wholes.”  

For Midgley, this is a better way of understanding the self in relation to others at the individual, social, and ecological level in the mixed community. Any effort to explain morality in terms that neglect these relationships, such as contract thinking or deontology, is not comprehensive enough to understand the variety of claims and obligations that we have to others.

In Midgley’s understanding, the mixed community and its holistic relationality is a more effective way of including nonhuman species in moral conversations. “Duties” can only be effective if understood in a relational sense, otherwise the questions, doubts, and distinctions of what makes humans different from nonhuman nature will take over the conversation: “What, then, about duties? I believe that this term can properly be used over the whole range. We have quite simply got many kinds of duties, including those to animals, to plants and to the biosphere. But to speak in this way we must free the term once and for all from its restrictive contractual use, or irrelevant doubts will still haunt us.”  

This is foundational to understanding humans and animals in the context of multifaceted social and ecological communities. These communities exhibit a range of values and claims that must be attended to and balanced in relation to the whole.

**Evolution as a Religion and the Mixed Community**

The picture that Midgley paints in *Evolution as a Religion* is a two-part understanding of evolutionary systems: science as a system for understanding evolution and evolution as the system by which nature operates. This dual-nature of evolution as

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72 Ibid., 178.

73 Ibid., 186.
science and nature is the lens through which we understand and explain our world, both biologically and ethically, and illustrates our common evolutionary heritage with other animals in the mixed community. Midgely points out that this can go quite astray in improper distortions of science and evolution, which can take on characteristics of religion.

Evolutionary distortions come through a number of means that discount the importance of subjectivity in relation to facts and values in science and morality, which is important both in science and relationships in the mixed community. Subjectivity cannot be bracketed or jettisoned, but must rather be acknowledged and properly portrayed in scientific dramas. Unfortunately, the most grievous distortions of science, the escalator fallacy and Social Darwinism, have powerfully misrepresented both science and nature, skewing the way that we view ourselves and the nonhuman world, including other animals. What is then needed is to firmly locate human facts and values in the social and ecological context of the natural world and the mixed community. This depiction of a unified and interrelated human nature, located firmly in nature and maneuvering the various social and ecological claims that arise in this context is reflective Midgley’s goal in advocating the most comprehensive and sophisticated conceptions of evolutionary systems, which is directly supportive of the foundations of the mixed community.

Heart and Mind: The Unity of Human Nature, Part I

As Mary Midgley writes in the opening line of Heart and Mind, this work is a collection of essays that focuses on a central theme: “The unity of that very complex
Though this picture of human nature and morality may seem to be fairly straightforward to some, Midgley is writing within a tradition that consistently ignores this unity, fragmenting the human being into various sorts of morally distinct pieces that are abstracted from their evolutionary setting with other animals. These pieces are compartmentalized into various dualisms and abstractions that greatly affect the way that we see the world, and, she reminds us, the way that we see the world has a direct impact on how we live in it. Midgley seeks to “put the pieces back together again,” which for her is really the “job of moral philosophy.” In this light, moral philosophy should be done in “everyday speech,” as a counter to the technical terminology that invites philosophers “to be clever at the expense of being realistic.” Ultimately she believes that the philosophy must be part of the philosopher—it is not neutral. Only then can this subjectively objective moral philosophy examine the richness, complexity, and unity of human life in the biological, social, moral, and personal sense. And it is only in this context that humans can truly be seen as living in a mixed community.

Heart and Mind, Reason and Emotion

In metaphors straight from the title of the book, Midgley speaks of the function of the heart, and how it is often spoken of in “two rather restricted contexts; the romantic or the medical. A heart is either the focus of a love-affair, or the seat of a disease…But a much wider use of the word is possible, and deserves examination.” In a reference to

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75 Midgley, Heart and Mind, xvi.
76 Ibid., 1.
Macbeth, she calls attention to the use of the “heart” as the “core or centre of someone’s being, the essential person,” whereas the romantic and the medical aspects of the heart are “partial and dependent.”\textsuperscript{77} The heart in this sense is a sort of central, organizing and unifying force that directs feelings and motives. Mind or thought is inextricably linked to this force for Midgley as the complementary to heart: “The heart is the center of concern, the mind is the center of purpose or attention, and these cannot be dissociated.”\textsuperscript{78}

This unity is vital for Midgley, and any artificially forced separation between heart and mind fragments our being: “All this matters because many things on the current intellectual scene tend to make us disconnect feeling from thought, by narrowing our notions of both, and so to make human life as a whole unintelligible.”\textsuperscript{79} She expands further on the interplay of reason and emotion: “We do not live essentially by calculation, interrupted occasionally by an alien force called feeling. Our thought (including calculation) is the more or less coherent form into which our perceptions and feelings constantly organize themselves. And the compromise between various, conflicting, strong and constant feelings expresses itself in our heart or character.”\textsuperscript{80} Of course there are often disjunctions and confusions in reason and emotion, or thought and feeling, but she highlights how these “antitheses” are really always connected, no

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 2. She illustrates the play of the word “heart,” in exploration of the medical usage: “Someone who has to have a heart operation needs a surgeon whose heart is in his work, a stout-hearted one, who in unexpected difficulties will take heart rather than lose it, one whose heart will not easily sink or fail him. A medical student who, at heart, has never really cared for his work, would never become this kind of surgeon whatever his brains. The surgeon too, on his side, needs a stout-hearted patient, not a faint-hearted one—a patient who will put his heart into the business of recovery.”

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
matter how much one wishes to separate them. Thoughts constantly influence feelings, and vice versa—reason and emotion are not purely separated and untainted by each other or oppositional forces that separate humans from animals (or men from women). She reminds us that suitable thoughts do not exist without some form of suitable feeling, and suitable feelings do not exist apart from suitable thoughts, otherwise neither would be worth anything. The rationalist and emotivist separation of reason and emotion is a major barrier to animal ethics and the mixed community for Midgley, both in the dissociation of the two in moral thought, and in the association of humans with reason and animals with emotion. A large part of *Heart and Mind* is devoted to combating this problem.

Midgley examines this division in philosophy, highlighting how David Hume pondered whether morality is really derived between reason or sentiment, and how he eventually famously settled on sentiment. Midgley calls Hume’s question a false dilemma, and reiterates that the foundational effort to separate the two, to question which one had priority, represented a fundamental misunderstanding of the internal relationship between reason and emotion. “Morality,” she recaps, “like every other aspect of human activity, has both its emotional and its intellectual side, and the connection between them can’t be just an external one…It is an organic one, like the shape and size of an insect.”

This division was not only spurred by abstract debates within rationalism and empiricism, but was further propagated by the gradual division, specialization, and

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81 Ibid., 6. Midgley is addressing Hume from *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Section I: “Hume’s words: ‘concerning the general foundation of Morals; whether they be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense.’” Ibid., 5.
territorialism of the academic disciplines. This was further complicated by more recent moral philosophy, characterized G.E. Moore, who, in an obsession with avoiding the “naturalistic fallacy,” isolated moral judgments as unsupportable by reason, thereby relegating all moral claims to matters of aesthetic taste. This turn slung open the door to extreme emotivism, which rested on the premise that moral judgments are only a matter of personal feeling that have no real correlation with or support from thought or reason. Emotivism in turn was often wrapped up with relativism, both on the individual and cultural level. Regarding this emergence, Midgley is strongly opposed: “I argue that in fact it is a fraudulent mess. Clashes and confusions cannot be dealt with only by feeling; they need thought, and no culture can be thought about in isolation from its fellows. Liberal principles depend, quite as much as many others, on serious moral judgments, articulated and endorsed, not just by emotion or some other selected faculty, but by the personality as a whole.”

Ibid, 14. Midgley devotes an interesting chapter titled “Trying Out One’s New Sword” to the issue of cultural relativism and the fear of disrespecting other cultures in judgments. The chapter title refers to the legend of tsujigiri, which means “crossroads-cut,” and refers to the idea that Samurai had to perform one of these cuts on a random passerby to ensure that their blade worked properly. She criticizes the idea that we cannot make moral judgment on such an action. She calls this mentality “moral isolationism,” or the idea that “moral judgment…is a kind of coinage valid only in the country of origin.” She says, however, that moral facts are available to us in other cultures, both in the positive and negative sense: “Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them. To respect someone, we have to know enough about him to make a favourable judgment, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures to this extent. Otherwise a great mass of our most valuable thinking would be paralysed.” Ibid., 80-1. She speaks further on moral isolationism and the idea that we cannot the understand the customs and values of other cultures well enough to make judgments by illustrating the implicit ideas within the internal arguments of cultural relativists: “Suppose, for instance, that I criticize the bisecting Samurai, that I say his behaviour is brutal. What will usually happen next is that someone will protest, will say that I have no right to make criticisms like that of another culture. But it is most unlikely that he will use this move to end the discussion of the subject. Instead, he will justify the Samurai. He will try to fill in the background, to make me understand the custom, by explaining the exalted ideas of discipline and devotion which produced it. He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally. He may well suggest that this is a healthier attitude that our own obsession with security. He may add, too, that the wayfarers did not seriously mind being bisected, that in principle they accepted the whole arrangement. Now, an objector who talks like this is implying that it is possible to understand alien customs. That is just what he is trying to make me do. And he implies, too, that if I do succeed in understanding them, I shall do something better than giving up judging them. He expects me

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What Midgley stresses is that, in their positive understanding that emotions and feelings do play a major role in morality, emotivists and relativists have overstressed and distorted this correlation, downplaying and ultimately eliminating thought and reason from moral deliberation. This, for Midgley, results in all kinds of bottomless moral judgments, including those related to animal ethics. In the mixed community, neither reason nor emotion should be the exclusive factor in moral deliberation, but rather a balance that properly allows for valuing and prioritizing a variety of social and ecological claims.

The Unity of Human Nature and Moral Complexity

For Midgley, the effort to oppose any form of naturalism became venerated in the battle against determinism, which led to a diminution of any consideration of our nature as a whole. Any form of naturalism that makes some claim about human nature and morality by saying “really” or “only,” such as the “crude reducivist” claim that “after all, a person is really nothing but £5 worth of chemicals,” is certainly a valid target for those combating determinism.\textsuperscript{83} This is because the claim, and others like it, are reductionistic, which is the real enemy if one is speaking about the determinism of naturalism. Determinism for Midgley is not really an issue here, since everything, individually or socially, is biologically determined in one way or another and nothing can separate humans from biology. Midgley continually stresses that much of the opposition to biological explanations of humanity stems from concerns about freedom and equality.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 18.
These are reactions against fatalistic and reductionistic portrayals of human biology, as well as those portrayals that use biology for racist, sexist, and other unjust means that perpetuate inequality. Midgley warns that the answer is not in denying that we have a biological nature, otherwise we would have no standard or ideal of humanity toward which to live. This extreme reaction against discussions of human nature is misguided for Midgley and is part of the reason that many try and deny any commonality or heritage with other animals in the mixed community.

Forms of naturalism that take seriously human nature and morality as a whole must not be confused by crude forms of distorted reductionism, primarily psychological and physical reduction. Midgley reiterates that “a great many kinds of fact about human needs, and therefore about our inherited emotional and intellectual constitution, really are needed for morals. Intelligent beings with a different constitution might have quite different duties and a different concept of duty.” She stresses that biological foundations compel our feelings and thoughts, which is to say, “our nature matters.” However, this does not give license to reducing morality to purely physical explanations, and we in turn need to put “reduction in its place.” For example, Midgley sketches speech in reductionist terms, the asset that is so valued by those wishing to separate humans and animals. “To investigate,” she writes, “the biology of speech is not just to dissect the relevant hardware—larynx and vocal chords, cerebral hemispheres and connecting nerves.” Speech and language is much more than this, including the nonverbal faculties and behavior that aid in inter-species understanding and

84 Ibid., 35.
85 Ibid., 37.
communication in the mixed community: “It is also to study the function of speech in social life by putting it in a context of the whole range of other sorts of human and non-human communication. Only against this background can we understand its uniqueness; refusing to compare would never reveal it.”86 Language is one among many areas that cannot be reduced to physicalist qualities, which opens the door to understanding the many commonalities we have in these faculties with other animals in the mixed community.

Throughout Heart and Mind, Midgley places an emphasis on combating those positions that excessively elevate either emotion or reason as conflicting sides of human nature. She criticizes the demonization of reason as much as the diminution of emotion. “All dramatizations which set ‘Reason,’” she writes, “as one participant over against other aspects of the personality are confused. We are still suffering from the Romantic Revival’s insistence on doing this, with the hope of making Reason somehow the villain of the piece, when in fact it is more like the containing scene of the drama. All such dramatizations, including Hume’s, make the real continuity of our nature inexpressible.”87 She also undermines the “slick intellectual scheme[s]” that seek to simplify and divide human nature and experience: “Experience shows us that: 1. in general, the human personality is really very complex, and 2. in particular, one of the most striking facts about it is its need for unity, for an order that will make that complexity manageable. Each of us has only one life to live, and needs therefore to live it as some sort of coherent whole.”88 Our instinctual desire for order and thought is very

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid., 102.
88 Ibid., 103-4.
much tied together with our emotional natures, and in turn is complementary (not conflicting) in navigating the complexities of moral deliberations. As Midgley writes, “Thought, feeling and action are conceptually, not contingently, connected. They are aspects of the one thing: conduct. It is no use trying to unscrew the outside from the inside of the teapot.” These complexities play out not only in the sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting personal needs, but also in the needs and conflicts of others in the social and ecological context of the mixed community.

Moral issues, which Midgley believes are generally distinguished by the importance and seriousness of the issue in one’s life, should be viewed and analyzed through the dynamic and holistic systems in which “we consider priorities, where we ask, ‘what are the most serious, the central things in life?’ Then, when we oppose it to other points of view, say to the aesthetic or political, we are not comparing two separate and equal systems. We are stepping back from all the partial systems and looking at their relation to each other.” This takes into account all of the rational and emotional components of morality, not simply one or the other in an oversimplified formula. Moral thinking is hard work, and with good reason. In this, we should resists those who claim to have simple answers, as this would be against our nature: “If all we had to do in moral philosophy was to wait for people to pronounce moral judgments like ‘x is good,’ life might perhaps be simpler, but far less interesting. And we would certainly be members of another species, not Homo sapiens.”

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89 Ibid., 118.

90 Ibid., 151.

91 Ibid., 185. Continuing on the notion of species, Midgley analyzes the ideas of drive, instinct, and programs in the concluding chapter, “The Notion of Instinct.” Here she spends some time in a comparative sense looking at human nature and other animals. Especially important here is the
**Heart and Mind** and the Mixed Community

Midgley advocates a picture of human nature in *Heart and Mind* that, in opposition to the dominant streams of rationalism and emotivism, integrates reason and emotion in a biological understanding of humans and nature. This is important biologically, socially, and morally in the face of a tradition that seeks to abstract and isolate humans from this setting. With this understanding, human-animal mixed community is possible by integrating reason and emotion in moral deliberation and by reuniting some of the dualisms that plague ethical theory and stand as barriers to animal ethics. These dualisms include reason versus emotion, atomism versus holism, and social versus natural among others. This happens through Midgley’s more holistic understanding of human nature, morality, and the biosphere. Humans are internally continuous through an integration of reason and emotion, and naturally continuous through an integration of biological and sociological factors in morality. As such, all claims of other humans, animals, and nonhuman nature must be seen as morally serious and considerable in light of this individual, social, and ecological unity in the mixed community.

**Wickedness: The Unity of Human Nature, Part II**

In *Wickedness*, Midgley examines a more specific and important aspect of human nature and morality: evil. Another way to frame this topic is to call it the “problem of evil,” though this question must be situated within human nature and biology, not toward God. As Midgley writes, “This book is about the problem of evil, but not quite in

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comparative idea that no one motive is primary in either human life or in other animals: “There is not in animals any sign at all of a system like Freud’s or Nietzsche’s whereby any major motive subsumes or rules the rest…To have a dictatorial motive, monopolizing the creature’s interest and absorbing the energy needed for other activities, would be suicidal. Freud and Nietzsche were saying something real and important, but the language of reduction cannot express it.” Ibid., 201.
the traditional sense, since I see it as our problem, not God’s.” Rather than base the conversation about evil on God and the reasons why God would allow evil to exist in the first place, she feels it is more helpful to firmly and finally locate the issue within human nature, not some external cause. This tendency to place all blame for individual evil on outside sources, be it God or society, is simply an avoidance of coming to terms with the wickedness that humans are capable of by nature. This is not to say that culture does not influence individual evil, but rather to recognize that even culture is biological and was (and is being) constructed by humans. In turn, efforts to uncover the sources of evil must include both individual and social causes in their context of our biological nature, each of which operates in the mixed community.

Midgley reiterates that artificially separating the individual and social aspects of causality ignores the unity of human life: “The idea that we must always choose between social and individual causes for human behaviour, and cannot use both, is confused and arbitrary. In calling it arbitrary, I do not of course mean that no reasons have been given for it, but that the reasons given are not, and could not possibly be, good enough to justify so crippling a policy.” She goes on to say that “causes of different kinds do not compete. They supplement each other. Nothing has one sole cause. And in this case, the inside and outside causes of human behaviour—its individual and social aspects—supplement each other so closely that they make no sense apart. Both must always be considered.”

Midgley points out that, in her emphasis on the unity of human nature within biological and social contexts, she wrote

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93 Ibid., 2-3.

94 Ibid., 3.
“this book in order to deal with business that I knew was left over from my first book, 
*Beast and Man.*” As such, it contributes to her overarching ideas of a unified picture of 
humans as animals that support the concept of the mixed community.

**Biological and Social Forces**

For Midgley, conceptions of evil that place its roots completely outside of 
individuals trivialize it and push away our responsibility to wrestle with the danger that 
lies within our natures. This is quite natural because it is difficult to honestly come to 
terms with this darker side of human nature—understanding this part of us indicts us of 
the many grievous evils that have been unleashed over the millennia. However, to push 
away this reality is dangerous because we have to detect and understand evil in order 
to resist it. We must then “tak[e] seriously the emotional constitution which people are 
born with, as well as their social conditions.” This work stresses what she is often 
concerned about, which is the dual influence of biological and social cause of human 
nature and morality, which is an important element of the mixed community.

Midgley realizes that “we are capable of these vices, because we are capable of 
states opposite them, namely the virtues, and these virtues would be unreal if they did 
not have an opposite alternative…Our nature provides for both. If it did not, we should 
not be free.” To account for the range of motives and behaviors that humans possess 
is to grasp the full picture of human nature, not just one aspect, positive or negative. 
Midgley’s understanding of wickedness or evil is as a privation or lack of the positive 
aspects of our nature, almost in an Augustinian sense instead of a Manichean duality. In

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95 Ibid., x.
96 Ibid., 4.
97 Ibid., 3.
turn it is more helpful for her “to think of wickedness not primarily as a positive, definite tendency like aggression, whose intrusion into human life needs a special explanation, but rather as a negative, as a general kind of failure to live as we are capable of living.”

We have a number of motives that, on their own, do not necessarily lead to evil: aggression, possessiveness, anger, competitiveness, etc. These are aspects of our nature that must not be downplayed or ignored, but rather analyzed and understood in order to see how they can and do become vices. Further, they represent ranges of motives that we share with other animals and can study in an effort to understand both ourselves and other animals in the context of the mixed community.

Midgley identifies two moral objections to looking not only at social, but also to biological explanations of human nature: fear of fatalism and fear of power-worship, two issues she consistently addresses. In these cases, “people feel that, if we accept these motives as natural at all, we shall be committed to accepting bad conduct as inevitable, and power-worship seems to follow because what seems inevitable may command approval.” She claims, however, that recognizing these motives does not require adherence to the negative instincts: “We do not need to approve of everything we are capable of desiring.” Rather, we have a variety of natural goods, some better at certain times than others, and this is the complexity of human motivation. We hold the capacity to organize our goods in relation to our needs and those of others, which can happen at the social and ecological levels in the mixed community.

98 Ibid., 7.
99 Ibid., 8.
100 Ibid.
Not only does writing off negative internal instincts as fatalistic cut us off from investigation into being good people, but it also fails to recognize external fatalism: “A social automaton,” Midgley presses, “worked by conditioning, would be no more free than a physiological one worked by glands. What we need is not a different set of causes, but a better understanding of the relation between all causes and free-will.” She reiterates that these causes are negatives or shortcomings: “People have positive capacities for generosity and courage. They do not need extra capacities for meanness and cowardice as well. To be capable of these virtues is also to be capable of the corresponding vices, just as the possibility of physical strength carries with it that of physical weakness, and can only be understood if we think of that weakness as possible.”

Saying that evil is negative in this sense is not to say that we are naturally evil or fatalistically determined to be wicked, but rather that we are capable of certain evils if we lack the corresponding positives. This requires an understanding of both the evil and the good that is in us, and she says that evil cannot be defined unless it is in tandem with good. In other words, evil cannot be understood in isolation. This understanding of evil is also difficult for some because it is thought to downplay the strength or force of evil. Midgley counters that negatives can certainly be as strong as any positives, such as darkness as absence of light and cold as absence of heat. All of this also contributes to the paradox of how humans are able to negatively exploit and harm animals because they are able to positively form bonds and relate to their subjectivity in the mixed community. In other words, humans are capable of such harm

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101 Ibid., 9.
102 Ibid., 14.
in the mixed community because they are capable of such good, and reflects Midgley’s point from *Animals and Why They Matter*: “exploitation requires sympathy.”

**Evil, Dualism, and Skepticism**

For Midgley, there is no reason to think of the negativity of evil as weak or unreal, though some feel that it can only be real as a force in itself or, conversely, that it is unknowable whether it is real or not. However, some have seen it as so powerful that, in the Manichean sense, they have portrayed evil as an overwhelmingly powerful cosmic force. She criticizes this dualistic thinking which glorifies spirit and mind while denying the body and, ultimately, life. Additional dualisms, which claim that either thought or feeling will save us from evil are equally harmful in disintegrating the unity of human nature, as reason and emotion must be integrated rather than separated in moral deliberation.

Moreover, there is a further challenge by skepticism that questions whether we can even reach the knowledge of what is good or evil, either by thought or feeling or both. Midgley is scathingly critical of skepticism, chalking up this challenge to ritually complacent universal skepticism. This form of skepticism is a distortion of proper skepticism, which takes on issues in the particular in order to formulate the best knowledge rather than preemptively dismissing any and all moral knowledge as impossible. “Skepticism needs to be genuine enquiry,” she reiterates, “not dogmatic denial. It is rightly used to point out specific faults in traditional moralities, not to damn them wholesale without examination.”

Skepticism and dualities not only blur understandings of human nature, but also our relations to and knowledge of other

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103 Ibid., 47.
species, something that must be opposed since we are capable of formulating more unified and continuous ideas of ourselves and the subjectivity of others in the mixed community.

**Real, Dangerous Motives**

The ultimate point that Midgley drives home is that we must understand evil as a negative aspect of human nature, which, in tandem with social factors, can give rise to wickedness at the individual and group level. Though accepting this has its own set of existential difficulties, denying it is much worse. Midgley warns, “‘Owning’ bad motives can indeed lead to fatalism about them. But disowning them can conceal their presence in us.”

People attempt to disown these motives by projecting them onto society, therefore absolving themselves of the horrendous evils they commit. Midgely questions whether, in Nazi Germany, genocide on such a grand scale could ever have happened if these negative motives were not present in individuals to some extent. If this were not the case, how could such support for the cause have been drummed up? Hitler was certainly a charismatic leader, but she wonders if he could have been so charismatic as to single-handedly be blamed for this wickedness:

Communal projection of unacknowledged shadows is a possible cause—and seems the only plausible cause—for the strong element of fantasy in our hostility to outgroups...The idea that a few wily leaders may have imposed this whole condition on an entirely passive mob of supporters is not plausible. The leaders can only take them where they will go, and this particular direction is one which has succeeded too often to be a matter of chance...If this (not very surprising) view is right, we can see the point of saying that evil in the supporters is negative. Their trouble lies in their *failure* to do something universally necessary. They have failed to acknowledge, and to deal with, powerful motives which are in origin their

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104 Ibid., 133-4.
What was displayed in Nazi Germany and is present in other cases of wickedness is not some external power, but an internal “imbalance of motives.” Thus, in the cases of Sigmund Freud with sex, and Friedrich Nietzsche with power, they are correct in understanding how an overemphasis on one motive can be a source of evil. However, these motives are not the only sources of behavior, and Freud and Nietzsche’s flaw is in downplaying or not recognizing that there are many motives that can and do, through excess and imbalance, lead to wickedness.

**Wickedness and the Mixed Community**

In continuing her work from *Beast and Man* and *Heart and Mind*, Midgley makes it apparent how dangerous it can be to ignore the underlying biological motives that exist in each of us. This fragments the unity of human nature and morality, distorting our biological and social context in the mixed community. This is dangerous not only because we possess these motives, but also because of the systemic lack of inquiry into these biological motives and the false attribution of evil to outside sources, such as God or some mystical idea of society, which absolves individual wickedness. This is a blaring result of the failure to accept a more unified biological and social picture of human nature. We are capable of studying these motives in humans much like we are in other animals because we share a range of motives and behaviors with other animals in the mixed community. Midgley’s work in *Wickedness* not only illustrates the continuity of humans with animals and nonhuman nature, but also sheds light on the biological and social factors contributing to how we are so often capable of inflicting such evil

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105 Ibid., 135.
upon other animals in the mixed community. The capacities for positive (virtue) and negative (vice) are inextricably related, and humans must be aware of these factors in moral thought in the context of socially and ecologically mixed communities.

**Wider Support for the Mixed Community**

This final section on the message and meaning of the mixed community highlights a number of areas in Midgley’s thought that fall under the umbrella of human nature, morality, and science, and give support and context to the concept of the mixed community. Since Midgley’s first and most important book, *Beast and Man*, she has reiterated the concepts of humans as animals, embedded in and continuous with the natural world alongside other animals and ultimately members of a mixed human-animal community. All of her works focus the necessity of a proper understanding of science and evolutionary theory in viewing the human place in this social and ecological world, which is foundational to the mixed community.

Through nature and culture, humans have developed into a unique species that is capable of great goods and great evils, and these potentialities and powers must be considered and analyzed through scientific and ethical thinking. We need to be aware of the unity of human nature by reuniting the dualisms that have fragmented our conceptions of ourselves: culture/nature, reason/emotion, human/animal, individual/ecological. Value and the means of appraising it comes through understanding humans in mixed and ecological communities, living within a biosphere and alongside of other humans and other animals. Moral deliberation in this setting is not always easy as a number of claims of individuals and wholes of various species must be weighed and considered in relation to social and ecological wholes. Many have grossly oversimplified this process of moral deliberation by fragmenting human nature
and quarreling about who can or cannot have claims on us. Midgley’s position is that we must resist this, and the best way to do so is to challenge ourselves to think, in scientific and moral discussions, about the difficult questions related to human nature in our individual, mixed, social, and ecological contexts.
CHAPTER 5
MARY MIDGLEY AND THE MIXED COMMUNITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

In the preceding chapters, I analyzed and interpreted the various levels of Mary Midgley’s conception of the mixed community. The first level consists of core elements of the mixed community, primarily the human ability to sympathize with and understand the subjectivity of animals through a common historical and evolutionary kinship that makes human-animal bonds and community possible and provides grounds for animal ethics. The second level is the foundation and framework for the mixed community that is found throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*, which primarily consists of a systematic criticism of the barriers to animal ethics, mainly the rationalist moral tradition, as well as reiterations of the core elements of the mixed community. The third level is the wider support and context of these ideas that are present in Midgley’s work during the time that her concept of the mixed community arose, including such emphases as the significance of humans as animals and the unity of human nature. All three levels can be seen as fully constituting the meaning and message of her concept of the mixed community.

In this analysis and interpretation of the mixed community, I have highlighted the most salient and relevant components of Midgley’s work in relation to environmental ethics and religious studies in the overarching unity of her corpus. One of my main purposes in the preceding chapters has been to delineate how these aspects of the mixed community and Midgley’s work can be valuable to environmental ethics. Others have noticed these features and connections before, and in the next two chapters of this study I analyze how these theorists have interpreted and utilized Midgley’s concepts, especially the mixed community, in their own work in environmental ethics and religious
studies. Therefore, in this study, I not only elucidate why Midgley’s concept is valuable and should be used, but also how it has been used in these fields.

The mixed community is valuable in its message and meaning alone, as I delineated in the previous chapters. However, it is also important in addressing some of the key issues in environmental and animal ethics, such as the problems of the individual and the whole, domestic and wild animals, and human-animal sociality among others. Since the publication of *Animals and Why They Matter*, a number of environmental ethicists have utilized Midgley’s concept of the mixed community for diverse purposes in their own theories in addressing these issues. This chapter traces Midgley’s impact on environmental ethics, especially through the concept of the mixed community, highlighting the usages of Midgley’s thought in the work of Baird Callicott, Eugene Hargrove, Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère, Ted Benton, and Michael Leahy. Among the uses of Midgley’s work we find Callicott’s quest for a theoretical unity between environmental and animal ethics, Hargrove’s criticism of metaphysics in Callicott’s environmental ethics, Larrère and Larrère’s pursuit of a contractarian mixed community, Benton’s human-animal continuism, and Leahy’s criticism of animal ethics. Though various other environmental and animal ethicists provide passing references to the mixed community, usually through a paragraph illustrating Midgley’s importance (especially in relation to Callicott), the focus in this chapter is on the most extensive and important uses of Midgley and the mixed community.

