

Dialectical Aristotelianism: On Marx's account of what separates us from the animals

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I have noticed, in Anglophone philosophy, a certain way of invoking Marx. The pattern here is—understandably, given the relative scarcity of substantial engagement with Marx outside of (radical) political theory—a rather loose one. But I've spotted it in the work of John McDowell, Michael Thompson, and Mary Midgley. In each of these thinkers, Marx is invoked in the context of an inquiry into human nature: into the question of what (if anything) separates us from the animals.

In this paper, I propose to adjudicate a certain debate between these three thinkers—a debate which their shared invocation of Marx allows us to stage. I will argue that this debate between McDowell, Thompson, and Midgley, such as it is, is doomed to remain interminable, unless we clear up a confusion about Marx which all three share. Clearing up this confusion will allow us to get in focus an account of human nature I label “Dialectical Aristotelianism”. I am unable to offer a detailed defense of this position here—rather, I offer it as something which might be worked out more comprehensively in other work.¹

The point I wish to make here, and the way I wish to make it, unfortunately demands a structure which might at first glance seem a little obscure. To spell it out: in Section 1, I introduce the perennial philosophical problem of “what separates us from the animals”—working my way toward Midgley's critique of the “single distinguishing factor” conception of what separates human beings from other animals in *Beast and Man*. Sections 2 and 3 relate an existing debate between McDowell and Thompson, who both incorporate Marx into their attempts to find such a single distinguishing factor. In Section 4, I introduce Midgley's specific criticisms of what she sees as Marx's attempt to identify a “single distinguishing factor” answer to the question of what separates us from the animals—criticisms which would seem to do for McDowell and Thompson as well. In Section 5, I explain why (in my view) Midgley was wrong about Marx—and then proceed to demonstrate that, in *The German Ideology*, he and Engels (albeit in an incomplete, increasingly disputed text) can be read as providing us with a “single distinguishing factor” answer to the question of what separates us from the animals that does *not* suffer from the problems Midgley identifies with (usual) attempts to identify such a factor. The result is an account which is, handily, able to incorporate the best of Midgley's, McDowell's, and Thompson's views. This is the position that, in the conclusion, I label “Dialectical Aristotelianism”.

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1 | THE QUESTION OF WHAT SEPARATES US FROM THE ANIMALS

As human beings, we have some notion of ourselves as a species, and not only that, we have a sense of ourselves as a different kind of species, distinct somehow from all other animals. This sense of difference is perhaps best articulated as the Aristotelian notion that humans, as rational animals, are in some important sense “between beast and god”.²

We bear the kind of animal life which is capable of doing things like living in great cities, building cathedrals, and of writing *The Simpsons* seasons 2–8. Over time, we have invented agriculture, industrialism, and the internet. Our economic activity is capable, we now know, of making the rest of planet unlivable; our weapons could destroy all life on earth in a few seconds, if we cued them up to detonate at the right time. Other animals are impressive—brilliant and beautiful and terrible—in all sorts of ways. But not, you know, like us.

And yet, almost invariably, whenever philosophers have attempted to articulate the source of this difference, to give an account of what precisely the distinction between human and animal life consists in, they have ended up saying things that can sound basically rather *silly*. The danger here is perhaps best expressed in that story about Plato—presumably apocryphal, although based on a remark from the *Statesman* (266e)—where he was lecturing one day in the academy, and asked to provide a definition of “man”. He defined man as a “featherless biped”—only for Diogenes the Cynic to pull out a plucked chicken.

Thus Descartes identified human life as being distinguished by our ability to use language in novel and spontaneous ways—only to leave us with no way of distinguishing “lower” animals from convincing automata (Descartes, 1968, p. 72ff). Thus Kant identified us as being distinguished by our faculty of reason—as being a creature that has a “rational nature” capable of existing as “an end in itself” (Kant, 1997, p. 37)—only to be left with no real way of distinguishing human beings from rational Martians (Thompson, 2013, p. 701).³

It is therefore tempting to suppose that the very question of “what separates us from the animals” might be radically misconceived. Of all the various thinkers who have critiqued this way of considering the distinction between human and animal life, perhaps none has done so more stridently than Mary Midgley. In her 1979 book *Beast and Man*, she writes:

Man has always had a good opinion of himself, and with reason. What, however, is essentially the ground of it? What finally (you may ask) does distinguish man from the animals? Nearly everything is wrong with this question. (Midgley, 2002, p. 195).

