

reviews

Basis for an ethical system

Stuart Sutherland

Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature. By Mary Midgley. Pp. 377. (Harvester Press: Brighton, Sussex, 1979.) £7.50

Beast and Man has been widely praised by the litterateurs who contribute to the book pages of the surviving intellectual weeklies. It is a long, rather rambling book, in which it is difficult to discern a clear connected argument. Its main aim seems to be to establish a secure basis for ethics. Mary Midgley argues that, like other animals, man has many inborn drives: these drives can only come to fruition within the context of a culture. She argues that what is good for man must depend upon the nature of his motives: moral reasoning consists of the attempt to harmonise conflicting emotions and to give priority to those which are most deeply ingrained in our nature. It will be a comfort to scientists that she believes the scientific study of human nature can assist in making ethical decisions by revealing more about man's true nature. A second theme running through the book is that we are part of the Animal Kingdom and of the Universe and that one principle of morality is that man should have respect for other animate beings and indeed for the inanimate universe.

In preparing the ground for her own thesis, she assails previous views of the nature of goodness, but she frequently seems to espouse the mistakes of which she accuses others. For example, she attacks Aristotle for arguing that the ultimate human value must be the development of that function which is unique to man and not shared by other animals. She rightly remarks that "it must be shown separately that this differentia is itself the best human quality, that it is the point where humanity is excellent as well as exceptional". Yet later in the book she writes: "Should we therefore say that everything we want is good? In a minimal sense this is right...but...we must go further...because of a competition amongst our various wants. What is good in a stronger, more considered sense must be wanted not just by someone's casual impulse, but by *him as a whole*" [her italics]. The meaning of "him as a whole" is obscure, but supposing

it were to turn out — as it might — that hatred for outgroups was an inborn human characteristic, she would seem to be committed to the proposition that it was thereby good. Edward Wilson has emphasised that the mechanism of evolution depends on the selection of genes that survive and she criticises him for erecting the survival of the individual gene into a principle of morality, but she herself seems to be committing the same fallacy in arguing that whatever is an essential part of human nature must be good.

When she wishes to recommend a given course of action she tells her readers that it is "natural". She believes that: "Respect for other forms of life is certainly a natural feeling. It is not a mere inclination, it is a feeling that we must not destroy certain things — and one that is not isolated, but forms part of our central system of standards". She provides no arguments to show that this feeling is any more natural than delight in wanton cruelty; nor does she provide criteria for deciding that something is natural nor even attempt any clear definition of what the word means. The fact that something forms part of the "central standards" of some people cannot automatically make it good: many societies have as part of their central system of standards a belief in the duty to avenge themselves and their families for slights.

Much of her book seems to be based almost on word play. For example, she insists that the word "rational" is used not merely to describe the behaviour of someone who makes the correct moves in solving intellectual problems, but also the behaviour of someone who acts consistently from a well harmonised set of emotions. Her point about the use of language is right, but it does not seem to advance her argument and it is not clear that it is any more difficult to harmonise a set of bad motives than a set of good ones.

She frequently embarks on arguments that look promising, but they tend to peter out. For example, she uses a cunning analogy to attack one of Wilson's arguments: he believes that understanding how ethical systems have evolved and how our reasoning about morality is controlled by the nervous system will throw light on the nature of ethics. She points out that

discovering how the workings of the brain enable us to do mathematics will not illuminate the nature of mathematics: to understand that we must understand the relationship between numbers, how mathematical proofs work, and the standards by which to judge the correctness of a mathematical calculation or proof. But she makes no attempt to explain what the standards are that are used in moral argument or decision making. It is easier to agree about the canons of mathematics than to resolve a disagreement about ultimate goals.

Although the book as a whole is both unsatisfactory and unsatisfying it does contain nuggets of robust common sense, many of which are well put even if they are not entirely new. For example, in arguing for the continuity of man and the Animal Kingdom, Mary Midgley points out that we often project our own evil on to animals and use a double standard in evaluating their behaviour and our own. It is unreasonable to despise the fox who kills hens for sport more than those who ride to hounds. Again, she points out that we cannot abnegate from instilling a culture and norms in our children — an adult who tries to adopt a non-committal position and tells the child he need not accept a particular ideal until he is old enough to judge for himself is in effect saying "I do not take this seriously and nor need you" and is likely to instil norms of "timidity, shiftiness, and dilettantism". She proposes a sensible if slightly vague resolution of Wilson's dilemma over how altruism towards unrelated members of the same species may have originated: it may have been built on filial and parental instincts, and indeed affectionate gestures between adults mimic those made by parents to children and children to parents.

In view of her obvious sincerity and high-mindedness and the importance of the endeavour, it is a pity Mary Midgley has not produced a more cogent and carefully argued book, but most previous attempts to establish a secure basis for an ethical system have proved equally unsuccessful.

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