

# Relationality in the Thought of Mary Midgley

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## Abstract

For over 40 years, Mary Midgley has been celebrated for the sensibility with which she approached some of the most challenging and pressing issues in philosophy. Her expansive corpus addresses such diverse topics as human nature, morality, animals and the environment, gender, science, and religion. While there are many threads that tie together this impressive plurality of topics, the thread of relationality unites much of Midgley's thought on human nature and morality. This paper explores Midgley's pursuit of a relational notion of the self and our connections to others, including animals and the natural world.

## 1. Introduction

One of the more central themes in Mary Midgley's work is her emphasis on integrated notions of human nature and the self. These notions can become disintegrated or fragmented when central elements of our lives – reason and emotion, mind and body, self and others, human and animal – are isolated and divided against each other as warring alternatives. Throughout her career, Midgley endeavoured to reintegrate these and other aspects of human nature and the self as complementary, rather than oppositional. She long argued for the practicality of philosophy, showing that the ways in which we think of ourselves and the world around us greatly impact how we live. She argued, in particular, that our visions of human nature and the self – how we imagine ourselves and our place in the world – shape our moral principles, attitudes, and actions. For this reason, these visions should be scrutinized regularly and refined.

One significant component of these visions is how we picture human sociality and relationality. In this paper, I will focus on this relatively underexplored aspect of Midgley's work.<sup>1</sup> Relationality involves our intrinsic connections to others, human and nonhuman alike. Throughout her work, Midgley makes the case that this central element of human life should feature more prominently in

<sup>1</sup> This paper is adapted from portions of Gregory S. McElwain, *Mary Midgley: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

our imaginative visions of the world. In what follows, I will first focus on Midgley's critique of individualistic visions – primarily atomistic ones – that fragment our notions of human nature and the self by unrealistically emphasizing the isolated individual (or ego) over more relational or holistic visions of ourselves and our place in the world. From there, I will trace the more constructive elements of Midgley's relational account, which ultimately run throughout her influential approach to animals and the natural world.

## **2. Critique of individualism**

Midgley's emphasis on the relational aspects of the self emerges from her critique of atomistic individualism, which unrealistically isolates individuals and threatens to fragment our understandings of the self, society, and our place in nature. Social atomism, in brief, is the idea that people are distinct individuals. Like atoms or billiard balls, people are envisioned as discrete, self-contained units. Society, in this sense, is nothing more than the aggregate of individual units. Within this atomistic framework, which is often assumed within a contract framework, people are originally separate and isolated individuals.

Thomas Hobbes is perhaps the most vivid and influential proponent of this approach. Hobbes claimed that, in the state of nature, we are originally atomistic and egoistic – that is, inherently solitary and motivated primarily, if not entirely, by self-interest and self-preservation. These assumptions underlie his influential formulation of the social contract, in which he argued that it is in our best interest to strike a collective bargain with each other in order to escape the ruthless and destructive state of nature. Otherwise, there is little stopping us, in the 'war of all against all', from pursuing our own individual interests to the destruction of others. Life, if our egoist natures were to prevail, would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.<sup>2</sup> Thus, we contract with each other in order to live – rather than merely survive – in a lawful society. Here, under the power and protection of the sovereign, we then give up some of our more dangerous freedoms – for instance, the freedom to kill and steal – to live in a lawful world that is, in the end, more conducive to other freedoms and, ultimately, self-preservation. Thus, Hobbes's vision offers an account of why originally solitary and egoistic individuals are able

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. E. M. Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 76.

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to come together and live in society: the contract is, ultimately, a bargain of calculated self-interest in which we are much better off than the cutthroat alternative.

Hobbes's vision, and others that followed, involved real efforts to allot more significance, protection, and self-determination to individuals in the face of tyrannical and oppressive social and political forces. Midgley does not question or disregard these significant contributions to individual autonomy and political reform. Her concern is with the wider impacts of such visions, which have remained influential over time and variously emerged in aspects of Social Darwinism, sociobiology, and free market idealism (these were significant targets of Midgley's criticism in her early writings). She argues that an emphasis on atomistic egoism, the social contract, and correlated notions of individual freedom, though often politically useful, are not necessarily representative of or conducive to the types of lives that people want (and perhaps need) to live. They can, perhaps even more significantly, distort our moral visions by obscuring our connection with each other and the natural world.

