'Wittgenstein, oh dear me, well he was an ego wasn't he, and he was always right': Midgley on Wittgenstein

ELLIE ROBSON

1 INTRODUCTION

Mary Midgley (1919–2018) was an undergraduate at Oxford University when her friend Elizabeth Anscombe first met Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). When Anscombe persuaded Wittgenstein to come and speak to the undergraduate students at Oxford University in the late 1940s, Midgley was there. She found Wittgenstein's words 'important and illuminating', and 'scolded herself for not having brought a notebook' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 172). An Anscombe-Wittgensteinian influence is clear and informative on Midgley's philosophy of language and meta-philosophy, but it has been scarcely explored in the literature. With this in mind, the aims of this chapter are twofold. Primarily, I aim to provide an account of Wittgenstein's influence on Midgley's philosophy. I do so by focusing on how Wittgenstein's ideas influence Midgley's

meta-philosophy and philosophy of language – in particular, her use of cluster concepts (akin to family-resemblance concepts), discussion of 'life forms', and implicit description of something like Wittgensteinian language games (PI: 19, 23, 241).

My other aim, pursued first, is to retell the little-known story of Midgley's connection with Wittgenstein during her time at Oxford University in the 1940s. As Midgley puts it, 'I worked on [my D.Phil thesis] in Oxford along with the rest of that lively post-war generation of philosophers – Iris [Murdoch], Peter Strawson, Peter Geach, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Jack Smart, Anthony Flew, Geoffrey and Mary Warnock – and took part in the process of understanding Wittgenstein that was going on' (Midgley 2005). To do so, I first expose some problematic features of the historiography of Wittgenstein's life, with a particular focus on how the women philosophers – many of whom have been described as 'disciples' of Wittgenstein – are portrayed in this story. To this end, the question of whether certain women philosophers, including Midgley, were 'Wittgensteinian' might itself be a problematic one to ask. This chapter will pose a kind of answer to this question by drawing possible fruitful connections between Midgley and Wittgenstein without concluding that she should be labelled a 'Wittgensteinian' (a move which may frustrate the reader desiring a simple answer to the question was Mary Midgley a Wittgensteinian?). In Midgley's case, it is worth noting that although there are many fruitful crossovers with Wittgenstein's philosophical writings, she was also his critic and poorly disposed to become one of these so-called 'disciples'. It is much more likely that the Wittgensteinian influence came not directly from him, but from the words and conversations of Mary's friend Elizabeth.

2 WOMEN PHILOSOPHERS AND WITTGENSTEIN'S 'GENIUS'

The history of Western philosophy remembers Wittgenstein as a genius among anglophone analytic philosophers. Biographers like Ray Monk's – the author of *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1991) – have written this 'genius' narrative into the history of twentieth-century philosophy, solidifying a label developed during Wittgenstein's own lifetime. Bertrand Russell, for example, once described Wittgenstein as 'perhaps the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense, and dominating' (Russell 1998: 329). Wittgenstein's demeanour is said to have inspired awe and devotion amongst his colleagues and students.

In a particularly captivating example of such worship, Elizabeth Anscombe – famously one of Wittgenstein's star students – sat at the feet of her teacher, looking up, listening intently to a talk he delivered at Oxford University's student society, the Jowett Society, in the late 1940s. As Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman note, '[Anscombe] did so because there were no remaining chairs, but the symbolism of this arrangement raised eyebrows and contributed to the myths that were developing around her relationship with Wittgenstein' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 171). Anscombe would go on to become a life-long friend and philosophical interlocutor of Wittgenstein's, working with him to translate the *Philosophical Investigations* from German to English into the very last days of Wittgenstein's life. Further evidence for Wittgenstein's awe-inspiring status surrounds the philosopher Alice Ambrose (1906–2001), Wittgenstein's doctoral student. Ambrose, who we will hear more about below, studied with Wittgenstein a generation before Anscombe and once allegedly warned him not to use his 'power over people to extract worship' (MacCumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 148).[1]

Recent literature on women in the history of philosophy has shown the problematic gendered aspects of the 'genius' label (see in particular, Connell & Janssen-Lauret: 2023). Normative connotations that accompany the label 'genius' – an atypical, non-conforming, eccentric individual – have set certain men apart as philosophical prodigies, rather than outsiders. But when (if ever) applied to women philosophers, this label hasn't historically bestowed the same glory. Women who did not conform to norms and gender stereotypes tend to be marginalized rather than celebrated. Take, for example, John Searle's description of Anscombe in a 2015 article for *Philosophy*. 'Descriptions are easiest to give when one can appeal to stereotypes understood by the reader, [this is] impossible for Elizabeth. She did not fit any stereotype known to me' (Searle 2015: 177). Instead of concluding that Anscombe's non-conformance was, like in the case of Wittgenstein, a sign of an atypical genius, Searle goes on to provide lengthy and sexist descriptions of Anscombe's physical appearance, including that 'Elizabeth was short, dumpy, disorganised, [and] obscure in philosophical presentations' and '[i]t would not be correct to describe Elizabeth as "fat", rather she came across as more or less shapeless. She invariably wore trousers and once we all returned from one of the between term vacations to discover that in the interim Elizabeth had given birth to her sixth child. None of us had known she was even pregnant' (Searle 2015: 177).

