Neo-Naturalism and its Pitfalls•

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Naturalism, the purported derivation of values from facts, is a fallacy which stubbornly persists despite all attempts to root it out. And nowadays the naturalists seem to be getting the upper hand. It has become a commonplace of contemporary thinking, both in ethics and the philosophy of science (social and even natural), that the fact-value distinction has 'broken down'. As early as 1955, J. L. Austin spoke disparagingly of the 'fact/value fetish'; three years later, Philippa Foot referred to the 'disappearance' of the logical gap between factual premises and moral conclusions. In the following decade, Jonathan Cohen baldly asserted that 'the statement/evaluation dichotomy is erroneous'; and John Searle produced a famous paper which set out to demolish the 'alleged' and 'not very useful' distinction between descriptive and evaluative utterances. More recently we find Benjamin Gibbs telling us that the 'positivist doctrine of a fact-value dichotomy' is 'only a sort of myth'; while Richard Rorty asserts that the 'positivist distinction between facts and values' is based on a 'philosophical fiction'. Finally, Roy Bhaskar goes so far as to pronounce that 'the transition from "is" to "ought", factual to value statements, indicatives to imperatives' is 'not only acceptable but mandatory'[1]

Despite the impression given by these quotations of an overwhelming and unquestioned victory for the naturalists, it is not easy to find the conclusive knockdown arguments on which the alleged victory is supposed to be based. Where clear and detailed arguments are to be found (for example in Searle's paper), they have been subjected to telling and powerful rebuttals, which seem, to me at any rate, to leave the supposed triumph of naturalism very much in doubt. But rather than survey old battlefields, I want instead to look at the recent work of one of the most eloquent spokespersons for the new naturalism, Mary Midgley. In her recent and much acclaimed *Beast and Man* (a book whose many virtues I shall be ignoring in this paper because I want to concentrate on what seems to me to be its central flaw), Midgley puts forward a theory of human nature. An analysis is offered which focuses on certain human wants and needs; and conclusions are drawn about 'the good for man'. In undertaking such an enterprise, Midgley expressly states that 'we can and must reason from facts to values.'[2]

Now the old-fashioned, dyed-in-the-wool anti-naturalist will always tend to look at this kind of project with Hume's classic warning firmly in mind. He will keep his eye open for arguments which begin with assertions about what is the case, and then by an 'imperceptible change' shift to claims about what ought to be done or avoided. Alternatively, in the tradition of Moore, he will be on the look-out for the fallacious attempt to derive non-natural, ethical properties from natural, empirical properties. Or, more generally, he will be on the look-out for the fallacious derivation of evaluative conclusions from factual premises.

Midgley's strategy against this type of traditional objection to her project is one of swift counter-attack. Her first point against anti-naturalists is that they have a naive and mistaken view of what constitutes a 'fact': they assume

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[1] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 150; P. Foot, 'Moral Beliefs', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1958); repr. in W. Hudson (ed.), *The Is/Ought Question* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 206; J. Cohen 'Do Illocutionary Forces Exist?', *Philosophical Quarterly* (1964); cited by A. Flew, 'How Not to Derive "Ought" from "Is" ', *Analysis* (1964), in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question*, p. 135; J. Searle, 'How to Derive "Ought" from "Is" ', *Philosophical Review* (1964), in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question* pp. 133–134; B. Gibbs, *Freedom and Liberation* (Sussex University Press, 1976), p. 115; R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (*Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 364; R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1979), p. 69.

[2] Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 194.

> that [facts are] simple, neutral things easily defined—matters seen and described …without reference to standards, which arise separately as a kind of practical convenience or even luxury.

The truth of the matter, according to Midgley, is that

> we are never neutral even in what we 'see' — we must always select, interpret and classify. This is just as true of scientific observers as of ordinary ones. And the conclusion is that (with some exceptions) facts are 'never logically isolated from some kind of "evaluating".[3].