**Baird Callicott: Midgley and Unified Environmental Ethics**

Arguably the most visible use of Mary Midgley’s work is in the environmental ethics of Baird Callicott. Callicott employs the mixed community in formulating a comprehensive theory of environmental ethics that incorporates both environmental and
animal ethics into what he calls a “unified theory of environmental ethics.” Strikingly, Callicott’s postulation of a unified theory of environmental and animal ethics came almost a decade after he held an opposite and more polarizing perspective, which was that environmental and animal ethics were incommensurable or even oppositional. Only after Callicott read Midgley did he modify his position so absolutely. In this section I trace Callicott’s earlier position on this theoretical divide and his later revisions based on Midgley’s concept of the mixed community, and provide evaluation of what I term the resultant “Midgley-Callicott paradigm” of environmental ethics.¹

The Environmental Ethics/Animal Liberation Divide

In his influential essay, “Animal Liberation: A Triangular Affair,” Baird Callicott highlights what he sees as a conflict of interests between environmental ethics and animal ethics.² For Callicott, the “triangular affair” is comprised of three separate and oppositional divisions: environmental ethics, moral humanism, and animal liberation (or humane moralism, as he calls it).³ The first division, environmental ethics, is characterized by the ecological “biotic community,” in which moral value is accorded to individuals as parts of the whole, and the paradigm case is Aldo Leopold’s holistic land ethic, which Callicott calls the “exemplary type” for environmental ethics and a criterion against which any version of environmental ethics must be judged.⁴ The second division, moral humanism, is the liberal philosophical tradition that gives humans alone

¹ I use this artificial term as shorthand to Callicott’s flawed application of Midgley.
³ Callicott uses the phrase “animal liberation” as an umbrella term for animal ethics in reference to Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation.
moral standing or value based on qualities or characteristics that individuals do or do not possess. The third division, animal liberation, is a movement that seeks to grant animals liberation and/or rights through categories or faculties that warrant moral standing such as consciousness or the capacity to suffer. Callicott claims that, though animal liberation is often perceived as a component or subdivision of environmental ethics, it is actually separate and the two are even theoretically and practically oppositional. In turn, the search for animal ethics is not simply a polar opposition between moral humanism and environmental ethics, but a triangular opposition between three distinct areas: environmental ethics, moral humanism, and animal liberation.

Environmental ethics and animal liberation are each opposed to moral humanism because of humanism’s refusal or reluctance to grant moral standing to non-human life. However, Callicott holds that environmental ethics and animal liberation are also opposed to each other, primarily because animal liberation is concerned with individual animals while environmental ethics is concerned with ecological wholes and species. Moreover, in setting itself in opposition to moral humanism, animal liberation has employed the same theoretical foundation of its opposition by simply extending the scope of the qualities or characteristics that constitute moral value to include animals. Callicott claims that the animal liberation movement follows in the modernist tradition, attributing value and rights to animals in a Benthamic fashion based on qualifying individualistic criteria such as sentience. As such, animal liberationists “draw a firm distinction between those beings worthy of moral consideration and those not.”

He therefore characterizes the conflict as an “internecine” war in which the “familiar

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5 Callicott, “A Triangular Affair,” 42.
historical positions have simply been retrenched, applied, and exercised." In this, he portrays both animal liberation and moral humanism as “atomistic, or distributive in their theory of moral value, while environmental ethics (again, at least, as set out in Leopold’s outline) is holistic or collective.” For Callicott, the inability of animal liberation to move beyond the historical debate of ethics as an individualistic concept vitiates the movement’s standing as a form of environmental ethics. Holistic environmental ethics rather views the worth of individuals as “relative, to be assessed in accordance with the particular relation of each to the collective entity which Leopold called ‘land.’”

In addition to the conflicting theoretical foundations of environmental ethics and animal liberation, Callicott is greatly concerned with the apparent failure of animal liberation to make appropriate divisions between domestic and wild animals: “Concern for animal (and plant) rights and well-being is as fundamental to the land ethic as to the humane ethic, but the difference between naturally evolved and humanly bred species is an essential consideration for the one, though not for the other.” This distinction between domestic and wild is overlooked not just behaviorally for some animal liberationists, but also in their relation to ecosystems. Callicott speaks of how environmental ethicists “set a very low priority on domestic animals as they very frequently contribute to the erosion of the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic communities into which they have been insinuated.” He maintains that full liberation of

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6 Ibid., 43.
7 Ibid., 59.
8 Ibid., 51.
9 Ibid., 54.
10 Ibid., 60.
domestic animals (in the full freedom manner he sketches animal liberationists as sometimes promoting) would have extreme and destructive consequences on ecosystems. Further, he claims that, because domestic animals are “creations of man” and “living artifacts,” there is nowhere to which domestic animals can be liberated. “It is, he maintains, “literally meaningless to suggest that they be liberated. It is, to speak in hyperbole, a logical impossibility.”

Callicott is also concerned with the equal consideration and even equal treatment that animal ethicists often seem to demand for animals. If each individual animal deserved and received equal consideration, a single invasive species, such as a mouse or goat, would have the same value as an endangered bald eagle, a species that has more ecological value in relation to the entire ecosystem. This approach to species coincides with his defense of the value of ecological features and systems in holistic environmental ethics as opposed to ethical individualism. He writes that “inanimate entities such as oceans and lakes, mountains, forests, and wetlands are assigned a greater value than individual animals,” granting natural systems value that ethical “systems which accord them moral considerability through a further multiplication of competing individual loci of value and holders of rights” would not consider as worthy of moral value.\footnote{Ibid., 53.} To counter this distributive perspective, he reiterates that the biotic community is not “a collection of objects, some of them alive, some conscious, but all the same, an aggregate, a plurality of separate individuals,” but, in an ecological sense\footnote{Ibid., 60.}
as “a unified system of integrally related parts, as, so to speak, a third-order organic whole.”

Therefore, in Callicott’s environmental holism, moral value is not granted to an individual by weighing its rights or interests against other individuals, but rather by determining its relation to the integrity of the whole system, or biotic community, in the heritage of the ecological and holistic land ethic of Aldo Leopold. He asserts that environmental ethics (the land ethic) is not only more theoretically sound, but also more practicable on the ground “since, by reference to a single good, competing individual claims may be adjudicated relative values and priorities assigned to the myriad components of the biotic community.”

This summary represents Baird Callicott’s early thought on the conflict between environmental and animal ethics, primarily between the ethical individualism of animal liberation and the ethical holism of environmental ethics. For animal liberation, the individual is the primary unit of moral value that demands some type of equal consideration. For environmental ethics, the individual is valued as part of the whole and the good of the ecosystem or species is more important than individual animals, wild or domestic. Callicott and others critiqued these theoretical divisions, as well as the practical outcomes of these divisions, such as the lack of distinction between domestic and wild, and the valuing of individuals over wholes. As a result, he essentially held environmental and animal ethics as incommensurable due to the incompatibility of their

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13 Ibid., 45.
14 Ibid.
theoretical foundations and practical differences until he read Mary Midgley and integrated, or rather appropriated her concept of the mixed community.

**The Mixed Community and Callicott’s Environmental Ethics**

Though Baird Callicott originally thought that environmental ethics and animal liberation were essentially incommensurable or even oppositional, he revised his extreme stance on the relationship between the two areas in “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again” by integrating Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community.\(^{15}\) He acknowledged that his early position on the opposition between the two fields led to “an increasingly acrimonious estrangement between advocates of individualistic animal welfare ethics and advocates of holistic environmental ethics.”\(^{16}\) In light of the divisiveness of the rift and the overlapping concerns of environmental and animal ethics, Callicott set out to bring the two fields “back together” through the work of Mary Midgley.

Callicott again bases his environmental ethics on the foundation set by Aldo Leopold and presents an evolutionary genealogy of ethics that stems from Leopold’s land ethic. Leopold posits a Darwinian evolution of ethics from the self, to society, then eventually to the land in a naturalistic progression. For Leopold, expanding ethics in this way would put limits on human action and freedom toward the land, relegating humans from the position of conqueror to “plain member and citizen.” In the end, actions can be judged by whether they preserve the beauty, stability, and integrity of the biotic community. Callicott traces how Leopold was influenced by Charles Darwin, David

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\(^{16}\) Callicott, “Back Together Again,” 249.
Hume, and Charles Elton in devising this progressive view of ethics. Darwin helped in understanding why humans developed social ethics in a competitive biological world and Hume’s moral sentiments accounted for why humans had a basic impulse to cooperate with others, even if their actions were not in their best interest. Additionally, Charles Elton’s biotic community provided a burgeoning ecological sensibility. As Callicott writes, “Leopold integrated Elton’s ecological model with Darwin’s construction of the evolution of ethics to create a nonanthropocentric environmental ethic, or ‘land ethic,’ as he called it.”

With Leopold’s scientific and historical framework of ecological ethics in mind, Callicott fills in the philosophical details of Leopold’s land ethic since Leopold was a scientist and environmental thinker and not a philosopher. Callicott states that, as a philosopher, one of his overriding concerns is for logical cohesion and unity in order for competing claims to be articulated and resolved in the same terms—otherwise moral incommensurability can arise. Thus if animal and environmental ethics are to come together, it cannot be through mutual tolerance, but through a real unification under one theory. He writes, “To achieve something more than a mere coalition of convenience—to achieve, rather, a lasting alliance—between animal welfare ethics and ecocentric environmental ethics will require the development of a moral theory that embraces both programs and that provides a framework for the adjudication of the very real conflicts between human welfare, animal welfare, and ecological integrity.”

In this, he dismisses the attempts by Tom Regan and others at a rights-based environmental ethic because it

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seeks to delegate rights by ethical extension and individualism and “condemns as unjust and immoral the trophic asymmetries lying at the heart of evolutionary and ecological processes.”\footnote{Ibid., 252.} For Callicott, this is too centered on individual domestic animals and unrealistic when dealing with ecological wholes and wild animals. This is his primary concern and the area that he uses the mixed community to address.

Callicott argues that an answer to the environmental and animal ethics debate that is theoretically unified can come from a combination of Aldo Leopold’s biotic community and Mary Midgley’s mixed community. He classifies Midgley’s main points to be that animals are not “mere automata, devoid of a rich subjective life” and that “the species barrier to human-animal social interaction is both artificial and unhistorical.”\footnote{Ibid.} Callicott draws on some of the core elements of the mixed community, primarily the human ability to understand and relate to other animals, in an effort to construct an ethic that can address both domestic and wild animals under a common holistic framework.

Callicott contends that, rather than base her theory in utilitarianism or deontology, Midgley draws on Humean moral theory, which generally states that “morality is grounded in feelings, not reason; although reason has its role to play in ethics,” and that “altruism is as primitive as egoism; it is not reducible either to enlightened self-interest or to duty.”\footnote{Ibid., 253.} He identifies this Humean moral theory as the historical foundation for Aldo Leopold’s land ethic as well (along with Charles Darwin’s “biosocial reduction of Hume’s moral theory”), placing Midgley and Leopold in a unique conceptual confluence. He surmises that “Mary Midgley’s suggested animal welfare ethic and Aldo Leopold’s
seminal environmental ethic thus share a common, fundamentally Humean understanding of ethics as grounded in altruistic feelings. And they share a common ethical bridge between the human and nonhuman domains in the concept of community—Midgley’s ‘mixed community’ and Leopold’s ‘biotic community.’ He concludes, “Combining these two related conceptions of a metahuman moral community we have the basis of a unified animal-environmental ethical theory.”

He calls Midgley’s community “biosocial,” and from this biosocial perspective, “we are members of nested communities each of which has a different structure and therefore different moral requirements.” In these communities, we have responsibilities regarding our relationships: reasonable and real obligations to our families that we do not have to strangers; obligations to our friends that we do not have to strangers; obligations to our pets; obligations to our barnyard animals, and so on. These relations are complex, emotive, and ever-changing, placing claims on us not by intrinsic value or interests, but by kinship and relationships. Callicott summarizes Midgley here as showing that inclusion in our moral consideration involves perceptions of where the boundaries of our moral communities lie, and that these boundaries should include animals as they often have historically. As such, we feel moral outrage when animals are “depersonalized and mechanized,” not because of individualistic concepts of moral value, but because they are “fellow members of our traditionally mixed communities,” and they deserve moral consideration as such. This is especially relevant in the case

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22 Ibid., 254.
23 Ibid., 256.
24 Ibid., 255.
of the animals that we have domesticated and lived alongside, which is where Callicott sees the mixed community as being the most relevant.

Callicott claims that the “Midgley-Leopold biosocial moral theory” fills in the gaps between ethical individualism and holism and the domestic/wild animal problem that he previously saw as insurmountable divisions between animal liberation and environmental ethics. This is because “domestic animals are members of the mixed community and ought to enjoy, therefore, all the rights and privileges, whatever they may turn out to be, attendant upon that membership.”

Wild animals are “not members of the mixed community and therefore should not lie on the same spectrum of graded moral standing as family members, neighbors, fellow citizens, fellow human beings, pets, and other domestic animals.” Wild animals are rather members of the “biotic community,” and “the duties and obligations of a biotic community ethic…may, accordingly, be derived from an ecological description of nature—just as our duties and obligations to members of the mixed community can be derived from a description of the mixed community.” Therefore, Callicott concludes that Midgley’s mixed community applies to domestic animals and Leopold’s biotic community applies to the land and the wild animals upon it. Each community for Callicott based in an evolutionary perspective that draws on a Humean theory of moral sentiments. In the end, each community member is valued as part of its respective whole, mixed or biotic.

Callicott sees the theoretical lineages of Leopold and Midgley as forming a common and unified foundation in which conflicts and duties can be adjudicated in the

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25 Ibid., 257.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
holistic sense of environmental ethics sense that he desires. He draws on some of the key elements of the mixed community: the human ability to relate to animals through our common evolutionary heritage and the role of emotion in moral deliberation among others. Additionally, Callicott takes advantage of the commonality he shares with Midgley in weighing moral claims in a holistic system of values and priorities.

Callicott’s use of the mixed community, however, is flawed. He reads Midgley with a very specific lens and intention, which is his search for ecological holism and his desire to compensate for the problem of domestic and wild animals within the same theoretical framework. These concepts can be found in Midgley’s work, but Callicott exaggerates the domestic aspects of the mixed community in this pursuit. Though the mixed community is primarily a concept about domestic animals, it is not exclusive to this realm, and there is certainly overlap with what Callicott sharply distinguishes as wild animals in the mixed community.

Midgley demonstrates this in how she addresses wild animals when discussing the mixed community, and this is primarily because she sees the line between domestic and wild as a blurry division. Just as we share an evolutionary history with other animals, domestic and wild animals are closely related and not always separable. The most direct way that she deals with this issue is in distinguishing social and ecological claims. Social claims are primarily those within the mixed community and ecological claims are primarily those within what Callicott sees as the biotic community. This fairly straightforward division generally works for Callicott’s purposes, but Midgley adds more complexity to this distinction, noting that social and ecological claims are at times distinct and separate, but at times indistinct and the same. That is, the boundaries of
where the mixed and ecological communities begin and end are at times unclear and always semi-permeable. This subtle distinction is important in Midgley’s balanced work, and Callicott overlooks it in his monistic approach.

Eugene Hargrove also recognizes the significance of Callicott’s use of Midgley, as well as the problematic issue of Callicott’s reliance on exemplary figures that have disparate and even conflicting metaphysical foundations. In this, Callicott’s theory is not as unified as he wishes. In the next section I trace Hargrove’s critique of Callicott’s environmental metaphysics and illustrate a second flaw in Callicott’s use of the mixed community, which is his misunderstanding of Midgley’s metaphysical foundations.

**Hargrove on the Midgley-Callicott Paradigm**

Eugene Hargrove investigates and critiques Baird Callicott’s “metaphysics of morals” in “Environmental Ethics without a Metaphysics,” and, significantly, speaks to Callicott’s use of David Hume, Charles Darwin, Aldo Leopold, and Mary Midgley, the figures upon which he builds his “unified” theory of environmental ethics. Hargrove is primarily concerned with two aspects of Callicott’s environmental ethics: (1) the legitimacy of metaphysics in environmental ethics, and (2) whether Callicott effectively constructs a consistent metaphysics through his exemplar figures (Midgley, Hume, et al.).

Hargrove’s position on metaphysics is that, for the most part, environmental ethics must address metaphysics, but in a descriptive rather than revisionary or constructive manner. His working definition of metaphysics is “an elaborate system

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developed through reason that provides a rational explanation of the nature of being or existence. This general overview of being or existence then becomes the perspective from which more specific matters are viewed, for example, science or physics.”

Drawing on Strawson, Hargrove differentiates between descriptive metaphysics and revisionary metaphysics. Descriptive metaphysics “describe[s] the actual structure of our thought about the world,” whereas revisionary metaphysics “is concerned to produce a better structure.” He advocates that environmental ethics should practice descriptive metaphysics rather than revisionary metaphysics, claiming that “an emphasis on the revisionary at the expense of the descriptive will, in my view, simply make environmental ethics completely esoteric and unusable.”

Hargrove clarifies that his opposition to metaphysical system building is primarily because of the practicality of these systems in applied ethics: “As I noted earlier, nonanthropocentrists’ efforts to establish the independent existence of intrinsic value in the world have contributed to the view among environmental professionals that environmental philosophy has no practical value.” He continues, “It is for this reason that I recommend that environmental ethicists engage in metaphysical speculation sparingly and only when necessary for explaining or conceptualizing some matter that cannot be dealt with in any other way.”

This opposition to revisionary metaphysics places Hargrove in stark contrast with Callicott, who seeks theoretical unity in his revisionary metaphysics by constructing a

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 143.
metaphysics of morals that draws on a metaphysical lineage of David Hume, Charles Darwin, Aldo Leopold, and Mary Midgley.

Callicott holds that eclectic environmental ethics without a unified metaphysics leads to incommensurability, and that metaphysically pluralistic ethics “is inconsistent because all the baggage of each philosopher, everything that each has said about ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and every other field within philosophy, is drawn into and attaches itself to the decision-making process, producing irreconcilable conflicts and contradictions.” Herein lies Hargrove’s second criticism of Callicott’s metaphysical environmental ethics: Callicott’s theory itself is not as metaphysically unified as he claims.

Callicott’s metaphysical lineage begins with David Hume, especially Hume’s idea of the moral sentiments underlying morality. Hargrove holds that Callicott does not actually follow Hume’s metaphysic in a consistent manner: “Callicott’s borrowing of moral sentiments from Hume’s philosophy is not the borrowing of Hume’s metaphysics, merely a borrowing of an element of Hume’s ethics.” He continues, “To borrow Hume’s metaphysics, he would need to borrow Hume’s claim that nothing but sensations or impressions exist, a position that would leave him with little more to say, until he left Hume’s skeptical philosophy and returned to inquiries based on custom and habit.”

Hargrove notices that Callicott latches on to a beneficial aspect of Hume’s philosophy without taking on the whole “baggage” of Hume’s metaphysics. Further, though

33 Ibid., 144.
34 Ibid., 146.
perspective), he believes that Hume would not likely have approved of Darwin’s work since Darwin was unaware of genetic material and how it interacted. Hargove believes it likely that Hume would have “accused Darwin of developing a theory, to paraphrase from an analogous context pertaining to the existence of God, ‘too bold to ever carry conviction’ because it does not have an impression corresponding to both the cause and the effect in evolution.”

This conflict in metaphysical foundations between Callicott’s exemplars is important for Hargrove because, for Callicott’s metaphysics to be unified, it must not only correspond between Callicott and each exemplar individually, but also amongst the metaphysical exemplars as a group. This situation is magnified with Aldo Leopold, who is the primary ecological pillar of Callicott’s metaphysics. Hargrove notes that, though Leopold does mention metaphysics in his allusions to Ouspensky, he is a scientist rather than a philosopher, which Callicott himself has duly acknowledged. However, he notes further that the key elements of Leopold that Callicott draws on metaphysically can certainly be tied to Hume’s moral sentiments, but they can also be tied to Aristotelian virtues, which is one of the components of Hargove’s eclectic, anthropocentric environmental ethics. He elaborates that “the differences between Callicott and myself actually pertain to whether virtues or moral sentiments are primarily the product of social evolution or biological evolution.” He continues, siding with Midgley and ethology: “In biological terms, Callicott takes his stand with the sociobiologists, tying moral behavior most fundamentally to biology, whereas I side with the ethologists, who hold that the behavior is a mix of biological and social factors involving, for example,

\[\text{Ibid., 140.}\]
imprinting and malimprinting.” In this, Hargrove essentially argues that these are elements of ethical systems, not metaphysics: “This issue, once again, is not a metaphysical issue.”

Callicott’s last metaphysical exemplar is Mary Midgley, and Hargove finds difficulties in this use as well. He criticizes Callicott’s claim that Leopold and Midgley share a Humean system of ethics grounded in moral sentiments, and that Midgley and Leopold share a community-based “biosocial moral theory.” Hargrove duly points out that, though Midgley does have certain affinities with Hume, she is often critical of Hume’s overemphasis on feelings in morality as the root of emotivism, and she moreover does not share his skeptical metaphysics. Further, he notices that Midgley’s ethics can fit with Aristotelian conceptions of morality as well, much as Leopold’s does. Lastly, with good reason, he recognizes that Midgley is a vocal critic of sociobiology, which Callicott more heavily supports, and that she is rather a leading advocate of ethology, upon which Hargrove also draws: “Her book, [Beast and Man], for example, is primarily a criticism of the ethical conclusions that are normally drawn from sociobiology that relies heavily on ethological research for factual arguments. The key issues with regard to Callicott’s discussion are, insofar as I can determine, concerned with the role of contemporary biology, not metaphysics.”

Rather than dismiss Callicott’s work, Hargrove approves of the interrelations that Callicott brings together. His position, however, is that this can only work as descriptive metaphysics rather than as revisionary metaphysics because of the metaphysical

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36 Ibid., 141-2.
37 Ibid., 142.
38 Ibid.
inconsistencies within Callicott’s chosen exemplars. Ultimately, Hargove applauds Callicott’s analysis if it is an invigorating history of ideas that ties together significant contributions to environmental ethics, and he objects to it “only if he wishes to claim that a specific metaphysics begins in Hume’s conception of moral sentiments and is carried forward through Darwin into Leopold, Midgley, and the sociobiologists.”

**Back Together Again?**

Callicott’s narrowing of the mixed community to purely domestic animals is an interpretive liberty. Because the mixed community is primarily built on our relation to the social claims of domestic animals, this interpretation is appropriate to a certain extent. There is an aspect in Midgley, however, that the boundaries of the mixed community do not close at the line between domestic and wild, both because this distinction is often times hard to draw, and because she uses wild animals as examples in formulating her picture of the mixed community. As such, she does not rigidly separate the two types of animals, domestic and wild, but rather sees them on a ranged continuum that is constantly shifting. This is in addition to her realization that social and ecological claims, represented by animals and species in this case, are at times conflicting, at times complementary, and at times the same, both social and ecological. This not only undermines Callicott’s rigid distinction between domestic and wild, but also casts doubt on his position that the claims of the domestic (social) and the wild (ecological) are fundamentally in conflict.

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39 Ibid., 143.
Larrère and Larrère: A Contractarian Mixed Community

In “Animal Rearing as a Contract,” Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère offer an understanding of contractarian ethics between human and animals within the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics. Their main question is, “Can domesticated animals be the object of moral concern?” If so, they ask, should there be certain restrictions on how we treat domesticated animals in their various forms, especially farm animals? Their answer to these questions is ‘yes,’ but they believe that many have offered poor answers and solutions to these problems, and that the best approach to domestic animals is in a combination of Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community and a contract view of ethics.

Larrère and Larrère criticize the classical approaches to animal ethics in a manner similar to Callicott and others in the 1980s by questioning both the theoretical and practical utility of the animal liberation movement. They look primarily at Utilitarian conceptions of animal ethics, characterized by Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer, which center on pleasure and suffering, and animal rights conceptions, based on the ideas of Joel Feinberg, that base weak rights on animals’ “connative life,” or the possession of “aims, desires, and mental representations.”

Following along with traditional criticisms of these systems of ethics, Larrère and Larrère highlight the problems of moral extensionism: “Where is the closure of the moral universe thus enlarged? Shall we only worry about the well-being and the pain of


42 Ibid., 52.
mammals and birds, or also about that of fish, mosquitoes, earthworms, and snails? Which animals amongst these are endowed with a ‘connative life’?"\(^4^3\) Attempts to answer these questions often rely on some assumption of the commonality of certain mental traits with humans, though, unfortunately, “their mental universe is still enigmatic.”\(^4^4\) These extensionist foundations, along with the individualism of animal liberation ethics (including its inability to distinguish wild and domestic animals) make animal liberation ethics egalitarian in nature. The effort to universally extend equal rights or consideration to each individual, however, is impossible for Larrère and Larrère because “animal rearing is hierarchical and inegalitarian” by nature, though this “does not mean that domesticated animals are things to be manipulated arbitrarily.”\(^4^5\) It means, rather, that egalitarian extensionism is unhelpful in understanding how to address domesticated animals in human communities, and their position is that “we need to recognise that each theory extends to animals the paradoxes which already make their application to human affairs problematic."\(^4^6\)

Larrère and Larrère construct a two-part approach to domestic animals by combining the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics with a contract theory of human-animal ethics. They first point out that “animal ethics are not able to guide the relations between humans and wild animals.”\(^4^7\) Rather, “our relationship with wild

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{44}\) Ibid. For Larrère and Larrère, this is not to say that we can know nothing of animal minds, but rather we should not wait on or selectively choose research that validates the supposed shared mental traits between humans and animals.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 53-4.

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 54.
animals arises out of an environmental ethics, which we have good reason to think can only be ‘eco-centric,’” in the terns that Callicott lays out. Therefore an alternative approach to environmental ethics and to animal ethics is needed for dealing with domestic animals, which they find in Mary Midgley.

Larrère and Larrère build on Midgley’s “anthropological thesis” that “all human communities have involved animals”: “It has been so since the Neolithic period; social relationships have been established between human beings and animals. Domestication was only possible because human beings knew how to exploit the sociability of certain animal species…In subsequent agrarian systems, humans and domesticated animals have thus constituted a sort of ‘mixed community.’”48 On this foundation, they characterize Midgley’s mixed community as based on reciprocal relationships: “To consider animals as subsidiary members of a human community is to invoke a relation which is hierarchical and inegalitarian, but which nevertheless implies the exchange of goods and services to the benefit of both parties, as if there were a sort of pact between man and beast, sought by each for their mutual aid.”49

They trace this idea of reciprocity and mutuality back through Montaigne and Lucretius, and relate it to a contract. The contract works for them because, though it may “appear ludicrous at first blush,” the idea of the contract is not only hypothetical, but implicit, based on the communication of its ideas amongst its members. Larrère and Larrère see no reason, through the mixed community, that this cannot exist between humans and animals as well: “In the same way, the idea of a contract of domestication

48 Ibid., 55.
49 Ibid.
rests on the hypothesis of communication between men and their domesticated animals. This idea of communication presupposes that there can be an exchange of affect, of emotion and information interpretable by each party.” They continue, “The contract we are taking into consideration, is not a pact among individuals, but a collective contract expressing the norms which rule the mixed community of men and their domesticated animals.”

Larrère and Larrère hold firm to this combination of ecological holism, the mixed community, and the social contract in viewing human-animal relations, highlighting the two-way ability of human-animal communication and understanding. They recognize that this does not mean that animals may not occasionally break the contract, for example dogs returning to the wild, or that humans may not often break the contract, for example, factory farming and the general brutality that humans can display toward animals. Their goal, however, is to offer a novel approach to understanding the human-domestic animal relationship. Larrère and Larrère ultimately stress that “the big question is not so much, as we had thought, that of knowing what distinguishes men from animals; it is rather that of inventing ways of living together,” which is through a contract understanding of the mixed community.

Larrère and Larrère’s approach to animal ethics and usage of Mary Midgley is intriguing. On the one hand, they highlight aspects of the mixed community that are certainly representative of the concept and fit well with their ideas: interspecies communication and understanding, the history of domestication and sociality between animals.

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50 Ibid., 56.

humans and animals, and the relation between collective groups of animals and humans. In this, their usage can be seen as a decent representation of the mixed community.

Their point of departure from Midgley’s thinking on the mixed community comes with the addition of their contract understanding of social relations and ethics. Though Larrère and Larrère appropriately emphasize the implicit and collective aspects of the contract in their conception, application of the social contract to the mixed community can be seen as a violation of its foundational framework, as a large percentage of Midgley’s thought is devoted to undermining contract ethics and its biggest problems: its individualism, atomism, exclusivity, and reliance on rationalistic categories such as language and consent. Their ideas of reciprocity between humans and animals are creative and likely work to an extent, but it is unlikely that this reciprocity is strong enough, either implicitly or explicitly, to instantiate the contract.