### 2.1 Atomist and egoist visions

Midgley argues that atomist and egoist visions of the world tend to paint a somewhat bleak and isolationist view of others. These vivid dramas misconstrue our social landscape, portraying the illusion that we are much less connected and interdependent than we are (and always have been) as social animals. We are depicted, first and foremost, as selfish, disconnected individuals struggling for limited resources. In this competitive climate, we need a strong, self-interested reason to come together and live peaceably with each other (i.e., the contract for self-preservation). Rather than recognizing our intrinsic social natures and bonds – which are prior to, as opposed to consequences of, the contract – and the wider communities of significance to which we belong, atomistic visions chop the world up into separate agents and entities. Other people become *externals* – things out there that may be more or less useful but not really necessary. Relationships, in turn, appear provisional and instrumental, things we do not necessarily seek out and need, but things we use and easily dissolve.

Midgley argues that this vision of the world and its offshoots are unrealistic and undesirable. Hobbes's theory relies too heavily on the assumptions that we are inherently isolated and egoistic. Midgley points out that, while these may be *aspects* of our nature,

this is not the *whole* picture. Hobbes's vision, in other words, exaggerates and hyperbolizes these aspects of our nature to the exclusion of much that makes our species. 'Far from being originally solitary', Midgley writes, 'the earliest human beings were heirs to a long, complex tradition of group life, deep social affection and interdependence, a tradition which dates from many ages before their emergence as a separate species and their famous rise in intelligence'.<sup>3</sup> To even exist as a social species today – with the hindsight of a Darwinian worldview unavailable to Hobbes – we required much in our evolutionary development besides isolation, competition, and selfishness. The requirement for social connection and dependence is intrinsic to our species and much less calculated and intellectual than it may at first appear. Midgley explores our social development in a Darwinian context:

Early theorists as well as Hobbes often gave this strictly intellectual explanation of human sociability. Assuming that people had once been solitary, they asked: how, then, did they ever get together? They too thought this must have been due to intelligent planning, assuming that, as somebody once put it, language had been invented by a congress of hitherto speechless elders who had agreed to assemble and determine the rules of grammar. But this does not sound very plausible. If, however, you look at the issue zoologically instead, as Darwin did, these difficulties vanish. It becomes clear that the human species did not arise as an isolated miracle but as just one in a wide spectrum of other social creatures. The inborn sociability that these creatures all share actually provides the only possible context in which language could ever have developed. Speech only makes sense as a device for creatures who were already intensely sociable, creatures interested in each other who already communicated eagerly, but who needed to do it better. And, suitably enough, our immediate neighbours on that spectrum are indeed the great apes, who, like other primates, are well known for their rich variety of social interaction. It would have been an extraordinary evolutionary step if, in this situation, our species had reverted to the simpler, ego-bound emotional constitution that suits a crocodile. This, however, has important consequences. It means that the intellect of which we are so proud is not really our prime mover. It is not the inventor of our social nature. Instead, it is a later, benign outgrowth and

<sup>3</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom and Morality* (London: Routledge, 1994), 119.

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instrument of that nature. Before we are thinkers, we are lovers and haters, creatures deeply aware of those around us and fully integrated into their life. As soon as we start to think, our thoughts draw their force from those rich flows of natural feeling.<sup>4</sup>

This original connectivity and dependence, moreover, goes much further in contextualizing motives and behaviours that span beyond self-interest, including altruism, care, friendship, and so on. In fact, as Midgley notes, ‘selfish’ itself is one among many human traits, which indicates a lack, rather than the rule:

*If this bizarre story [of overriding selfishness] had been true, the notion of selfishness could never have arisen. Had regard for others really been impossible, there could have been no word for failing to have it. And it needs to be stressed that the word “selfish” in its normal use is essentially a negative word. It means a shortage of this normal regard for others. Calling somebody selfish simply does not mean that they are prudent or successfully self-preserving. It merely says that they are exceptional – and faulty – in having too little care for anybody else.*<sup>5</sup>

We have many traits and needs, some of which, such as solitude, are more self-contained. But many or most of our deepest and overarching needs require other people: bonds, love, attention, help, companionship, sex, and so on. Without these, the very self that egoist visions emphasize risks being fragmented and disintegrated from the social landscape that makes individuals possible.