The genius narrative also damages our collective memory of women philosophers.[2] For instance, scholars tend to misattribute the work of certain women philosophers as derivative of the so-called 'genius' or to include them in standard narratives only on the basis of some perceived connection to a

major male thinker.[3] The history of Oxford Philosophy from the 1930s–50s exposes the difficulty of seeing women in their own light, once the shadow of Wittgenstein's 'genius' has been cast. Ambrose provides a clear case of this. As Sophia Connell notes, '[Ambrose's] association with probably the most famous philosopher of the twentieth century contributes to her obscurity. Ambrose is referred to in historiography of this period as "follower" or "disciple" but never considered in her own right as a philosopher' (Connell 2021: 312). This trend is rife in history books and anthologies of the twentieth century in philosophy. In Hans-Johann Glock's *What Is Analytic Philosophy?* (2008), for example, Anscombe is the only woman philosopher mentioned (on 1 of the 298 pages) in relation to a discussion about Wittgenstein, effectively deeming Anscombe's contributions as limited to those drawn from her teacher.

The depth of our tendency to misattribute the work of women philosophers to their 'genius' interlocutors is compounded further by the tendency of some women to credit their own original and innovative work to their male teachers. When presenting a paper at the Moral Sciences Club, for example, Anscombe is said to have begun by stating that 'everywhere in this paper I have imitated Dr Wittgenstein's ideas and methods of discussion. The best that I have written is a weak copy of some of the features of the original, and its value depends only on my capacity to understand and use Dr Wittgenstein's work' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 188). Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman are quick to clarify that Anscombe was in fact presenting 'not fragments but a sustained philosophical argument' but Anscombe's own understatement of this fact suggests an internalized under-valuing of her own philosophical ingenuity (cf. Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 189).

The previous discussion suggests that our storytelling of the time-period in which Wittgenstein operated is fraught with societal and institutional gender norms which explicitly or implicitly devalue the voices of women (for more on this, see Lipscomb 2021). Important scholarly work to release women philosophers from the shadow of Wittgenstein is ongoing.[4] The best historiographical methodology of ensuring that voices surrounding a so-called genius are heard is a lengthy and complicated investigation, so I will only gesture towards a solution now.

One way to de-centralize focus around one figure is to employ a method recommended by the philosopher Sarah Hutton (2015, 2019). Hutton argues that we should approach the history of philosophy (and the living practice of philosophy) *as a conversation*. This conversation is both literal and figurative. It is intended to reflect the sense in which the living practice of philosophy is constituted of interchanges between philosophers. It also pictures philosophy as involving conversations of many forms, including 'engagement with and development of philosophy by means of debate, dialogues, objections-and-

replies, commentaries, glosses, and correspondence' (Hutton 2015: 18). The conversation device immediately calls for context. We must ask questions like: who were the philosophers in conversation with? Did they ask similar questions to an interlocutor? What was happening at the time that motivated their thinking? Hutton's model also demands that we consider the influences going on around the thinkers whose voice is our focus (aka, the 'genius').

Hutton's contextualist approach to the history of philosophy has various benefits for women philosophers. For instance, it demonstrates that certain voices have dominated conversations at the expense of others, without making any assumptions about 'major' or 'minor' status of these voices (cf. Hutton 2015: 15). The model therefore takes away the common assumption that the loudest voices are necessarily the most sophisticated, important, or sensible.[5] We are encouraged instead to look at a 'web' of conversations, which sometimes happen around one figure, and sometimes in an entirely different place to where we have previously looked (cf. Hutton 2015: 15).

With this model in mind, next section will retell the story of how Midgley came in contact with Wittgenstein, and the conversations Wittgenstein's lectures sparked amongst Midgley and her friends. In doing so, I hope to position Wittgenstein's influence not as 'extracting worship' from the web of conversation that surrounded him, but as motivating and animating the work of young philosophical minds, all of whom would go on to make important contributions to the history of analytic philosophy.

3 WOMEN AND WITTGENSTEIN

As a result of the standard historiographical trends discussed above, the story of the women who surrounded Wittgenstein, whose conversations and ideas later became the publications and translations that sealed his legacy, is lesser known. But women in early analytic philosophy are central to the story of how Anscombe, Foot, Murdoch and Midgley came to understand Wittgenstein's work.

Within the generation of students before Warnock, Murdoch, Midgley, Anscombe and Foot, at Cambridge University, Ambrose, Helen Knight and Margaret MacDonald attended Wittgenstein's lectures (1934–6). During this time, 'Wittgenstein was at the height of his influence, […] [and MacDonald] was among the little circle that studied "the blue book" and "the brown book"' (Bradbrook, 'Margaret MacDonald': 27). These books (or more accurately, this set of notes) were recorded during an important point in Wittgenstein's philosophical career in which his conception of philosophy itself underwent significant changes. Having recently visited the Vienna Circle and experienced the circle's interpretation of the *Tractatus*

through logical empiricism, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929 to renounce the *Tractatus* and dogmatic focus on logic. This 'middle period' of Wittgenstein's thought was witnessed, recorded and developed by a group of students, including those listed above, who attended private meetings with Wittgenstein, alongside his lectures, and worked tirelessly to produce four books: brown, blue, yellow and pink.[6] By the early 1940s, unofficial versions of *The Blue Book* and *The Brown Book* were circulating amongst the student body in Cambridge – just in time for Anscombe's arrival.