Ultimately, Larrère and Larrère present a largely accurate portrayal of the mixed community, but promote a divergent though interesting understanding of its concepts in relation to a contract theory of humans and animals that is intriguing but an unnecessary revival of an unhelpful approach to animals. Further, Midgley argues that the contract thinking of Rousseau and others is fundamentally egalitarian. This is contradictory for Larrère and Larrère because they classify animal rearing as fundamentally inegalitarian yet still argue for the social contract, an egalitarian concept. She would likely approve of their usage of the concept to the extent that it reflects her core ideas in the mixed community, but would likely dismiss the addition of the contract as an unnecessarily loaded, unwieldy, and faulty egalitarian concept that leads more to
splintering individualism and selfishness than relational and holistic ethics. Moreover, they maintain Callicott’s exaggerated and bifurcated distinction between domestic and wild animals, perpetuating his misapplication of the mixed community.

**Ted Benton and Mary Midgley: Allies in Animal Sociality**

In a diversion from the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics, Ted Benton’s *Natural Relations* is a book that looks at the interaction of animal rights, ecology, and Marxist social theory. Benton is especially concerned with addressing the “paradox” of radical social theory and environmental ethics, which he defines as “the mutual suspicion, hostility or, at best, indifference which has pervaded the relations between radical social movements (primarily socialist in orientation) and those which campaign for radical changes in or relations to non-human nature, despite evident complementaries or outright convergences in values and policies.” Benton rather believes “that both socialist moral thinking and the concern for the well-being of animals can benefit significantly by being put into critical relationship with one another.”

Benton claims that this disassociation is rooted in Karl Marx’s contradictory view of human nature and naturalism. Though Marx holds a naturalistic humanism, his theory advocates human transcendence from nature and a dualism between humans and nature, which rests on two elements. The first is the “humanization of nature,” which is characterized by the anthropocentric view that “only when the whole word is appropriated cognitively, aesthetically and practically can humanity itself be fully

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54 Ibid., 60.
realized.” Benton does not focus on or criticize this element as much as the second element, which is Marx’s human/animal dualism:

The estrangement of labour is supposed by Marx to have disastrous effects on human beings, their relations to one another, and their relationships to their external, material world. These disastrous effects can be summed up by saying that the estrangement of labour reduces human life to the condition appropriate to non-human animals and, within human life, inverts the relation between the human and the animal. The overcoming of estrangement means restoring to human beings their properly human status, and relationships to one another and to the rest of nature.

Benton wishes to correct these dualisms “between humans and animals, and between the human and the animal within the human” through a Marxian nonreductive naturalism that features human/animal continuism and sociality. For Benton, this continuism and commonality between humans and other animals still maintains “human specificity”:

“The specification of the distinctively human then proceeds not by identifying some further, sui generis class of attributes or needs possessed only by humans, but, rather, by identifying the species-specific ways in which humans exhibit attributes or meet needs which they share with other species.” Humans and other animals are then understood in their social and ecological relationship and kinship while still retaining species-specific characteristics, much like Midgley argues.

Benton is dogged in his opposition to liberal individualists that try to frame animal rights outside of embedded and embodied social and ecological relationships. He takes up the radical social critique of rights while trying to “provide a single framework for

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55 Ibid., 30.
56 Ibid., 25.
57 Ibid., 45.
58 Ibid., 54.
thinking about the moral status of both humans and non-humans.”

Like Midgley, Benton draws on “the well-established radical criticism of rights as merely formal, and so ineffective in the protection of individuals, as long as the profound social and economic inequalities of capitalist societies persist.” He builds on this with a lengthy critique of many aspects of the inadequacy of rights for both social and animal ethics, especially in the theory of Tom Regan. In the end, Benton establishes a Marxist social theory that harnesses the radical critique of liberalism and combines it with an ecological, nonreductive naturalism that recognizes embeddedness and continuism with animals as vital components of a more properly conceptualized picture of the human relationship to nature and animals.

Midgley and Human/Animal Continuism

Benton supports Leslie Francis and Richard Norman in their opposition to the extension of rights to animals and in their placing animals in social relationships with humans as the grounds of moral concern. However, in favoring social relationships, Benton holds that Francis and Norman still maintain a human/animal distinction, this time in terms of sociality: “We find that what is peculiar to human sociability, what grounds our justifiable preference for our fellow humans, are certain very specific dimensions of sociability: self-conscious intention in communication, recognition of mutual autonomy in economic activity, the growth of reciprocity in parent-child relations, and so on.”

Benton is concerned that this reopens the privileging of non-relational

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59 Ibid., 99.

60 Ibid., 120.

faculties in moral consideration and also maintains a selective and elitist list of features in human sociality, such as self-consciousness and autonomy.

In order to correct this, Benton goes further in establishing human/animal continuism, and relies on Mary Midgley’s *Beast and Man*. “By contrast,” Benton writes, “the broad framework of thought which informs my approach in this book is one which shares this emphasis on the significance of social relations, but which at the same time takes seriously the ‘human/animal continuism’ which is presupposed in the animal rights literature. The point is, as Mary Midgley famously argued, that humans are not just *like* animals, but *are* animals.”62 He also acknowledges that “Midgley’s work, and especially this book [*Beast and Man*], have had a strong influence on the formation of the approach presented here.”63

His reliance on Midgley’s concept is displayed in his discussion relating Midgley’s ideas on an expanded view of human/animal continuism that moves beyond Francis and Norman’s human/animal opposition. “There are good,” he writes, “if not overwhelming, arguments to be drawn from modern biology to the effect that we share a common ancestry, more or less close or distant, with the other species with which we now interact—we are, in other words, more or less distant kin.”64 He expands on Midgley’s ideas on evolutionary kinship and bonds in the mixed community: “It is this kinship which grounds a wide field of commonality which we share as ‘natural beings.’ We, like other species of animals, have needs which require us to interact with our environment (living and non-living), and with one another if we are to survive and

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62 Ibid., 16.
63 Ibid., 224, n. 14.
64 Ibid., 16.
reproduce.” He continues, “Many of our capacities for interpreting our environment and
adapting our responses to it, for interacting with others of our own species, and for
developing complex social bonds and relations are also shared with many, though of
course not all, other animal species.”65 This model of social relationships with animals
built on evolutionary kinship and sympathy can be seen as a reflection and synthesis of
Midgley’s work in *Beast and Man* and *Animals and Why They Matter*.

Benton also uses Midgley in support of his position that our evolutionary kinship
with animals is strong enough to allow us a means of understanding and communication
with animals, which is in opposition to behaviorist or linguistic theories that maintain that
the gap is too large: “It is also necessary to show either that enough of that natural
history is shared across the species-boundary for comprehension to get a foothold, or
that there are sufficient ‘bridgeheads’ for us to gain a comprehension of the psychic life
of species whose behavioural expressions and modes of life are quite different from our
own.”66 He believes that this can be shown by Midgley in *Animals and Why They Matter*
and her concept of the mixed community, and sees her as a valuable ally in this
discussion.

**Midgley and Animal Symbolism**

Benton draws on Midgley’s discussion of animals and symbolism from *Beast and
Man* at different times. This is important for Benton’s effort to disentangle animals from
oppressive symbolism and embed us alongside them in a relational and naturalistic
context. This use of Midgley’s critique of animal symbolism appears first in his critique of

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 79.
Marx’s separation between humans and animals, which maintains that “humans possess historical potential, whereas animals exhibit fixed standardized modes of activity, from generation to generation.”67 He looks at several ways that “potential” can be interpreted in Marx, and roughly characterizes the “collective historical potential” of humans as when “the acquired capacities (fulfilled potentials) of groups can be transmitted from generation to generation in such a way as to enable a continued augmentation of powers of the associated group which is independent of preservation of the identities of the members of the group.”68 Benton sees Marx as taking collective historical potential to extreme lengths of abstraction by crediting it to the entire human race as a species rather than to specific historical groups. To compound this, Benton is not sure that these special historical potentials can readily be identified. More importantly, he is concerned with negative potentials, such as evil or destruction, since these are clearly historically ubiquitous features of human development.

One way of addressing this is to embrace evil as a human potential, which implies a whole set of problems regarding human nature if taken to the extreme. Another way to address the problem is to deny the evil and negative aspects of human nature as animalistic and something that humans are transcending and moving beyond in their barbaric animal past, which Benton classifies as “speciesist” if there is such a thing. He notes that “the temptation towards utopian blindness to the causal importance of those individual and collective historical possibilities denied the status of ‘potentials’ is both strong and dangerous.”69 This is where Benton brings in Midgley’s discussion of

67 Ibid., 37.
68 Ibid., 39.
69 Ibid., 40.
the more “beastly” qualities of human nature: “As Mary Midgley has eloquently shown, the human/animal opposition has served as a convenient symbolic device whereby we have attributed to animals the dispositions we have not been able to contemplate in ourselves.” He continues, “The point of these considerations is to suggest that if Marx was right in supposing that only humans have historical potentials, it does not follow directly from this that any great gulf stands between the animal and the human with respect to their moral status.” Benton then draws on Midgley’s discussion of “Animals and the Problem of Evil” in *Beast and Man* in showing how unbalanced prescriptions in human-animal morality often result from the symbolic displacement of immorality onto animals due to metaphysical commitments to human progress and separation from animality.

Benton’s second instance of invoking Midgley in relation to animal symbolism comes in his discussion of animals and society. Here he traces nine categories that have broadly characterized human and animal relationships over the years. One of these categories is the “symbolic place occupied by domestic pets in the household: they may be valued for what they represent as well as for what they are.” He mentions how Midgley has reiterated that “animal metaphors continue to play a significant part in our thinking about ourselves in modern Western societies,” which is in contrast to the view that animals are only important as symbols in “non-Western, ‘traditional’ societies.” This is not only in how animals are resources for thinking about ourselves, but in how animals are “forces of good and evil, the emotions,”

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 65.
72 Ibid.
types of human character, natural forces and processes, objects of worship,” and other ideas that define human communities.\textsuperscript{73}

**Human Animals**

Mary Midgley fits nicely into Ted Benton’s work on ecological and animal ethics for a number of reasons, and he presents a faithful understanding and application of her critique and concepts. They are allies in conceptions of animal ethics that focus on naturalistic relationality and sociality between humans and animals. This begins with Midgley’s strongest emphasis, namely that humans are animals. Many implications follow from this strong embedded view, and Benton is quick to notice how similar their perspectives are in the continuism between humans and other animals that is grounded in a common evolutionary heritage that makes interspecies understanding and sociality possible. Midgley and Benton’s naturalistic perspective makes great strides in contextualizing human nature and animals, which is aided by the effort to tear down the negative and oppressive symbolism that is associated with animals in favor of more representational and beneficial symbolism.

Their work is also confluent not only because of its constructive emphases, but because it relies heavily on a critique of foundational concepts in rationalist morality such as rights and equality. Though Benton presents a more radical critique of rationalism, they are both targeting the same problems in rationalist ethical theory that stand in the way of animal ethics, or the mixed community. As such, Midgley’s work in *Beast and Man* and *Animals and Why They Matter* is a valuable critical tool for Benton in undermining these systems of ethics that often neglect animals in moral thought.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
Benton’s use of Midgley and the concept of the mixed community, including her thoughts on animals, symbolism, sociality, and rationalism, is an appropriate interpretation of her emphases. Their point of divergence is in Marxism. Midgley is often critical of Marxism, especially in its religious aspects, which she delineates in *Evolution as a Religion*, but she would likely find Benton’s effort to integrate Marxist morality into a more socially and ecologically relational moral system a positive contribution to environmental ethics.

**Michael Leahy: Criticism**

Mary Midgley is not without her critics, the most vocal of which is Michael Leahy. In *Against Liberation*, he seeks to “tease out in considerable detail the implications of what Wittgenstein has to offer to a particular picture of human, then by subtle contrast animal, nature.” For Leahy, much as the title suggests, this involves combating the predominant lines of argumentation for what he generally lumps together as “animal liberation.”

To illustrate his aims, Leahy takes aim at one of the progenitors of the field of ethology, Konrad Lorenz. According to Leahy, Lorenz is guilty of anthropomorphizing animals, especially dogs. Leahy claims that dogs do not have the capability of insincerity or deception that underlies some of Lorenz’s terms such as servility or sycophancy. He seeks to dismiss the ability of animals to hold such “mental attributes”

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75 Leahy quotes a selection from Konrad Lorenz *Man Meets Dog* (London: Pan Books, [1954] 1959) 84-5 [Leahy’s italics]: “Sycophancy is one of the worst faults a dog can have and, as I have already mentioned, it comes from a persistence of the indiscriminate friendliness and servility which very young dogs show towards all people and adult dogs. It is a defect only in adult dogs; in young ones it is perfectly normal and in no way reprehensible.” He notes that Lorenz’s anthropomorphism here is paradoxical since he is normally on guard against such practices. Leahy, *Against Liberation*, 4.
on *a priori* grounds and “to undermine the attribution to animals of a whole range of what are often called mental abilities, such as desires, emotions, intentions, preferences, self-awareness, *in the sense in which these are used of human beings*.”

Any such mental abilities for Leahy consist purely in instincts, in reaction rather than in understanding or reflection. This is the critical foundation from which he attacks a range of “animal liberationists,” including Peter Singer, Bernard Rollin, Tom Regan, and Mary Midgley.

Leahy follows in the tradition of R.G. Frey in attempting to undercut and clarify the terms and concepts that are used in reference to animals and, in turn, animal liberation. Drawing heavily on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later revisions, he wishes to show how a Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and mind will summarily eliminate animals from the moral considerability that animal liberationists mistakenly wish to attribute to them. Leahy ultimately holds the primacy of language and self-consciousness as overriding factors in placing classifying animals as “primitive beings”:

“This then is the status of animals. They are *primitive* beings, to recall the psychic hierarchy of Aristotle and Aquinas and the *scientific* legacy of Darwin, spanning the continuum between plants and human beings.” He expands on this classification:

“They exhibit the pre-linguistic sensations of pain and the ancestral tokens of human attributes as deliberative intent, rational planning, choice, desire, fear, anger, and some beliefs, where our guiding criteria are close similarity of their behavioural patterns, in like circumstances, to our own.” He then illustrates his main point about the primitive

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76 Ibid., 8.

77 Ibid., 166.

78 Ibid.
status of animal emotions: “What we observe, however we dignify it, is the pre-linguistic
prototype and it will include the gestural and vocal ‘primitive forms’ of language
observed in the vast majority of higher species. Clearly animals, unlike plants, are
conscious; but self-consciousness, like hope, ambition, remorse, and envy, come only
with the capability of speech.”

Leahy goes on to advise that the “pre-linguistic” nature of animals is the
determining factor in their moral consideration: “It is as primitive creatures that we must
assess the claims to proper treatment made on behalf of animals.” Ultimately, though
much of the outrage-inducing treatment of animals can be defended by Leahy’s moral
framework, he ends on a note relating ethical treatment of animals to our moral
instincts: “All of this is perfectly compatible with our treating other creatures humanely
and with respect and it is a sign of a perverted human nature not to be instinctively
inclined to do so.”

Criticism of Midgley?

Judging by the opening summary of Against Liberation, one may expect
extended criticism of Mary Midgley along with others in the polemical volume by Michael
Leahy: “Michael Leahy discusses the equivocal basis of the rights of animals by
focusing on the writings of prominent pro-liberation advocates. The theories of Singer,
Regan, Midgley and many others—that animals are no less than persons with rationality
and self-consciousness are analysed in detail.” In the opening section of this book,

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79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid., 253.

82 Ibid., Opening Page.
Leahy lists Midgley along with many others as having laid paths “substantial enough in radiating a deep commitment to matters animal, which is no bad thing, and have eased the way for considerable devotees to follow them.” However, though Midgley is cited as one of the most influential philosophers on this topic, there is little extended criticism of her thought, contrary to what one may think by a quick glimpse at the opening overview of the book. Intriguingly, Leahy seems to hold a begrudging respect for Midgley’s well-reasoned and common sense approach, an approach that he advocates (though for different purposes).

Leahy brings Midgley into the conversation a dozen or so times, though rarely castigating her work as he does with others. He mentions that Midgley is one of the only philosophers on this topic to address the arguments of R.G. Frey, one of his key allies, at length. Later, in criticizing how Tom Regan and others are “polemicists” (which Leahy would likely be considered as well), he notes that Midgley “is sensible to this” and “calls it howling,” something she tries to avoid. Again, in arguing against oversimplification and the flattening out of the variables in moral deliberation, Leahy turns to Midgley for support: “Mary Midgley is alone amongst prominent liberationists in refusing to truckle to moral theories that, as she sees it, unduly promote one aspect of the problem (consequences for the utilitarians, the value of life for Regan) at the expense of others equally important…She prefers to engage her readers at the coal-

83 Ibid., 2. Among the other figures he is arguing against, Leahy lists Andrew Linzey, Stephen Clark, Bernard Rollin, Tom Regan, Vicki Hearne, and Peter Singer.

84 Ibid., 3.

85 Here he quotes Midgley on “howling” in Mary Midgley, “Discussion,” Between the Species (1986): 196., which is a brief essay in response to reception of Animals and Why They Matter and her concept of the mixed community: “Howling does have a point, and I do sometimes do it. But it has the drawbacks of making people react—more especially academics—by providing them with something to contradict.” Ibid., 57.
face, as it were; that of the formation of moral intuitions, or the making of decisions.  

He then adds, however: “I quite agree with this approach although (I add hastily) with little of what Midgley has to offer it.”  

Leahy is primarily concerned not with Midgley’s methodology or clarity of thought, but rather with her conclusions, that humans have an evolutionary connection with other animals that enables us to understand and relate to their subjectivity.  

In discussing how animal liberationists have dismissed Kant, Leahy says that “only Midgley attempts to do Kant justice.”  

This is in reference to her example of the shepherd that displaces his anger by beating his dogs, which Midgley relates to Kant, showing that this is immoral for Kant only in that it may lead to cruel treatment of humans and thus defile the shepherd’s character. She says that humane treatment of the dogs in this case is really from “shadowy near-duties.” Leahy asks “why is Midgley reluctant to admit to the existence of shadowy near-duties?,” though he seemingly answers his own question: “However, the fact that such quasi-duties are commonplace does not, of itself, advance the cause of animals.”  

Ultimately, in trying to show that animals may not just be “things” to Kant, Leahy seems to agree with Midgley’s judgment on the shepherd: “Midgley is right. Kant would condemn such goings on because they would be inhumane. But what price humaneness, that great virtue of the Enlightenment, if animals were mere things?”  

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86 Ibid., 169.  
87 Ibid.  
88 Ibid., 183.  
89 Ibid.  
90 Ibid., 183-4.
Last in the group of positive and quasi-positive references to Midgley is in Leahy’s discussion of meat eating, a practice that he condones. He cites Midgley, who is a vegetarian: “The only other dissenter [than Bernard Rollin] is Mary Midgley who, with good sense, questions the pride of place given to an unambiguous vegetarianism…she augments this by advocating a gradual move towards the consumption of less meat.”91 He only qualifies this by saying that “she needs to have added the caution that much depends upon the reasons why people are vegetarians. My brother just dislikes the taste of meat and is faintly surprised that other people do not.”92

**Criticism of Midgley**

Leahy’s real criticism of Midgley comes in his most constructive chapter “What Animals Are: Consciousness, Perception, Autonomy, Language.” Naturally, Midgley is a target here as she opposes aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and mind insofar as it is seen to set up an impenetrable, behaviorist wall between human and animal consciousness and subjectivity. Leahy underscores how Midgley is critical of Wittgenstein, Max Black, and Stuart Hampshire, who selectively ignore studies of consciousness in animals and are guilty of “defining themselves into respectability.”93 He calls this “a tempting criticism; typically half truth and half error,” and acknowledges that Wittgenstein does not draw on zoological studies of any sort (he says the same of Regan, Singer, Frey, and Midgley, though this is a false claim, certainly in the case of

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91 Ibid., 212. Here he quotes from her discussion of vegetarianism in *Animals and Why They Matter*.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., 140. Leahy quotes two lines from *Animals and Why They Matter* here to illustrate her critique.
Midgley).\textsuperscript{94} Wittgenstein’s aim is, rather, to “clarify the implications of our everyday ways of attributing psychological concepts like hope, fear, belief, understanding, and so on” (something that Midgley also points out incidentally).\textsuperscript{95} Leahy says that this analysis of the roles of terms is the goal of philosophy, and good science does not always translate smoothly into good philosophy. Midgley’s mistake, for Leahy, is in extending the use of terms, in the sense that they are applied to humans, to animals: “We may certainly talk of animals, in the absence of speech, ‘consciously intending’ or being compassionate, both of which carry implications of understanding to some degree. The error is to confuse the identity of terms in the language-games used of animals and human beings, with an identity of implication. The differences are as significant as the similarities.”\textsuperscript{96}

Leahy continues his defense of Wittgenstein against Midgley near the close of the chapter, this time in reference to Midgley’s critique of Wittgenstein’s claim that animals cannot hope: “Midgley is similarly dismissive of Wittgenstein’s remarks about hope and fear…Like Clark, her argument is an all-or-nothing affair: either animals hope and fear or they do not. There is no sense of the various nuances involved in the attributions, nor that some might be inconceivable without language.”\textsuperscript{97} He says further, that “there is no suggestion that we are to take this other than literally. Yet it seems inconceivable to be able to do so without investing every creature from worms and

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 141.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 164. He quotes Midgley again here from Animals and Why They Matter and her discussion of Wittgenstein and anticipation in animals.
viruses, which follow very precise cycles of action, to the higher mammals, with the
g sagacity and foresight of seasoned desert nomads or intrepid Viking explorers. This is
anthropomorphism." Midgley would surely disagree with this by pointing out that it is
this sort of all-or-nothing, rather than graded and spectral, thinking that has crippled
animal ethics.

**Weak Criticism**

In the end, Leahy’s inclusion of Midgley as a target in his book against animal
liberation simply does not work, though some of his criticisms are strong against certain
animal liberationists. Not only is Midgley inappropriately labeled an “animal liberationist,”
and invulnerable to his generic criticisms against the field, but most of his criticism
against her is only focused on the outcome of her thought, namely the evolutionary
kinship and relationality that exists between humans and animals and the mixed
community. He generally finds her thought consistent and reasonable, and he makes no
noticeable steps toward undermining her work other than typecasting her into a group
with a number of ethicist toward whom she herself is quite critical. Lastly, many of the
criticisms that Leahy tries to level against Midgley and others are similar to arguments
that she made against the animal ethics tradition in critiquing rationalist morality and
laying the foundation for the mixed community.

**Midgley and Environmental Ethics**

Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community is important in its own right, but
it is also important because of its value and its impact in environmental ethics. Primarily
through a combination of Midgley’s work in *Beast and Man* and *Animals and Why They

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98 Ibid., 165.
Matter, a diverse range of environmental ethicists and others have utilized Mary Midgley, some better than others, but all with good reasons. The most visible use of Midgley’s work is in Baird Callicott’s unified theory of environmental ethics that seeks to bridge environmental and animal ethics through the mixed community. This use of Midgley is flawed, which Eugene Hargrove recognizes, because of the inconsistencies between Callicott and Midgley’s metaphysics. This is compounded with his exaggeration of the division between domestic and wild animals into mixed and biotic communities to suit his purposes in constructing a theoretically unified environmental ethics.

Because of Callicott’s paramount importance to these areas and the importance of this debate, Midgley’s impact on environmental ethics therefore cannot be overstated. This importance can also be seen in the work of Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère and Ted Benton, each of whom draws on significant aspects of Midgley and the mixed community. Larrère and Larrère construct a contract-based view of the mixed community, which, though a creative use of her concept, would likely be criticized by Midgley as too grounded in problematic rationalist morality. It also perpetuates Callicott’s bifurcation of domestic and wild animals. Benton, on the other hand, is a staunch opponent of the rationalist tradition and suitably allies with Midgley in constructing a naturalistic and holistic portrayal of humans as animals in a socially and ecologically embedded context, the result of which is a positive and powerful synthesis of radical social theory and Midgley’s thought.

In drawing such attention, Midgley of course is not without her critics. Michael Leahy is the foremost critic of her work, though the majority of his critiques are either
more flattering than damning or without legitimate foundation. In the end, it is apparent that Midgley has much to offer environmental ethicists who seek serious and well-formulated answers to the long overlooked problem of the animal question, especially in relation to human nature in a social and ecological context. This is also seen in ecologically-focused scholars of religion who wish to formulate more comprehensive understandings of human nature, evolution, and the natural world, which I will examine in the next chapter.
Mary Midgley’s concept of the mixed community is a valuable theory of human-animal relations, and its full message and meaning is found in three levels. The first level consists of core elements of the mixed community, primarily the human ability to sympathize with and understand the subjectivity of animals through a common historical and evolutionary kinship that makes human-animal bonds and community possible and provides grounds for animal ethics. The second level is the foundation and framework for the mixed community that is delineated throughout *Animals and Why They Matter*, which primarily consists of a systematic criticism of the barriers to animal ethics, especially rationalist morality, as well as reiterations of the core elements of the mixed community. The third level is the wider relation and support of these concepts that are present in Midgley’s work during the time that her concept of the mixed community arose, including the unity of human nature, the relationship between reason and emotion, the valuing and prioritizing social and ecological claims, and especially the concept of humans as animals in the natural world. All three levels can be seen as fully constituting the meaning and message of her concept of the mixed community.

In the previous chapter, I focused on Midgley and the mixed community in environmental ethics and stressed that the mixed community is a valuable concept for the field and traced how it has significantly impacted environmental ethics. In this chapter I continue to trace Midgley’s impact in environmental ethics, but this time through the lens of ecologically-focused religious studies, which can be seen as an overlap in environmental ethics and religious studies. I especially focus on the concept of the mixed community, highlighting the usages of Midgley’s thought in the work of
James Gustafson, Lisa Sideris, Anna Peterson, and the criticism of Gary Comstock. Gustafson utilizes Midgley in constructing a more unified theocentric perspective on humans and nature, Sideris uses Midgley in critiquing distortions of evolution while creating a comprehensive naturalized ethic, Peterson draws on Midgley in formulating a balanced view of human nature, and Comstock disapproves of the implications of the Midgley-Callicott paradigm.

The spotlight in this chapter is on the most extensive and important uses of Midgley and the mixed community in religious studies. As such, the emphases and goals of this chapter are twofold: to draw attention to Midgley's reception and impact in religious studies, and also to elucidate and highlight the work of these ecological religious scholars and ethicists. This is in effort to show the importance not only of Midgley, but also Gustafson, Sideris, and Peterson to religious studies and environmental ethics.

James Gustafson: Theocentric Ethics

In *A Sense of the Divine*, James Gustafson organizes the implications of his theological ethics into a naturalistic approach to human nature in a “theocentric” perspective.¹ Gustafson revisits some of the ideas he first schematized in his landmark work *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, primarily the relation of nature and human nature to God.² His primary objective is a system of theocentric ethics that recognizes interdependence with nonhuman nature, the importance of evolutionary theory, and the cosmic idea that the divine plan may not always revolve around human interests. To

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construct these ideas he draws on Mary Midgley’s views on human nature, evolution, and the natural world. This section presents Gustafson’s work in this area and his utilization of Mary Midgley.

Gustafson emphasizes experience in nature as the root of the sense of awe (or of the divine) and sketches a balanced position on the human place in nature. Our “pre-reflexive” and “reflexive” responses to “nature” are particular, as “we never experience it as a whole, we experience aspects of it.”³ Further, in his effort to particularize abstractions, he recognizes also that “our stance is not unmediated; it is culturally affected by values we imbibe in our time and place, socialized by our families and religious outlooks, or focused by our consciousness of threats to well-being that occur, or by our indignant passions when we see and feel threats to it.”⁴

In addition to this nuanced perspective on nature, Gustafson insists that God can be seen in the majesty, power, and glory of nature. Both because of biological need and God’s presence in nature, humans are dependent upon its life-giving essence in every shape and form. However, along with this life-giving force, we must also understand and accept its volatile and life-taking force as well. “If there is a sense of the divinity,” he writes, “it has to include not only dependence upon nature for beauty and for sustenance, but also forces beyond human control which destroy each other and us.”⁵ This leads Gustafson to pronounce his influential edict that God’s good may not always be humanity’s good: “If God saw that the diversity God created was good, it was not

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid., 44.
necessarily good for humans and for all aspects of nature.”\textsuperscript{6} The natural forces that create and destroy instill a sense of dependence on God, which Gustafson calls the “sense of the divine.” Ultimately, determining the theocentric good depends upon discriminating between the various types of good that can be distributed to the various types of species and entities in nature, including humans. “The purposes of nature,” he writes, “relative to ‘anything that exists’ and to the interdependence of all, are conflictual relative to the human good and even various ‘goods’ of the nonhuman world.”\textsuperscript{7} This culminates in Gustafson’s famous theocentric questions: “We have to ask, ‘Good for what?’ ‘Good for whom?’”\textsuperscript{8}

Gustafson stresses both the conflict and harmony that can be found in nature and how this relates to what is good and for whom it is good. In determining the good, or values, involved, he draws on H. Richard Neibuhr’s relational value theory, which deals with the “multidimensionality” of all beings in relation to one another and all things. This value system sees all things in terms of interdependence, interactivity, and relationships rather than in static and abstract terms. Moreover, interdependence for Gustafson does not mean simple equilibrium or harmony, but rather dynamic value in relation to others.