### 2.2 Relational visions

Midgley maps an alternative social landscape to the egoistic atomist picture. Her approach highlights our natural relationality and sociality, emphasizing the interdependence of the self and others. We are parts of networks of relationships and dependencies that mold and shape us throughout our lives, making any vision of intrinsic isolation largely unrealistic. However active or passive we are in this dynamic process – for instance, we are completely dependent on others as young children – we are almost certainly never, really, as originally free or self-determined as egoistic atomism would lead us to

<sup>4</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Solitary Self: Darwin and the Selfish Gene* (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 130–131.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London: Routledge, [1985] 2002), 136–7.

believe.<sup>6</sup> We do, of course, have freedom and agency in the world. Yet, the paths we wish to forge are never in isolation or without a wider map or landscape of relationships and dependencies, many of which are unnoticed or overshadowed in visions of individual choice and freedom (she points out the extent to which male freedom has historically relied on the support of ‘non-autonomous females’<sup>7</sup>). Much like LEGO blocks, people are here imagined as separating with ease. Midgley resists this plastic vision, arguing that we cannot snap so easily in and out of each other’s lives. We are, rather, intrinsically ‘members one of another’.<sup>8</sup> With this context in mind, she writes, ‘It may even become possible for our species to admit that it is not really a supernatural variety of Lego, but some kind of an animal. This ought to make it easier to admit also that we are not self-contained and self-sufficient, either as a species or as individuals, but live naturally in deep mutual dependence’.<sup>9</sup>

Midgley argues that the history of Western philosophy displays much of this strange negligence toward meaningful relationships.<sup>10</sup> Bonds and dependencies are regularly portrayed as weaknesses rather than strengths, as dangers that may bring pain and sorrow (thus, the Stoic advice not to become too attached to others and their well-being). Midgley faces the other direction, suggesting that our visions of the self should integrate our need for others and emphasize ‘all the riches around us, the great stores of *otherness* in which we need to live’. She continues: ‘Of course, our dependencies are dangerous, but who wants to live safely like a billiard ball or a doll that never leaves its package?’<sup>11</sup> She argues that there are realistic ways

<sup>6</sup> Midgley sees connections between notions of the radically free agent and Hobbesian atomism. These notions – which often grow out of the vivid visions of heroic individualism in Nietzsche and Sartre – imagine the self to be radically shaped and determined by the active will. This agent forges its way in the world, independent of the connections and dependencies of the outside world.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, [2004] 2011), 132. This coincides with her critique of traditional individualist conceptions of the self as largely masculinist (see McElwain, *Mary Midgley*, 107–20).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Philosophical Plumbing’, in *The Impulse to Philosophise: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 33*, ed. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 145, italics mine.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. note 8, 146–47.

<sup>10</sup> Midgley, *The Solitary Self* op. cit. note 4, 64–65.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. note 4, 64.

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of balancing this picture of individuality and sociality, and that philosophers too often have followed their visions far away from the reality of our social nature and needs. 'I am suggesting', she challenges, 'that this extreme individualism is itself just a local and limited point of view, like other cultural world-pictures ... it is one of the many partial visions that we must use in our attempt to forge a workable worldview'.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Midgley implores us to reimagine our place and connectivity in the world. Rather than envisioning ourselves as isolated atoms or billiard balls bouncing off each other, we can picture ourselves in any number of interconnected and holistic ways. We might, for instance, think of ourselves as dancers: 'Our life', she writes, 'is not a collection of solo performances but an immensely intricate large-scale dance in which solos take their place among figures performed by groups of the most varying sizes'.<sup>13</sup> Our places and roles in this dance may shift and change, but our unique expressions as soloists are cultivated *within* the larger dance itself. The dance and the dancer need and complete each other. And, in the more holistic sense, this dance is embedded in a larger whole still, composed of many other entities and collectives, from our local communities to the global ecological networks of which we are part. If we abstract individuals away from this setting, we again lack the total picture through which we can envision the integrated or 'whole' self:

This "whole person" of whom we have been talking is not, then, a solitary, self-sufficient unit. It belongs essentially within a larger whole, indeed within an interlocking pattern formed by a great range of such wholes. These wider systems are not an alien interference with its identity. They are its home, its native climate, the soil from which it grows, the atmosphere which it needs in order to breathe. Their unimaginable richness is what makes up the meaning of our lives. The self's wholeness is not, then, the wholeness of a billiard ball but that of an organism, a transient, struggling creature which has, of course, its own distinct shape but which still belongs in its own context and background.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, though we value our freedom and individual pursuits, they are embedded within these inescapable connections to the wider whole. This does not, to be sure, mean that we are subsumed to

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. note 4, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit. note 4, 140.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, [2001] 2006), 20.

society or other collectives. Rather, it means our visions should negotiate the interplay of collectives and individuals and resist ‘compressing individuals into a homogenous mass and isolating them completely; between lumping and splitting’.<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Animals and the natural world**

This general overview of Midgley’s relational (and holistic) emphasis helps in understanding other aspects of her work, particularly her influential animal and environmental thought. Our many connections and interdependencies simply do not stop at the species or even sentience barrier. Rather, our dynamic embeddedness in the world involves relations and networks that stretch far beyond the human realm, reminding us of our animality in context. Midgley’s refrain is that we should take this wider natural context more seriously in scrutinizing our moral visions.