In 1942, Anscombe, then a postgraduate student of twenty-five, was struggling with the metaphysical complexities of her Oxford D.Phil thesis: 'Thomas Aquinas on the identity of bodies' (Lipscomb 2021: 153). In the same year, she was awarded the Sarah Smithson studentship at Newnham College, Cambridge. This is where she first met Wittgenstein and soon became in a 'state of besotted reverence' for him (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 158). Anscombe was struggling financially, which necessitated travel back and forth from Oxford to Cambridge to soak up the post-war teaching load. The to-and-fro had an unexpected benefit for Anscombe's Oxford friends. It allowed Anscombe to take her Cambridge philosophical findings – including the unofficial Blue and Brown books – to meetings with Foot, Murdoch, and Midgley (among others) – all of whom were in Oxford University, just after the Second World War.

Midgley (then Mary Scrutton) had just begun her post-graduate work – a D.Phil at Oxford on Plotinus. In her words, 'I worked on [my thesis] in Oxford along with the rest of that lively post-war generation of philosophers – Iris [Murdoch], Peter Strawson, Peter Geach, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot, Jack Smart, Anthony Flew, Geoffrey and Mary Warnock – and took part in the process of understanding Wittgenstein that was going on' (in an article for the *Guardian* entitled, 'Proud not to be a Doctor'). Midgley also attended H. H. Price's course on Contemporary Philosophy which, she notes, gave her 'some idea of Wittgenstein's later philosophy' (Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022). As I will outline below, this period in post-war Oxford was formative on Midgley's entire approach to philosophical investigation.

In the early 1940s, in Foot's living-room, the four women came together. Anscombe explained what she had learned from her lessons with Wittgenstein in Cambridge. We can imagine her explaining to them the early lessons from the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI). In particular, the radical idea that the history of Western philosophy was based upon an inadequate theory of language as essentially *representational* – or 'imposed from the outside' as Anscombe might have put it. Re-imagined by Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman, Anscombe told Philippa, Mary and Iris that,

[L]anguage has to be rooted in the complexities of real life, not imposed on it from outside as a calculus derived from axioms […] 'I am thinking' must be brought back into the context of human life, where its use can be described and its meaning and significance can be seen.

(Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022: 196–7)

Ideas from scraps and drafts of the *Philosophical Investigations,* taught through Anscombe, would stay with Midgley, a backdrop to her later thought. Her friendship with Anscombe and their grapples with Wittgenstein's then-unpublished work would orient her philosophical framework. In what remains, I will show that Wittgenstein's influence is present in Midgley's meta-philosophy, her ethics and her philosophy of language.

4 MIDGLEY AND WITTGENSTEIN

Wittgenstein's thought certainly influenced Midgely's writing, but finding it involves some digging under the surface (as I shall outline in my conclusion, this is largely due to Midgley's own philosophical style). In her 1999 book *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* for example, Midgley tells us in no uncertain terms that '[t]he ideas that can be found in Wittgenstein's later writings are very helpful here. I believe […] these matters still deserve much more serious philosophical attention' (Midgley 1999, introduction). After this statement however, Wittgenstein's name only appears twice in the book, without substantial exegesis or discussion. In what follows, I will draw out some of the clear Wittgensteinian influence on Midgley's thought, as well as highlight some points of convergence. Specifically, I focus on Midgley's meta-philosophy (4.1), her philosophy of language and meaning (4.2) and her account of how capacities for language and speech emerge in animal lives (4.3).

4.1 Midgleyan metaphilosophy

In a book review, written by Midgley in 1986, she makes an interesting observation about Wittgenstein's philosophical style. She notes that

[n]ot the least remarkable feature of Wittgenstein's later philosophy concerns its reception by readers. There are those who regard him as a master of clear expression – someone who took great pains, and finally succeeded, in saying exactly what he meant, and saying it in the

best possible way; while others regard his work as desperately obscure, requiring much labour to find out what, if anything, he was getting at.

(Midgley 1987: 529)

In characteristically Midgleyan fashion, she seems to think that neither approach has truly captured Wittgenstein's approach in his later work. She takes him as neither aiming for 'clear expression' nor 'desperate obscurity', suggesting that approaches which claim that 'investigating Wittgenstein is a matter of elaborate detective work' or 'puzzle-solving' are mistaken.

> The *Investigations* is not condensed like the *Tractatus*; the main points are made and discussed many times (though with variations and in different contexts); the book is not putting forward a metaphysical system, nor does it require a knowledge of logic or technical terminology. It is not, of course, an easy work to understand; but the kind of effort needed to see what it is getting at is something other than archaeology and ingenious puzzle-solving.