Gustafson takes this sophisticated understanding of nature and value and applies it as a lens for viewing the various typologies that are visible in religious positions toward nature. The first is despotism, in which, under God, “the natural environment can be exploited arbitrarily by humans for whatever ends they choose or

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
perceive to be of immediate benefit to them.”

The second is dominion, which is less severe and “situated ‘somewhere between God and the world of nature,’ further from God than despotism, but closer than stewardship.”

Next is the most common typology, stewardship, in which “the steward is a caretaker of what he or she does not own. The caretaker is responsible to God who is the ‘owner’ or the giver of all that is.” On the opposite extreme from despotism is subordination, which “would militate against any human intervention in nature,” perhaps similar to deep ecology spirituality.

Each of these typologies is flawed in its own way for Gustafson, primarily in their anthropocentrism or even their idolatry toward nature. He rather prefers the “participation” typology, which draws from various sources beyond the Bible, such as the sciences, in understanding the dynamic interdependence of humans in nature as well as relational value theory. In its short form, “human beings participate in the patterns and processes of interdependence of life in the world.” This stance of participation takes seriously our biological history and dependence, our place in nature, and our relations to individuals and communities, very much as Midgley does in the mixed community. In this, the ordering of nature, informed by science, and human experience all dynamically interact in determining what is good for whom and for what as well as how we ought to attain it. Gustafson reiterates in that, as participants in

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9 Ibid., 79.
10 Ibid., 87.
11 Ibid., 92.
12 Ibid., 95.
13 Ibid., 99.
nature, the good may not in the end be the good for humans—this is our dependence on nature, and, for Gustafson, God’s plan.

Gustafson ideas in *A Sense of the Divine* flow directly out of his ethical system in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Volume 1*. It is therefore helpful to briefly look at this work as well, not only to more closely approximate the meaning of “theocentric ethics,” but also because he more fully develops his ideas on human nature here and relies heavily on Mary Midgley. Gustafson’s aim in this work is to construct a theocentric ethic, which first and foremost requires decentering humans—in other words, theocentrism must do away with the anthropocentrism resultant from centuries of self-aggrandizing. Gustafson expresses the special place that humans have acquired:

> Culturally, religiously, theologically, and ethically, man, the human species, has become the measure of all things; all things have been put in the service of man. Man is always the *measurer* of all things; among the millions of forms of life only our species has developed the biological capacities to know, measure, evaluate, intend, experiment, and test perceptions. This is the glory of the human species; this is the distinctiveness that can be described and is to be valued.\(^{14}\)

However, he goes on to say, this is not tantamount to a human-centered universe, because measuring does not necessitate controlling. Here he advocates that is important to understand the vast, deep history of the universe, and that our small place in it is quite infinitesimal. This knowledge should help to ground the delusions of grandeur that humans have in the face of the universe and of God: “If it were not for that knowledge, one might live contentedly with the traditional Western assurance that everything has taken place for the sake of man; that man is the crown of the creation.\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 83.
Gustafson then mounts the critique that “religion and God have been put in the service of human needs. Theology continues to assure human beings that the Deity serves to fulfill particular human desires.” Further, this hubris is implicitly a rejection of God’s dominion: “Put in first-order religious language, this anthropocentrism implies a denial of God as God—as the power and ordering of life in nature and history which sustains and limits human activity, which ‘demands’ recognition of principles and boundaries of activities for the sake of man and the whole of life.” In this, he again underscores that “theos is not the guarantor of human benefits” and that “the chief end of God may not be the salvation of man. Man’s place in relation to the universe has to be rethought, as does man’s relation to God.”

The ultimate mandate resultant in this theocentric ethic is that “we are to conduct life so as to relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God.” Part of the ethical task then is “to discern the will of God—a will larger and more comprehensive than an intention for the salvation and well-being of our species, and certainly of individual members of our species.” Discerning the will of God is not a straightforward task for Gustafson, and the outcome of this discernment may not always be in the best interest of humans. The ultimate theocentric pursuit then regarding

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16 Ibid., 84.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 112-3.
19 Ibid., 113.
20 Ibid.
humans, animals, and nature for Gustafson is “that we are to relate ourselves and all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God.”

Mary Midgley and “Man in Relation to God and the World”

James Gustafson develops a perspective on human nature that locates us firmly under the domains of God and of nature, and he is especially concerned to combat the anthropocentric ideal that humans are in an elevated place above the other animals. Rather, drawing heavily on Mary Midgley, he fights against the dominant strains of theological ethics in pronouncing humans to be animals, albeit animals that possess a number of special characteristics and distinctions that are important for ethical considerations. Midgley is a natural complement to Gustafson’s ideas, and he points out that she “develops a viewpoint of biological and philosophical grounds that is in many respects similar to mine…In apt turns of phrase and with intellectual poignancy she over and over shows how interpretation of man in continuity with nature enables us to take into account the contributions of sociobiology, behaviorism, and other views that many humans, including theologians, often find distasteful.” He cites Beast and Man to illustrate his point, highlighting that she focuses on distinguishing humans among, rather than from animals, and stresses the human place in nature. Like Midgley, Gustafson stresses the continuity of humans in the natural world, and feels that this is essential to a theocentric perspective that understands theological and biological dependence and interdependence, as well as our limits.

21 Ibid., 327.

In addition to our embeddedness in nature, it is important for Gustafson that we understand our roles as valuing creatures, which stems from our evolutionary history: “As Midgley so nicely points out, 'We did not, personally and unassisted, invent every aspect of humanity. Much of it is drawn from a common source, and overlaps with dolphinity, beaverishness, and wolfhood.’”\(^\text{23}\) This understanding of our nature and values in the light of our evolutionary kinship and continuity with other animals is generally ignored or downplayed in philosophy and theology in efforts to keep humanity enthroned in its special place in the world as “higher” beings. On this, Gustafson agrees with Midgley: “The metaphor of ‘up and down,’ as Midgley indicates, has had a decisive impact on our evaluations as well as our descriptions. And from the assurance of greater value has come the assurance of a special purpose for humanity; the assurance that all other things were created for our sake.”\(^\text{24}\) Midgley is a valuable ally for Gustafson is approaching value in a nonanthropocentric perspective, asking for what and for whom it is good.

Perhaps the strongest traditional position on human exceptionalism is in exaggerated claims about human reason, “that our capacities to reason are somehow discontinuous with the capacities we share with other animals.”\(^\text{25}\) Gustafson locates this view in rationalist biases, highlighting motives as the more appropriate way of looking at the question of rationality in animals. When looked at in this manner, we can understand motives and “wants” as ordering principles in our values. He draws on Midgley here, who is staunchly against the privileging and abstraction of reason and favors a

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 284, quoting Midgley, *Beast and Man*, 160.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 285.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
continuum of rationality: “We ‘can indeed only understand our values if we first grasp the given facts of our wants.’ And our wants are to a great extent shared with other animals. ‘[W]hat is good does not have to be unique to a species.’” Therefore, rationality in this sense is an instinctive faculty, shared with other animals (in varying degrees), which functions to order various goods in life, biological and moral. “Moral choices,” he writes, drawing on Midgley, “involve the sorting out of our plural and often conflicting motives, and these motives are not just our ‘reasons’ for acting but are grounded in our biological and social natures. Our rationality is expressed in sorting out our motives and our desires, and in directing our actions in a fitting way.”

Gustafson, like Midgley, advocates a system of prioritizing and weighing values that features a combination of reason and emotion.

Motives are also important for Gustafson in that, though they stem from natural instincts and thus locate humans alongside other animals, they represent a range of conscious and unconscious factors that determine human behavior in contrast to the sheer fatalism that often pervades sociobiological interpretations of human nature. “Many intentions and actions,” Gustafson writes, “are susceptible to more refined causal analysis that the agent is conscious of in the moment of choice. As Midgley says, ‘Central factors in us must be accepted, and the right line of human conduct must lie somewhere within the range they allow.’” Building on this, he goes on to convey a more rounded understanding of biological and social factors: “Our intentions and choices, whether moral or otherwise, draw upon and give focus to our biological

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27 Ibid.
natures. Other factors must be accepted; at least they are not subject to radical revision and alteration in most persons under most circumstances.”

Gustafson’s emphasis on motives and rationality is consistently shown in his opposition to the manufactured antithesis of reason versus emotion. Gustafson favors Midgley’s critique of this dualism, and draws on her unified position. “Emotion or affectivity is not antirational; rationality means more than intelligence or following the rules of formal logic, ‘[i]t includes a definite structure of preferences, a priority system based on feeling.’ Even this kind of structure, Midgley argues, is also found in higher animals.” He continues, “The term ‘valuing’ can take account of the primacy of desire and affectivity, but valuing, at least in human beings, involves a consciousness of conflicting motives and of alternative objects of desire.”

He quotes Midgley further here, stating that “‘Reason’ is not the name of a character in a drama. It is a name for organizing oneself...It is the process of choosing which that is rightly called reasoning.’ To reify reason and emotion, and to think about their relations as if they were separate characters in a drama of deep conflict, is to falsify the nature of man.”

Gustafson reiterates this relationship between reason and emotion again later with Midgley’s famous colonial metaphor: “The relationship is not, as Midgley so aptly phrases it, a ‘colonial’ one, ‘in which an imported governor, named Reason, imposes order on a chaotic alien tribe of Passions or Instincts.”

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29 Ibid., 290.
30 Ibid., 287, quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, 256.
31 Ibid., quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, 258.
32 Ibid., 311-2, quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, 260.
Later, in his critique of rationalism in moral theology and philosophy, Gustafson drives his point about reason and emotion home again since he is stringently opposed to this “false dichotomy”: “Rules and principles have been justified rationalistically, without due attention to the desires, drives, impulses, and affections that need to be rationally ordered. Application procedures have been rationalistic and have been based upon that sharp distinction between reason and affectivity, reason and ‘nature,’ that I have argued is incorrect.”

He continues, bringing in Midgley again: “An often hidden assumption is that, as Midgley so nicely puts it, reason and desires are separate roles in a drama, as if the old ‘faculty’ divisions of the person could still be defended. Or, in another of her metaphors, this drama often takes a ‘colonial’ view of reason, as if it were an outside power that is necessary to dominate the crudities and incivilities of human nature.” For Gustafson and Midgley, reason and emotion should be seen integrated and graded faculties and not sharply divided as oppositional.

Gustafson, in challenging another opposition, that of means and ends, builds on Midgley’s relational and holistic thought on “parts and wholes”: “Mary Midgley suggests that we need to get rid of the language of means and ends, and ‘use instead that of part and whole.’” Though Gustafson does not feel that means and ends must be abandoned, he does like the parts and whole concept: “Means and ends, and governing life according to moral principles, need to be seen in relation to a larger whole than

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33 Ibid., 316.

34 Ibid. Here Gustafson aligns with Midgley in her similar critique or hyper-rationalism and the use of “rights” language in A Sense of the Divine: “Mary Midgley, in Animals and Why They Matter, says that rights is a desperate word. I agree with her conclusion, the argument for which cannot be summarized here.” Gustafson, A Sense of the Divine, 32-3, quoting Mary Midgley, Animals and Why They Matter (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 63.

individualistic and anthropocentric visions permit. Ethics in the theocentric perspective developed here both encourages and requires this. “This is valuable for both Gustafson and Midgley in adjudicating claims in a relational sense, which is important on the social and ecological scales.

A final interesting thread that runs throughout Gustafson’s usage of Midgley in *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* and, in turn, *A Sense of the Divine*, is the tension between Midgley being a secular ethicist who bases her thought completely outside the concept of God, and his own, which doggedly maintains the importance of a theocentric lens. He is careful to note that one can have a similar perspective to his own (much like Lisa Sideris later claims) without any theological beliefs, but this acceptance of secular perspectives is shaded with undertones of “lacking” a fuller view of humanity and nature. He stresses his point of decentering humanity and, in turn, seeing all things from God’s perspective: “Man is perceived and interpreted in relation to the purposes of the divine governance that can be grasped by humans, and the divine governance is of the whole of creation.”

Gustafson then seeks to clarify that this does not exclude secular ethicists such as Midgley from seeing things the right way: “This is not to claim that Mary Midgley and many others cannot adequately perceive the place of man in relation to nature without a theology or an avowed theocentric interpretation of life. The enlargement of vision that a theocentric perspective enables certainly can be achieved, at least in considerable measure, from nontheological perspectives.”

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 308.
38 Ibid.
undercurrent of lacking still persists in his position: “But the theocentric view does enlarge the context within which humanity is perceived and interpreted.”

Gustafson expresses a similar sentiment in *A Sense of the Divine*, as though there is an implicit deficit if God is not included in understandings of humans and nature. “The theocentric perspective,” he begins, “deeply informed as it is by the Bible and traditions which flow from it, probably evokes, better than it explains.” In this it shares commonalities with secular theories, which can work well with a theocentric perspective. However, Gustafson subtly expresses that there may be some reason to think that a true sense of wonder or awe toward nature is not fully attainable outside of belief in God. “I have no serious quarrels” he writes, “with Mary Midgley, Melvin Konner, and many earlier writers who have similar moral stances toward nature but are agnostics or declared atheists.” He continues: “Their senses of wonder, appreciation, respect for nature, and their willingness to allow this to suffice is more comfortable to my thinking and living than are the systematic debates in which I also must be engaged. I cannot persuasively argue that their stances entail acknowledgement of God or gods, nor do I wish even to try.” Gustafson is here careful to avoid theological pretension, but still belies a sense that the well-founded positions of Midgley and other secular theorists may actually be so appropriate and persuasive because of some presence of God in their thought, however hidden and however slight.

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39 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 46-7.
Midgley Theocentrized?

Regardless of Gustafson’s position on Midgley’s lack of God, it is readily apparent that he is strongly influenced by her work, and he presents a faithful and beneficial interpretation of her work. This is more obvious with Beast and Man, as Animals and Why They Matter was not written until after Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective was published, though Gustafson does address the mixed community concepts in A Sense of the Divine. Their ideas on human nature, human continuity with nature, embeddedness, value, the role of evolution, the unity of reason and emotion, and the relationship between parts and whole are extremely complementary. In drawing on Midgley, Gustafson is able to add philosophical backing and legitimacy to his perspective on human nature in a natural world. In a sense, Gustafson, a major theological figure, shows Midgley’s relevance and value to religious thinkers, though she does not need to be “theocentrized.” God is an extra “relation” for Gustafson, and Midgley sees no need to go beyond a naturalized context.

Lisa Sideris: Naturalized Ethics

In Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection, Lisa Sideris seeks to clarify the relationship between theology, ethics, and the human place in the natural world as portrayed by Darwinian evolutionary theory.\(^43\) Like Mary Midgley, her emphasis is on the implications of natural selection and how evolutionary theory is distorted for various purposes. Sideris battles prominent ecotheologians, and to a lesser extent environmental ethicists. In spite of their alleged reliance on natural selection, she finds that some ecotheologians and environmental ethicists do not fully consider the

tenets and implications of evolutionary theory in their work, most specifically by
downplaying competition and violence in favor of harmony. This is not universal,
however, as she finds more appropriate utilizations of natural selection in
ecotheologians such as James Gustafson and environmental “land ethicists” such as
Holmes Rolston and Baird Callicott, as well as in moral philosopher Mary Midgley. In the
depend, Sideris seeks to integrate these thinkers and a more faithful interpretation of
Darwin into a “comprehensive naturalized ethic,” which takes natural selection, our
kinship with animals, and our connection to the world seriously.

Sideris finds it important to have a well-informed understanding of Darwinian
natural selection and its implications if one is to construct a system of ethics relating to
the natural world that evolutionary theory explains. Her overarching claim is that, though
many may understand the theory and embrace it in the abstract, they are resistant to
fully accepting its claims or practical implications. The “radical message” of natural
selection is hard for many people to swallow. Sideris asks, “What exactly is this
message?” She answers, “A significant part of it consists in the revelation that humans
are not the center of creation—a message that is as simple as it is difficult to grasp.”

This is a point that Gustafson makes with the help of Midgley, who Sideris relies on
throughout this work. She continues on the implications of natural selection: “Another
disturbing feature of the Darwinian message is that nature operates according to
processes that seem wasteful and cruel, mechanisms that cannot easily be attributed to
a benevolent creator, that defy explanation in terms of intelligent design. Struggle and
suffering are integral to evolution by natural selection—a point that even Darwin

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difficult to keep firmly in mind." This is one of primary issues that ecotheologians struggle with, which leads to distortions that accentuate harmony rather than suffering, much like pre-Darwinian views.

Sideris contrasts Darwinian with "pre- and non-Darwinian views" that downplay the "darker side" of evolution and result in environmental ethics that are "inconsistent with well-established knowledge about the natural world." These views often tend to focus on the rosier idea of harmonious "ecology" rather than evolution, and their representations of ecology are usually reflective of earlier, static views of ecology rather than modern ecology's ideas of tempered chaos. In other words, "the ought they are deriving represents only a part of nature's is, as science understands it." Faithful interpretations of Darwinism in environmental ethics not only keep these considerations in mind, but also rely on the key themes that are found in evolution: "animal-human kinship, the ethical status on nonsentient nature, and the issue of anthropocentrism."

Sideris presents an interpretation of natural selection and its various implications and uses it as a lens to judge the appropriateness and practical efficacy of formulations of ethics in ecotheology and environmental ethics.

Sideris examines ecofeminist views, specifically those of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sallie McFague, which claim to be informed by science but are rather

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45 Ibid. The "radical message" is in reference to Stephen Jay Gould: "Evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould has written that the 'stumbling block' to widespread acceptance of Darwinism lies less in comprehending the scientific details of the theory than it does in the radical message of Darwinian science, namely, 'its challenge to a set of entrenched Western attitudes that we are not yet ready to abandon.'" Ibid., 11, quoting Stephen Jay Gould, Ever Since Darwin (New York: Norton, 1979), 12.

46 Ibid., 12.

47 Ibid., 27.

48 Ibid., 38.
incompatible with scientific understandings of nature. For Sideris, Ruether and McFague blur the distinction between “an ethic derived from nature and one extended to nature.”\(^{49}\) In the former case, Ruether attempts to isolate an overly harmonious ecological view of nature as the human-nature ideal, and in the latter, McFague extends a Christian ethic to nature, also emphasizing a harmonious ecological view. Both, according to Sideris, “present nature in a non-Darwinian, romanticized light, echoing and affirming older, often pre-Darwinian perspectives, while glossing over elements of what I have described as the components of an evolutionary perspective.”\(^{50}\)

These positions present an ethical extension in both directions, to and from nature and (Christian) society, which Sideris sees as unrealistic and incompatible with science. The same lens is applied to Jürgen Moltmann, John Cobb, and Charles Birch, who, in their desire to overturn mechanistic philosophy and create an organismic model, “embrace a type of theistic evolution that is not representative of Darwin’s theory but provides a better fit with the theological orientations they espouse.”\(^{51}\) The biggest flaw in Birch and Cobb’s theological perspectives on nature, for Sideris, is in how they “present ethical guidelines for our treatment of all life that, like McFague’s ethic, could not be applied to the natural world without causing serious disruption to the very processes of evolution and ecology they claim to take seriously.”\(^{52}\) This is the double burden of unrealistic interpretations of nature and unrealistic formulations toward nature, or, essentially, faulty descriptions and prescriptions. Efforts to save, redeem, or liberate

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 92.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 93.
nonhuman life are incompatible with both evolutionary theory and the human place in nature for Sideris.

Sideris also examines misuses of Darwinian theory within environmental ethics, specifically by Peter Singer and Tom Regan. She criticizes the two of being “happy to invoke a Darwinian account of our kinship and psychophysical similarity with animals in order to correct biases against animals; however, they prefer not to let an evolutionary perspective interfere with their belief in the rights of the individual organism and their characterization of suffering as an evil to be eradicated.” She criticizes how they too selectively draw on evolutionary theory, especially in highlighting common faculties between humans in animals in effort to extend morality to them because of shared traits. In the process, however, they overlook the implications of competition and violence in nature, which is especially salient when considering wild animals. Singer and Regan are more concerned with individual animals than species, and Sideris draws on the Midgley-Callicott paradigm to critique their positions.

Sideris notes how “Singer and (especially) Regan are adamantly unconcerned with the moral status of \textit{larger} aggregates of beings such as species or ecosystems,” which runs counter to the holistic themes of interdependence and species that are important to her position. Interestingly, Sideris draws attention to the division that is often seen between environmental and animal ethics, primarily instigated and addressed by Baird Callicott, yet she still refers to Peter Singer and Tom Regan as “environmental ethicists” in an unqualified manner. “The rift that exists” she writes,

\footnote{Ibid., 133.}

\footnote{Ibid.}
“between animal rights/liberation arguments on the one hand and holistic, ecocentric environmentalism (such as land ethics) on the other is also an important theme.”

She expands, “As I have already suggested, Regan and Singer resist an ethical focus on aggregates and communities of beings. They acknowledge that animal rights and liberation arguments do not mix well with holistic approaches that seek to preserve a biotic community, sometimes at the expense of individual lives.”

Sideris refers to them as environmental ethicists because she claims they occasionally address the whole of nature: “Nonetheless, Singer and Regan attempt in different ways to apply their arguments to nature as a whole (that is, not just to animals in factory farms, laboratories, or other cultural contexts).” However, environmental ethicists or not, she rejects these attempts and places them in the same category as ecotheologians: “Try as they might to formulate an environmental ethic, their arguments, like those of ecotheologians, remain largely incompatible with evolutionary realities because they focus on the humanlike capacities of animals (sentience, psychological complexity, subjecthood) and give primacy to individual organisms.”

The problems that Sideris finds in Singer and Regan seem to confirm the critiques of Callicott and others, a debate with which she is well aware. “One of the leading journals in this area,” she summarizes, “Environmental Ethics, has featured essays about the incompatibility of animal liberation and environmental ethics since its inception; much discussion has been devoted to the difficulties of constructing

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55 Ibid., 134.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
environmental approaches upon a concern with animal sentience and rights. The recognition that these movements are often at cross-purposes is as old as the field of environmental ethics itself.” In light of her understanding of this division and her critiques, it seems that the continued description of Peter Singer and Tom Regan as “environmental ethicists” turns out to be more of a rhetorical effort to meet the conditions of the title of the book rather than a critique of environmental ethics, since they seemingly violate her own classification of holistic environmental ethics.

Sideris’s inclusion of Singer and Regan as representatives of environmental ethics is ultimately an uncharitable categorization of their positions. She sides strongly with the Midgley-Callicott paradigm that was initiated by Callicott in order to overcome this schism. Though Callicott believes with good reason that environmental and animal ethics can work well together in the Midgley-Callicott paradigm, a distinction must still be made between holistic and more individualistic “environmental ethicists” if one is to criticize the field. The more conventional “environmental ethicists” that she cites are those secular theorists that she most relies on, Holmes Rolston and Baird Callicott. These theorists are more representative of the common conception of the field that she is supposedly criticizing. If she were critiquing these figures, then her constant claim that some environmental ethicists do not take natural selection seriously would be more legitimate.

Nevertheless, to counter these misuses and misunderstandings of Darwin in ecotheology and “environmental ethics,” Sideris calls on the theories of the land ethicists, Mary Midgley, and James Gustafson, which she sees as more reflective of the

[^59]: Ibid.
implications and nature of evolution and “far more consistent with natural science and provid[ing] a much more appropriate perspective from which to discern the proper role of humans in protecting natural environments.” She summarizes how land ethics can correct the misuses of ecotheology and certain versions of environmental ethics: “In land ethics, our ethical obligations to nature do not include eradicating the causes of suffering that are natural. Concepts of health and suffering should be understood within the context of natural processes, including evolution.” She continues, “Although the desire to heal environments whose health has been compromised by human actions points to a worthy imperative, natural process[es] themselves cannot be seen as wrong, evil, or in need of redemption in an eschatological sense.” Land ethics is, in turn, combined with theocentric ethics, form a more appropriate portrayal of nature in ethics for Sideris: “Theocentric ethics and land ethics recognize the conflict of values and the inevitability of tragedy that are part of nature and that follow from taking natural processes seriously.” This feeds into her constructive chapter that seeks to build a “comprehensive naturalized ethic.”

Sideris’s comprehensive naturalized ethic maintains that “scientific knowledge must play a central role in the process of discerning our ethical obligations” while recognizing that ethics do not “follow directly from evolutionary and ecological

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60 Ibid., 169.
61 Ibid., 200.

62 Ibid., 215. Sideris interestingly claims that theocentric ethics can be practiced by those that do not believe in God: “A secular orientation may be generally compatible with a theocentric orientation without understanding consent to the powers that sustain us and all life as a religious movement or a leap of “faith.” Ibid., 227.
considerations.” Building on this and her foundation of land and theocentric ethics, Sideris retains the ecotheological concept of love and its potential in being extended “toward nature and animals…provided that the ethic is qualified in important ways.” In this, she reiterates a less interventionist perspective toward nature “that recognizes the reality of evolutionary kinship with animals as a partial basis for love, while acknowledging that we need to be discriminating in how we extend such an ethic…continuity and sameness between humans and animals is not sufficiently discriminating.” Throughout this section, she relies heavily on Midgley’s concept of the mixed community, especially in addressing kinship with animals and making subtle and complex distinctions between various social and ecological claims.

In setting this framework of her naturalized ethic, Sideris relies on the work of Aldo Leopold, Holmes Rolston, Baird Callicott, James Gustafson, and Mary Midgley. She seeks to retain the important qualities of love and interdependence found in ecotheology while emphasizing Midgley’s point that “ethical choices involve us in a process of ranking values, of relating parts to wholes, individuals to communities, and the conflicts that inhere in those choices are never entirely resolved.” Sideris ultimately maintains that there is no simple, single approach to environmental ethics. While harmony and interdependence are important in nature, there are real conflicts that must be acknowledged, and ethics must deal with this. For this we must understand human nature and our place in nature, which should be informed by Darwin and natural

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63 Ibid., 217.
64 Ibid., 218.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 224.
selection. Drawing on Gustafson, Sideris closes by advising that the ambiguous answers that we give in moral deliberation must begin with the questions: “‘Good for who?’ ‘Good for what?’”

Midgley, the Mixed Community, and a Naturalized Ethic

In constructing a naturalized ethic and deconstructing ecotheology and environmental ethics that misrepresent evolutionary theory, Lisa Sideris sides with Midgley. Sideris summarizes how helpful Midgley is in this Darwinian perspective: “As philosopher Mary Midgley has tirelessly argued, the critique of anthropocentrism is a Darwinian critique, and yet the myths of both science and religion continually marginalize this perspective.” She agrees with Midgley in how the myths of science have built up humans as the center of creation in a misuse of evolutionary theory, the concept that Midgley calls the “escalator fallacy” in *Evolution as a Religion* and elsewhere. They are, in turn, allies in campaigning for proper conceptions of ethics in the light of naturalized understandings of human nature and science.

In her analysis and critique of misuses of natural selection in environmental ethics, Sideris discusses the charge of speciesism that is leveled toward humans by Peter Singer as an injustice on par with racism. For Sideris, like Midgley, it is important that humans are seen in continuity with nature and other animals, but she stresses that there must be a graded and discriminating scale with real distinctions between species.

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67 Ibid., 267.

68 Ibid., 42. Sideris quotes from Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 147: “Evolution, in these prophecies, figures as a single, continuous linear process of improvement. In the more modest form in which some biologists have used it, the process was confined to the development of life-forms on this planet. But it is now increasingly often extended to do something much vaster—to cover the whole development of the universe from the Big Bang onward to the end of time—a change of scale that would be quite unthinkable if serious biological notions of evolution were operating.
Sideris sides with Midgley in arguing that species is a real category that requires distinctions, whereas racism is a constructed category that has no biological significance. She summarizes Midgley’s position from *Animals and Why They Matter*:

“Races among humans do not have biological reality—all humans can interbreed; genetic differences are insignificant, dissimilarities are superficial. For this reason, differential treatment of humans due to specious classification of ‘race membership’ is unethical, but the same cannot be said about the concept of species.” She continues, “Unlike racial classifications, distinctions drawn between species are not trivial or meaningless: they are real and crucial. The term *species* marks a boundary between animals that cannot (or do not) interbreed, that occupy distinct niches and are adapted to their surroundings in particular ways, morphologically and behaviorally.” She also adds that knowledge of one’s race requires no differentiated treatment, whereas knowledge of one’s species is vital in understanding what is good and also what is harmful for them.

Along the same lines, Sideris responds to the animal liberationist argument against favoring one’s own species. Again drawing from Midgley’s discussion of the mixed community, she writes: “Indeed, preference for one’s own species appears to be biologically rooted, a form of natural bonds within species.” Though this is a strong biological disposition, humans and other animals have the capacity to expand these bonds to others, which constitutes elements of the mixed community. “This does not mean,” Sideris writes, “that species barriers prevent members of one species from

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69 Ibid., 163.