#### *3.1 The mixed community*

Midgley’s philosophy grows out of the statement that ‘we are not just rather like animals; we *are* animals’.<sup>16</sup> Her thought locates humans alongside other animals in the natural world and takes the reality and implications of this picture seriously. This is apparent in Midgley’s emphasis on human-animal relations. In focusing on our innate sociality, she draws attention to the fact that relationality is not exclusive to our own species. Animals are significant members of our ‘mixed communities’, locally (in our homes and neighborhoods) and globally (in our ecosystems and on our planet). All of these connections and communities matter, from the particular and local to the general and global. However, localized human-animal communities – typically the ‘domestic’ settings with which we are most familiar – are especially unique. These communities are manifestations of the wider human impulse to connect to the world around them. ‘All human communities have involved animals’, she observes, and it is ‘one of the special powers and graces of our

<sup>15</sup> Mary Midgley, *Can’t We Make Moral Judgements?* (London: Bloomsbury, [1989] 2017), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, revised ed. (London: Routledge, [1979] 2002), xxxiii.

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species not to ignore others, but to draw in, domesticate and live with a great variety of other creatures'.<sup>17</sup> Such domestication was achieved largely because many animals (dogs, horses, pigs, etc.) share a number of social and emotive characteristics with us. They were, in turn, able to form bonds, understand social signals, learn to obey particular persons, and so on. These shared traits and behaviours made possible the historical development of complex human-animal communities that have taken innumerable shapes and forms over time and space.

Though animals may not be equivalent to 'persons' in these communities – a term Midgley argues is too loaded with legal baggage – as members of our mixed community, they are certainly fellow *subjects*, not objects or things. That is, the simplistic Kantian antithesis of 'persons *versus* things' is unhelpful here and obscures our recognition of animal subjectivity and relationality.<sup>18</sup> We have long recognized the subjectivity of animals – indeed, animal cruelty paradoxically underscores this fact.<sup>19</sup> Yet, we need not dwell on the negative. Genuine interspecies love and care are pervasive, from intense bonds of companionship – many of which are held to be as important as human bonds – to altruistic acts toward animals (rescuing injured animals, animal welfare charities). Instances of cruelty do arise, but these are unfortunate episodes in a long history of coexistence and community. In fact, animals are typically seen as significant elements of human life. They are featured prominently in our imagination, identity, and social worlds. It is hard to even imagine life without animals, be they companion animals, songbirds and squirrels, or characters in books and films. In this mixed-species context, in which our very language is reflective of our history and coexistence with other animals, most of us are imprinted by interspecies sociality from a

<sup>17</sup> Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 111 and 112.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing* (London: Routledge, 1996), 111–12.

<sup>19</sup> Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, op. cit. note 17, 114. Cruelty involves a belief that something is a subject capable of suffering. Dogs are kicked and horses are beaten not because they are things (like machines and stuffed animals), but because they are beings that feel and experience pain in a significant way. In other words, belief in animal sentience is essential 'for exploiting them successfully'. In fact, Midgley points out, 'exploitation *requires* sympathy' (114 and 116). Abuse and cruelty to animals is an outcome of our ability to understand and relate to the 'inner' as well as the 'outer' states of other animals, coupled with the tendency to devalue or disregard these states.

young age. We crave animal contact from our youth, and it is a foundational element of our early lives along with song, dance, and play.<sup>20</sup> Bonds with animals work alongside our bonds with people as part of a 'full human life'.<sup>21</sup> They are, in other words, significant parts of our intrinsic relationality with the world. Human and animal worlds intermix and overlap in powerful ways, especially in our youth, which shapes and influences how we view life from the beginning:

The species-barrier, imposing though it may look, is rather like one of those tall wire fences whose impressiveness is confined to their upper reaches. To an adult in formal dress, engaged in his official statesmanly interactions, the fence is an insuperable barrier. Down below, where it is full of holes, it presents no obstacle at all. The young of *Homo sapiens*, like those of the other species present, scurry through it all the time. Since all human beings start life as children, this has the quite important consequence that hardly any of us, at heart, sees the social world as an exclusively human one.<sup>22</sup>

This childlike wonder and curiosity motivates us, throughout our lives, toward 'otherness' in the world, human and nonhuman alike. That is, we are drawn to and capable of appreciating the world and its many inhabitants in affective and moving ways. In this intra- and interspecies community, bonds with animals and the nonhuman world complement and enrich our connection with humans. By caring more, we widen our horizons.