(Midgley 1987: 529)

The first, basic point to be made here is that Midgley clearly found Wittgenstein's philosophical style of writing perplexing but *appealing*. She writes, '[…], since it is not very easy to read Wittgenstein, [we] certainly need more widespread discussion [of his work]' (Midgley 1991: 17). Later, in a footnote, she notes that 'Wittgenstein's little book [*On Certainty*] is not written as a continuous text but in detached remarks, requiring readers to do their own thinking. That was what Wittgenstein wanted, but he didn't always make it easy' (Midgley 1999: 27). In both passages she draws out the relationship that later-Wittgenstein seems to demand between the text and the reader – one that involves active participation and effort. Recall Midgley's first interactions with Wittgenstein's work as an undergraduate – this was done in a group, collaboratively, underpinned by philosophical friendships. While Midgley doesn't seem to have been taken in by Wittgenstein's character, she clearly thought deep, and slow philosophical work was important and necessary to understand what Wittgenstein had to say – and admired this aspect of this philosophy.

The second, more interpretive claim I want to make in this section is that Midgley's puzzlement at reading Wittgenstein in fact seems to have impacted her own approach to philosophy, including what she saw as its appropriate methods, goals and purposes (in other words, her meta-philosophy). As I see it, Midgley's entire methodology is inspired by this slow (and sometimes painstaking) Wittgensteinian methodology. Many of Midgley's

eighteen monographs – including most notably her final 2018 book *What is Philosophy For?* – do not follow the cumulative and linear analytic approach typical of many academic journal articles or philosophical monographs which lead the author clearly through and argument, premise by premise, into a conclusion. Instead, Midgley often tackles philosophical problems and puzzles from their middle, exploring different angles and returning to them in cyclical and rhythmic ways. In doing so, she is enabling the reader to draw their *own* connections between bodies of work and concepts that otherwise appear discrete. For example, in *Beast and Man* (1978) Midgley returns to the central concept of 'nature' and 'natural' throughout the book, in contexts of science, religion and ethics. The idea of being an 'animal' is considered through poetry, philosophy and ethology. As we saw above, this cyclical is the same feature that Midgley admires in Wittgenstein's writing when she observes that 'the main points [in the *Investigations*] are made and discussed many times (though with variations and in different contexts)' (Midgley 1987: 529). This seems a clear instance in which Midgley can be called thoroughly Wittgensteinian.[7]

Another example of a Midgley-Wittgenstein likeness is the thought that philosophical work is needed to cast light on problematic myths, stories, images and concepts leading society astray. As Wittgenstein famously notes, 'a *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably' (PI 2009: 115). Wittgenstein uses the term 'picture' here to refer to a conceptual framework or a way of understanding the world that is deeply ingrained in both our language and thought. Being *captive* to an idea, concept or story that no longer serves us is a motivation to *do philosophy* for Midgley. One of her own examples of what she calls a 'myth' of this kind is the idea that humans are pure and rational spirits not to be mixed up with the 'beastly' natures of non-human animals. Midgley argues that this captivating story damages our sense of self, distancing us from our felt bodily emotions and kinship with our community (e.g. see Midgley 2003: Chapter 21 'Are you an animal?'). Midgley shows this by looking at the myth from many angles, considering its consequences for various areas of human life and animal life, and debunking it through methods drawn from different disciplines. Philosophy, Midgley thinks, ought to help us to see connections for ourselves, to act as a kind of therapy.

I want to turn to another example of how Midgley might be seen to put to work some of Wittgenstein's meta-philosophy in her own work. There is a methodological point underlying Wittgenstein's lack of analytic, necessary-and-sufficient-condition-style definition of central concepts like 'language games' (which Wittgenstein deems 'dogmatic'). Philosophers have

a 'craving for generality', thinks Wittgenstein, and we may indulge ourselves by offering 'family-resemblance' definitions, instead (PI 2009: 66). Such concepts form 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing' and rely on a background of a 'form of life' (something I discuss in more detail below) (PI 2009: 66). This is the idea that concepts can be understood according to *overlapping* patterns, much like how members of the same biological family share certain characteristic features according to which we categorize them. There may not be one essential feature which holds together entities falling under the same concept.

On my reading of Midgley, she puts into practise a 'family-resemblance' concept in one of the most important aspects of her work – her naturalism. I have argued that Midgley's broad ambition in the vast majority of her work (and particularly in her first book *Beast and Man)* is to offer an account of human life which is naturalistic in nature.[8] She does not endorse an austere or reductive approach to human life akin to a scientific naturalism which might argue, for example, that certain specific human behaviours are reducible to a single scientific phenomenon, like the gene (Richard Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene,* was chiefly guilty of this, according to Midgley). Instead, Midgley seeks to explain specific human behaviours against a rich backdrop of our history as *a species of animal*. Her idea of a species nature, or a life-form, outlined in more detail below, is a good example of a family resemblance concept originating in Wittgenstein. According to Midgley, each individual living being has a distinctive nature according to its species or kind. In her ethics, Midgley argues that the nature of each species provides a normative guide to which individuals strive. Hence, it is according to this nature that individuals of a given species are normatively judged to be good or bad, flourishing or defective.