First, Midgley notes, for all that humans really “do things differently” from other animals, we are all too inclined to be forgetful of the fact that the form of life we bear is (at least) *also* an animal one. We should therefore limit ourselves to only asking what distinguishes man *among* the animals, not what separates us from other animals entirely (ibid.).

Second, Midgley states: “as the question is usually put, it asks for a single, simple, final distinction, and for one that confers praise” (ibid.). But we have no real way of backing up our commonplace assumption that the human form of life is an especially *good* one. No other animal, Midgley notes, is as aggressive toward their own kind (Midgley, 2002, p. 27); no other animal is as wantonly cruel to, and exploitative of, other species (Midgley, 2002, p. 30).

Midgley thus recommends a deflationary, therapeutic approach, emphasizing humanity’s continuity with the rest of nature. Rather than attempt to develop a robust and philosophical account of what single thing ultimately, finally distinguishes human life, we should look instead for a “knot of general structural properties,” which might include things like language, rationality, and culture—all of which, Midgley specifies, are contiguous with, not distinct from, “nature” more broadly understood (Midgley, 2002, p. 309).

Sound advice, perhaps. But it is not as if every single philosopher since Midgley has taken it to heart. Even if ideas in general really could be demolished by a single, somewhat well-known thinker calling them convincingly into question: the heritage of the “single distinguishing factor” conception of human life is vast; its temptations, for all the problems with it that Midgley diagnoses, are in many ways wired into our understanding of ourselves. As Midgley herself notes,

the linguistic construction I am exploiting in this paper, “that’s what distinguishes us from the animals” is an almost everyday one (Midgley, 2002, p. 35).

It should hardly be surprising, then, that we continue to find advocates of some form of “single distinguishing factor” (henceforth, SDF) view. Arguably, Midgley has only shown that we *must* abandon SDF. To paraphrase John McDowell in the Introduction to *Mind and World*, she has not (yet) shown that we *can*.⁴

2 | MCDOWELL’S APPROPRIATION OF MARX IN MIND AND WORLD

McDowell, as it happens, is among the more sophisticated contemporary exponents of SDF.⁵ It is his attempt to articulate a sophisticated version of SDF, which motivates his appropriation of Marx. Reporting McDowell’s appropriation of Marx will be the first contribution to the “debate” that I wish to stage in this paper.

This appropriation takes place in Lecture VI of *Mind and World*: “Rational and Other Animals”. McDowell opens that lecture by stating his intention to defend the core Aristotelian claim that human beings are “rational animals” (McDowell, 1996, pp. 108–109). According to McDowell, the decisive factor, which separates us from other animals, is what he calls “self-conscious subjectivity.”

“... the objective world is present only to a self-conscious subject, a subject who can ascribe experiences to herself; it is only in the context of a subject’s ability to ascribe experiences to herself that experiences can constitute awareness of the world” (McDowell, 1996, p. 114).

If we can ascribe subjective experiences to ourselves, then we can become aware of the world—which is thus able to operate as a rational constraint on our thought.⁶ This power, McDowell claims, is identical to “spontaneity of the understanding” and thus also to “the power of conceptual thinking” (ibid.). Self-conscious subjectivity, then, separates us from the animals by making reason and language possible.

McDowell thus clearly holds a version of SDF. What makes him a *more sophisticated exponent* of such a view, as I have claimed, is that he appears to have identified—and moved to mitigate—certain problems with it.

The first of these problems consists in what we might call a *Descartes-type worry*.⁷ As McDowell points out, if we require self-conscious subjectivity to experience the world, but other animals lack it, then surely it follows that non-human animals have no external experience at all? “And that can seem to commit me to the Cartesian idea that brutes are automata” (McDowell, 1996, p. 114). “Mere animals cannot enjoy ‘outer experience,’” McDowell tells us, “on the conception of ‘outer experience’ I have recommended.” And yet, “it is a plain fact that we share perception with mere animals” (ibid.).

In order to short-circuit the Descartes-type worry, McDowell borrows the distinction between “world” and “environment” from Hans-Georg Gadamer. For Gadamer too, language distinguishes human beings from other animals—and this is identical to the fact that we exist in a “world,” which we can have a “free orientation” toward (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 440–441).

The “environment,” by contrast, is something which “all living beings... possess” (ibid.), a “milieu” of problems and opportunities, which—unlike the “world”—one is not as such freely oriented toward (ibid.). “World” means thought, thus freedom; “environment” means instinct, thus its opposite.