Thus, Midgley argues that our community with animals – and the sympathy, compassion, and care therein – is a significant aspect of our existence and must feature more prominently in our moral visions. Yet, these features can be easily overlooked in approaches to animal ethics that favor sweeping moral principles. Principles that promote equal consideration of the interests of sentient beings or respect for subjects-of-a-life make sense in devising compelling and consistent reasons to treat animals better in accordance with our general notions of moral worth.<sup>23</sup> Here, animals are shown forcefully to meet at least some of our prevailing standards for moral consideration

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 118.

<sup>21</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 119.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. note 17, 118.

<sup>23</sup> These positions are presented influentially, respectively, by Peter Singer (*Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. [New York: New York Review of Books, (1976) 1990]), and Tom Regan (*The Case for Animal Rights* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983]).

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(possessing certain capacities, for instance). In charting a more pluralistic moral map, Midgley argues that this account is incomplete without the relational element: 'If we ask what powers can give a higher claim, bringing some creatures nearer to the degree of consideration which is due to humans, what is most relevant seems to be sensibility, social and emotional complexity of the kind which is expressed by the forming of deep, subtle and lasting relationships'.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.2 *Our connection to nature*

These threads of relationality and community extend beyond humans and animals and continue further still to the whole of nature, or to what Midgley often refers to as 'the biosphere'. She envisions our connections to each other and the natural world in terms of 'wholeness and separateness'.<sup>25</sup> As we have already seen, we do indeed exist as individuals, but we are also deeply entangled with wider, overlapping collectives of varying types and intensities: families, communities, cultures, ecosystems, and so on. Utilizing another vivid image, this time a tree, she writes of the 'variety of asymmetrical relations found within a whole. Leaves relate not only to other leaves, but to fruit, twigs, branches, and the whole tree. People appear not only as individuals, but as members of their groups, families, tribes, species, ecosystems and biosphere, and have moral relations, as parts, to these various wholes'.<sup>26</sup> She reminds us:

Of course, human beings are distinct individuals. But they are also tiny, integral parts of this planet – framed by it, owing everything to it, and adapted to a certain place among its creatures. Each can indeed change its life, but does not organically 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.<sup>27</sup>

Our environments are not alien entities or mere aggregates of competitors, but the vibrant contexts of the self, a self which 'unavoidably looks for its fulfilment to horizons far beyond its private

<sup>24</sup> Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers*, op. cit. note 18, 116.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate*, op. cit. note 3, 102–3.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion*, op. cit. note 5, 178.

<sup>27</sup> Op. cit. note 5, 170.

destiny'.<sup>28</sup> This more relational and holistic way of thinking may not always be forefront in our visions. Yet, she believes it is essential to replace atomistic visions with more holistic and connective ones if we wish to alter our treatment of the nonhuman world. This, again, is because our visions are 'crucial for our moral attitude. When this larger imaginative vision changes, the light in which we see all our various concerns is altered. Priorities shift, carrying a corresponding change in duties'.<sup>29</sup>

People can and often do look to this wider horizon. As parts of the wider community of life, the fates of other beings need not be a matter of indifference to us. In fact, we often feel and express this connection to the greater whole. Midgley expands:

You feel akin to the whole thing. And that, I think, is probably a central point. We rejoice in the whole of nature and being part of it, as something to which we belong. It follows that if some important part of it is threatened, then we take alarm, as if for ourselves, so to speak, but presumably in proportion. Nature is a whole of which we are quite a small part. ... If we hear news of the destruction of a forest, 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, mostly, have thought of themselves as a small part of something much larger.<sup>30</sup>

Given this relational and holistic emphasis, Midgley gravitates toward more ecosystemic ways of envisioning nature. These approaches, which focus on the interconnection and interdependence of organisms, positive feedback mechanisms, and local and global patterns of natural systems, tend to go much farther than atomistic and mechanistic approaches in capturing the dynamism and vitality of the natural world and its entangled constituents.<sup>31</sup> And,

<sup>28</sup> Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, op. cit. note 14, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Midgley, *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers*, op. cit. note 18, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Midgley, Interview by Gregory S. McElwain, March 6, 2011, in Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.