The concept of a species consists in a group of properties (i.e. 'powers and tendencies') which, together form a distinctive and organized whole. As Midgley puts it, there is a 'cluster of properties that together mark man's nature' (Midgley 1978: 283) and '[w]e commonly employ a cluster of [properties]' when we come to understand a species (Midgley 1978: 162). On my reading of Midgley, a species' nature means the following: the nature of a particular species consists of a cluster of possible properties. Membership of a particular species requires satisfying *some of* the properties in that cluster, as opposed to *all and only all* of the properties in the cluster (i.e. they should not be thought of as necessary and sufficient criteria). Hence, a species' nature is not a list of essential properties that all members of a given species must possess. A concept of a given species might include some central properties, but these can be realized in different ways – and, in turn, membership of a species can also be realized in different ways. In

Midgley's view, this family-resemblance concept plays a dominant role in our explanation of the behaviour of a species or a species member.

I have been suggesting that Midgley's meta-philosophy contains hints and clues of the Wittgensteinianism she'd engaged with at Oxford and beyond. It seems plausible that her reading of Wittgenstein animates her meta-philosophy in an important way – and in this sense, Midgley's philosophy aligns closely with Wittgenstein's. In what follows, I shall outline some more specific uses of Wittgenstein's concepts and ideas present in Midgley's thought – though it is notable that Midgley's writing is scarce in direct references to Wittgenstein. Moreover, in the next two sections I shall be connecting what Midgley does say directly about Wittgenstein to a broader sketch of their thought. In particular, I shall suggest that a Midgleyan account of 'life forms' maps onto a Wittgensteinian 'form of life' and there may be some important crossovers in their conceptions of how it is that human children come to 'have language'.

4.2 Forms of life and language games

I suggested above that Midgley's naturalism makes use of Wittgensteinian cluster concepts and family resemblance. More broadly, Midgley's methodology takes an ethological approach to animal life, observing in a detailed and patient way the various instincts, tendencies, need, wants and capacities that make up species' natures. In her view, animal life includes human life – as she famously puts it in the first line of *Beast and Man,* 'we are not just rather like animals, we *are* animals' (Midgley 1978: xiii). In Midgley's words, 'the nature of a species […] consists in a certain range of powers and tendencies, inherited and forming a fairly firm characteristic pattern' (Midgley 1978: 58). Human nature, as Midgley sees it, is constituted by a complex plurality of things that make us *human,* in much the same way that wolf nature is constituted by a complex plurality of things that make it *wolf*. To explain a single human behaviour, then, involves making reference to this complex background of our species, as a kind of animal.

We might find a corresponding idea in Wittgenstein claims that our statements, concepts and actions find their meaning from an ordinary, basic background of human life. As he puts it, '[w]hat we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes' (*PI*, 415). Midgley has an account of what might make up such a human natural history, 'always before our eyes' as Wittgenstein put it. Human traits include things like 'forming families' and 'our strong and special affection for our

children', 'loyalty and friendship' and 'the need to be able to rely on other people' (Midgley 1978: 70, 1983: 93). We also have natural tendencies for 'doing mathematics, for jokes and laughter, for music and poetry, for play, for sympathizing or for quarrelling' (Midgley 2011: 555). All of these fairly familiar facts about human nature provide the necessary background for making sense of everyday actions and the concepts and words we use to describe such actions. Midgley offers the following example of how our language is so deeply embedded in the complex norms of human life:

> An unknown man runs up to you holding out his hand. Does he want to pull you over and rob you, take something from you (if so, what?), grasp your hand in friendship, or exchange with you the agreed sign of some secret society? We all know what gulfs of misinterpretation can open here, even on such apparently trivial matters, far more if something more complex than a single gesture is involved. Even when we know roughly what sort of gesture this is meant to be (say, a friendly greeting) we are badly hampered if we know nothing of the culture concerned. Is it the common, regular approach to a stranger? Is it an extraordinary, personal decision? Is it something reserved for special occasions of intimacy or alliance? Does he expect us to answer with some sign that we accept it? And what would that commit us to?
>
> (Midgley 1978: 297)

This example suggests that a single gesture (such as outstretching a hand) can land under numerous different descriptions depending on various contexts. Though Midgely does not use the term, this example could easily be read as an endorsement of what Wittgenstein calls a 'language game'. Language games are all around us and though Wittgenstein himself offers no definitive definition, he provides examples of 'regular' language-games, including 'reporting an event, speculating about an event, forming, and testing a hypothesis, making up a story, reading it, play-acting, singing catches, guessing riddles, making a joke, translating, asking, thanking', etc. (*PI,* 23). The word 'game' refers to the rules that we follow when we engage in a practise like 'making a joke'. When we are doing this, we engage in rules like pretending, deceiving and trickery – practices which in a different context (or game) would not be appropriate. For example, in the language game of 'promising', the player who engages in deception is not playing by the rules. Moreover, language games rely on human convention, forming a large and overlapping nexus within everyday life.