70 Ibid., 164.
having any regard for those of another. Many species of animals show some ability to extend their social instincts and sympathies to those beyond the barrier. It is partly because of social instincts that human domestication of animals has been so successful and, at times, even beneficial to humans and animals.”

Sideris expands on Midgley’s ideas of the mixed community, noting that “an endorsement of moral obligations toward other animals need not imply that we have the same obligations toward them that we have toward humans,” a qualification Sideris believes animal liberationists overlook. Moreover, “we may not even have the same moral obligations to all nonhuman animals. Details of obligations will depend upon several factors: the kind of animal in question (e.g., the species of animal, its biological needs), the context in which moral claims arise (for instance, wild and nonwild situation), and our particular relationship to the animal in question.” Sideris here expands on the ways in which human and animal relationality functions within Midgley’s conception of the mixed community in contrast with rationalist morality, which is very much in line with her own normative system of naturalized ethics.

In her constructive chapter on “A Comprehensive Naturalized Ethic,” Sideris relies heavily on Mary Midgley and the mixed community. She classifies Midgley’s positions as “more promising as a basis for an environmental ethic that considers intraspecies bonding as an important factor,” though she still “acknowledges that her claims about bonds between humans and other animals imply that there are limits to

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 165.
how far we can extend our social bonds beyond our own species.” In this and the other elements of her ethics of human and animal nature, Sideris believes that Midgley is more nuanced and has a more complex position than E.O. Wilson and others. She revisits Midgley's ideas on the species bond, especially the strong tendencies toward our own kind that can also stretch to others, which is a Darwinian understanding of the roots of altruism. In some cases, this can even mean favoring other species over certain members of our own. “Species preference,” Sideris writes, “is far from absolute for many animals. Some species, including humans, will fail to recognize members of their own species as such (a phenomenon Midgley refers to as pseudo speciation), while including other animal species as part of their community.” She continues on the features of Midgley’s mixed community: “Animals that live in social groups requiring a certain amount of cohesiveness and cooperation can more readily extend social bonds to include other species than can solitary animals. Humans seem to have a particularly strong tendency to reach out to other animals, but some nonhuman animals express similar behavior, deliberately choosing the company of others—including humans—that lie beyond the species barrier.” The mixed community is vital to Sideris’s comprehensive naturalized ethic, as reflected in her use of these core elements of Midgley’s concept.

For Sideris, our instincts toward bond-forming with other animals derive from Midgley’s “open instincts” distinction, which allows room for integrating others into the complexities of human sociality: “The openness of human social instincts makes it much more likely for us to view other species as equals rather than as objects to be exploited.”

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74 Ibid., 236.
75 Ibid., 237.
76 Ibid.
more possible to develop bonds with many other kinds of animals. As Midgley notes, such practices as owning pets and training animals would be far more difficult to initiate, and perhaps even impossible, if this were not true.”

Sideris is quick to note that there is nothing inherently oppressive or unnatural about domestication because of this two-way connection with animals, however, like any other relationships, human-animal relationships can become unjust and oppressive, a dynamic with which Midgley is also concerned.

Sideris relates these biological components of the mixed community to the concept of neoteny, or the retention of juvenile traits and characteristics by adults of a species, something humans strongly display. Though these traits may often be physical, the mental ones such as curiosity and playfulness linger in human adults as a result of the flexibility of our open instincts where some animals may become more constricted by closed instincts. This phenomenon is an important characteristic for Midgley in enabling the mixed community. Sideris relates Midgley's discussion of social instincts and neoteny in the mixed community to naturalized ethics: "What do these biological arguments regarding interrelationship and innate responses imply about ethics? Neoteny and natural social bonds may be primary means by which we reach out to other species and take an ongoing interest in them.”

Sideris here distinguishes between the domestic animals of the mixed community and wild animals of the biotic community. She takes a stance similar to Callicott's in which the division between wild and non-wild is extremely significant and places us in

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77 Ibid., 239.
78 Ibid., 240.
an altered ethical relationship. She frames the question, “Once certain species became domesticated (particularly dogs and cats), relationships of bonding and even love became the norm. But what does our evolutionary heritage tell us about what human relationships are, or ought to be, with *wild* species of animals?"\textsuperscript{79} She illustrates the division: “Here it seems we have to supplement our natural bonding inclination with other kinds of considerations. Whereas we may be free to indulge our feelings of sympathy and affection for domestic animals and pets, we need to think more carefully about how we express these feelings toward animals in the wild. We do not possess wild animals in the way we possess pets."\textsuperscript{80} Like Callicott, Sideris then advises a noninterventionist position that brackets off wild from domestic animals: “It seems that where wild animals are concerned our natural feelings and our capacities to bond with other species must be channeled into some other kind of ethic, something less possessive and more detached, something less likely to interfere with their lives and their natural trajectories.”\textsuperscript{81} In this she recommends that the core elements of the mixed community are helpful for understanding wild animals, but they are still firmly located in the biotic community.

Sideris returns to morality within the mixed community: “Possessing an ability to sympathize with other creatures, to recognize their suffering, is also no guarantee that those creatures will be well-treated, since even exploitation requires sympathy, Midgley points out.”\textsuperscript{82} She importantly notices that “the biological fact of our interdependence

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 241.

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 240-1.
with other life-forms, including the genetic basis for kinship, does not issue in a straightforward, natural ethic. The relationship between the facts and the ethic is more complex than a simple conformity to nature."\textsuperscript{83} She attributes this awareness to Mary Midgley’s sophisticated naturalism. “Midgley makes an important point” she states, “about our ability to construct an ethic that takes our ‘nature’ into account but does not simply default to our nature (much less our genes) as some sort of infallible guide to conduct. Her basic argument is echoed by Rolston’s proposal that humans occupy the world intellectually and morally as well as biologically.”\textsuperscript{84}

Sideris hopes to uncover what we are to do with this instinctual response to animals and nature in her comprehensive naturalized ethic. She writes that Rolston, Gustafson, and Midgley hold comprehensive naturalized ethics in this regard. “Human beings,” she summarizes, “seem to have a basic response to nature that often involves feelings of love, respect, or awe. But this response must be subjected to scrutiny because it does not necessarily tell us what to do and may lead us to respond in ways that are inappropriate in a given context.”\textsuperscript{85} She is aware of this important distinction, qualifying her naturalism with reflexivity. Gustafson, Midgley, and Rolston,” she continues, “suggest that we are able to stand back from our ‘innate’ or prereflexive responses and consider whether or not they are appropriate. Part of our ‘nature’ as products of an evolutionary past may be reflected in their responses, but it is also in our

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 242.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 245.
nature to reflect upon these relations. In responding to nature and animals with an ethic of love, we need to deliberate about it, contextualize it, and qualify it.\footnote{Ibid.}

This quote represents the core of Sideris’s naturalized ethic—an integration of elements from Rolston and Callicott’s land ethics, Gustafson’s theocentric ethics, Midgley’s mixed community. On top of this she places an ethic of love, which is more in line with ecotheology than with Midgley, though she feels that Midgley expresses this through her ideas of bonding and caring. She agrees with Midgley in the significant claim of the mixed community, which is that it is in our nature to bond, and this usually characterized by some form of love. Whether or not Midgley can be said to maintain a love ethic, Sideris utilizes Midgley’s conception of human nature in moral deliberation, which is “far more subtle and complex than many biologically based accounts of human morality…Our capacities for reason and reflection are not separate from our ‘nature,’ they do not impose an alien order on our passions and instincts but are rather one part of our nature and continuous with the rest.”\footnote{Ibid., 248.}

These capacities and motivations in our moral thinking are pluralistic, complex, and at times come into conflict. Thus “we must negotiate between conflicting values—our bonds and attachments to other living beings, our own self-interest and desire—and choose our course of action, but the controller and the controlled in us are part of the same whole.”\footnote{Ibid., 249.} In these cases, “the best we can do is to reflect at length upon all these values and arrive at some means of ranking them. Human intelligence has evolved in response to the conflict in the world around us and the world within us, producing our
own incompatible desires.” Sideris caps this off by reiterating that “in our responses to natural environments our effort to make decisions that will produce ‘good’ outcomes is, or ought to be, constrained by natural processes themselves and by a recognition that, as human beings, our moral reasoning is inherently fraught with ambiguity.”

In concluding her naturalized ethic, Sideris surprisingly upholds an interpretation of the mixed and biotic communities that reflects Callicott’s exaggerated characterization of Leopold and Midgley: “Wild animals are members of a biotic community; domestic animals belong to what Midgley and Callicott refer to as the ‘mixed community,’ falling within a ‘spectrum of graded moral standing’ that includes ‘family members, neighbors, fellow citizens, fellow human beings, pets, and other domestic animals.’ She appropriately notes that a sharp distinction cannot always be recognized between wild and domestic, but domestic animals hold a similarity of context with humans and are part of human culture. Lastly, she highlights that “land ethics, in keeping with its evolutionary and ecological underpinnings, does not aim at ensuring the well-being of each organism in the biotic community, an ethic toward this mixed community does care for individuals.” In bringing together our sympathies for both wild and domestic animals, Sideris follows Callicott in constructing a comprehensive system for mediating our natural instincts toward each other and nonhuman nature, drawing on the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics.

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89 Ibid., 249-50.
90 Ibid., 250.
91 Ibid., 259.
92 Ibid., 260.
Midgley and Naturalized Ethics

Mary Midgley’s work, especially on the mixed community, is foundational for Lisa Sideris’s critique of ecotheology and environmental ethics and her comprehensive naturalized ethic. Midgley provides Sideris with the tools to deconstruct faulty interpretations and misrepresentations of evolution, something with which Midgley has often quarreled, especially in *Evolution as a Religion*. Sideris relies on Gustafson along with the land ethicists and perplexingly perpetuates Callicott’s bifurcated understanding of domestic and wild animals in mixed and biotic communities, which qualifies her application of the mixed community. Midgley’s concept of the mixed community is especially valuable for Sideris not only because it provides a way for conceptualizing human-animal relations, but also because of the critique of rationalistic morality in its foundational framework. In this, she relies on Midgley in pursuit of an ethics that is properly founded on evolutionary theory. The mixed community is then a valuable resource for this purpose and an appropriate utilization of natural selection that contrasts with its misuse by ecotheologians and certain environmental ethicists.

Anna Peterson and Human Nature

In *Being Human*, Anna Peterson looks at what it means to be human in various traditions and how these ideas of humanness shape ethical practices. These ideas are deeply ingrained within complex and multifaceted narratives about the interrelated meanings of “nature” and “human nature,” which are slippery concepts with multiple, and sometimes contested and controversial meanings. Peterson critiques those narratives that lead to domination and harm while drawing attention to those that offer

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promising stances toward nature. She ultimately creates a balanced and pluralistic approach to humanness that utilizes a variety of beneficial social and ecological narratives with inputs ranging from Buddhism and Taoism to evolutionary science and ecofeminism with significant contributions from Mary Midgley along the way.

Peterson takes a similar approach to religion and environmental ethics as Max Oelschlaeger, though she diverges from the philosopher at key points. Like Oelschlaeger, Peterson believes that religion cannot simply be ignored in contemporary environmental philosophy. Religion is too ubiquitous and too powerful in the lives of believers to be sidestepped or ignored in broader discussions of ethics and human nature. Rather, Oelschlaeger and Peterson seek to draw out what is positive and can be useful within religious traditions (primarily Christianity in Oelschlaeger’s case) as a front against the tide of anthropocentric, utilitarian individualism. However, in Oelschlaeger’s use of the “caring for creation” metaphor, Peterson points out that he never really address how important conceptions of human nature are in dealing with nature or ethics in general.

Baird Callicott corrects Oelschlaeger’s oversight, but seeks to universalize a new postmodern ecological and evolutionary narrative. Peterson’s critique of Callicott highlights this problem in an important passage:

Because he wants a single ethic rather than many disparate ones, he isolates elements of ethics embedded in unique cultures and places—a view of human nature here, a commitment to stewardship there—and merges them into a single, hybrid philosophy. The problem is that when different elements of worldviews or ethics are separated from their ecological, historical, cultural, and narrative settings, they rarely hold together, philosophically or practically. Much of their power, in other words, comes precisely from their embeddedness in particular contexts, histories, and stories. To understand and utilize religion in ecological action, then, perhaps what we need is less a single environmental ethic than new
This passage highlights not only a critique of contemporary perspectives on environmental ethics and religion, but also draws out Peterson’s general approach in the following chapters. Much of her emphasis is on stories or narratives as the norm-making power in our lives: “For ethics, this means that narratives not only describe events but also shape them, via moral claims woven into the story itself: a critique of some actions, praise for others, models of admirable personhood, a vision of how things ought to be and even how they might in fact come to be.” Narrative both explains what it means to be human and how to act as humans.

Peterson applies this lens to Western narratives about nature and science, which primarily stem from Christianity. In a similar vein as Lynn White and others, she highlights how the Christian tradition has tended toward a “not of the world” perspective while neglecting or dominating this world. The common assumption is that there is “a singular and impassable barrier between humans, on the one hand, and the rest of creation, on the other.” In other words, the view that “humans are the only animal with some essential trait lacking in all other animals and setting people not only apart from but also above them.” This is not only common to Christianity, but also wider Western thought, as the Enlightenment simply “shifted the emphasis from reason as the

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95 Ibid., 18.
96 Ibid., 28.
97 Ibid., 2.
transcendent source of human uniqueness to reason as the uniquely human expression of the transcendent.” This generally exemplifies what Karen Warren highlights as the “logic of domination,” a value laden assumption that claims that the other is not only different, but inferior. Peterson ultimately claims that this can be overcome, and that “hope for an adequate Christian environmental ethic depends on the possibility of transformation, practical as well as theoretical, in Christian notions of what it means to be human and, particularly, to live as a human being in the created world.”

Much like Midgley, Peterson seeks to tear down the rationalist and religious barriers to animal ethics. Peterson finds examples of positive approaches to nature in such sources as Buddhism, Taoism, and various Native American traditions. In the case of Eastern religions, there is especially a challenge to the liberal individualism of Western ethics. “In the cases of Buddhism and Taoism,” she writes, “central ideas, especially concerning the relational self, not only provide a basis for greater awareness of human dependence on the natural world but also shape foundational behavior.”

There is also a critique of anthropocentrism and autonomous dis-embeddedness in Native American traditions. Peterson writes, “On a symbolic and ideological level, being native means that one’s personal and cultural identity is tied up with a particular place, with its geographic features and, as many Native American traditions suggest, the well-being of the nonhuman persons that share it. In this, she looks favorably on Richard Nelson’s

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98 Ibid., 38.
99 Ibid., 50.
100 Ibid., 99.
101 Ibid., 125.
idea that one should “not attempt to achieve orthodoxy or enlightenment or even sophisticated mimicry,” but he or she can utilize these narratives “to express the fundamental canons of restraint, humility, and respect toward the natural world.”

Peterson builds on the insights of these traditions by utilizing feminist and constructivist critiques of Western religion and rationality. She supports the wider claims of constructionism, drawing attention to the traditional downplaying of the body and embeddedness in the West, as Midgley has often criticized. However, she advocates a “soft” or “chastened” constructionism, “which acknowledges the complex mutual shaping between humans and nature,” and avoids the extreme constructivist position that grants humans the status of “special creation” just as strongly as those traditions that constructivism critiques. For Peterson, the inputs of constructionism are valid and helpful if taken moderately with a balance of naturalism and a grasp of our biological limits. Understanding constructionism in this way can help us change our perceptions of the natural world. She reiterates that “only a recognition that interpretations of nature are culturally mediated and varied can makes us aware of alternatives to established ways of thinking about the nonhuman world and our relations to it.”

In tandem with the balanced critique of constructivism, Peterson affirms feminist critiques that highlight the particular, concrete embeddedness of humans, relationality, and contextualized knowledge. She draws especially on certain aspects of feminist ethics that are helpful in conceptualizing our relationship to nature and other humans, including “the emphasis on concrete relationships, attention to the importance of context

103 Ibid., 151.
104 Ibid., 64.
to ethical thinking, explorations of the narrative dimension of ethics, and reconceptualizations of human nature. All these themes are central to environmental ethics in general and especially to ecological feminist approaches."¹⁰⁵ Ultimately, these come together in Peterson’s sensible and balanced claim that: “We are natural and ecological, as well as social, animals, partially constituted by historical and social relations and conditions, including those tied to gender, and by relations with nonhuman nature.”¹⁰⁶

This nuanced position between the extremes of scientific naturalism and social constructivism strikes a chord that is lacking in many of the polarizing debates in environmental ethics and follows in the tradition of Mary Midgley and others in offering rounded and sophisticated synthesis of concepts that are often made to seem dualistic or mutually exclusive. Likewise, Midgley’s value in ethical theory has been recognized by many. However, it is possible that her balanced approach, like many well-reasoned authors, often results only in a cursory reference in the process of critiquing or siding with more extreme and polarizing theorists.

Peterson systematically advocates a similarly balanced and well-reasoned look at the competing claims and stories that we confront. We should strive for a chastened constructionism, a tempered vision of utopia, and new or revised narratives that will beneficially shape our ecological and social ethics. She writes, “These dimensions come together—not always but often and in especially powerful ways—in narratives. The moral landscape, like physical landscapes, is storied. We live both in and through

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 138.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 149.
the tales we hear, tell, and retell.” Peterson concludes that perhaps an understanding of these concepts can enrich and change not only religious approaches to nature, but also the various secular traditions and narratives that compete within environmental ethics.

Mary Midgley, Human Nature, and Ethics

Throughout Being Human, Peterson draws on Mary Midgley in constructing a balanced and naturalized understanding of human nature. She first draws on her as an ally in combating reductionism and extreme forms of social constructionism. In an effort to characterize how certain forms of social constructionism shift determinism from the biological to the social end of the spectrum, Peterson pulls from Midgley's key term in Beast and Man: “This is what Mary Midgley calls the ‘blank paper’ theory of human nature, the claim that humans, unlike other animals, have no instincts or other internal forces shaping their behavior but instead are entirely determined by the circumstances in which they are born and develop.” This is very much influenced by the fear of biological determinism. However, biological determinism cannot be seen as the real problem, as culture itself is a product of biology, as Midgley points out. It is actually the fear of biological fatalism that is warranted, and both Midgley and Peterson agree that it is to be combated, but not with extreme social constructionism.

Understanding that we have a nature is not only important in balancing approaches to human nature, but is also vital in determining human goods, resisting injustice, and challenging oppressive social norms, which Peterson recognizes: “Mary

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107 Ibid., 233.
108 Ibid., 57.
Midgley notes more concisely that the blank-paper theory cannot explain why people resist doing things they are culturally conditioned to do.”\textsuperscript{109} Further, social constructionism is unduly critical of environmentalists in holding that their overriding concern for nature exhausts their moral capacities on environmental concerns, misanthropically overlooking human concerns due to their preoccupation with other matters. This, for Peterson, is wrong in its faulty conception of the limits of morality. Drawing from Midgley’s oft-quoted metaphor, she counters this criticism: “Challenging this assumption, Mary Midgley writes, ‘Compassion does not need to be treated hydraulically[,]…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.’”\textsuperscript{110} Peterson maintains that social constructionism can be useful for a number of areas because of its incisive social critique: “We should value insights into the social construction of identity precisely because they enable us to question ‘givens’ such as the presumed opposition between compassion for humans, on the one hand, and compassion for nonhumans or the environment, on the other.”\textsuperscript{111} With the help of Midgley and others, Peterson delineates the benefits and limits of social constructionism in light of a more thorough and balanced understanding of human nature and morality.

Peterson draws on more aspects of Midgley work in her chapter on “Evolution, Ecology, and Ethics.” In analyzing various biological explanations of altruism, Peterson

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 68, quoting Midgley, \textit{Animals and Why They Matter}, 31.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
speaks of Midgley’s Darwinian explanation of the expansion of kinship practices to others. “Mary Midgley suggests a modified theory of non-kin altruism based on the model of parental care developed by ethologist Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt,” Peterson explains. She continues, “All animals who behave altruistically, Midgley points out, already care for and protect their young. Non-kin altruism simply supposes the extension of this sort of care to other adults…In other words, once a tendency or behavior emerges, it can extend beyond its original context as long as this extension does not damage the individual’s adaptive advantage.”\textsuperscript{112} Peterson points out through Midgley that this rise of altruism through genetic and/or cultural means should hardly be surprising if seen as an extension of such a strong instinct as parental care: “As Midgley points out, parental care must be a very strong motivation in order to inspire the great effort and sacrifice required to raise young. It is thus likely to shape individuals’ behavior outside the context in which it originally emerged.”\textsuperscript{113} This is counter to Midgley’s opponents such as Dawkins that downplay altruism and cooperation in favor of an overemphasis on egoism and competition.

In a closer examination of human and animal nature, Peterson looks at the discussion of Midgley and others on the difference and continuity between humans and other species: “Far from the image of a unitary animal nature, ethology reveals, as Midgley puts it, that ‘every existing animal species has its own nature, its own hierarchy of instincts—in a sense, its own virtues.’”\textsuperscript{114} This is a push against the positions that separate humans and animals and further abstract animals as a homologous and

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 171, quoting Midgley, \textit{Beast and Man}, 47.
flattened out mass of species, devoid of their own characteristic natures which accompany specific species. Midgley is an excellent resource here as her discussion of the mixed community is very much influenced by the similarities and distinctions among species. Human and other species are all quite distinct and different, but also very similar. “The message of ethology,” she writes, “we might summarize, borrowing from Midgley once again, is that many nonhuman animals are ‘much less different from men than we have supposed. (There is still plenty of difference, but it is a different difference.)’” Peterson goes on to summarize that “the difference in the difference, we might say, is the shift from a clear and impassable wall to a continuum with fuzzy boundaries and innumerable areas of overlap.”115 This is a core element of the mixed community that Midgley develops throughout her work.

Peterson recognizes that conceptions of human and animal nature are largely dependent on interpretations of evolution, much as Sideris also stresses in drawing on Midgley. However, the prominence of evolutionary theory in explaining life and behavior carries the burden of being open to distortion and misuse. Peterson highlights some of these distortions, siding with Midgley both against the Social Darwinist view of a hyper-competitive “survival of the fittest” and against the escalator fallacy, which holds that evolution has human-centered aims such as intelligence. Peterson undercuts the Social Darwinist position: “Thus, Midgley writes, we cannot insist that it is better to be ‘a wolf than a polar bear, a jackdaw than a wandering albatross, or a human than any of them.’ Such assertions lead her to ask ‘What test have the lives of these creatures failed? The answer, though embarrassing, seems simple—they have failed to become more like

115 Ibid., quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, 25.
ours.” She continues, “Understanding *fit* as a synonym for *human*, in short, grossly misreads evolutionary theory. It is Social Darwinism on the scale of species rather than economic class.”¹¹⁶ Likewise the escalator fallacy leads to similarly aggrandizing views of humans that can legitimate a number of injustices: “Most instances of the escalator fallacy seek to justify human domination over the rest of nature because we have, presumably, achieved a higher stage of development than all other creatures.”¹¹⁷

Peterson advocates a balanced approach that utilizes evolutionary theory in a critical and cautious manner in order to draw out the most appropriate conclusions for ethics while avoiding its pitfalls: “We need to find ways to move from evolutionary theory, as a general description of how the world works, to ethical reasoning and judgment. We must step cautiously, hedging our bets and taking the long way around, but we must look for a way.”¹¹⁸ A useful guide in this project is Midgley, as Peterson emphasizes: “In this effort, the work of Mary Midgley is invaluable…Midgley explores sociobiology’s claims about human nature, the opposition to these claims, and the philosophical implications of this debate. She begins with a conviction that evolutionary theory, including sociobiology and its parent field of ethology, makes ‘very useful contributions to the enquiry about the difficult subject of human motives.’”¹¹⁹ Peterson recognizes the tension Midgley highlights within science and behaviorist skepticism. She writes, “Most social scientists and humanists, however, react defensively and ‘retreat from the whole subject behind the species barrier’ at any suggestion that

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¹¹⁷ Ibid., 266, n. 34, in reference to Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion*.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 173.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.
evolution bears on their disciplines.”¹²⁰ This again relates to the dramas that can take over scientific theories: “Midgley acknowledges that this retreat stems in part from the crude and provocative language used by some sociobiologists, their apparent celebration of the endless competition among ‘selfish’ organisms making ‘investments’ for their own individual advantage.”¹²¹

Echoing Midgley, Peterson urges that we reevaluate our position of human exceptionalism and take seriously the findings of animal studies that point toward our commonalities with animals. In this, we must constantly check our assumptions and acknowledge the implications of evolutionary theory, starting with Midgley’s oft-quoted dictate: “First and foremost, Midgley writes, evolution tells us that ‘we are not just rather like animals; we are animals.’ This is the simplest and most self-evident but also the most profound and disturbing claim of Darwinism.”¹²² Additionally, in situating humans firmly within the story of evolution, Peterson draws on Midgley in firmly situating humans in the story of this planet, against the philosophical and theological traditions that seek to elevate humans to another plane: “In contrast to these dominant strands in Western thought, a number of alternative approaches argue that humans are fully and inescapably terrestrial, as Mary Midgley puts it.”¹²³ And further, again from Beast and Man: “Midgley also highlights this connection: ‘We are at home in this world because we were made for it.’ We have developed here, on this planet, and are adapted to live

¹²⁰ Ibid., quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, xv.
¹²¹ Ibid.
¹²² Ibid., quoting Midgley, Beast and Man, xxxiv.
¹²³ Ibid., 197.
here…We are not fit to live anywhere else.”

Peterson and Midgley are allies in their emphasis in embedding and embodying humans in their social and ecological contexts in a more unified conception of human nature.

In opposing the extreme skepticism of behaviorism and constructionism, Peterson draws on Midgley, perhaps the most vocal and critical opponent of behaviorism: “The fact that we cannot enter fully into their [animal] worlds does not mean that such worlds do not exist. ‘The world in which the kestrel moves, the world that it sees, is, and will always be, entirely beyond us,’ Midgley writes. This otherness, however, does not make other species or their worlds irrelevant to us: ‘That there are such worlds all around us is an essential feature of our world.’”

Others, including other species, are important to human life and we are, as Midgley’s mixed community reminds us, quite capable of understanding a great deal of the lives of others, including animals. This leads to Peterson’s ethical directive to act on this imaginative and creative ability to empathize: “Rethinking human nature means not only dethroning humans but also liberating other animals from their passive and mechanistic portrayal by Western rationalism.”

Later, in discussing Sharon Welch’s community models, Peterson expands on community by referencing the potential in Midgley’s mixed community. “While it is difficult to see the world through the perspective of other species, it need not be impossible. We can know nonhuman nature, to a significant though not full extent, because our senses serve as windows between our bodies and the outside world, and

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126 Ibid.
our bodies are not walls but semipermeable membranes.”¹²⁷ She continues, “The challenge of living with diverse people and diverse species calls us to attend to these signals, to engage the coresidents of our neighborhood, our bioregion, and our planet in conversations and shared work, to be open to the possibility of transformation. If we make room for nonhuman others and get to know them, we might be able to let the worlds they construct and inhabit transform our own worlds.”¹²⁸ This wonderful passage near the close of Peterson’s book represents a vision of community that is embodied and down to earth, living out ethics toward nonhuman nature very much in the sense of Midgley’s mixed community.

**Being Human**

Given Anna Peterson’s emphasis on presenting a balanced and naturalized approach to human nature, culture, and the natural world, it is not surprising that Mary Midgley is an important influence in *Being Human*. Peterson recognizes that Midgley’s emphasis on human nature, morality, and animals in *Beast and Man* and *Animals and Why They Matter* provides a rich source for combating scientific and cultural reductionism, which is crucial to our understanding of the various relations we have to others, including animals and the whole of nonhuman nature. Peterson and Midgley are allies in embedding humans in this natural context alongside other animals, emphasizing that our place in nature is in the narrative of biological and cultural evolution and situated in the mixed community. Midgley therefore works with rather than for Peterson.

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¹²⁷ Ibid., 237.
¹²⁸ Ibid.
The Mixed Community’s Value

Gustafson, Sideris, and Peterson have each recognized Midgley’s value and potential for religious studies. This value covers such important areas as human nature, social and ecological claims, human-animal relations, the role of science, interpretations of evolutionary theory, and a number of other valuable ways of naturalistically approaching ethics and religion. However, Midgley still faces opposition from some who believe she does not go far enough in establishing certain moral prescriptions in the mixed community such as vegetarianism. This is the contentious challenge that Gary Comstock takes up with Midgley, and is a result of Comstock’s reading of Callicott’s interpretation of the mixed community. The fact that Midgley herself is a vegetarian and does not condone meat-eating does not enter into his argument.