This comes very near to the extreme position which has become fashionable among some naturalists, that even the statements of the natural sciences are not value-free. Midgley however steps back from such a position by excepting 'physical facts' from the conclusion just quoted. It is not easy to explain this last minute qualification; for the point about the inevitable need to 'select, interpret and classify' applies, as Midgley herself expressly allows, to 'scientific observers as well as ordinary ones'. At all events, the premise about the need for selection, interpretation and classification plainly does not support the conclusion that the facts in question are never logically isolated from the same kind of evaluating. It is undoubtedly true that the gathering of data, whether in science or in any other area, is bound to be determined in part by the goals, interests and priorities —in a word, values—of the observer. Eskimos, as we are surely by now sick to death of hearing, have lots of words for different kinds of snow; they see distinctions which no desert dweller would recognize.[4] And the subtlety of such discriminations no doubt reflects the values of Eskimo society: snow is, naturally enough, very important to them. But it simply does not follow from this that the propositions which the Eskimo asserts are themselves evaluative, or have an evaluative element. It is a mistake to suppose that the values and goals which lead people to investigate a certain class of phenomena somehow necessarily 'carry over' into the content of the propositions which they use to describe the phenomena. An investigation into the behaviour of tides may be motivated by mercantile interests, or a passionate belief in the importance of naval superiority; but that patently does not entail that the proposition that high tide on such and such a beach is at such and such a time is somehow covertly or in any other way evaluative.

It may be objected here that, even if there are some cases where scientific fact is a matter of fairly straightforward measurement, in the great majority of cases the 'facts' will be a matter of more or less complex interpretation ('we always select, interpret and classify'); and it is here that the evaluative element will inevitably creep in. However, what seems to follow from the insistence that all or most scientific facts are 'interpreted' rather than 'brute' is that the facts are necessarily theory-laden; and this seems a quite different proposition from the proposition that they are value-laden. Many writers seem to be guilty of an illegitimate shift over this issue. Thus Rorty suggests that if the Kuhn-Feyerabend view concerning the incommensurability of scientific theories is correct, this should lead us to reject the 'positivist distinction between facts and values'.[5] Now let us for the moment assume, following Kuhn, that there is no neutral observation language: there are no 'brute facts' which will enable us to decide the issue between two different scientific theories. What follows? Presumably that the observation statements which are produced to support either theory do not have the status of 'objective' facts; instead they involve an element of interpretation, assessment, or whatever. But why should this make them evaluative? Rorty's argument seems to be that if there are no brute facts, the distinction between a belief and an attitude collapses: 'the fact-

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[3] *Beast and Man,* p. 178. The argument has its origins in Max Weber, 'Objectivity in Social Science' (1949); repr. in M. Brodbeck (ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 85ff.

[4] We must be careful not to go overboard here: the desert dweller surely could make the appropriate distinctions, given a bit of training.

[5] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* p. 364; cf. ch. 8.

value distinction . . . suggests that once "all the facts are in" nothing remains but the "non-cognitive" adoption of an attitude—a choice which is not rationally discussable'. But in reality, Rorty argues, to adopt one set of descriptive expressions is 'already to choose an attitude'.[6] But this argument only seems plausible because of an ambiguity in the notion of an 'attitude'. To interpret a given photographic plate as evidence of a stellar red-shift is, I suppose, to adopt a certain 'attitude' to it, in the sense that what is involved is a complex process of appraisal, assessment, judgment, estimation, computation, comparison and so forth—many of which activities can only be performed in the context of elaborate theoretical models. But to concede that the scientist must take up an attitude in this interesting but relatively innocent sense, is not at all to say that he must take up an evaluative stance, if this is taken to mean that there must necessarily be some element of approval, or disapproval, or favourable or unfavourable grading embedded into the content of his assertions.

It is of course true that some descriptive expressions (e.g. 'discourteous') have an evaluative element embedded into their very meaning. But this is quite a separate point, and one which need give the anti-naturalist no real problems. For, first, it would be wildly irresponsible to generalize and say that because the classification 'discourteous' is inescapably evaluative, any linguistic classification is inescapably evaluative. And, second, even in the 'discourteous' case it is logically possible to isolate the evaluative element. It is possible to refer to the type of behaviour which is normally called discourteous by using—if need be coining—a non-evaluative term whose denotation is identical.[7]

Midgley's second line of attack against the anti-naturalists is the objection that, by cutting values adrift from facts, they make argument irrelevant to ethics—value conflicts are taken to be 'ultimate and immune to reason'.[8] Moral philosophers 'from Moore onwards', we are told, have represented 'the notion of good' as:

> floating free, a kind of mysterious exotic pink balloon, a detached predicate, high above all possible attempts to entrap it and connect it with life by any conceptual scheme whatever.[9]