Midgley offers examples of how Wittgensteinian 'language games' can be seen to make up part of our species nature, quoting him directly, and

including things like our capacity to 'give orders, measure, draw, report an event, speculate, form hypotheses, make up stories, play-act, sing, guess riddles, tell jokes, translate, ask, thank, curse, greet, pray' (Wittgenstein PI 2009: 23)'[9] (Midgley 1978: 322). She goes on to offer examples of how the rules of a certain game might be broken. In a discussion of describing something as an *act of friendship,* for example, Midgley outlines the absurdity of describing such an act as 'frequent, brisk, or noisy, or that it was an act of friendship because it involved surprising him, or that it constituted sharing his trouble because one repeatedly wrote his name' (Midgley 1978: 185). This passage also makes clear that for Midgley, singular actions and feelings cannot be explained in isolation from the whole nexus of human life, for Midgley.[10]

4.3 Speech and language in Midgley

Midgley's account of *what language is,* where it comes from seems to both correspond and *diverge* in some important ways to that of Wittgenstein. A human's natural tendencies towards such things as language and thought are rooted in our practices and ways of living and Midgley makes use of the *Philosophical Investigations* to explain the importance of natural tendencies like 'speech' within the broader pattern of human life. In *Are You An Illusion?* for example, she writes,

> [S]peech does not just convey separate bytes of information, to be carried home and secretly devoured in one's lair. Speech, along with the rest of communication, is a vital medium, an ambient ocean in which we all swim, a power that allows us to make a whole mass of essential social moves. As Wittgenstein remarked, we do not use it just for informing but for all kinds of interactions that are vital to our lives – 'asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying'.
>
> (Midgley 2014: 66, quoting PI 2009: 1)

It is worth first noting that Midgley's use of the word 'moves' here indicates she's thinking of speech as a game – and hence drawing on Wittgenstein. But the broader point I want to draw out here is that our nature provides us with limits; without its background, we would not be able to make sense of all kinds of behaviours. Wittgenstein's remark that '[t]he common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language' seems to articulate this point well (PI 2009: 206). In other words, we need some points of reference, some activities which we *do* understand, in order to map those which are less familiar. In Wittgensteinian

terms, Midgley is claiming here that there are certain facts about our human nature (or our 'natural history') necessary to understand the features of our 'language games'. Michael Kober notes this feature of Wittgenstein's writing it in his paper 'Certainties of a World Picture: The Epistemological Investigations of On Certainty' (2017).

> There may be practices that baffle all our attempts at understanding. This is easy to grasp, if it is a non-human practice ('If a lion could talk, we would not understand him'; PI, xi, p. 223; PPF, xi, 327; cf. OC, 540). For such behavior does not belong to the common behavior of mankind (PI, 206), and we will never participate as competent members in such a form of life, being unable to play their roles (we merely project our understanding of human activities onto the possible behavior of animals or, say, Martians).
>
> (Kober 2017: 464)

The operations 'forms of life' and 'natural histories' in Wittgenstein's concept of the human can clearly be seen to have correlations in Midgley's own thinking. But the quote from Kober above highlights an important difference – a point at which Midgley would reject a move made by Wittgenstein. That is to say that we humans cannot hope to understand fully or 'participate as competent members' (as Kober puts it) in the forms of life of other kinds of animals. On Midgley's view, humans *do* have a remarkable ability to understand animal life and in a certain sense to *participate* in it.[11] What's more, Midgley saw animal life as complex and ordered, something Wittgenstein seems not to have agreed on.[12] In a sense, Midgley can be read as claiming that human forms of life *overlap with* certain animal forms of life, meaning that we understand certain animal behaviour in a *direct* sense through any apparent barrier between human species, and animal species. Consider the following quote from Midgley:

> Play-signals penetrate species-barriers with perfect ease. What is even more interesting is the starting set of emotional and practical consequences which the adult animals draws from the signals. The cat shows a mood of tolerance, playfulness and positive affection which would astonish us if we did not ourselves so readily share it [….] Infantile signals work only with species that cherish their young. And even there, the gap must not be too large if the message is to get across. Birds would in general be unlikely to decipher human infantile signals; […]. But where the message does get across, its power in producing fellowship is astonishing. It affects not only adults but other young as well, releasing

in them the hope of play. The human baby makes a beeline for the cat. The cat, if it is a kitten, returns the compliment with fervour. Both are inquisitive and playful.