Gary Comstock: Criticism of the Mixed Community

Gary Comstock offers up a defense of vegetarianism based on personal narrative and philosophical and religious reflection in “Pigs and Piety: A Theocentric Perspective on Food Animals.” Comstock’s goal is not only to defend vegetarianism, but also, as he states quite honestly, to “convince you to adopt a specific stance toward food animals.” He presents himself as an aberrant vegetarian in the context of an Iowan Mennonite community and, after meandering through philosophical, biblical, theological, animal rights, and world religious perspectives on vegetarianism, decides that killing animals for food is immoral. This is his answer to his primary concern: “Is it in


130 Comstock, “Pigs and Piety,” 121.
God’s will to raise and eat pigs?” He is ultimately critical of the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics for condoning meat-eating.

Comstock points out that he abandoned meat-eating because of philosophical arguments rather than theological reasons. This is because, though the philosophical tradition on animals and the environment may not provide all the answers, it offers better challenges to meat-eating than biblical traditions and even other world religions that are generally considered amenable to vegetarianism. The Christian Bible is unhelpful for Comstock because of its ambiguity and context in relation to animals, as are the ambivalent teachings of other world religions and even the theocentric perspective of James Gustafson, who Comstock calls, “my teacher.”

Comstock creates his own theocentric perspective that is informed by environmental philosophy, one that values all life as having intrinsic value as part of God’s “good” creation. He bases this primarily on Paul Taylor’s “respect for nature” perspective. Though Comstock originally disagreed with Taylor because of his separation of domestic and wild animals, he ultimately sides with Taylor’s principles of respect, realizing that vegetarianism can follow from this approach. He summarizes: “Taylor argues for vegetarianism by pointing out that humans have taken over much more than their fair share of the globe. To return land to wild animals we should cultivate less ground, shrink our farms’ size, and probably concentrate them in one location so as to leave large tracts of wilderness. His reasoning seemed sound to me then, as it does now. And that is where I have come to rest, for the moment.”

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 131.
he concludes, “There are good reasons, of an environmentalist and theocentric sort, for opposing the eating of meat.”\textsuperscript{133}

Comstock employs environmental rather than animal rights argument for vegetarianism, though he diverges from the Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics. This divergence, however, seems entirely based on Baird Callicott’s reading of Mary Midgley rather than a primary reading of \textit{Animals and Why They Matter}, but it certainly raises important issues in her conception of the mixed community and Callicott’s interpretation, especially regarding vegetarianism. Comstock claims that Midgley’s mixed community does not go far enough in prescribing vegetarianism.

Comstock claims that Midgely and Callicott “have a similarly bifurcated attitude toward animals. They think wild animals should be left alone whereas domestic animals should be treated humanely—that is, maintained in good health until they are to be killed painlessly.”\textsuperscript{134} He goes on to say that “Midgley and Callicott seem to condone meat-eating as part of the long history of relations between humans and domestic animals.”\textsuperscript{135} To support this claim, he summarizes his reading of Midgley through Callicott: “Consider Midgley’s view. She approaches ethics from a biosocial perspective, and points out that we are members of nested communities, each of which has a different structure. According to our various roles in the various communities, we have various duties.”\textsuperscript{136} He goes on to delineate how, in these communities, we have duties first to family, then neighbors, then other humans, pets, etc. He further notes how

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 128.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 130.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
Callicott explicitly condones meat-eating, and admits that “reading environmental philosophy made me wonder whether my decision not to eat meat had been divorced from narratives, history, and common sense, in the worst way.”

He then departs from this tradition in environmental philosophy, recalling that Taylor presents an environmental perspective on vegetarianism that is more amenable to the theocentric position he is attempting to promote.

Comstock seems to grasp pieces of Midgley’s concept of the mixed community, but only through Callicott’s interpretation of it. He uses the terms “biosocial perspective” and “nested communities,” terms that only Callicott uses, along with others coinages, to summarize the mixed community, though Midgley herself never uses them. This indicates a simple reading of Midgley through Callicott rather than a primary reading of *Animals and Why They Matter*. Not only is this a partial and uncharitable read of Midgley, but it also overlooks the fact that Midgley is actually a vegetarian and does not condone meat-eating. She would no doubt disagree with Comstock’s criticism and would likely proscribe meat-eating in the mixed community.

In noticing the lack of proscription against meat-eating in Midgley through Callicott, Comstock highlights an important issue: meat-eating can be read into our out of the mixed community. The mixed community lends itself to a variety of interpretations of the relations, duties, and claims therein. This for some may imply vegetarianism and

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137 Ibid., 131.

138 Comstock certainly reads Midgley through J. Baird Callicott, “Animal Liberation and Environmental Ethics: Back Together Again,” in *The Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate: The Environmental Perspective*, ed. Eugene C. Hargrove (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 249-261. He does cite the mixed community chapter of *Animals and Why They Matter* in the endnotes, but this chapter can also be found in the same *Animal Rights/Environmental Ethics Debate* volume as the Callicott reading which, incidentally, was published in the same year as Comstock’s article.
for others, as in the cases of Callicott (positively) and Comstock (negatively), may legitimate the meat-eating that most domestic animals were cultivated to fulfill. The power and allure of Midgley’s concept of the mixed community is not just in its face value, which is strong, but also in its ambiguity. Various theorists have faithfully interpreted and utilized her work, especially the mixed community, but it is a concept, a theory. In this, its breadth and occasional vagueness lends itself to misunderstandings and misuses, and it is as susceptible to distortion much like any other important theory.

**Midgley and Religious Studies**

Mary Midgley is a significant theoretical ally for ecologically-focused religious studies scholars and ethicists. James Gustafson, a major figure in theological ethics, was the first to pick up on this valuable resource soon after the publication of *Beast and Man*, which he relied on heavily in formulating an embedded portrayal of human nature in a theocentric perspective. Though he wrote *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* before *Animals and Why They Matter* was published and the concept of the mixed community arrived, he later recognized the importance of it as well in *A Sense of the Divine*. Her influence is obvious in this work as well, aiding in his unified understanding of the human place in nature. In Gustafson’s lineage, Lisa Sideris also relies heavily on Midgley as well as the land ethicists. She especially draws on the mixed community, utilizing it in her comprehensive naturalized ethic. In another stream of religious studies, Anna Peterson uses concepts from several of Midgley’s works in constructing a picture of human nature and ethics that is very similar to Midgley’s rounded and well-reasoned portrayal: a biological and cultural view of humans in nature. Gary Comstock, however, in criticizing Midgley and Callicott, identifies an issue in the mixed community and the
Midgley-Callicott paradigm of environmental ethics, which is that meat-eating and a number of other practical issues can be read into or out of the mixed community.
It is a rare privilege that one has the opportunity to interview a major philosophical figure as the subject of their dissertation. The more likely scenario is that, by the time the subject’s ideas have been digested, understood, and disseminated, he or she has passed on and left us realizing what a brilliant thinker we have lost. This dissertation, fortunately, is another story, and I had the great honor of interviewing Midgley at her home in Newcastle, England over biscuits and coffee after a wonderful off-the-record conversation about religion, nature, and philosophy. The main purpose of this interview was to place the findings of this dissertation up against Midgley’s current thought on the mixed community, to ascertain her present perspective on the concept, and to discover where environmental ethics and religious studies should go from here with regards to the mixed community. In this chapter I present the narrative of this interview, the conclusions of which I will more fully explore in the final chapter.

I began the interview by asking Mary Midgley what she saw as the main themes or emphases of her general work. Her answer centered on human nature, embedding us as animals in the natural world: “Attention to human nature, I suppose, but in context where nature means a connection with nature as a whole. I suppose I started by insisting that we are animals and drawing the consequences from that that we are part of the natural world as a whole.”¹ As a side note here, she pointed out that changing social and natural contexts were also factors in determining her emphasis at any given time, a practice that continues to this day. “Since that time,” Midgley continued, “the

¹ Mary Midgley, interview by Gregory S. McElwain, March 6, 2011, Newcastle, United Kingdom. All citations from personal audio recording and transcription of interview.
danger to the nonhuman part of nature has become more striking, so I suppose I have
concentrated a bit more on that.” This reflects the overall unity in her work, which
focuses on different concepts at different times, yet always maintains the overarching
emphasis of humans as animals in relation to the natural world.

She then expanded on her career-long focus on crusading against the extremes
of reductionism, both on the physical and spiritual side of the equation. “The way in
which people were viewed when I started off seemed to be so unrealistic,” she began.
She expanded on the physical reductionism of behaviorism, which overemphasized
physical and mechanical explanations: “On the one hand, Behaviorist psychology was
suggesting that there are simply physical phenomena, that they can be studied in the
same way as chemicals, and that the physical sciences alone are enough really to
understand where we are. There was a reduction of every other kind of thinking to a
particular kind of scientific thinking that belongs in that very abstract and physicalist kind
of area, and that temper is still with us.” She elaborated, “Although Behaviorism is
supposed to have been refuted, psychologists in fact are still very much inclined to think
of us as machines, and the machine model for understanding human life in general is
still very strong in certain areas like mental illness and so on that wish always to reduce
the whole of what’s going on to that side of it. This I always thought was pretty unreal.”

She then expanded on the other extreme position, that of spiritual reductionism,
which abstracted humans from nature: “And on the other side was religious thinking—
and the apparently anti-religious existentialist position—that we are pure choice, that we
are not really caused at all in what we do by the world around us, that we are pure
minds. This is explicit obviously in the religious tradition, that we are really spirits
(although the religious tradition was never only that, but it was available there).” She reiterated that “the sort of atheist forms of it that were coming up in things like existentialism seemed to me just as unreal.”

Midgley summarized that “these were two ways of trying to limit the study of human life to certain ways of thinking about it. They are both reductive in the sense that they both opt for one particular kind of thought, one particular kind of insight, as being the only one.” These extremes, which she has long fought against, have some merit in moderation, but each possesses the flaw of extreme reductionism for Midgley, which she has always opposed in favor of a more nuanced and balanced position. Each, she said, “is an attempt to simplify, to pretend that we know much more than we do, which should always be resisted (although these particular ways of thinking of it have their own uses).” This led her to ultimately conclude, “The idea that we should only use them is very bad and I think that’s been the uniting spirit in my work: I’m always saying, ‘But look further!’”

I next asked how Animals and Why They Matter and “the mixed community” fit into this picture or context of her wider work. She answered that the mixed community and its supporting arguments very naturally fit with her emphasis on human nature, specifically humans as animals, which is closely correlated with her stress on embodiment: “One starts to notice that people are in fact animals and the way in which we think about animals ought to be the way in which we think about people,” she stated. “We are very unrealistic about this and are trying not to do it in lots of ways. One of the ways we are treating humans as if they did not form part of the natural world at all is as if their bodies weren’t very important. We’re also treating animals as if they were totally
different from us.” She then clarified, “When I say ‘animals,’ of course, I mean ‘other animals’ in the use of the word just as I’ve always pointed out—very odd.”

She primarily rooted this disembodiment in a Christian context that posited a soul to transcend the crude, mechanical body. However, once the Christian stance on things lost its sway, the spirit/body and human/nature dualisms lingered: “Because people thought they were being scientific and it was a scientific age, it was agreed in principle that our bodies are just physical matter and acting mechanically. The sort of respect and value that was set upon this was somehow supposed to transcend that.” She pointed out that “this was understandable when the Christian position suggested there was a soul which was alien to all that, but when they stopped being alien toward that, the kind of conceit which the human race was indulging in seemed to me quite absurd.” For Midgley, in addition to the ecological dangers, this dualism is dangerous at a personal and economic level as well, in addition to the obvious ecological implications. “It’s bad in lots of ways,” she said, “which I suppose I kind of rushed all around.” She expanded that “it’s bad in personal life because one fails to pay attention to one’s body and what it’s doing, and fails to respect it. It’s bad in politics, obviously, when one thinks of human life as independent.”

The idea that we are detached and independent from nature is a main cause for its exploitation, both toward nature as a whole and toward animals. This, for Midgley, is also based in Christian dualisms and simply carried on after the Industrial Revolution: “The notion that we could use all the rest of the physical world as raw material, that it was simply ‘stuff’ there for us to exploit, was latent in Christianity.” She quickly clarified, acknowledging the diversity within the Christian tradition: “Though it was not the only
thing—respect for God’s creation was there too.” Nevertheless, “when the Industrial Revolution started, people came very much over, I think, to the thought that this is all material for us to exploit. That’s bad enough with the inorganic world because, of course, we can destroy all things there. But when you come to how to treat other animals, and indeed plants, it’s monstrous, and obviously very unrealistic.”

She then explained some of the foundations of the mixed community in her criticism of the rationalist morality that is closely correlated with this exploitative attitude: “In Animals and Why They Matter I dealt with a whole lot of different ways in which that rather contemptuous and detached attitude is expressed. I was shocked in the first place by the way that philosophers like Plato really identify us with something nonmaterial that owes nothing as it were to matter where it happens to be.” This, she said, has not completely faded, and somehow “seems to have caught on to a rather absurd extent in our culture even though we’re now supposed to be totally dependent on material science.” Rather than embrace or acknowledge the naturalism that science portrays, the dualisms that abstract humans from nature and other animals are still ubiquitous, which is a major concern for Midgley.

From here I asked Midgley what the central features of the mixed community were, if she could identify any. She naturally began with the holistic concept of “community”: “The mixed community. Central to it, the point of the concept is to apply the idea of community, which means not just love of beings that happen to be together, but a genuine unity of the whole of beings which are important to each other, to whom it is essential that they form part of that network.” She reiterated that, with a few exceptions, the trend has been to not include animals in this community. This was
strong in the Christian tradition, and the Industrial Revolution furthered this position: “The thought, very strongly in our culture and to some extent in others which it came from, was that humans were of course a community; that is, every human is important to every other human, and it stopped there.” Again, she acknowledged that the tradition was not monolithic: “Now people did not always stop it there; they sometimes were very fond of their dogs and horses or other creatures, but the idea was that they should stop it there.” She continued, “This was explicit in Aquinas and certainly in the Christian tradition, that there was something really wrong and irrelevant about valuing animals for their own sake.” Midgley again noted the ambivalence that arose: “This alternated with the occasional point where people sensed that they was part of God’s creation and that they should be treated in some way with respect, and that varied from time to time.” Ultimately, the Industrial Revolution merged with the more anthropocentric and dualistic tradition within Christianity into a more unified mentality of exploitation: “As I said, with the Industrial Revolution it seemed to go off—the thought that they’re all things.” Therefore Christianity itself is not to blame for many of the negative attitudes toward animals, but rather a combination of mechanical and dualistic worldviews that fed off each other and became barriers to the mixed community.

In discussing the position of animals as things, she brought up Immanuel Kant, echoing her conversation from *Animals and Why They Matter*: “I think it’s a little shocking the way that Kant expressed that, although the point about a person is the existence and end in himself—a thing exists to be used. So what’s an animal, you see? Kant really didn’t answer that one. In talking about particular animals he said one should indeed honor them: we are impressed with wolves when we see the love that they have
for their offspring. So how do you say that about a thing?” “Things” cannot be part of community for Midgley, and for the mixed community to work, animals cannot and should not be thought of as things or machines, but rather as members of this community. “He was simply using this black and white antithesis,” she continued on Kant, “which was really quite deeply worked into the culture, and the point of the community is that you can’t talk like that [laughs] if you are considering these creatures as important to each other, as forming part of a whole where all of them are as necessary. That’s the point of the community.”

I then asked her to contextualize the mixed community in relation to the themes and features of Beast and Man, Heart and Mind, Wickedness, and Evolution as a Religion that are supportive of or important to the mixed community. She replied that one of the central emphases in her work directly relates to animals and the mixed community, which is the separation of humans from other animals and the natural world, of which she is always critical. “I suppose that, all along, once I’d taken that stand about people being animals (also animals not being alien), they’d become relevant from time to time,” she began. She continued, “In a way, once you start to think a bit about religion, you may be struck by the thought that we are suggesting a liaison both upwards and downwards, so to speak, both to God and to animals. But we are not alien to any of these beings and we can be connected with beings who are indeed very unlike us in some ways.” Midgley then significantly pointed out that her emphasis is always on humans as animals, which is a core element of the mixed community: “In some of these books I wasn’t talking about animals a lot of the time, but I think I was always talking about us being animals.”
In turn, humans are firmly located in the wider whole of self, species, and nature, embodied and naturally continuous: “We have to view ourselves as wholes, and other people as wholes, but also as wholes that are part of the larger whole.” Moreover, the way in which we treat other animals is closely tied to how we treat ourselves: “And if we treat other animals as things—say by putting chimpanzees in small square boxes to do research about them and so on—if we do that, we are expressing an attitude which cuts ourselves in half! The body and the life that goes with the body cannot be treated with that sort of total lack of respect without the same sort of thing happening to other people. The diminution cannot be kept in a water tight compartment.”

This holistic thinking is very complex and multifaceted for Midgley. It is not simply focused on ecological parts and wholes, but on the relation of every part to every whole, including the self. Therefore each part of the self—mental, emotional, physical, etc.—is connected to every other part, which is connected to the other parts and wholes of the species, mixed community, ecological community.

In dualistically “cutting ourselves in half,” we also cut the connections we have to other animals and non-sentient life out of morality and the discussion of rights. She illustrated her rejection of this, and the quagmire of rights: “As the talk about human rights became important in the world, I think it seemed altogether a bit puzzling why these were just ‘human’ rights.” She then expanded on rights: “The way to understand them, I take it, is that these are things that shouldn’t be done to anyone, anywhere. They’re not about detailed legal privileges; they’re what shouldn’t ever be done.”

Midgley then related these limitations of these rights in addressing animals: “The thought that you could say about people, ‘You mustn’t put a person in box and
experiment on them,’ but you couldn’t say it about a chimpanzee seemed kind of arbitrary. This sort of dignity which was taken to be essential wasn’t justified.” Next she addressed the peculiarity of the sacrality of human life alone: “And people say that the notion of the sacred is quite lost and should be got rid of. Well, the one thing that’s always considered to be sacred is human life, isn’t it? What? Human life? [laughs] Not life, you see.”

From here she then clarified and expanded on her foundational critique of rationalism and rights, and how they are not the best language for dealing with animals. She began, “I use words as and when they seem appropriate. Sometimes one is talking at a very general level, and the abstractions are very important, and sometimes you get nearer to things and other words are needed.” This relates to the inadequacy of rights language. “What I feel about the human rights idea,” she continued, “is that ‘rights’ is quite a tricky term and so if you’re wanting to stop people being nasty to animals, it is not necessarily the best way to say an animal has a right.” She illustrated this with Washoe the famous chimpanzee: “For instance, people were saying at one time that, ‘Chimpanzees have a right to education, so why aren’t they all getting trained like Washoe?’ [laughs] You see, this isn’t the way to do it.”

She then continued on the critique of rights: “I think Tom Regan was way too stuck on the idea of rights. Of course, he is very influential in the states, but it’s a legalistic concept. It’s about a claim of A against the B, and you often need, however, to have some compromise in which both A and B will be considered. I don’t mind claims, you see, they have competing claims. But once you say rights it seems you can’t shift it.” Rights and equality are often tied in with rationalist ideas of competition in lifeboat
ethics. “Similarly in cases of competition,” she expanded, “you’ve got this crowded lifeboat, ‘Can you throw the dog over? No, it has a right to be not thrown over.’ It’s not quite like that!” She laughed and returned to how legal terms and ideas such as these and not very helpful. “This legalistic framework,” she concluded “isn’t always useful for thought dealing with compromises and there are a lot of issues, particularly about children, where people say it’s a conflict between the rights of the child, which must always come first, and of the parent.” Claims may be more helpful in approaching these complex issues: “Well, there is a conflict of claims, and really you need a context, I think, of very well experienced people in dealing with justice conflicts in order to arbitrate. And you’re not going to get surefire answers a lot of the time.” In this she reiterated that a number of moral claims and injustices are intrinsically related, and that it is “not just about animals.”

In speaking about claims, Midgley then brought up the important issue of conflicts and claims between individuals and the whole. For Midgley, there is no simple or easy answer to these conflicts, but they are real and pressing. She touched on the key debate within environmental ethics: “I know there has been a lot of controversy, and in particular, controversy about conflicts between the claims of animals and the claims of the wider environment—you know, ‘Can you cull elephants that are destroying the vegetation?’ and so forth—and it seems to me entirely proper that that goes on because once you’ve noted a big issue, people walk closer to it and they find that there are lots of little ones.” She reiterated the reality of these conflicts: “There really are conflicts. I don’t think this is anything that can be brushed aside—it has to be solved, and can be. And in order to solve it you have to have bright ideas about, ‘Can we give elephants
contraception or does that spoil their family life?’ [laughs] And the way in which Jane Goodall educated the locals so that they were nice to chimpanzees.”

She reiterated that these conflicts are interrelated, and that moral thinking does not dictate that we must choose between humans and animals: “There are all sorts of that kind of thing where it was taken before that it’s either people or animals.” She made an interesting distinction that the broad concept of the mixed community may be an umbrella term for small and localized mixed communities that really deal with practical issues, conflicts, and claims: “That sort of development has happened so that a wide concept like the mixed community, I think, is naturally going to dissolve into a lot of little ones. If it’s more important to you as a whole, you’ll want to resist that.” She joked, “Don’t we always go on like that?” Midgley continued, “Similarly with human rights, you make this great claim and then you get closer to it and you begin to wonder, ‘Well, what about euthanasia?’ These things do not solve themselves. It doesn’t mean that you weren’t right to make the claim in the first place.” Her point here is that the conflicts can be exaggerated or downplayed, but they are real and must be dealt with in a practical manner. Systems of morality that are too holistic can become too bogged down in broad and abstract thought.

I next asked Midgley to expand on how reason and emotion, the role of science, and human nature influence the mixed community as key supports for it in Animals in Why They Matter and her wider work. In addition to reason and emotion being a barrier to a more unified understanding of human nature and ethics, she correlated the duality of animals as emotion and without reason as a barrier to animal ethics: “One thing that’s gone on is it was taken that animals simply are emotion, that they are sort of only one
side of this [duality], and humans are reason. This was very unrealistic in all sorts of ways.” For Midgley, this gross simplification of both humans and animals is closely linked to efforts to show that animals lack qualities, such as rationality or consciousness, which separate them from humans.

Midgley especially expanded on the consciousness debate in which she is currently involved. “I’ve engaged lately [the idea],” she began, “that animals are not really conscious. I am always appalled when I find people still going on like that. It usually turns out that they mean by ‘conscious’ something very high brow—you know, self-conscious in some sort of way. I think it’s chronic in that area.” She illustrated her idea of consciousness: “Conscious seems [to me] what they say in the operating theatre, that you know what’s going on: a point of view. And it’s not really doubted that animals do have that.” This is of great importance as there are pressing implications to denying consciousness in animals, which “has been used to excuse experimentation, and to suggest that we need not consider their interests—say of the elephant population or something—not in themselves but only insofar as they are of ascetic interest to people or something.” She then tied this back into the reason and emotion duality: “The thought seems to be that they have feeling but not thought really.”

She continued on her discussion of consciousness: “I don’t know quite what people do think is happening but it’s often supported by a few experiments which someone has done in which the animal had failed to notice something: ‘Animals are not self-conscious because X.’” Next she expanded on how this plays out in scientific research: “There’s this experiment where you put a spot of paint on a monkey’s face, and it does or doesn’t notice it in the mirror. So the story is that the ones that do notice
it, I think the great apes but I’m not sure about anybody else, are self-conscious and the others aren’t. And dogs apparently aren’t interested.” She jokes, “Now who would think they would be? Dogs aren’t visual, right? [laughs] Dogs don’t look in the mirror to see what’s going on—they smell it!” She then concluded, “This seems so manifestly senseless that I am appalled that people still talk like that. And they do! People with a scientific education talk like that. This sort of self-deception that people have engaged in about animals seems to me a monstrous crime, not what one ought to do. It’s under one’s control to not think in that sort of self-justifying way.”

She then addressed how this relates back to the barriers to animal ethics, be they reason or consciousness: “Is the contrast between reason and emotion relevant to the mixed community? Yes, I’m saying that placing a barrier there is what makes the mixed community unavailable to people, and is simply indefensible.” Midgley thinks that this is often instigated and perpetuated by scientists as well. Science, then, can be an ally but also a danger to the mixed community. “It is a matter of human self-interest,” she admonished, “defended by the notion of what it is to be scientific, that something is only real if it’s perceived by physics or chemistry really, that biology should model itself on physics and chemistry and not take any notice of life.”

I then mentioned how Michael Leahy made similar claims about consciousness and emotions through a Wittgensteinian philosophy of mind, language, and consciousness, though I did not think his criticism of Midgley held well. She expanded on these ideas of consciousness and language by looking at more closely at animal faculties: “Yes, yes. So what about babies? What they mean is they can’t talk. Or at least they can’t talk in academic terms that, as it were, justify them to me. I think that’s
what he means.” She continued on nonverbal communication and understanding, an important aspect of the mixed community. “An awful lot of our own talk is not explicit or verbalized,” she pointed out, “and doesn’t need to be, and we often have trouble making it explicit and verbalizing it. It seems to me a very unreal way of thinking about human thought. Now it is really an interesting mystery how we eventually do make things explicit, isn’t it? We are often highly partial, utterly at a loss about something, then suddenly out it comes. Well, it was there wasn’t it? [laughs]” She then related this to other animals: “And the parts of the brain that we use for all this talk are, I gather, ones that were used by other creatures a lot of the time for smell. So they can smell things in a way which we simply cannot.” Here she quoted G.K. Chesterton’s poem: “The Song of Quoodle,” which is about the worlds available to dogs that are not available to humans because of smell. She then retrieved the poem for me to read aloud:

They haven't got no noses,  
The fallen sons of Eve;  
Even the smell of roses 
Is not what they supposes;  
But more than mind discloses 
And more than men believe.

They haven't got no noses,  
They cannot even tell 
When door and darkness closes  
The park a Jew encloses,  
Where even the law of Moses 
Will let you steal a smell.

The brilliant smell of water,  
The brave smell of a stone, 
The smell of dew and thunder,  
The old bones buried under, 
Are things in which they blunder 
And err, if left alone.

The wind from winter forests,
The scent of scentless flowers,
The breath of brides’ adorning,
The smell of snare and warning,
The smell of Sunday morning,
God gave to us for ours

And Quoodle here discloses
All things that Quoodle can,
They haven’t got no noses,
They haven’t got no noses,
And goodness only knowses
The Noselessness of Man.²

She laughed and responded: “Yes, and you don’t have to be an expert in animal
behavior to do that. People have always known a lot, particularly about domestic
animals, and they simply don’t allow this type of thinking. Philosophers and
psychologists have gotten so stuck on really a Behaviorist approach about this lately,
and I think it’s pretty disgraceful. But it’s still there, isn’t it?” To this I replied in the
affirmative and she reiterated that overcoming this barrier “is quite important.”

Midgley feels that these *a priori* approaches to dismissing animal consciousness
selectively overlook the data, and she reiterated some of her points from *Animals and
Why They Matter*: She rehashed the familiar example of elephants: “If one comes
across creatures that are clearly planning very skillfully—like elephants that live in the
Kalahari. Well, they should be able to because they’ve got to get water. They are able to
do this because the old elephant knows the way to all the water holes, and if a water
hole is not working at any time will know to go on, to lead the whole lot. And when that
elephant dies, the next one will be able to do it. Well, no words.” She continued, “The
objection is that people try to think this is mechanical somehow. Well, it isn’t, is it? You

see, it isn’t the same every time: the weather changes, various threats around you change. Think of a wolf pack planning who’s going to block the deer and the other goes around.”

She then pointed out the disjunction of these animal behaviors and machines: “The thought that a machine could do this is absurd. When people say, ‘Oh, but some machines are very clever,’ that means that the people who invented the machines are pretty clever, that they’ve had a particular end in view. Somebody pointed out the chess machine Deep Blue can’t find its own way to the championship. [laughs] You know, it isn’t like that.” She returned to language and consciousness, saying that Wittgenstein “is prepared to think the dog knows its his master at the door, but doesn’t think the dog knows it will be tomorrow. Well, plenty of evidence shows that animals can get used to someone turning up on Thursday if that’s when they do. The evidence doesn’t interest these people.” Her final point here, exemplified by Quoodle and overlooked by experts and non-experts alike, is that “animals are much more complicated than we have been prepared to say.” This again is in direct opposition to Leahy’s position on language, consciousness, and emotions in a Wittgensteinian critique of animal ethics.

I then asked Midgley about some of the reactions to the mixed community, primarily why she thought it has drawn so much attention over the years. She thinks it is mainly in how the human/nature dualism has been undermined, to which the mixed community is a helpful way of thinking: “I think that people were beginning to wake up, were they not, to the unreality of this view of people as being totally shut off from everything natural. There a number of reasons for this, partly because it is just so extreme that it couldn’t be defended.” One of the main reasons was the animal
liberation movement in general and advocacy on the behalf of animals: “Obviously there
was propaganda—there had been propaganda for some time about animals right from
when Bentham really started it—and there was a fair amount of it, particularly about the
experimentation in the nineteenth century that had run on. That sort of campaigning,
you often feel, is getting nowhere, but in the end it sometimes does.” This combined
with the demise of the Christian influence and an increase in the vulnerability of science:
“I suppose that the decay of the narrow, dogmatic Christian position allowed it in. And
the other position which said ‘Oh well, science shows this and we must experiment [on
animals],’ had discredited itself. To some extent people were beginning to get anti-
science for various reasons. So people were becoming stirred up.”