There is something fair and something unfair about this characterization. What is unfair is the sweeping generalization about moral philosophers since Moore. For while Moore did indeed regard 'good' as the name for a sui generis property, totally unconnected with any non-ethical property, many subsequent anti-naturalists have pointed out the 'supervenience' of goodness—the fact that the predicate 'good' is always applied 'in virtue' of some descriptive feature of an act or object. However—and this is what is fair about Midgley's characterization—the anti-naturalist does indeed insist that goodness is 'free-floating' in the sense that it cannot be logically tied to any descriptive features: it will never be contradictory to accept a descriptive characterization of X and deny that X is morally good. It follows from this, according to the anti-naturalist, that it is logically open to anyone to call the most bizarre objects good or, in general, to evaluate objects or actions in the most outlandish and idiosyncratic ways. As Hume graphically puts it, it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of one's finger.[10]

However, to accept that this is a consequence of the anti-naturalist position is not to concede that anti-naturalism is fatally flawed. In particular, the cutting of values adrift from facts does not at all entail, as Midgley suggests it does, that the anti-naturalist must regard reason and argument as irrelevant to morality. Hume's insistence that reason is the slave of the passions indeed implies that one cannot argue to values (there is strictly speaking no such thing as an irrational desire or an irrational evaluation); but it does not entail that one cannot argue from values. Aristotle's notion of

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[6] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* p. 364.
[7] Cf. R. M. Hare 'Descriptivism', *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1963), repr. in Hudson, *The Is/Ought Question*, pp. 240ff.
[8] *Beast and Man,* p. 187.
[9] *Beast and Man,* p. 194.
[10] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), Book II, Part 3, Sect. 3.

the 'practical syllogism', for example, seems to allow for the latter possibility. The first premise of the syllogism—the goal or end in view— may be determined non-rationally by simple desire (*boulēsis*). But at every subsequent stage in the unrolling of the syllogism rational deliberation (*bouleusis*) is employed to work out the appropriate means for achieving the desired end.[11] Another perfectly proper role for reason in ethics, which is quite consistent with anti-naturalism, is in the spelling out of the consequences of some evaluative scheme. Suppose someone holds that pleasure is the *summum bonum*: though no argument can demonstrate that such a position is logically untenable, rational argument may well be effective in showing that the adoption of such a value will lead to unwelcome consequences (e.g. consequences which are inconsistent with some other valued end—liberty perhaps). (There is perhaps something of a parallel here between this conception of a role for reason in ethics, and Popper's conception of reason's role in scientific enquiry. There is, for the anti-naturalist, no rational procedure for generating values, just as, for Popper, there is no rational procedure for generating scientific hypotheses. But in neither case is the possible use of reason at a subsequent ('testing') stage necessarily ruled out. Reason can show that a given evaluation is inconsistent with particular intuitions or desires we may have, just as reason can show that a given hypothesis is inconsistent with particular observations we may make.)

II

It is now time to look more closely at the positive arguments of the neonaturalists and, in particular, their programme for deriving the good for man from an analysis of human nature. This recently revived project has, of course, a long and distinguished ancestry. Its fans et origo is Aristotle's attempt in the Nicomachean Ethics to derive the good for man from an analysis of man's *ergon*.[12] As it stands, that attempt has had few defenders. If ergon is taken to mean function, then the required premise that man has a function is highly debatable, if indeed it is intelligible; and Aristotle's attempts to support it ('since the eye and the foot have functions, surely the whole person does … ') are notoriously flawed. If, on the other hand, man's *ergon* is interpreted less problematically as 'what man characteristically and distinctively does', then we seem to be being invited to accept the proposition that man's happiness must lie in attributes or activities which mark him out from other animals; yet why on earth should not human happiness lie in activities which we have in common with the animal kingdom (eating, procreation)? Or again, why should it not lie in activities which are extremely *un*typical and *un*characteristic of the mass of mankind (e.g. '*theoria*'; an activity which Aristotle himself awkwardly admits is 'more divine than human')?[13]