(Midgley 1983: 118)

Here Midgley offers clear examples of communication through the species barrier that is not syntactical – meaning, communication is not reducible to arrangement of words and phrases in a sentence to form grammatical structures. The reasoning behind this view is that for Midgley, (unlike Foot) facts that make up the clusters of our species natures (outlined in 4.1) are not independent or autonomous to that of other animals – we live in mixed communities with creatures whose 'forms of life' overlap with and co-form ours. As Midgley puts it, 'what is special about each creature is not a single unique quality but a rich and complex arrangement of powers and qualities, some of which it will certainly share with its neighbours' (Midgley 1978: 206). While there are different readings of what exactly Wittgenstein means, Midgley would certainly reject a face-value reading of Wittgenstein's famous claim that 'If a lion could talk, we would not understand him' (PI 2009: xi) and other similar suggestions about understanding animals (e.g. OC: 540). As David DeGrazia explains, in this passage

Wittgenstein is emphasizing that there must be sufficient overlapping among forms of life for one lifeform, say humans, to understand another, say lions. For meanings within a language are grounded in shared forms of life and explanations of meaning depend on common dispositions to react in certain ways to particular signs.

(DeGrazia 1994: 132)

Midgley's account of the overlapping nature of life forms suggests she thinks that in various distinct cases, humans are capable of understanding certain actions, feelings and behaviours in other non-human animals.[13] And this is particularly the case for young mammals. As she puts it,

[T]he 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 on 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 other species present, scurry through it all the time.

(Midgley 1983: 118)

What I have said above, however, should not be taken to rule out the idea that Midgley would not be sympathetic with some areas of Wittgenstein thinking about non-human animals. If we take a reading of Wittgenstein like the one provided by Luke Cash (2017), they may have more in common. Cash engages with Wittgenstein's account of how children come to learn a language, suggesting a possible reading in which such learning is 'crucially dependent on forms of communication that are *animal* in nature' (Cash 2017: 303). Consider *On Certainty* in which Wittgenstein notes that in order to learn a language, a child must take certain truths and assumptions for granted:

> When a child learns language, it learns at the same time what is to be investigated and what not. When it learns that there is a cupboard in the room, it isn't taught to doubt whether what it sees later on is still a cupboard or only a kind of stage set […] Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc., etc., – they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc., etc., Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise, 'Is there such a thing as a unicorn?' and so on […].
>
> (OC: 472; 476)

Here Wittgenstein argues that the kind of certainty *needed* for learning basic forms of language and communication is fundamental and doesn't require further justification or answers to basic ontological questions about existence in order to operate. Midgley argues that humans should be thought of as first and foremost, a kind of *animal*. Wittgenstein goes on to say that in the context of language learning,

> I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination.
>
> (OC: 475)

This passage may suggest that 'communication' does not necessitate 'ratiocination' (meaning to reason logically) but simply a framework of shared *understanding,* which young humans might share with other kinds of social mammals. I want to return to Cash's reading of Wittgenstein, according to which in his words 'there is no good reason to think that there is anything conceptually problematic in the supposition that a child

might develop linguistic skills without already having a language' (Cash 2016: 234). Midgley would agree with the idea that communication does not necessitate having syntax and perhaps we can find the roots of human language in the pre-linguistic forms of communication found in young mammals. As she puts it in a chapter entitled 'Speech and Other Excellences' in *Beast and Man,*

> Language, then, is perhaps not, any more than reason, a yes-or-no business, a hammer that you are holding or not holding, a single, indivisible, sacred heirloom guaranteeing supremacy. It, too, is a rich and complex range of skills. (Compare the question: Has man, yes or no, a sense of smell? Or a sense of direction? Would charitable dolphins consider that he could swim, or not?) "Having language" in the sense in which human beings have it is having a large and versatile tool kit.
>
> (Midgley 1978: 226)

In this sense, Midgley's account of 'having language' is not something exclusive to mature adult humans – it is a capacity which comes in varying degrees and forms in many kinds of animals. There is much more to be said about how Wittgenstein's account of animal life, language and mentality differs from Midgley's. But for the purposes of this chapter, this section has suggested important dimensions of convergence and divergence between the work of these two philosophers' accounts of the origins of language and speech.

5 CONCLUSION: MIDGLEY IN A TRADITION

Midgley's missing place from the story surrounding Wittgenstein is an interesting one. I say 'missing' because, up until the publication of two recent books (cf. Lipscomb 2021; Mac Cumhaill & Wiseman 2022), Midgley had not been connected with Wittgenstein at all.[14]

There are various potential reasons for this oversight. First, no doubt the trends I outlined in Section 3 play into the extent to which Midgley, a woman philosopher, is not credited with involvement in developing and sustaining Wittgenstein's ideas. Second, certain features of Midgley's own philosophical temperament meant that she was (as I said in opening) poorly disposed to become a so-called 'disciple' and hence not recorded in the story in that familiar way. I shall outline three potential factors below before concluding.

First, Midgley was not a student of Wittgenstein, and when she did listen to him speak, she wasn't taken in by his character. I think it plausible that she saw Wittgenstein as wrapped up with a certain style of philosophical personality she disliked. Once she left Oxford – having decided not to complete her D.Phil thesis – Midgely became quite dissatisfied with the kind of philosophy being practised at Oxford. She thought it rather narrow and combative. For example, writing in the *Guardian* for an article entitled 'The Golden Age of Female Philosophy' Midgley describes her experiences before the War at Oxford as 'a particular style of philosophizing that results from encouraging a lot of clever young men to compete on winning arguments' (Midgley 2013). Though Wittgenstein also carried a disdain for Oxford, Midgley might have likened his character to that of an Oxford don. 'Wittgenstein, oh dear me, well he was an ego wasn't he, and he was always right. And it was quite interesting seeing how Elizabeth Anscombe, who also was always right when she was with Wittgenstein, she became quite small and, and submissive [in his presence]' (*Life Story Interviews*, 2015).