When it comes to perception, mere animals might well be oriented toward the exact same *object* as us world-havers—but *subjectively* speaking, their orientation could not be more different. In the absence of self-conscious subjectivity, what sentience animals do have is “in the service of a mode of life that is structured exclusively by immediate biological imperatives... the animal’s behaviour at a given moment is an immediate outcome of biological forces” (McDowell, 1996, p. 115). Gadamer, thus, allows us to affirm McDowell’s account of what separates us from the animals without succumbing to the Descartes-type worry.

But there remains a further problem with McDowell's view. This we might express as consisting in a Kant-type worry. McDowell's notion of "self-conscious subjectivity" is lifted almost verbatim from Kant: as the "spontaneity of understanding", which is identical with "the power of conceptual thinking," McDowell's "self-conscious subjectivity" is essentially what Kant named, in the Transcendental Deduction, as "the original synthetic unity of apperception."⁸

But, as McDowell himself notes, Kant "lacks a pregnant notion of second nature" (McDowell, 1996, p. 110).⁹ This amounts to the accusation that Kant, by conceiving of "nature" only in the law-like terms of mechanistic natural science, was unable to think "nature" and "reason" together. This means that self-conscious subjectivity as Kant defines it—the original synthetic unity of apperception—"could not be something substantially present in the world; it is at best a point of view" (McDowell, 1996, p. 111).

The invocation of Gadamer's distinction between world and environment has, McDowell thinks, resolved what I have called the "Descartes-type worry". But it has not yet done enough against the Kant-type worry. Our "world" after all, in being the sort of thing we are able to assume a "free and distanced" orientation toward, might not be quite enough of an "environment"—might, one supposes, be the sort of thing we are only *disinterestedly* oriented within. In short, we would be oriented toward our world not as "human animals", but as something rather closer to gods. "Self-conscious subjectivity" cannot account for our animal nature satisfactorily, because it does not have enough to do with the "animal" world.¹⁰

It is to overcome this worry that McDowell starts talking about Marx's 1844 essay on "Alienated Labour". McDowell begins his appropriation of Marx by noting a "convergence" with Gadamer—a convergence which, he says, "should help exorcize the [Kantian] idea of the passive observer" (McDowell, 1996, p. 117). The implication here being that Gadamer's distinction between world and environment should be able to see off the Kant-type worry mostly by itself—it is just that Marx is needed to help make this explicit. For McDowell, the key contribution Marx makes, is this:

"For Marx, of course, a properly human life is nothing if not active: it involves the productive making over of 'nature, the sensuous exterior world.' If productive activity is properly human, it can in principle range freely over the world. This contrasts with merely animal life." (McDowell, 1996, p.117.).

To read Marx, McDowell seems to be telling us, is to understand that self-conscious human subjects cannot be mere, disinterested, Kantian transcendental points of view. This is because our form of life requires us to live off and "make over" nature—"the sensuous exterior world." Nevertheless, with that necessity can come freedom. It is in our productive relationship to the world that we live off, that our freedom is expressed.

Of course, it is not always true that this expression is *successful*. It is crucial, McDowell notes, to understand that Marx is arguing that the worker is "dehumanized" in wage labor:

"The part of human life that should be most expressive of humanity, namely, productive activity, is reduced to the condition of merely animal life, the meeting of merely biological needs" (McDowell, 1996, p. 118).

It is worth mentioning that McDowell's reading of Marx is at least somewhat restricted. While in Marx, alienation has four moments,¹¹ for McDowell alienation appears to consist fundamentally in the rendering for the worker of the Gadamerian "world" into a mere "environment". It is this point that unites all four moments of alienated labor: an "alienated" existence would be an unfree one, because the worker would find their lives governed by a necessity that is, in McDowell's understanding, baldly natural.

An "unalienated" existence, by contrast, would not, McDowell thinks, be an "easy" one, but would rather be "distinctively free." We would still need to produce things from nature in order to survive, but we would do so in such a way that our humanity was affirmed—realising our humanity in the act of making.¹² McDowell notes, for instance, that Marx tells us in "Alienated Labour" that "man is unique in producing 'according to the laws of beauty'." (McDowell, 1996, p. 119).

It is this sort of thing—an awareness of the “laws of beauty” and suchlike—that McDowell thinks indicates that we are a creature defined by our “self-conscious subjectivity”: the single distinguishing capacity which allows us, from our position within nature, to resonate with whatever it is that reason, free in some sense from nature’s law, happens to demand. Free, seemingly, of both the Descartes-type and Kant-type worries, McDowell is able to cite “self-conscious subjectivity” as what distinguishes us from the animals, quite regardless of any Midgleyan critique.