Midgley acknowledges her general debt to the Aristotelian approach, but is careful to avoid both the pitfalls of the 'function' argument, and the unfortunate suggestion that our eudaimonia must lie in what differentiates us from animals. Midgley invokes the apparently more straightforward notion of human wants. 'When we wonder whether something is good, common sense will naturally direct our attention to *wants*.'[14] Later this is expanded to 'wants and needs'; 'in dealing with [value] conflicts we have . . . no option but to reason from the facts about human wants and needs'.[15] However, the two terms are by no means synonymous, and the attempt to reason from wants presents different problems from the attempt to reason from needs. Let us take wants first. The obvious difficulty about trying to reason to goods from wants *simpliciter* is the simple though perhaps still not well enough appreciated fact that what is desired is not necessarily desirable. People want ugly, nasty things: Spaniards want to see bull-fights; bullies want to torment the weak. 'The good is what all things desire.' But (as John Finnis has pointed out[16]) it is easy to be misled by the Aristotelian tag. The analytic connection is merely one-way: what is good is

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 3–4.
[12] *Nicomachean Ethics* 1, 7; 1097b22ff.
[13] *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 7.
[14] *Beast and Man,* p. 182.
[15] *Beast and Man,* p. 189
[16] John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 70.

necessarily an object of desire (or perhaps at least a possible object of desire); but the converse does not hold—what is an object of desire is not necessarily good.

Some philosophers have suggested that if someone desires *X* then *X* must be at least presumptively or prima facie good. Thus Midgley: 'In a minimal sense . . . everything we want has to have something good about it, otherwise we could not want it'.[17] But why does there 'have to be something good' about tormenting the weak? To say 'there must be something good about it, or the bully would not want it' seems to be a strangely aprioristic piece of reasoning; one is tempted to say with Wittgenstein 'Don't think, look!' What can you find that is good about such an object of desire? Perhaps that the bully derives pleasure from his activities? But the pleasure the bully takes in the suffering of others surely does not show that there is after all some minimal case to be made for bullying. On the contrary, the pleasure taken in the suffering of others, so far from constituting any sort of argument for the goodness of bullying, is an additional reason for thinking it bad (it is a further bad aspect, in addition to the bad that is constituted by the victim's suffering). John Rawls seems to be on the right lines here when he criticizes the utilitarian thesis that the satisfaction of any desire has some value in itself: 'an individual who finds that he enjoys seeing others in positions of lesser liberty . . . has no claim whatever to this enjoyment. The pleasure he takes in others' deprivations is wrong in itself.'[18]

If what is desired is not necessarily desirable, then the prospects for deriving goods from wants looks bad. Midgley gives no direct acknowledgment of these difficulties, but the way in which she talks about wants seems designed to forestall the type of objection just sketched. Wants, we are told, are 'not random impulses', but 'articulated recognizable aspects of our life; they are the deepest structural constituents of our characters'.[19] What we seem to have here is a stipulative redefinition. Nothing wrong with that, perhaps, provided we realize how far it takes us from the standard meaning of 'wants'. For the ordinary connotation of the noun derives directly from its cognate verb: wants, in the ordinary sense of the term, are simply what people want (or desire). Chocolate, for example, is one of my son's wants: both his behaviour and his frequent utterances make it abundantly clear that he wants it. But is the desire for chocolate one of the 'deepest structural constituents of his character'? I am not sure—partly because I am not quite clear as to what a 'structural' as opposed to a non-structural constituent is—but I rather think not. What Midgley's redefinition has done, it seems, is to pull us away from actual wants, and prepare us for the shift from wants *simpliciter* to 'wants and needs'. 'In dealing with value conflicts we have . . . no option but to reason from facts about human wants and needs.'

Now the notion of a need carries a prescriptive or imperatival force that is lacking in the simple notion of a want. A parent will every day refuse a small child a very large number of the things it wants. But what would we say of a parent who systematically frustrates a child's needs? Again, it is indisputably true that at the moment I want some caviar on toast; to which the perfectly proper response of a sympathetic and benevolent friend might be: 'You can just go on wanting'. If, on the other hand, I can make out a case that I need caviar (perhaps I have taken a rare poison for which caviar is the only known antidote), the friend's response will and ought to be very different. In general, a need is a pressing lack of something which is necessary or essential; which is why the incontestable paradigm cases of human needs are the necessities of life—food, water, air.

The notion of needs thus moves us on to very different terrain. If, as just suggested, the notion of a need carries some prescriptive or imperatival force, then the naturalist strategy of starting from needs and reaching conclusions about what is good, and how human life ought to be lived, already looks more promising than was the case when the argument started simply from wants. For to say that S needs X is surely to imply that X is good for S, and perhaps also that S ought to have X, other things being equal. So far so good; but soon we run into complications. We have noted that the things S needs are the things which are necessary or essential, which S requires. But requires

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[17] *Beast and Man,* p. 182.
[18] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 31 (emphasis added).
[19] *Beast and Man,* p. 183.

for what? The central examples of needs noted above concerned the requirements for physical survival; but a theory of the good for man based on these needs alone would make very thin reading indeed. What the naturalist needs to get his theory off the ground is a list of needs that are required not just for survival, but for human happiness or fulfilment.