Midgley pointed out how influential Peter Singer had been to her and others in
this process, which corresponded with a surge in ethological studies: “I first encountered
this recent expansion of worry about it when I read Peter Singer’s Animal Liberation,
and I hadn’t know until then what factory farming was like. People don’t know these
things. I think that since then there have been obviously good efforts.” She then cited
the founders of ethology and related their work to Darwin: “The better understanding of
actual animal behavior, particularly in the wild, was set off by Lorenz and Tinbergen,
following on from things that Darwin had started only people didn’t take notice of it at the
time.” She continued, “That started up in the thirties and people did notice it and later
with Desmond Morris in The Naked Ape, an unbalanced sort of book, and Ardrey’s The
Territorial Imperative.3 People were being given some reason to think that there’s some

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continuity in their own behavior and that of animals." She highlighting the reactions that came from human-animal comparisons: “This was always controversial. Desmond Morris, I think, was a bit crude. Ardrey wasn’t quite so crude but he was taken to be crude. It ran into all sorts of interesting controversies but still it’s been strong enough really to change a lot of people’s consciousness. People didn’t know about it and simply didn’t want to know about such things.”

Though more knowledge and consciousness of animal issues did not guarantee change, it helped, for Midgley. People learned more about both animals and what was being done to them, which did influence their attitudes: “Bullfighting is becoming a little unpopular in Spain. What has gone on is, by any ordinary sorts of moral standards, monstrous, and it is not surprising that once people draw attention—more people, different sorts of people—it gets heard.” She believes that her concept of the mixed community came at the right time to aid people in thinking about our continuity and relationship with animals and the natural world: “Yes, and if you think, ‘Well, perhaps all this isn’t quite right,’ you’ve got to have some sort of wider concept of what our relation with other species is, and that’s what being called the mixed community, I suppose.”

Here she pointed out that, though ethicists explicitly use her terms and concepts, other people have an intuitive sense for it but do not call it “the mixed community”: “I don’t think people are familiar with the term ‘mixed community,’ that’s a philosopher’s term, isn’t it? But that’s indeed how you have to think.” Throughout the interview, she at times alternated between addressing the concept of the mixed community and what she sees as the actual mixed community, being humans and animals. This was an
interesting development, as it illustrates the dual nature of the mixed community as a concept yet also a practical description of human and animal relations to Midgley.

I then moved on to the “philosopher’s term” of the mixed community, raising how some environmental ethicists and philosophers have utilized the mixed community in their own work. Specifically I mentioned how Baird Callicott uses it as a bridge between what he sees as individualistic animal ethics and holistic environmental ethics. She responded, “Yes. Yes, well that’s been very important.” I discussed how he correlates his ecological holism with wild animals and the mixed community with domestic animals, though he exaggerates the separation between domestic and wild animals. I also mentioned Ted Benton and how he uses her idea of animal sociality, and a “human-animal continuism” as he calls it. I asked if she was familiar with these uses and if she agreed with them. She replied: “Yes, I’ve been reading it as it’s come, and I applaud it.” She is especially keen on uses of her work that address the reality of conflicts. “As it comes,” she said, “it points out conflicts, but it also tries to deal with them. I think that’s so important.” Midgley also approves of and encourages new language and new ways of looking at the real issues: “And different sorts of concepts and different language will be needed at each stage. But I do think that very often, some sort of compromise is possible, like the ones I was mentioning about elephants and chimps. We have to think of a different way of living to make some change, something which you haven’t mentioned yet, and organize things differently.” In this she is happy with people utilizing the mixed community in creative ways.

Midgley then specifically addressed some of the issues with domestic animals in recent years: “Domestic animals, I think, got rather left out of it early on, but people are
becoming more conscious of them and indeed there is a little bit of ethology starting about them now.” She continued, “I think for a long time the ethologists thought it was rather beneath them, you know, but they are now talking about dogs and cats. And, as soon as you think of that, of course, you run into problems about what to do with all these superfluous kittens and so on. Well, there is no simple answer to that at all—I’m all for spaying creatures but nothing will really be adequate. But I don’t think it means that you mustn’t keep them.”

This prompted her to raise issues about children, neoteny, and animal sociality in the mixed community, of which domestic animals are of paramount importance. “A quite interesting aspect about the mixed community,” she pointed out, “is that animals are an important part of human life, and very many people think quite naturally that children should have pets, but don’t quite see why. [laughs] You fairly often meet a sort of contemptuous reference to somebody being nicer to their dog than to some people. Well, we are nicer to the people around us than to more distant people and it would be nice if everybody was equal, but they aren’t.” Overall, she is fairly happy with the use of the mixed community in environmental ethics and she mainly wishes for it to help make change: “I hope that this is going to lead to more thinking in that way. I see all this, Greg, as a step in the right direction. I read these people, and I like a lot of it. I don’t think that any of it settles anything, but we should go on because these are practical problems.” This reflects her constant focus on practicality. Though much of her work is broad, theoretical, and conceptual, she is always concerned with the practical value of ideas, and she reiterated this throughout the interview.
I then asked Midgley if she is familiar with any of the uses of her work and the mixed community in religious studies, specifically in James Gustafson, Lisa Sideris, and Anna Peterson. Regarding Sideris and Peterson, she seemed to know of the names but noted that she does “read stuff and now I forget the names, but I have read a good deal of Christian stuff that I have approved of in that area, yes.” I explained how these works utilized her general theory and the mixed community as a way of embedding humans as animals in nature and in addressing issues such as evolution and environmental ethics. I also mentioned how they are both concerned with interpretations of evolutionary theory, especially Sideris in her critique of overly rosy portrayals of the harmony of evolution. On this Midgley commented: “Yes, well this is the general point about evolutionary theory, isn’t it, that sometimes it uses drama to exaggerate mutual destructiveness and then you get the selfish gene and so on. And sometimes it gives a different drama that everything is for the best. [laughs] Well, these are both exaggerations, I take it, and one has somehow to get in the middle.”

Generally speaking, she understands religious studies here as Christian scholarship, primarily because of James Gustafson, with whom she is quite familiar: “Gustafson wrote a great big book, which he sent me, and I thought, ‘This was jolly good.’ I haven’t looked at it lately, that’s Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, isn’t it? Yes, I liked that. In fact, I think he had written that before he asked me out to his university and I had a very interesting time…it was a long time ago. Yeah, I liked him.”

At this point she conveyed some interesting thoughts on the relationship between her ideas and Christianity: “I have read other stuff, and it seems to me that the kind of worldview that I favor is perfectly compatible with most of Christianity. I’m really not
interested in the question of the virgin birth or something and I don’t know what to think about the resurrection. But the general worldview that Christianity supports is surely the right one. So I suppose I’m a bit selective about Christianity, you know dogma isn’t my thing.” She continued, “I’m very quite happy for people to use different world visions, provided it’s a matter of how it causes them to act. If they’re claiming that it justifies monstrous behavior then they’re mistaken, so to speak.” She then returned to Gustafson, Midgley reiterating that she does not always remember those that she agrees with: “I do remember Gustafson’s book. When you read a lot of stuff that on the whole you agree with, you don’t remember the details so much. I remember the things that I object to, and read them again and so on, so it’s a bit selective.”

From here I asked her to expand on what she saw as an appropriate use of the mixed community in environmental ethics. She started with the significant idea of “community,” and what it requires: “Well I suppose that the emphasis for me is always on what the word ‘community’ means. If we think of all humans as one community, this is something pretty abstract, isn’t it? We have the idea that if we encounter anything human anywhere we ought to be nice to it, so to speak, that it is a fellow with us within some important whole.” She continued on the mixed aspect: “And, as I say, that used to be supposed to not apply to dogs and elephants. If one says that it does, I suppose the similar response is, if you encounter a dog or an elephant in trouble, you should try to do something about it. That our duties extend in that way is part of the point.”

Here she addressed the more fundamental element of evolutionary kinship: “Of course, it’s something deeper than that: that you feel akin to them beforehand, you feel akin to the whole thing. That you do that, I think, is probably the more central point. We
rejoice in the whole of nature and being part of it, as something to which we belong. It will follow from that that if some important part of it is threatened, then we take alarm as if for ourselves, so to speak, but presumably in proportion.”

This kinship takes into account our relationship with both animals and the planet as a whole. In turn, Midgley is favorable toward Gaia theory: “I like the idea of Gaia because (I liked it from the start) nature is a whole of which we are quite a small part, and it acts as a whole. Well, as you say, there’s been exaggerations both ways there. When the notion of Gaia first came out, some people were saying, ‘Well, it’s a fairy godmother,’ that was going to make everything all right so we need not bother to behave better,” she joked. She continued, “Others dramatized it as being something completely in horrors—that it’s this bloody nemesis. Well, neither of these things is appropriate because it isn’t about humans, you know. It’s a whole, and it acts as such.”

Our embeddedness in nature and our connection to the whole then gives rise to the sentiments we feel for our home: “If we hear news of the destruction of a forest or something, the point is it is not something totally alien to us. It’s not something to throw away like last month’s newspapers. It concerns us. It’s how we identify ourselves, isn’t it? What we feel ourselves to be. People, surely, have thought of themselves as a small part of something much larger.” She continued, “They didn’t necessarily personify this; they sometimes did. But they weren’t at all surprised, when the forest caught fire; they knew it wasn’t put there for them, so to speak, and they did what they could about it. It’s something pretty exceptional that our culture has sort of lost this.” “If you’re a hunter-gatherer,” she mused, “it’s very upsetting if your forest catches fire, but you don’t feel exactly surprised, and it is your business then to look out for what things to do when
such things occur. There isn’t a human role which is insulated and protected from
everything else and there can’t be.”

For Midgley, we cannot eschew personal responsibility and sever our connection
to nature through false hope in science or Gaia or anything else: “I remember talking,
ages ago, probably in the seventies, to a friend who was quite high up in civil service,
and suggesting that the state of the environment was alarming and there was going to
be climate change, and she said, ‘Oh well, I think the scientists will be able to deal with
it.’ You see? She was a very high profile English graduate. [laughs]” Here personal
responsibility and acknowledging our connection and duties to nature should lead to
practical action, which is a continuing emphasis for Midgley.

She returns again to Gaia and fleshes out some of the baggage involved with its
particular holism and its accompanying dramas: “Lynn Margulis is inclined to despise
everything that isn’t a microbe. She’s absolutely marvelous, but she’s so hot on
microbes. She’s saying we should not be surprised at all these sort of unnatural
outgrowths, like us. [laughs] It’s a different position, and I’m sure she’s humane in her
dealings.” This reflects the dramas of science: “But the drama that people live in no
doubt varies so much and I’m never surprised that it does. We all live different lives and
hear different stories.” She continued on Margulis: “Now she’s been busy pointing out
the independence of all these little things in our cells, the organelles. It’s a marvelous
job, and really it’s altered the way in which people think about individuality and I think it’s
terribly valuable. I only say that she causes people’s blood to run cold a bit. [laughs]
You know what I mean?”
Midgley then continued on Gaian dramas by discussing James Lovelock: “She’s not the only one. Lovelock doesn’t quite do that, but he does upset people by saying, ‘Well, we’re gone now aren’t we?’ He may be right; I don’t think it at all surprising.” She noted the importance of politics and science here: “The only catch about Lovelock is I think he is not a political animal—he isn’t interested in how we should organize.” Here she shared a personal anecdote regarding Lovelock’s political awareness: “Margaret Thatcher, you know, she quite liked him. Margaret Thatcher was the first politician who took him seriously as he had been dismissed by everybody. But he thought she was marvelous. I mentioned to him one time that, of course, she put beggars on the streets of London, didn’t she? And he said, ‘Oh, did she?’ [laughs]” She reiterated that “he isn’t in that world, and not everybody has to be. I don’t think there’s anything really wrong about it. But his recent books have been a bit, sort of unhelpful, I think, because they’re so fatalistic.” Ultimately her point here is that there are varieties of extreme interpretations of ecological problems, especially within Gaian holism, and the goal is to motivate people to take action rather than despair. However, she acknowledged that “things are going to get pretty bad, and I’m glad I shan’t be there to cope. The question is then, ‘How shall we deal with that?’ This has to be what interests people.”

Next I asked how she saw the mixed community properly fitting into religious studies. She disclaimed that, “I don’t really move in that world very much.” Again, along with a more Christian understanding of religious studies, she took a sort of religion and ecology approach in examining how religion can work with environmental ethics: “I do think, as I mentioned, that there’s room enough in Christianity and in the book of Genesis, Job, and a few similar places for it to be fitted in, but it hasn’t been fitted in
much.” Aware of the ambivalence in religions about the environment, she continued on the anachronism of environmental concerns: “I don’t know that the New Testament is much help; it didn’t sort of interest Jesus, as far as I can see, and that wasn’t the problem at the time, was it? The danger of all this is so new, I don’t think there’s much room for it in traditional frameworks.” And further, on Islam: “I gather the same thing’s true in Islam, that there are sort of pro-nature bits, but mostly it’s this drama of God and man, isn’t it?” She reiterated, “I guess, there are many more possibilities that could be cultivated than one always hears about.” She then isolated the key problem as anthropocentrism: “But I think the whole Mosaic tradition is a bit too human-centered.” She concluded with the emphasis once more on the practical: “Hinduism should allow for it. Now what was I hearing about Japan? [laughs] In theory, I think that Shinto, a Japanese tradition is quite modest about people, but it isn’t in practice.” She humbly emphasized again that, “I am really quite ignorant in this area.” However, she recognized that “the people in each tradition have got to work on it I think, because what gets emphasized in each tradition is what they fight their neighbors about, and then it’s quite hard to move on to wider questions.”

I then asked her, “Where do we go from here? If we want to build all these things together, and start pulling on the relevant areas, where should environmental ethics and religious studies go from here?” To this big question she addressed the big issue of climate change and its corresponding skepticism: “I can’t help feeling the most urgent thing at the moment is to deal somehow with this very bogus outbreak of skepticism about climate change. I think it’s entirely fabricated. Those notorious emails from the University of Essex don’t amount to a row of beans. There’s been slight doubt about just
how fast the Himalayan glaciers are melting and so on, but it’s neither here nor there!”

She continued on this skepticism: “I am fairly well ready to believe that outbreak of fuss about those things last November was planned and calculated by the sort of people who don’t want climate change taken seriously. You know, there’s been a great increase in the last six months in people not believing in it. Well, you see why I prioritize this—until people get that into their heads, nothing’s going to shift.” This is an area she has been concerned about for some time: “Before that, of course, I was worried about how slow people were to take on board how great the danger is. I think it’s entirely understandable that this has been an enormous, solid assumption well before the Industrial Revolution, but increasingly since—that we’re all right. That’s what my friend the civil servant said. And scientists have been partly responsible.” She interestingly related this to manifestations of science as a religion once again: “People’s religion had been taken away so they wanted something else; they tend to rely on it.” She concluded, “This is the first thing that occurs to me because I have been worrying about it.”

From the “cosmic” to the more practical, she reiterated that animals and the mixed community are part of this whole, and that is where conflicts arise and must be addressed: “I suppose that is about the large-scale, cosmic application,” she joked. She commented on the challenges to the mixed community: “The mixed community includes the help of the whole earth, the Gaian bit. Now about how we treat animals—well, these controversies go on, and I think they are well-conducted in lots of ways, but there’s always new danger, as it were, on the economic front.” She continued, “We’re hearing now about enormous pig factories and chicken factories and people saying we must
have these because otherwise we can’t make cheap food. Well, the splendid organizations like Compassionate World Farming, which have long campaigned and done it jolly well and made a lot of success against things like field crates and chicken factories, are having to deal with that.” She reiterated, “This is the sort of conflict that we’re going to have in the world and it is only one side, isn’t it, of the way in which economics is going to be held to justify things which are abominable.”

These conflicts and injustices are all interrelated and tangled together in the big picture for Midgley. She addressed the implications of climate change: “The problem of dealing with human immigrants, anywhere, is going to be dreadful, and I guess Lovelock’s right that one of the last places to suffer from climate change is liable to be the British Isles, [laughs] and the North of the United States and Canada. It’s a matter of thinking how society is to go on under that kind of impact.” She took a serious tone: “Honestly, I don’t feel hopeful. When it’s a matter of getting a new insight into people’s heads, like that global warming is serious, it’s even harder. In the matter of animals, it’s a matter of keeping on stressing what people have been saying for some time: that you shouldn’t treat them like that! So I can’t be at all hopeful but that’s where I see us at the moment.” Without despairing, Midgley reminds us that things can be bleak, but that does not mean that we should stop trying to solve moral problems. However, they can seem overwhelming at times.

I then shifted to questions about studying the mixed community. I recalled that the mixed community is generally seen as a theoretical and philosophical concept, as she alluded to earlier. I asked if she sees it as something that can be practically or empirically researched in historical and contemporary examples. Here I was leading
toward research of the actual concept but she answered it as research on animals themselves. In this, though there can be positives, she is ambivalent about its value. She began by reiterating the context of language and concepts: “Well, my general view is that different language is needed in different contexts.” She then continued on studies of animal consciousness: “A certain amount of research goes on about animal consciousness. People are still trying to establish that animals are conscious of this and that, and claiming that, ‘Oh yes, they do know when you take their children away,’ or something. If you start from there, you’re not gonna get that far.” She is not convinced of its value: “I don’t know how useful such research is; I suppose it does do some good. I doubt that the people who are hardliners and won’t hear any of it, I doubt whether they hear it much, but I suppose they do. Research of that sort isn’t something that I put a bunch of trust in.” However, there have been some studies that have had an impact: “But, I suppose that some of those experiments have sort of become famous and changed perceptions, haven’t they?”

Unfortunately, even some of the influential studies relied on exploitative methods: “I’m thinking of all those dreadful deprivation experiments where baby monkeys are brought up in steel vats and went on for ages. You prove that if they were brought up in a steel vat it wasn’t as bad...no, pardon me, you gave them an artificial mother that was prickly and the other ones had an artificial that was cold, all that sort.” She stressed her point here: “We shouldn’t have ever been doing it! And I doubt whether any of it took things in the right direction. Now, it got cited when separation anxiety in humans became a topic. All that was happening about fifty years ago, wasn’t it? I don’t think anyone did any controlled experiments about that, but they made observations on if
your mother had been away at this or that time...there was quite a lot of science going on."

She clarified that, "Obviously, this isn't pointless." Midgley reiterated that it is important that research is done for certain reasons: "People who are working in such a field should do something which tends to check whether we are indeed justified in our beliefs. But the shifting of consciousness in general doesn't start from there." Here she brought up Jane Goodall, and the idiosyncrasies and challenges of science in animal studies: "You see, Jane Goodall seems to me to have done an amazing job simply by talking about chimps in the way that she did, in a perfectly human way. She got into trouble in the first place because she gave them names, which was held to be unscientific. But it proved what some quite famous psychologists had established already, which is if you give names to your human subjects, you remembered it better." She joked, "So that was okay. [laughs] I do despair of science sometimes! [laughs]"

Again, for Midgley, it comes down to what scientists want to test and how they go about it: “The question is which way do you face, isn’t it? What do you consider needs proving? If you wanted to prove that animals were unconscious you’d have a terrible time. So while I expect research of some kind might help, it’s much more a matter of how things are expressed and what approach to them is being established.” In addition to Goodall, she drew attention to the pioneers of ethology, and the issue of scientific objectivity in relation to animals: “Lorenz and Tinbergen were perfectly serious scientists; nobody’s ever said they weren’t. But they were—I think this is perhaps relevant to what you’re asking—they quite clearly viewed their birds and things as their fellow beings.” She continued, “Tinbergen said if you watch the gulls circling you cannot
doubt they are enjoying it. And at other times, of course, he takes the Behaviorist line that you never know what an animal is feeling.” Again, she reiterated her point about the influence of language and how the dramas of science are portrayed. “Just like Jane Goodall,” she said, “it’s the way which the stuff is described that makes the difference.” Use of this rich, human language in speaking about animals in science is not unscientific for Midgley, but rather a helpful way to convey information to the public. “And, of course,” she said, “that makes it bloody readable—it gets through to people. Even Desmond Morris had a more companionable attitude to his animals than a lot of zoologists do and I think that did shift things. Of course, since Jane Goodall there’s been a lot of sympathetic ethological writing, and I think people do take it up now.”

She continued by noting that ethology and animal studies still face the challenges of Behaviorism and anti-anthropomorphism. She commented that Franz de Waal “is very good, but he still has to contend against this stuff. And he has, I think, to use a rather colder language than he naturally would. It’s still terribly strong. Yes, what de Waal says is very good and he does indeed establish it.” She continued, “Quite interesting, when he first started *Chimpanzee Politics*, he was much more automatic than he became later.⁴ Of course, that was a matter of observing these things in a zoo in Amsterdam. It was a very limited community. In calling it politics, there was a lot of stress on these feuds, so it was all pretty crude.” She then joked, “It is always easier to admit that animals have objectionable feelings, isn’t it?” [laughs] She concluded that research on animals can be helpful if done properly with the right language and concepts for the context, but its many obstacles, such as behaviorist skepticism, slow

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consistent progress. “I am depressed,” she says, “that things haven’t moved faster, but I
do think they have moved and are, on the whole, continuing to move in the right
direction.

I narrowed down the question and returned to the idea of researching practical
and historical examples or features of the concept of the mixed community. I asked
about social research into what she saw as the mixed community—the way that
humans and animals relate to each other and understanding animal subjectivity among
other things—and what she thought about research into that in contemporary and
history examples. She replied: “Yes, well I think there is a bit more attention now to that.
I’m noticing some quite interesting things about labs where they have experimental
animals and how the technicians make one of them a pet, [laughs] you know, ‘We
mustn’t interfere with that one.’” She continued, “I have seen some and I’ve seen
certainly a bit more about domestic animals. Of course, the animals and the people
have to do research together, [laughs] don’t they? If you’re going to research it gets
tricky because it’s rather harder to deceive the people. [laughs] I think that it is
something that should be done and I have a vague impression that it sometimes is
done.” She is therefore positive about the possibility and ultimately concluded, “The
more the better, yes.”

As we neared the end of the interview, I asked Midgley about her current work,
especially The Solitary Self, and discovered that she is still writing about the issues of
evolution, its interpretations, and human nature. 5 She began by saying: “Well, like I said
in it, I had really thought ‘It’s too much trouble writing books, I don’t want to write

another,’ but then I got so cross with the Dawkins-ism.” The issue that roused her into writing another book is her old nemesis of individualism and Social Darwinism: “The point of the whole thing is it’s about individualism, which is, I think, terribly important to us now—a concept which leads people to take all sorts of action because they feel they should be individuals, or other people should. It needs understanding and the mere fact of bringing in the word ‘selfish’ in that crude sort of way really had a tremendously unfortunate effect.”

For Midgley, this has personal and political implications, something that must be acknowledged as a component of science: “I suggested that the reason it went across so big was that, politically at the time, people were rather feeling like, ‘We don’t want to be rationed any longer, and that will be all right.’ ‘Greed is good,’ and that sort of idea, was coming in politically.” She pointed out that this concept is imploding on the political and economic fronts: “Well, it’s turning out badly. It’s turning out badly in economics, isn’t it?” She also correlated it with economics and religion: “The free market ideology, which again is almost a religion, is kind of getting discredited by the bankers and so forth, and a lot of people are saying that right now.” She continued: “But it’s been important to a lot of people and that’s where the individualism operates: at the political and economic level. It seems to me very obvious that this isn’t satisfying people and I thought it was about time to say so.”

Midgley continued on the trouble of individualism, and how misinterpretations and distortions of evolution lead to all sorts of problems: “You see, the misuse of Darwin is what I had long been bothered about. Darwinism is taken to be the justification of unbridled individualism, isn’t it? Yes, and that’s wrong. When people kind of rule out
evolution in the sort of way that you’re mentioning on religious grounds, they take it that believing in evolution means believing in *that* [selfish individualism].” This public understanding of evolution was mainly why she felt compelled to write again: “So, it seemed important to point out that it didn’t. That’s the general reason why I went to the trouble. It’s a short book. It’s a simple book. It is simply, really, about individualism and nature.”

She focused on Richard Dawkins, who she sees as a prophet of individualism: “People do, rightly, respect and take him to be a prophet who they can follow, and I do think one needs to know what he [Dawkins] actually said. He didn’t expect to be a prophet. His idea was he would knock holes in everything, and of course he had to be standing on something to do it. He does disseminate some positive ideas, but I thought it worth looking at.” This relates to Hobbes for Midgley, in that certain aspects of his thought are grossly exaggerated over the positive: “And Hobbes I take very seriously. I think Hobbes did something very important in his time. But he did not mean to drive everybody to feel isolated in this sort of way.” Her emphasis here was on the real implications of individualism, and how it has dangerous social consequences: “People, Greg, do feel terribly isolated now, I think. An awful lot of people are very lonely and don’t know what to do about it. Somebody was saying that there are now more and more one person households. Well, I’m one myself a lot of the time, and I don’t think it’s a terribly great idea, really. [laughs] I mean, I don’t mind it. Marriages break up, and the upshot often tends to be that people get stuck on their own.” She concluded that, “though it may be all right in certain contexts because you’ve got other things going on around you, people do become utterly isolated, and that is not a natural situation.”
In closing, I asked if she has any further comments, questions, or things she’d like to amend or add to the interview. She joked: “I do tend to have the feeling I’ve said everything, [laughs] but I’ve had that feeling before, writing this book.” Midgley returned to climate change, and pondered what needs to be done in order to change perceptions of its reality: “I’ve been very worried about climate change for a long time, and the fact that people don’t take in climate change, and I can’t say anything more constructive about that, I think. If somebody finds a way of waking people up about climate change, that would seem to me really to be of first importance. And possibly out of the present, absurd skepticism something may emerge.” She was not optimistic on this: “I don’t know. I don’t see it yet.” She continued, “In this sort of campaign, my hope is they’ll make a terrible mess of that and people will say so. The existing sort of fear about science can easily be stirred up, and the sort of contempt for science: ‘Who are these experts in their labs?’ There’s a really disastrous sort of lack of sense about this. If you ask what’s worrying me, intellectually, that’s worrying me at the present. I think things may change, and it’s right time they did.” She then pointed out the variability of “belief” in climate change: “And it’s different in different countries. About three years ago, there was a totally hot summer with a lot of people dying in France. People did seem to notice it; they noticed it in France and they even noticed it here. But we aren’t in the part of the world where much of this sort of thing happens. So I am a bit depressed about that.”

She also returned to science and religion, this time with her long-standing focus on religious aspects of science: “I go on thinking about science and religion. I just touch, toward the end of that book, on the issue of teleology, on the notion that biologists tended to have got rid of it. I was thinking they are extremely teleological at present. If
any sort of human habit is mentioned, or the habit of any creature, they want to find a function for it. They aren’t happy until they have.” She continued, “Well, we all know, as they’ll explain on alternate Thursdays, in theory, they don’t mean that: the ones who happened to have that survived. So that’s, as it were, the cause of it being there, but the teleological language is still extremely strong. And they get quite scandalized if something doesn’t have an evolutionary function.” Midgley addresses this in a forthcoming article, which she printed out for me: “I wrote an article about evolutionary function for a small magazine which will come out shortly. In fact, I could bring that one up on my machine and give you a copy of it. But I don’t think I’m gestating an enormous project at the moment.”

Following this final reference to religion, I asked if she had any further comments or advice for those in religious studies dealing with her work. She replied: “I’ve always been jolly cautious of what I say about religion, but not because I don’t know of it. My father was a parson and a sensible one. I am still really puzzled, Greg, that such really apparently different views can be held by people who get on perfectly well, you know? I don’t feel, sort of, contentious about it.” Her hope is that these different views can be mediated on such issues as climate change and evolution. She closed with a simple final encouragement to me and my colleagues working in religious studies: “Press on. Do your stuff.”
As Midgley stressed in interview, the starting point for all of her work is that “we are animals.” This is also the starting point for her value to ethical conversations about human nature, animals, and the natural world: we constantly seem to forget this point and its implications. We are social animals navigating a morally complex and ambiguous world fraught with conflicting values and claims. If we take Darwinian evolution seriously, then we must acknowledge that we share this world with other animals as our fellow beings on this planet. We therefore share a natural and moral context with other animals. The concept of the mixed community is an especially valuable description of this picture. We are connected to the other beings on this planet and to nature as a whole. This natural relationality and interrelatedness is where values arise for Midgley, not in abstractions about rights or interests. We are capable of valuing and caring for a wide range of things, and animals matter to us because we are animals living alongside other animals in this world. As Midgley said in the interview, we are part of the “whole of beings which are important to each other.”

Midgley reminds us that values are organic and have to make sense in the context of our lives on this planet. Her description of social and ecological claims in the mixed community reflects her wider emphasis on a relational naturalism, one which locates moral questions in this setting. Here the organic metaphor of a tree captures the various asymmetrical relationships that shape our lives and our moral decisions. The flower petal is a unique individual, but it is related through direct and indirect connections to all the other parts of the tree: flowers, fruit, twigs, branches, roots, leaves, trunk and so on, as well as to the tree as a whole. No part of this tree exists or is
understandable apart from the whole tree, but each part is important. Individuals and collectives are both important in this picture. This holistic relationality stresses the interplay of parts and wholes and does not exaggerate either to a fault.