<sup>31</sup> Donald Worster examines the extent to which organicist visions of nature influence ethics in *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas (Studies in Environment and History)*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1977] 1994). See also C. J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

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significantly, rather than treating wholes and collectives as mere aggregates of individuals, holistic and ecosystemic approaches recognize that ‘wholes and parts are equally real’, and that each is unintelligible without the other.<sup>32</sup>

One such vision that integrates ecosystemic thinking on the largest scale is the notion of Gaia. Originally advanced by James Lovelock, Gaia is a scientific vision that sees ‘Earth and the life on it as an active, self-maintaining whole’.<sup>33</sup> Gaian theory, which draws its name from the ancient Greek earth goddess, maintains that this great whole is constituted by the totality of systems and their organic and inorganic parts, all of which are connected to all others through complex webs of interactions and dependencies. From local interactions between organisms and their environments to global weather patterns and currents (such as the massive flows of Saharan dust to the Amazon basin and the Amazon’s ‘Rivers in the Sky’), the earth can seem like a vibrant, active organism. Life, in this picture, is not simply ‘a loose, chance jumble of competing entities but an interdependent system, a symbiotic whole that keeps itself going by a constant interchange of benefits between its parts’.<sup>34</sup>

Midgley employs the concept of Gaia as a *metaphor* for understanding the interconnections of the earth as a whole. She argues that Gaian thinking, as something of a readymade holistic vision, is one way among many – including atomistic and mechanistic models – of picturing the world. And, given the global climate crisis, she suggests that this type of vision might help us in understanding our role and impact on the earth. That is, the whole system, in these approaches, is vulnerable. This vulnerability does not mean that the system can be destroyed, but rather that it can, in its current state, be damaged or altered in response to stimuli (i.e., human intervention and harm). And, on a more ominous note, will carry on in whatever state, with or without *us*. Thinking in these more global, interdependent terms is a direct counter to the hubristic view that humans – and, furthermore, individuals – are at the center of the cosmos.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, op. cit. note 14, 258. Emphasis removed.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Introduction: The Not-So-Simple Earth,’ in *Earthy Realism: The Meaning of Gaia*, ed. Mary Midgley (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007), 3. See James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1979] 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Mary Midgley, ‘Visions, Secular and Sacred’, *The Hastings Center Report* 25, no. 5 (1995), 26.

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Holistic thinking, in this way, might help us out of some of our more abstractionist and exploitative visions. 'I regard [Gaia]', Midgley reiterates, 'as a *myth* about the earth, and a good myth, that the Greeks and many others have had of the earth as a parental relation to us. This means that we *owe* it a great deal. ... It's not just something that we have been given to work with'.<sup>35</sup> This relational view of the earth, she emphasizes, is 'pretty important because people really do need this sort of inclusive place within which everything takes place. We really do need the unity'.<sup>36</sup> There are, of course, a number of ways to conceive of this wholeness and connectivity, but, regardless of the exact language or metaphors used, Midgley argues that these holistic concepts better capture the collectives or wholes in which we live, as well as our interdependence with them. Nature is not our 'static background', but the whole of which we are part. Seeing ourselves as part of this larger community is not fantasy, but a reasonable understanding of the earth's systems and inhabitants.

### 4. Conclusion

Given the length and scope of this paper, I cannot offer an exhaustive account of Midgley's relational account of human nature and the self. My goal has been to provide an overview of her critique and construction in such a way that makes apparent the unity of her expansive work without forcing it into one simple narrative. The relational (and holistic) element is, again, one of many unifying threads in her thought. Yet, it is an influential thread that grows out of her resistance to visions that unrealistically fragment notions of human nature, the self, and our place in the world. As such, she emphasizes our intrinsically relational nature as social animals as a sort of antidote to these imbalanced visions. This approach, consequently, has the added benefit of encouraging us to re-envision, re-think, or maybe even discover significant features of our moral landscape. Midgley's animal and environmental thought, with its relational and holistic overtones, does just this by encouraging us to revise our visions in ways that more fully account for what matters in the world.

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<sup>35</sup> Mary Midgley, Interview by Gregory S. McElwain, May 26, 2015, in Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Midgley, Interview by Gregory S. McElwain, October 23, 2017, in Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.