We have now reached the core of naturalism: the view that an analysis of human nature will yield conclusions about the requirements for human happiness. This view seems to involve two claims. (1) The first is the supposedly 'factual' claim that there are certain universal aspects of the human make-up—certain 'deepest structural constituents of our nature'. (2) The second is a philosophical claim: the claim that in deciding the good for man, and how to live, we can and must reason from the facts established under (1). This second claim seems to have both a metaethical and a normative aspect: the metaethical component is a thesis about how moral philosophy is to be conducted; and the normative element is a recommendation expressible in the ancient maxim 'live in accordance with nature', *secundum naturam*.

This recommendation seems at first sight to be the most straightforward part of the naturalist position. But on reflection it is not easy to see how one is supposed to set about following it. What would it be to live not in accordance with nature? Anyone behaving in accordance with his inclinations is presumably living in accordance with human nature—a point which de Sade craftily exploits in his notorious *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir*. (The title is no euphemism: interspersed with the expected purple pornographic passages are large chunks of abstract speculative argument.) When defending his bizarre sexual proclivities against the charge that they are unnatural, de Sade points out

> None may be qualified thus: all are a part of nature. When she created men she was very pleased to vary their tastes as she made different their countenances, and we ought no more to be astonished at the diversity she has put in our features than at that she has placed in our affections.[20]

The point about the diversity of human inclinations is straightforward enough, but the challenge it poses to the naturalist is a crucial one: is he not using the concept of 'nature' and 'the natural' to label those dispositions and activities of which he happens to approve, in an attempt to give a spurious objectivity to his own arbitrary preferences? If this is right, then the maxim *vivere secundum naturam* risks becoming a deceptive and pretentious way of saying 'Live in accordance with *my* recipe for human happiness'. The de Sade objection also bears strongly against the naturalist's 'factual' claim about human nature—the claims about the 'deepest structural constituents of our characters'. Does not the naturalist's factual analysis covertly give primacy to those dispositions and desires which are bound up with his own particular favoured picture of the good life?

This line of criticism is in effect a challenge to the naturalist to come clean and specify exactly what work is being done in his arguments by the concepts 'nature' and 'natural'. Interestingly, Midgley is quite prepared to concede that words like 'nature' have what she calls a 'double function'.[21]There is a 'weak sense' of 'natural', where 'natural' simply means 'what actually occurs'; but there is also a strong sense where 'natural' has a recommendatory force, and its opposite, 'unnatural' a condemnatory force (thus the sexual abuse of children is natural in the first sense but not in the second).[22] At first sight this concession seems to face the naturalist with a fatal dilemma: either he is reasoning from what is 'natural' in the weak sense (from the propensities which people as a matter of fact usually have), in which case his premise seems too weak to support conclusions about the good for man; or else he is using 'natural' in the strong sense, in

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[20] *La Philosophie dans le Boudoir* (1795) tr. R. Seaver and A. Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 227.
[21] *Beast and Man,* p. 186.
[22] *Beast and Man,* p. 79.

which case his premises about human nature will already be covertly evaluative, and the much trumpeted derivation of human good from human nature will simply amount to a bald and unargued set of personal preferences.

Midgley opts for the second horn of the dilemma. The naturalist uses 'nature' and 'natural' in the strong, recommendatory sense, but this does not entail, Midgley argues, that the naturalist's recommendations are arbitrary or unargued: If I say that, for example, . . . playing with one's children is natural, I am not just describing an action and then adding, after a pause, 'hurrah', or 'and incidentally I approve, do so also' . . . If it is natural, in the strong sense, it fills a need, and one that cannot easily be filled with a substitute.[23] Midgley's claim here, and I think it is an interesting and important one, is that in framing our recommendations for human life, there are certain facts about human psychology that we ignore at our peril. Human beings do spontaneously seek out each other's company; they do flourish and prosper when they are able to make close emotional ties; they do derive deep satisfaction from setting up homes and raising families. Such psychological facts are, Midgley notes, a fundamental part of our biological inheritance; and it follows that they must be reflected in our value system:

> our basic repertoire of wants is given. We are not free to create or annihilate wants … No human being therefore can possibly find himself going out to shop for values for the first time.[24]

Perhaps the best way of understanding and assessing this position is by contrasting it with the diametrically opposed views of the existentialists. For, according to the existentialists, 'going out to shop for values for the first time' is precisely what the human agent must do. The slogan 'existence precedes essence' means that for human beings there are no 'givens': the belief in 'human nature' as a limiting factor which exists prior to our choice is a case of 'bad faith'; our choice as to how to live is absolutely free and unrestricted by any prior constraints.

