

What Does It Mean to Be Human Today?

A *Questions for a Resilient Future* Talk by Senior Scholar Mary Midgley



Mary Midgley

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Along with David Sloan Wilson, Professor Midgley served as a Senior Scholar for the Center's "What does it mean to be human?" question series.

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Hello, I'm very sorry to be missing this sociable occasion. I would love to be with you, talking with everybody else, and I hope if any of you cross the Atlantic you'll come to see me. I can't do it myself, and they haven't got the transporter working, so I have to do it from home.

Looking through the answers that contributors gave to this question about the meaning of humanness, I am struck by how central the problem is to our present concerns. Our self image always affects our actions, and that image is shaped by the wider picture within which we place it. Until fairly lately, this wider picture was rather simple, showing chiefly our relation to God, other lifeforms within simply fitting in as extra elements in our relation to God, placed somewhere beneath us in the grand scale of being. For a long time, that picture didn't serve Western people too badly as a framework for development. It surely, however, always showed marks of the lifestyle that had originally shaped it. The lifestyle of pastoral people in which an ideal benign ruler could direct his tribe and provide them with the sheep, goats, and pasture that they needed—that, I think, was their main vision of nature.

It's not surprising that, as Western society developed in ways unlike that model, people gradually grew dissatisfied with the picture, and with the story behind it. But as usually happens, they didn't drop it entirely; they simply developed another story, another picture, which they could use in parallel to it, as it were, on weekdays, while still keeping the traditional one for Sundays. That new, up to date story has taken a lot of forms, but it is always considered as scientific. Today, it largely works by substituting evolution for God, both as providence and as creator. Some aspect or other of our species' early history is now regularly called on both to explain our current behavior and to tell us where we ought to go next.

The advice given is often rather confusing because there are many such aspects, so there can be many such stories. In recent times, however, the reigning story has been the one that tells us to follow only our own self-interest. This advice has been justified from evolution by ruling that natural selection is strictly egoistic, always allotting the prize of survival to those who put themselves first—unlike Darwin, who saw what an advantage sociability gives to creatures through the selection of cohesive groups. Twentieth century evolutionists quite ignored that possibility. Instead, they [evoked] earlier egoistic prophets in finding elaborate ways to explain friendly activities as indirect paths to looking after number one. Selfishness got its own literature. Historically, this odd solipsistic thinking probably derives from those earlier political philosophers, such

as Hobbes. But on the contemporary scene, it seems chiefly to have been fed by the neo-liberalism of the Thatcher/Reagan era, which used extreme individualistic theories to justify deregulation and produce a financial free-for-all.

I think it's this anti-social bias in the times that accounts for the uncritical way in which people have, for a time, accepted the romantic exultation of selfishness as a central force in evolution, treating that as scientific and dismissing talk of the natural affections as mere folk-psychology. But if one actually looks at the many ways in which animals organize themselves, this one-sided story makes no sense. The peculiar advantage of sociability is so plain that biologists are getting tired of explaining it away, and have started to notice the importance of group selection in evolution, just as Darwin did.

David Sloan Wilson has played an important part in this difficult but welcome return to the obvious. And he's developed it in a very interesting way, by stressing what a central role cooperativeness has played in the bizarre development of our own species. This readiness to work together is, he says, the crucial peculiarity that has made it possible for humans to proliferate so widely. It's what has allowed us to invent cultures to fit such a vast variety of places and climates. The thing is that humans, when faced with new challenges, quite naturally consult together and cooperate in a way that apparently never occurs to most other species. In fact, we are not just social animals; we are, he says, hyper-social. We pay a remarkable amount of attention to one another, and this is what has made it possible for us to operate in this quite new scale.

Intelligence, which we often prefer to emphasize as our special distinction, is actually only one aspect of this sociability. Determined egoists who weren't interested in each others' thinking, as humans are, could never have developed this intelligence. Perhaps they could never have developed speech itself, because you do have to listen as well as talking in order to make this work. If we ask about our future prospects, he suggests that it is this mutual caring, this profound sharing of concerns, that may still make it possible for us to deal with our present conflicts. It may yet allow us, he says, to move further towards unity by forming what Teilhard de Chardin called the neurosphere of harmonious unification of intelligences.

Whether that can happen or not, this celebration of group selection is surely an excellent thing. It displaces the childish glorification of competition that has so long distorted talk about evolution. I welcome it unreservedly!

So, it may seem rather strange that my own introductory essay in this series has struck some people as conflicting with David Sloan Wilson's. There is a reason for that apparent clash. It is the specied arrogance and the ecological blindness of our

culture (which was my chief theme) that is actually quite closely connected with group selection. This species chauvinism is an instance of the well-known downside of group selection, which is xenophobia.

Friendly groups do constantly reinforce their inward loyalty by hatred and indifference towards outsiders. Those 300 Spartans at Thermopylae were indeed wonderful, but then, they did have the Persians to hate. This sort of two-sided relation arises, as we know, constantly between different human societies. And it surely also accounts for our alienation from the other inhabitants of the natural world. It really is unfortunate that the current reference to evolution has not led us, as it might have done, to feel more closely related to these other inhabitants, or to grasp our dependence on them. Instead of that, evolution is widely seen as a race, which our species has won, so that it shows we are entitled to exploit other organisms just as we please.

Since this sort of ambivalence is always possible, group selection, like many other things, is a bit of a mixed blessing. I think what David Sloan Wilson and I have jointly been celebrating is the paradox of group selection: the fact that it gives us both our chief glories and our chief curses. Of course, he's quite aware of this complication, and he traces the ways in which these conflicts have repeatedly been resolved. As he says, human communities have gradually grown larger as one's hostile tribes became reconciled, either from sheer exhaustion or because of some outside menace. They quite forgot after a time that they had ever been strangers. Teilhard de Chardin's program does indeed require that this process should go on indefinitely. And surely we can all hope that it will. But if we want to look at that as a prediction, what are we supposed to do about the still-continuing tendency for love to be constantly accompanied by hate and indifference of someone else?

This is surely the next great evolutionary problem of our age, and I don't see it getting the attention it deserves. How should we move forward on this journey towards consistent peacemaking. It's true that by today's standards, humans have indeed become hyper-social, but if we look at things from the other end—from the neurospheric end—how does it look then? How can a species that still can't even form a parish council without quarreling or stick to a treaty when it becomes inconvenient, a species that is still putting many others out of business and still tends to regard the whole lot of them as its property, be considered as fully social at all? Well, plainly, this species does have a long way to go, yet for sure we have to keep on trying.

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