As I mentioned in Section 4.1, the second reason why Midgley hasn't been traced in this Wittgensteinian tradition (or any for that matter) has to do with her own philosophical style. Midgley did not heavily reference any philosophical influences on her work (and of course Wittgenstein, himself, didn't have the most reliable citation practices either – though this doesn't seem to have led to his neglect). This certainly had something to do with the fact that Midgley thought it of upmost importance that we philosophers learn to communicate clearly to those outside our institutions – such as the general public, as well as biologists, artists, health workers, teachers and zoologists. I think that for this reason, she resists heavy referencing and what she may have seen as a disruptive and alienating use of philosophical jargon. Hence, as this chapter has shown, tracing Wittgenstein's influence, and that of many other thinkers, is not always straightforward which no doubt will have contributed to the general lack of discussion of Midgley's connection to Wittgenstein.

This chapter has discussed Midgley's place within a web of conversations and influences surrounding ideas developed by Wittgenstein in the 1930s and 1940s. I suggested that our historiography of this time-period needs some re-evaluation, and figures involved ought to be included in the story via Hutton's conversation model. I went on to introduce some of Midgley's Wittgensteinian perspectives on the philosophy of language, including language-games and *life forms* revealing a Wittgensteinian incitement of the need for a connection between our evaluative language and the background, context or pattern of the human life form, against which they make sense. As I see it, the strongest case for Midgley's incitement of Wittgenstein is

through her methodology and use of cluster concepts, outlined in 4.1. There is certainly more work to be done on Midgley's disagreements with Wittgenstein when it comes to the lives of non-human animals, but I suggested some enlightening cross-overs between their philosophies of language and concept of how we human children come to learn a languages. Indeed, Midgley explicitly endorses Wittgenstein's rejection of language as self-contained system, seeing it as woven into the way of life to which it belongs. As Midgley once wrote in an article for the *London Review of Books,* 'to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life' (Midgley 1987).

NOTES

1. See Connell 2022 'Alice Ambrose and Early Analytic Philosophy' for discussion of her work and the tendency of philosophers to see Ambrose as a 'discipline' of Wittgenstein.

2. For discussion, see Connell and Janssen-Lauret, 2023.

3. This practise is what Sarah Hutton calls 'coat-tailing' (Hutton 2019: 689); Green and Broad describe this as 'Piggy-backing on developments of other men's ideas' (Broad et al. 2017).

4. For example, see previously cited Connell articles and the work of Peter West (2024) and Oliver Spinney (forthcoming) on Margaret MacDonald.

5. Connell & Janssen-Lauret 2022 use this metaphor of volume when speaking about the influence of women's voices in the history of philosophy.

6. See *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge, 1932–1935* (1978). The pink book recorded by Francis Skinner, see Gibson and O'Mahony, 2020.

7. This Wittgensteinian methodology is perhaps best summarized in Midgley's work by her analogy between philosophy and plumbing (see Midgley's 1996 book *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems of Philosophical Plumbing*). As she sees it, the philosopher's job is akin to that of a plumber in the sense that both disciplines require digging below the floorboards, unblocking damp and clogged pipes (or concepts), and reconnecting pathways to get the water (or thought) flowing again. For more on Midgley's analogy see Robson, 2023.

8. It is notable that Midgley doesn't explicitly say this in her own words, but I have argued elsewhere that this naturalism underpins her moral philosophy (cf. Robson 2023; 2024).

9. Interestingly, Midgley uses the phrase 'life-form' many times in *Beast and Man* – sometimes interchangeable with 'way of life' and 'scheme of life' – she doesn't reference Wittgenstein directly she uses it.

10. As Ian Ground (2016) explains it in his exposition of Midgley, 'the concept of a psychological state is that of a whole stretch of the agent's life, involving a slew of capacities and contexts bound together through the shape of a particular kind of life lived in a particular kind of world' (Ground 2016: 132).

11. The idea that humans and animals live in 'mixed communities' has been explored and developed in depth by Gregory McElwain in various publications, following a decade of interviews with Midgley (cf. McElwain 2016, 2018, 2020). McElwain regularly quotes.

12. As DeGrazia (1994) puts it, Wittgenstein is commonly regarded as having been sceptical about the mental life of nonhuman animals […]. He is thought to have denied that any animals are self-conscious, thinking, perhaps even conscious creatures' (1994: 121).

13. I discussed this idea at length in my PhD thesis 'Mary Midgley's Aristotelian Naturalism' alongside how Midgley's notion overlapping life forms presents a problem for Foot's account of life forms as autonomous (Robson 2023).

14. The only scholarly article on a Midgley-Wittgenstein connection, as far as I am aware, is Ian Ground's 2016 paper 'Minding Animals', which I have referenced above.

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