If the contrast between the naturalist and the existentialist is put as starkly as this, then it becomes easy to represent the naturalist position as robustly realistic and backed by common sense, while the existentialist claim seems to belong the world of fantasy. Thus Midgley: 'the Existentialist, in talking about total freedom, is exaggerating as wildly as someone who might tell us to transcend the limitations of space and be omnipresent'.[25] The existentialist seems to be talking as if a human being is a pure mind who creates his future *ex nihilo*. Yet the undoubted fact is that man is, first of all, a physical, three-dimensional being, subject, like any other such being, to innumerable physical constraints, such as the law of gravity. Further, and more importantly, he is an animal—a warm-blooded animal with a specific genetic inheritance. (Compare the opening sentence of Midgley's book: 'We are not just rather like animals, we are animals'.[26]) All this seems so straightforward and obvious as to make the Sartrean refusal to acknowledge any limitation on our freedom seem either perverse or fatuous.

However, to leave the matter thus seems to me to miss the point of the existentialist rejection of the idea of human nature or essence. Statements about essences license universal necessary truths (I leave aside the question of whether the necessity involved is 'real' or simply '*de dicto'* necessity). All water must evaporate when heated above one hundred degrees Celsius at a certain pressure: it is of the nature or essence of water to do so. Similarly, all cows, placed in a field under suitable conditions, are bound to eat grass—that is their nature. But—and here is the existentialist's point—there are no such universal predictions that can validly be made about human beings. Of course, if you push someone over a cliff, he will fall; but that is true of him *qua* physical object, not *qua* person. Of course, if you deprive him of food or air he will die; but that is true of him *qua* animal.

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[23] *Beast and Man,* p. 186.
[24] *Beast and Man,* p. 182–183.
[25] *Beast and Man,* p. 71.
[26] *Beast and Man,* p. xiii.

But in so far as he is a human being there is, quite literally, nothing that can be safely predicted. In the case of people, there are no universal statements that can be made comparable to such statements as 'all cows eat grass'. Any supposed feature which allegedly defines man's essence is subject to counter-examples. 'Man is a social animal': but there are hermits who live in total isolation. 'Man is philoprogenitive': but there are voluntary celibates. 'Man is rational': yet much human behaviour can be capricious, purposeless, absurd. In short, any feature or activity proposed as definitive of the nature or essence of man can be denied by a human agent, in the sense that it is open to him to conduct his life without reference to that feature or activity. This is surely the kernel of truth in the existentialist slogan 'existence precedes essence', the truth behind the (misleading) insistence on 'total freedom'.

If this is right, then it has important implications for the naturalist programme. Starting from an analysis of the essential nature of cows, we can indeed draw conclusions about the well-being of cows. All cows eat grass; and it is in the nature of cows to flourish and prosper when placed in lush meadows with plenty of space, sunshine, fresh air, and so on. But there is no parallel argument which can get us to valid conclusions about man's *eudaimoni*a. That is, there is no set of physical, psychological or sociological facts such that any rational person who accepts them is logically bound to reach certain evaluations about how life should be lived. Part of the reason for this is that flourishing or 'the good' for plants or animals is defined straightforwardly in terms of physical survival, growth, health and procreation. Hence it is just obvious that a life of captivity is not a good life for a panda: the wretched animals won't eat, or they get all sorts of physiological disorders, or lose their sexual desires. But a man in captivity can still practise that highest Aristotelian virtue—theoria; a man at the point of starvation may achieve *nirvan*a; and, according to the sayings of Jesus, being 'reviled and persecuted' can be an occasion for 'blessedness'. The point of referring to these strange but nevertheless highly respected conceptions of human *eudaimonia* is not to advocate them, but simply to illustrate the enormous variety of possible and indeed respectably held conceptions of the good for man: human *eudaimonia*, unlike the flourishing of any other species, is an indeterminate concept which can be filled in with an indefinite number of different and widely divergent blueprints.