This relational interplay of parts and wholes is what Midgley draws out as a central feature of life and morality. We are wholes. This is the unity of human nature. We are multifaceted beings with a number of constitutive parts. We are individual and social, rational and emotional, formed by nature and nurture. As such, ignoring any of our parts, as she pointed out in the interview, “cuts ourselves in half.” Like the flower petals on the tree, we are unique beings constituted by a number of complementary parts and aspects of human nature. When we see ourselves as wholes, as unified, then we begin to see how we are related to the other parts of the tree. We are individuals and parts of our families, groups, communities, cultures, countries, species, ecosystems, and biosphere. Nothing makes sense outside of this context, which is why Midgley locates our values in this setting. The mixed community illustrates how we are related to animals in this world, and thus how we relate to them as part of our moral landscape. We are part of them and they are part of us in this interrelated worldview. This is why they matter to us.

For Midgley, then, it makes little sense to based animal ethics is artificial categories such as rights or justice. These legal terms do not do their jobs well for humans and extending them to animals in concentric circles misses the picture. They are not simply receptacles of value or subjects-of-a-life—we do not need to go through these verbal and intellectual gymnastics in order to understand that we need to treat animals better. We must rather see them in the context of our lives on this planet and
how they are related to us, how they share this world with us. Perhaps this is something that we are just now awakening to, but as Midgley mused in the interview, it is more likely something that we have lost. If humans are part of some larger community, she said, every human is important to every other human to some extent. However, to stop community at species barrier seems to be something that “went off” with the confluence of the dualistic and mechanistic worldviews of Christianity and the Industrial Revolution. Animals have always been part of human communities, and “things” are not parts of communities. Whether we are reclaiming this older wisdom or realizing something new, Midgley believes that this community and relationality is morally significant and a good place to start our discussions about animals.

What develops for Midgley is a comprehensive approach to a wide array of complementary and interrelated ethical issues. Therefore, in the interview, she discussed animals alongside climate change, social justice, family, and politics quite seamlessly because these are all 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. Midgley thus delineates the mixed community as a way of approaching the important place of animals in our lives. Animals are but one of the many components of our value systems that we constantly weigh and prioritize as we sift through the hectic and confusing array of conflicts that we encounter in our lives. Moral questions are complicated and she seeks to describe the complexity of how the various parts of morality relate to each other. In this practical approach to the variability of value systems, priorities and values shift, social and ecological settings change, and the rules are constantly rewritten. There are no easy
answers. No single ethical system can account for the diversity and unpredictability of moral issues that arise each day. Those that claim to do so, Midgley says, simply deceive us.

Midgley’s relational value system runs counter to the ethical systems that she criticizes. She is relentless in her opposition to individualistic and rationalistic systems of morality in wider ethical theory and in animal ethics. This is because these systems fragment and abstract human nature and relations. We are not abstract intellects and we are not alien to this planet. Any system that begins from some place other than a unified understanding of the complexity of human nature and our place on this planet is destined to fail for Midgley. It makes little sense to her then to attempt to extend ethical systems to animals that are already unwieldy and unhelpful for humans. Her critique of rationalism and other systems that dismiss animals or seek to extend these concepts to animals is invaluable and a large part of why she matters. Her keen and incisive critique exposes the inconsistencies and inadequacies of these systems and has proved valuable, along with her concept of the mixed community, to those trying to undermine the strictures of rationalism.

Others have noticed the value of Midgley’s critique and concepts. Her deconstructive and critical work is doubly valuable because, in the process, she also offers constructive and balanced insights, giving attentive readers both a sledgehammer to level these structures and the more delicate tools with which to build more complex and nuanced ideas. Her concepts such as the mixed community, her system of values and claims, and her emphases on humans as animals in a natural world are valuable insights for a number of theorists. However, she cannot be all things to all people.
Otherwise, she appears to be a disjointed and noncommittal thinker. Quite the contrary:

Midgley is a clear and consistent writer whose arguments and ideas are all interconnected in a unified project. So where does this leave us in appraising uses of Midgley’s work?

Midgley can be a valuable resource for those that carefully and thoughtfully apply her critique and concepts and allow her to work alongside them rather than for them. Her critique, which is wide-ranging and addresses a number of issues, is helpful in undermining a number of areas of ethical theory, especially rationalistic and dualistic thought related to human nature, animals, and the natural world. Her constructive concepts build on this critique, locating humans as animals in social and ecological contexts. For Midgley, our values stem from this setting and manifest in the relationality and interplay between parts and wholes in a dynamic and pragmatic value system. Those who ally themselves with Midgley in similar projects can gain valuable input from these aspects of her thought, which is the context for the mixed community concept. In order to appraise uses of Midgley’s work in environmental ethics and religious studies, I measure how accurately theorists both understand and her critique and concepts.

So who gets Midgley right? I contend that those who meet both of the above qualifications get her right: they must understand and interpret her accurately and apply her suitably. In this category I place Ted Benton among the environmental and animal ethicists and Anna Peterson and James Gustafson among the religion scholars. Among these three, Peterson presents the best handling of Midgley because she does not layer additional metaphysical commitments such as Marxism or theocentrism with which Midgley would disagree. In other words, Midgley’s work is continuous with Benton and
Gustafson until they diverge into areas that Midgley is critical of or avoids. Peterson is not heavy-handed with commitments such as these, making her use of Midgley more continuous. Nevertheless, all three of these theorists accurately understand Midgley’s project and apply her as a valuable ally in their critique and in their constructions of human nature. They all share a similar commitment to locating humans as animals in the natural world and recognize that formulations of animal and environmental ethics stem from this context. They do not miss Midgley’s point and they do not try to manipulate her concepts to their purposes. Midgley is therefore an ally in their similar though not identical projects. She manifests works alongside rather than for these theorists, which is why they get her right.

Ted Benton allies with Midgley in a critique of rationalist individualism and human/animal dualism. Midgley is valuable to Benton in this task as she resolutely argues against the artificial dichotomy that has been erected between humans, animals, and the natural world. His coinage of a social and biological “human/animal continuism” is on point with Midgley’s emphasis on humans as animals embedded in the natural world and reflects the relational and social features of the mixed community. He also draws on her critique of animal symbolism as well, seeking to remove harmful perspectives that drive a wedge between humans and animals, perpetuating the human/animal dualism. Benton gets Midgley right because of his understanding of animal and environmental ethics as deriving from understandings of human nature and the human place in the natural world. This is why he values her critique and uses it well. Though Benton and Midgley diverge at Marxism, this does not vitiate his use of Midgley because he understands and interprets her accurately and does not misapply her
concepts for his purposes. He is not too heavy-handed and satisfies the most important requirement for applying Midgley’s thought, which is in developing social and ecological ethics in relation to human nature, specifically in how we relate to each other, animals, and the natural world.

Anna Peterson begins her project at the same place that Midgley does: human nature. Peterson recognizes that our relations to each other, to animals, and to the natural world stem from human nature and our understandings of it. Therefore she finds it vital to construct a complex and nuanced picture of human nature and understands that our value systems stem from how we see ourselves in this world. This is parallel to Midgley’s project in many ways and they reach many of the same conclusions. They each locate humans as animals that are embedded on this planet. They each oppose the extremes of social and biological determinism in arguing for balanced understandings of human nature while challenging misrepresentations of evolution. Moreover, they value community and relationality, and understand the complexity and ambiguity of morality. Midgley is valuable in Peterson’s deconstructive and constructive work on these aspects, and she does not metaphysically diverge from Midgley in any significant way as do Benton and Gustafson. Therefore Peterson most effectively parallels and utilizes Midgley throughout and does not manipulate Midgley’s work outside of the unity of her thought. She understands Midgley and applies her well.

James Gustafson crafts a picture of human nature that draws heavily on Midgley’s understanding of human nature and its implications. His picture seeks a unity that embeds humans as animals in the natural world where the human good may not always be the primary good. He thus de-centers humans as the epoch of creation and
traces the relational value system that follows. Along the way he criticizes rationalism and dualistic thinking by allying with Midgley. In all of this, he is confluent with Midgley and understands her work very well. Moreover, Midgley herself said in the interview that his work was, “jolly good.” However, they diverge at God. God is an extra “relation” in Gustafson relational value system that is not present in Midgley’s thought. Like Benton, he adds a metaphysical commitment that Midgley does not maintain. This divergence is enhanced by Gustafson’s suggestion that there is a weakness in allied thinkers such as Midgley since they lack the theocentric angle. Midgley cannot and need not be “theocentrized,” and Gustafson’s mistake is in trying to do so, or at least hinting at it. For Midgley, there is no need to go beyond a naturalized context. However, this again does not vitiate that he accurately understands Midgley and applies her well in his construction of human nature.

Thus far, Benton, Peterson, and Gustafson get Midgley right by accurately understanding her project and suitably applying her critique and concepts. An interesting enigma arises in Lisa Sideris, who draws on Gustafson and Midgley, as well as the land ethicists. Sideris as gets Midgley both right and wrong. Her use of Midgley must be qualified, though it is very well developed and thought out. Out of all of the religion scholars, she relies most heavily on the concept of the mixed community, as it is vital to her “naturalized ethic.” Midgley is also valuable for Sideris’s critique of misuses of evolution as well as in her constructive naturalized ethic. She understands Midgley well and traces a number of the nuances and intricacies of the mixed community concept. However, though she faithfully traces many components of Midgley’s value system and the mixed community, she is too heavily influenced by Baird Callicott’s
reading of Midgley (which I will more fully address shortly). Therefore she ultimately maintains an exaggerated and bifurcated position toward animals, simplistically placing domestic animals in the mixed community and wild animals in the biotic community. This is surprising, as she is very on point with her handling of Midgley until she perpetuates this division. She nuances this to an extent, and she certainly handles this question better than Callicott, but ultimately settles on this division. I contend that this adds a perplexing asterisk to an otherwise faithful interpretation of the mixed community because she misapplies the concept.

What develops then is a scale of how accurately theorists understand and apply Midgley. On the accurate end we have Peterson, Benton, and Gustafson. Somewhere between accurate and inaccurate we frustratingly have Sideris. So who is on the inaccurate end of the scale? This end is comprised of those that misunderstand and misinterpret her and/or misapply her concepts. At the far end of the scale is Callicott, who both misunderstands and misapplies Midgley, followed by Catherine Larrère and Raphaël Larrère, and then by her critics, Michael Leahy and Gary Comstock.

I’ll begin with her critics, who do not make the mistake of misapplying her concepts because that is not their intention. Rather they simply misunderstand and misinterpret her. On the environmental and animal ethics side, Leahy hastily places Midgley in a grouping with disparate animal liberationists. It is soon apparent that he has misread Midgley and missed her point since his criticisms against this group do not work against her. Moreover, she is quite critical of others in this group, and Leahy ends up siding with Midgley more than he criticizes her. Ultimately, his quarrel with Midgley is more in her conclusion of including animals in our moral community rather than her
methods. Comstock also misunderstands Midgley’s project by claiming that the mixed community prescribes, or at least does not proscribe meat-eating. However, this misunderstanding of Midgley comes through Callicott’s distorted interpretation and application of the mixed community. Though Comstock touches on an important issue in the mixed community, he relies on Callicott’s flawed reading of Midgley rather than on his own interpretation from a primary reading or analysis. Consequently both Leahy and Comstock misunderstand Midgley. Leahy does so by not grasping Midgley’s project and disagreeing only with her pro-animal conclusions rather than her methods, and Comstock does so by uncharitably reading her through Callicott rather that examining the concept of the mixed community in a primary reading of her work. Ultimately they both get Midgley wrong—not because they misapply her, but because they misunderstand her.

The remaining theorists misapply Midgley’s concept of the mixed community. Larrère and Larrère again represent a perplexing case because they seem to understand the relationality and other facets of the mixed community. However, they fall in line with Callicott in staunchly separating domestic and wild animals as belonging to the mixed and biotic communities respectively. They therefore apply the similar “Midgley-Callicott” distinction that Sideris puts forward as well, perpetuating Callicott’s misunderstanding and misapplication of the mixed community. Further still, they claim that the mixed community falls under a contract theory of ethics between humans and animals. However, Midgley is bitterly critical of the individualism and flawed egalitarianism of the social contract, and believes that it cannot work in human relations and especially cannot be extended to work for animals. Though Larrère and Larrère
seem to understand the mixed community at first blush, they go astray in following
Callicott’s faults as well as in attempting the correlate the mixed community with
contract thinking, an ethical system which Midgley staunchly opposes.

This brings us finally to Callicott, who ultimately gets Midgley wrong and in turn
leads others astray, exacerbating his mistakes. This is primarily because Callicott seeks
a silver bullet to the animal question, something which Midgley warns can never exist in
any area of morality. Nevertheless, Callicott approaches Midgley from the start within
his monistic land ethic paradigm, seeking a unified theory of environmental ethics. He
believes that he finds a theoretical bridge between environmental and animal ethics in
Midgley, but he essentially misunderstands and misapplies the mixed community in the
process.

Eugene Hargrove picks up on the ground level mistake, which is that Callicott
attempts to plug Midgley into a “unified” group of ethical exemplars that are meant to
consistently promote Callicott’s vision of the land ethic. However, he fails in this
because he seeks a unified revisionary metaphysics that is coherent and consistently
shared among its members, namely David Hume, Charles Darwin, Charles Elton, Aldo
Leopold, and ultimately Midgley and Callicott himself. Hargrove exposes how there is no
consistent metaphysics to be found in this group. This is certainly the case with Midgley,
who is critical of Hume, especially elements of his skepticism and emotivism. Callicott
does not see this, and actually claims that Midgley and Leopold share a Humean
system of ethics. While Midgley does argue for the role of emotion and the importance
of sentiments in animal ethics, she also criticizes Hume for basing morality in emotive
factors alone without the complementary focus on reason that Midgley maintains.
Callicott only sees that Midgley agrees with Darwin and Hume in that altruism is possible and makes exaggerated claims on basis. Though Midgley does hold Darwin in high esteem, she cannot be seen as sharing the same metaphysical unity as Callicott’s exemplars, including Callicott. This is compounded with the fact that Midgley is critical of sociobiology, which Callicott is supportive of, in favor of ethology. The scope and purpose of Midgley and Callicott’s projects simply to do fit together.

Callicott therefore misunderstands Midgley and places her in the metaphysical lineage of David Hume and others, which is grossly off the mark. He also misses a number of other things in Midgley’s project, which stems from his selective reading and ultimately leads to his misapplication of the mixed community. In his effort to replicate the biotic community, he misses the relationality in Midgley’s project. Callicott is focused on the *supremacy* of the whole and the *subordination* of the parts. Midgley, on the other hand, stresses the *interplay* of the parts and the wholes, as well as the interplay of values and claims. Parts and wholes are important for Midgley—they are relational, or interrelational. In this, she advocates a relational and holistic system rather than simple holism. Callicott attempts to make the mixed community a model of simple holism. Not only this, but he exaggerates and bifurcates the distinction between domestic and wild animals, claiming that the mixed community (Callicott’s version) applies to domestic animals and the biotic community (Callicott’s version) applies to wild animals. While the mixed community is a helpful way of viewing our relation to domestic animals, and though Midgley primarily focuses on what we see as domestic animals, she never makes a firm moral distinction between domestic and wild animals. This may strike some as odd, but it reflects her emphasis on degrees rather than divisions, gradations
rather than dichotomies. Callicott rather dichotomizes, maintaining and perpetuating the same divisions that he has from the start, and tries to force the mixed community with all its complexity and nuances into his rigid and incompatible approach to animals.

This is not to say that Midgley does not recognize wild animals or the distinctions that exist between species and their various contexts. She actually is very sophisticated in her approach to animals in stressing the importance of distinguishing and differentiating species. This is vital to understanding and respecting them. She rather recognizes that there is much more to animals than the simple distinctions of domestic or wild. This includes humans. One quickly realizes she also does not rigidly distinguish us from domestic or wild animals either. This is this mixed community, and Callicott misses the point. The mixed community represents a complex, nuanced, and graded continuum of animals that share biological and social features living in the same natural world. Domestic and wild are really relational categories—how animals relate to the context of their social and ecological setting. These animals vary according to a number of factors—the complexity of their social lives, their individuality and their context in relation to their species and ecosystems, and so forth. The mixed community is Midgley’s way of describing this relationality between humans and other animals on this planet and how this relates to our value systems. In her thought, context and relationality is where animal values arise and arrange into well-reasoned and pragmatic value systems rather than in a priori conceptual prescriptions on the moral status of domestic versus wild or individual versus whole.

So how does this all come together? We are animals. We live alongside other animals in morally significant social and ecological worlds. This is based in our
evolutionary heritage on this planet and its corresponding enabling features. The mixed community is Midgley’s description of our relation to other animals in this setting. We are evolutionarily related to other animals and we also have developed other special relationships through domestication. This largely stems from our shared sociality and context with these animals. However, domestic animals are not the only members of these mixed species communities. It is also larger than that—all animals are related and interrelated in this sense. They are our fellow beings, and Midgley is paralleling human community. We have a sense of this large-scale human community, one in which every human is seen as valuable in one way or another to every other human. She argues that humans need not be the only members of this moral community.

Now, this wide-ranging community, human or mixed, seems a bit abstract. As she mentioned in the interview, this is more of a starting point, and this larger understanding of community dissolves into “a lot of little ones.” We can then see ourselves as diverse and variegated mixed social and ecological communities that are intimately connect to a larger community, part of the whole. There are whole ranges of relationships that we have with animals in this context and they do not stop at the line between domestic and wild. Midgley would likely contend that varying contexts would make it difficult to discern this artificial 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, and so on. To classify companion dogs and dairy cows in the same category is a stretch. Differing relations and contexts determine where these animals land on the domestic/wild scale. These terms are therefore not helpful as essential categories that preordain the moral status of animals.
This is what Callicott attempts when he tries to bracket domestic and wild into mixed and biotic communities respectively.

Midgley does focus on domestic animals in discussing the mixed community, but it does not stop there. Her discussion of social and ecological claims is helpful in understanding her distinctions. Social claims are those that we respond to in our social communities, claims on behalf of sentient members. In this we weigh and prioritize claims in our value systems. This is where we place “what matters to us” in relation to everything else. It is holistic and relational, valuing the interplay of parts and wholes. Midgley argues that animals matter to us as our fellow beings and belong in this moral community, a mixed species community. Therefore 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. They matter. Ecological claims are those we respond to in our ecological world, claims on behalf of non-sentient members. These include trees, forests, species, and the biosphere as a whole. Social and ecological claims are at times in conflict, which Midgley recognizes, but she believes this conflict is exaggerated. These claims are at times in conflict, at times independent, and very often continuous and complementary.

Therefore when we think of animals, say of an elephant, we must consider both social and ecological claims, as each elephant is part of the mixed community in the ecological world. What develops for Midgley is a large-scale understanding of our relation to animals and the natural world that is the foundation for the more particular and small-scale communities in which values are weighed and prioritized. In turn, Midgley advocates a pragmatic model of ethical decision making. This model is holistic
and relational, taking into account all of the parts and wholes, bringing together all individual, social, and ecological considerations. Animals are not simply parts of the mixed or biotic communities. Rather they are parts of social and ecological worlds, much as we are, in particular socially and ecologically mixed communities. If we consider a feral cat, then, Midgley does not think it helpful to begin our discussion by asking if it is domestic or wild. For some, this is beginning and the end of the discussion—determine its domestic/wild status, and we will know what to do. This simply will not do for Midgley. There are many more factors involved before a decision can be made.

I do not propose that Midgley has all of the answers, but her system lends us more practicality and relevance than do abstract conceptions of moral worth. She offers us a better set of questions than simple individualism or holism in dealing with animals. The mixed community is in turn an alternative to liberal individualist and simple holistic approaches to animal ethics. The individual and the whole each matter for Midgley—one does not trump the other. The parts are in relation to each other, the whole, and to everything else. Therefore animals are not individuals to be liberated or species to be left alone, but beings that matter to us in relation to our whole value system. Our value systems develop by living in the world, constantly weighing and adjusting priorities as we encounter difficult value-shaping questions. This is more pragmatic and reflective of how we operate. Midgley argues that animals are part of this value system and their claims should be highly prioritized because they are our fellow beings in the mixed community. They matter to us and this should reflect in our value systems.
This is important to us since we live in the world and make practical decisions. Midgley approaches issues from the context of our lives on this planet and in view of the wide range of things that can matter to us. In the interview, she seamlessly mentioned dogs, cats, elephants, chimpanzees, forests, and climate change in addition to politics, evolution, and family in answering questions about the mixed community. This is because we cannot bracket parts of our life in fragmenting approaches to ethics. She contextualizes animals as valuable parts of our moral landscape. Her approach is valuable and more helpful than other approaches to animals because it brings together all these various aspects into a more unified understanding of human values.

In closing, I would like to take a brief look at Midgley’s emphasis on the practical. Midgley’s critique stems from the fact that many of the views surfacing in ethical theory or politics or science are simply impractical ways of viewing human life. They do not truly reflect our experience on this planet and often do more harm than good in making practical moral decisions. In the interview, she said that once you walk closer to a big issue there are lots of little correlated issues as well, and people often start with the wrong questions. Again, she reminds us that there are no silver bullet solutions and there are no simple answers to many of our problems. We are often going to make decisions that we are not completely happy with because there are a variety of conflicting claims and values in our moral landscape. There is no simple formula or prescription for the problems we must address. This is why her approach is more pragmatic, taking into account a variety of variables in a weighted system of priorities and values in making the best decisions we can in our particular contexts, our mixed and ecological communities.
In the interview she mentioned cats and superfluous kittens. This is reflective of the developing concern with overpopulations of feral cats. A single feral cat may not pose many problems, but large collections of feral cats in one single area can lead to a number of problems, from minor issues such as late night cat fights and mating outside of our windows to great reductions in local songbird populations. People, Midgley would point out, are likely to hold strong opinions on this issue in their communities. It is loaded with emotion, and suitably so. However, approaching this issue purely out of emotional passion, either for or against the cats, will only result violent clashes between the interested parties and lead to hasty and drastic decisions. Midgley reminds us that emotion must be balanced with reason. Reason should not subsume or defer to emotion, but work with it. In the mixed community, reason and emotion are unified in making the best decisions that are reflective of all of our many capacities as humans. Strong emotions are only one piece of this unity.

Likewise reason will not provide all the answers. Like lifeboat ethics, purely rationalist approaches to issues only get us so far, perpetuating a fragmented approach to practical questions. Therefore, to ask questions such as “is this cat a subject-of-a-life?” or “does this cat have rights?” is misguided. These are abstract and artificial individualistic categories that do not really help us solve problems. They do not even work for humans. They are one side of the reason/emotion complement that must work together. They do not reflect the many other variables that must be present in our decision-making, the many other features of human life that distinguish us from simple calculating machines. Midgley reminds us that we “are not abstract intellects.”
She also reiterates that “we are not alien” to all of this. So what are we? We are animals. The question of feral cats must be seen in this light. They are our fellow beings. Midgley believes that when someone says that the cat has “rights,” it is really more of a placeholder for something else. She identified this in the interview as our intuitive sense of our relation to other animals, which she described as the mixed community. They matter to us. Feral cats are part of this mixed community. However, it is not because they are simply domestic as opposed to wild, granting them membership in the mixed rather than biotic community as Callicott would claim. Feral cats are an excellent example of the degrees of domesticity and wildness. They are neither, at least not at the extremes. Where is the line drawn between domestic and wild? Again, this is overblown. There are fuzzy boundaries here, just as there are fuzzy and questionable boundaries between civilization and wilderness. To act as though all of these distinctions are razor sharp moral boundaries misses the point. Animals, like humans, are part of mixed and ecological communities. Their values must be seen in relation to both of these communities, not one alone. Ecological holism does not ask the right questions with its emphasis on wild and the supremacy of the whole, and animal liberation does not ask the right questions with is focus on the individual and abstract extensionist categories of morality.

The mixed community describes the relation of the individual and the whole, social and ecological. For Midgley, feral cats are part of our moral community, our mixed community, and this should then reflect in our weighted system of values and priorities. This is how pragmatic answers to questions develop: by not taking prescriptive shortcuts on moral questions. Midgley argues that animals deserve more
than “shortcut” answers as members of our community. Questions about how to deal
with this problem must then be seen in relation to this system. Cats are important to us
and we are responding to their social claims. They are valuable. They are the most
popular single companion animal in our country. We cannot then act as thought they are
things to be trapped and disposed of but as fellow beings and relations. They relate to
us in special ways because we have domesticated them and live companionable lives
with them. Feral cats are feral primarily because humans have neglected them, not
because of their own calculated choice. They did not break the domestic contract, as
Larrère and Larrère would wish us to think. The special capacities that have allowed us
to live with and love cats also carry with them the corresponding cruelty and neglect that
often manifests in human relationships. We have created the feral cat situation while
they have simply survived as best they know how.

This survival often leads to conflicts. A notable conflict is that between feral cats
and songbirds—the clash of predator and prey. It is not a major issue for locals if cats
whittle away at the rodent population, but songbirds are quite sacred. And with good
reason—they are beautiful, add joy to our lives, and, importantly, are our fellow beings
in the mixed community. So are feral cats. There are conflicts and claims of various
sorts playing out. There are the social claims of the songbirds and the cats as fellow
beings in the mixed community. There are various ecological claims and considerations
as well. Songbirds are not species that we have domesticated such as cats. Feral cats
would not be here otherwise, placing them in a special relationship with us. However,
many songbirds thrive in urban environments and rely on human communities for
survival. Many of them may not be here otherwise. The spectrum of domesticity and
wildness is fuzzy when birds and cats meet. Some birds are pets, some are in flocks in Asia. Some cats are pets, others roam in Siberia. These feral cats were domestic pets at some point, but cats are notoriously “wild” in relation to the domesticity of dogs in the first place. Likewise these birds are living among us, but perhaps our community is a temporary stop toward more wild locals. The point is that the domestic/wild distinction is not overwhelming in this case, so ecological holists cannot simply say “off with their feral heads” because cats are domestic and birds are wild. Further, if we went by individualist categories, for instance Tom Regan’s subject-of-a-life system, the cats win because they are mammals above the age of one et al., whereas birds are not.

So where does this leave us? Midgley advocates that we move toward practical systems of prioritized and weighted values grounded in holistic relationality because this is how we operate in the world. She is not an environmental ethicist in the standard sense, but her ideas and concepts shed light on how to relate our environmental values together into a coherent system. The results of this may in fact be very confluent with a pragmatic environmental ethic that can address a whole range of questions under one system, much like Callicott desires. In turn we have an environmental ethic that can address “domestic” and “wild” animals without theoretical incommensurability. However, this does not mean easy answers. Perhaps feral cats should not be euthanized because they are fellow beings in our mixed community, along with the songbirds they hunt. What then is the solution?

As I mentioned earlier, Midgley does not have all of the answers, but she does give us helpful tools and questions for pragmatically approaching our social and ecological communities. How do the feral cats relate to us and our value system? How
do these cats relate to their species and those alongside of them? How do they relate to their ecological setting? For how many generations have these cats been feral? What are the social and ecological claims involved? Where are these claims independent, continuous, and/or in conflict? Does this problem require intervention? What are some of the possible solutions to the problem? What are some of the previous solutions? What have we gotten right or wrong before? Does euthanizing fit into our value system? What about adoptions? How about spaying? Midgley mentioned that she is amenable to spaying cats in the interview. How then would this be carried out? What distinctions will be made? Will all cats be spayed? Will they be spayed and immediately released or first put up for adoption? Will they be relocated into manageable areas or returned to their dens? How much will this cost? Is it worth the cost? Are there enough professionals with time enough to spay these animals? As Midgley mused in relation to culling elephants, does contraception “spoil their family life?” The list goes on, and we would have to wrestle with all of these and other questions in relation to our communities rather than simply asking, “domestic or wild?” or “rights or no rights?”

These questions are the start of the practical decision-making process that Midgley advocates in the mixed community. It is not simply individualistic and it is not simply holistic. It is alternatively relational and holistic, surveying a whole range or interrelations that constitute moral questions. This is grounded in human nature. As animals on this planet, living alongside other animals, we are capable of making these ethical decisions in our communities. They are not easy, and there is no single question or answer that frames the feral cat question or any other animal question. Midgley encourages us to “press on,” and to contextualize these issues in the setting of our lives.
on this planet. This is our starting point for morality, and the critique and insights we gain on these issues is why Mary Midgley matters.


_____. “Discussion.” *Between the Species* 2, no. 4 (1986): 195-96


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gregory S. McElwain received degrees in religion and ethics from Abilene Christian University and Vanderbilt University before attending the University of Florida. At the University of Florida, he received a Doctor of Philosophy in religion and philosophy. His emphasis is in religion and nature and he is primarily interested in philosophical and religious environmental ethics. He currently teaches religion and philosophy in the College of Idaho Department of Philosophy and Religion.