What then becomes of the 'fundamental psychological facts' about human nature which we referred to earlier (for example, the deep satisfactions to be gained from the raising of children)? Well, the facts themselves need not be disputed. Certain kinds of activities are satisfying to human beings; and there is almost certainly a genetic basis for this. But two crucial difficulties stand in the way of the naturalist programme of deriving normative conclusions from these facts. First, the facts about our nature represent only prevailing tendencies; there are, as already noted, no universal laws. Human behaviour patterns are infinitely varied and complex; and though there are no doubt 'normal' or 'standard' patterns ('normal' in the purely statistical sense that not even the most enthusiastic naturalist is going to be able to construe evaluatively), there will be an indefinite number of variations and deviations from the norm (many people, for example, avoid parenthood like the plague). Second, even if there are some invariable genetic constraints that are present in every single human being, there is still no reason why these constraints necessarily have to be reflected in the specification of the good for man.

One reason for this is man's unique ability to modify or abolish constraints that other species simply have to take as 'given'. In the case of environmental constraints, for example, it is a commonplace that modern man has the capacity for making fundamental alterations in the conditions that for other species represent unalterable limitations on the kinds of activities they can perform. And the same is increasingly becoming true of genetic constraints. In one way, this is nothing new: artificial selection has long ago revealed the theoretical possibility of human eugenics: 'breeding for' certain desired characteristics. But now the direct manipulation of DNA offers the possibility of much more radical and fundamental modifications. The genetic engineer of the future seems likely to be faced with the real possibility of redesigning a human being: taking a certain repertoire of wants and needs as 'given' is precisely what he will not have to do. Admittedly, such a project would not amount to redesigning our nature *de novo*; the very physical

and chemical structure of the materials with which he is working necessarily impose some limitations on the bioengineer. But it is possible to conceive of transcending even these limitations:

> The first explorers of earth had long since come to the limits of flesh and blood; as soon as their machines were better than their bodies, it was time to move. First their brains, and then their thoughts alone, they transferred to shining new homes of metal and plastic. In these they roamed the stars. They no longer built spaceships. They were spaceships. But the age of the machine-entities swiftly passed. In their ceaseless experimenting they had learned to store knowledge in the structure of space itself, and to preserve their thought for eternity in the frozen lattices of light. They could become creatures of radiation, free at last from the tyranny of matter.[27]

The beings envisaged in Arthur Clarke's futurist fantasy would not of course be human beings, and their *eudaimonia* would not be human *eudaimonia.* But for all that, the picture sketched by Clarke indicates a conceivable direction in which the human race might strive to move. I do not particularly wish to defend such a blueprint for the future, but if it represents a coherent set of goals, then this is enough to show that when we tackle questions like 'what goods should we aim for?', we are not, *pace* the naturalist, forced to reason exclusively within the constraints imposed by our genetic structure as it now is. In this connection, there is, I think, a general defect in the naturalist strategy which deserves a passing mention. For, while it would be a crude over-simplification to accuse all naturalists of maintaining with Alexander Pope that 'whatever is is right', it is hard to resist the impression that there is a strand of cautious and unimaginative conservatism in the naturalist's account of the good life. For example, it seems to be no accident that Midgley's attitude to space travel is uniformly and unqualifiedly hostile: 'We do not live in the sky. If we had to . . . it would kill us . . . Nothing need take us up there . . . The heavens . . . do not concern us.'[28] Had our remote ancestors who first struggled to establish an existence on dry land behaved consistently with the prescription implied in these remarks, they would have remained for ever in their 'natural' environment—the oceans.

The naturalist, however, has a perfectly proper reply to the thought developed a moment ago that man has the capacity to alter his genetic structure and so to control his future development. For, although generation *N* may redesign the genetic structure of generation *N+1*, it remains true that for any individual, belonging either to *N* or to *N+1*, the basic repertoire of genetically determined desires and urgings remains 'given': no individual can redesign himself.

But in spite of this, it is a striking fact that the human being, unlike any other species, has the ability to redirect his innate desires and urgings. A woman does not have to fulfil her maternal instincts by becoming a mother; she may, to take an obvious example, become a 'bride of Christ'. Moreover, such deviations from the norm need not necessarily be a matter of the more or less subconscious 'sublimation' envisaged by the Freudians; they can be the result of a fully conscious and deliberate decision to redirect one's vital energies in the pursuit of some important goal. This is another way of reiterating the point made earlier that the goals of human life are not, as they are with other species, determined by our genetic inheritance.

Midgley acknowledges the existence of what she calls 'specialized' conceptions of the good life—ones which diverge substantially from the 'natural' pattern. But she suggests that there is always an element of 'risk' involved in such calculations: 'there are limits to how far we can go from a "natural" balance'.[29] The limit is determined, for Midgley, by a kind of trade-off of values. The life of a nun, for example, will involve the sacrificing of certain goods in order to achieve others; whether the overall package is a worthwhile one will depend on 'how human nature

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[27] Arthur C. Clarke, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), ch. 37.
[28] *Beast and Man,* pp. 199–200.
[29] *Beast and Man,* p. 193.

responds to such bargains' and this is a 'factual problem'.[30] The kinds of problem that face the 'specialized' life are illustrated by Midgley's parable of the beech hedge:

> Beech trees trimmed down to make a hedge are … probably less likely to be blown over in a gale than a natural beech tree; nevertheless they are much less well-balanced and proportioned. Balance, in fact, is not just a negative matter of not falling over; it is a positive one of attaining one's full growth.[31]

This conception of 'natural balance' is a rich and subtle one, and I think there is no doubt that it does correspond to the way in which we often evaluate people's lives. We do tend to classify the life of someone who pursues a single goal to the exclusion of all other goods as 'unbalanced' or 'one-sided'. And we do often ask whether the total package represented by a chosen pattern of life was 'worth it': was the production of *Das Kapital* worth all those dreary afternoons in the British Museum? But before we are carried away here, we would do well to reflect on how different the human case is from the beech tree case. What is it to say that a 'natural' beech tree has a balance or proportion that the trimmed-down hedge lacks? The sort of answer Midgley clearly has in mind is an Aristotelian or teleological one. There is a natural *telos* of a beech tree: it has the potentiality for attaining a certain height and size (its 'full growth'), and it will in the normal course of nature achieve this end-state, unless it is stunted by bad soil or the gardener's shears. But by contrast (and this is the point of the existentialist arguments discussed above, though there are other ways of reaching the same conclusion), for human beings there simply is no natural *telos*—no end-state which we will naturally attain unless something goes wrong. Man has no *telos* because he has no essence: he 'is' what he decides to do, and no list of facts about his psychology will answer the question of whether what he decides to do is worthwhile. Take the case of someone who sacrifices family, friends and fortune to work for years in some dingy laboratory in pursuit of some scientific goal. Was it worthwhile? If one thinks 'no', one will describe such a person as 'unbalanced' or 'fanatical'; if 'yes', then one will use terms like 'devotion' or 'heroism'. But such judgments are not derivable from any factual analysis of the life in question. The bestowal of epithets like 'heroic' or 'unbalanced' depends on whether one believes that the importance of the goal in question was sufficient to justify the costs incurred; and it is very hard to see how such an assessment reduces to the 'factual problem' of 'how human nature responds to such bargains'. A further difficulty-— which connects with the point made earlier about the indefinite number of variations from the 'normal' pattern of human dispositions and inclinations— is that the costs involved may vary from individual to individual: all those hours in the library may have been worth it for Marx, but they would probably have been intolerable for Castro; the discipline of the cloister may be a terrible sacrifice for some, while for others it may be a welcome escape. 'Human nature' seems to get us nowhere here.

The Humean or, if you will, 'positivist' doctrine that values cannot be squeezed out of facts thus seems to have survived Midgley's onslaught in remarkably good shape. Indeed, even in the beech tree case, the assertion that it is good that the tree should reach its full capacity for growth depends on the evaluative judgment that it is better that some potentialities be actualized rather than others (e.g. the potentiality for withering and decaying). And until he is faced with a more convincing refutation of his position, the anti-naturalist will continue to insist that any such judgments are, and must be, extraneous to the observed facts, to what actually occurs. As Wittgenstein so aptly put it, if there are any values, they must lie outside of what actually happens: '*Wenn es einen Wert gibt. .. so muss er außerhalb alles Geschehens und So-Seins liegen'*.[32]

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[30] *Beast and Man,* p. 193.
[31] *Beast and Man,* p. 192.
[32] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1921], transl. D. Pears and B. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), §6.41.