3 | THOMPSON’S CRITIQUE OF MCDOWELL

McDowell’s account of human nature, however, has been directly criticized by Michael Thompson. Thompson’s critique essentially consists in the claim that McDowell fails to do enough work to avoid the Kant-type worry—in part because he has not really understood the early Marx.

This critique is expressed in the text of Thompson’s 2013 lecture, “Forms of nature: ‘first’, ‘second’, ‘living’, ‘rational’ and ‘phronetic.’” There, Thompson’s overarching concern is to assert the claims of what he calls a “naïve Aristotelianism”, “opposed to the sophisticated naturalism of ‘second nature’ that has been occasionally proposed by John McDowell” (Thompson, 2013, p. 701). Here then, the debate between Thompson and McDowell is very much a direct one. What is important to me here is how Thompson uses Marx in it—for the sake of clarity if not brevity (both in terms of Thompson vs. McDowell, and also in terms of the positive position I will be arriving at by the end of this paper), I will unpack what is at stake in it beforehand.

For McDowell, “first nature” is identified as the object of the natural-scientific intelligibility—in *Mind and World*, this means it is aligned with the realm of law.¹³ It is thus perhaps natural to assume that second nature is supposed to align with the realm of law’s McDowell-Sellarsian opposite, the normative “space of reasons”—but this is not quite the case.

“Our human second nature,” it is true, “makes us inhabitants of the logical space of reasons” (McDowell, 2008, p. 220). But the idea of second nature in fact “fits any propensities of animals that are not already possessed at birth, and not acquired in merely biological maturation (like, for instance, the propensity to grow facial hair on the part of male human beings), but imparted by education, habituation, or training” (ibid.). Thus, McDowell tells us, “trained dogs have a second nature” (ibid.). But, because trained dogs are not able to think critically about their commands as we can, they are not therefore inhabitants of the space of reasons.

From this then, for McDowell, it seems, reason is not substantially part of nature—the two realms turn no particular gears with each other. As rational animals our second nature—appropriately formed—gives us access to the space of reasons. But the space of reasons itself does not, as such, have anything in particular to do with nature: “the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one’s eyes are opened to them” (McDowell, 1996, p. 91).

McDowell, naturally, does not think this is a problem, in fact, he thinks it is the only way we’re going to be able to make sense of the distinctive relationship between reason and nature at all. In his essay, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, an important supplement to *Mind and World*, McDowell gives the example of a pack of wolves who suddenly and collectively acquire reason (McDowell, 1998, p. 169). What, McDowell asks, can the wolves now do, that they could not before? Each wolf, McDowell answers, now has the ability to “step back” from their natural impulses and assume a “critical stance” toward them. To anything a wolf might instinctively do (hunt in packs, for instance), the wolf can now ask: “Why should I do this?” (McDowell, 1998, p. 171).

As McDowell notes, this example shows up the “deep connection between reason and freedom” (McDowell, 1998, p. 170). Wolfish nature—from which individual wolves might derive, for instance, the need to eat meat—continues to present each wolf with various demands, problems, and opportunities. But we could not make sense of the wolves actually being rational if they were not free to let their minds range over pretty much every possibility, hypothetical or concrete, that their world and their imaginations now present them with. The wolves would have to be able to entertain the possibility of being vegetarian, for instance: no matter how their stomachs were constituted.

“This allows,” McDowell tells us, “for radical ethical reflection” (McDowell, 1998, p. 189). The model McDowell invokes for this form of reflection—both in “Two Sorts of Naturalism” and *Mind and World*—is that of “Neurath’s Boat”,

“in which a sailor overhauls his ship while it is afloat” (McDowell, 1996, p. 81). In this image, the sailor has complete free reign to overhaul their boat however they may wish to—given the materials they have to hand. The only proviso is that the ship must always remain minimally functional as they do so. In time, of course, Neurath’s Boat could become like Theseus’s Ship, in which nothing of the original remains.¹⁴

First nature, as McDowell specifies, puts “limits on the courses reflection can intelligibly take” (McDowell, 1998, p. 190). But it does not do any more than that: there are not, that is, any *reasons* on the level of first nature itself. The natural fact that “wolves hunt in packs” is not a *reason* for rational wolves to hunt in packs. By contrast, the rational consideration that “wolves do best, in obtaining the things they need in order to survive, if they hunt in packs” is.

For Thompson, however, this Neurathian conception of reflection is deeply problematic. According to him, this way of conceiving of the relation between nature and reason is evidence that McDowell—like Kant—thinks that, as “rational animals” we must in effect share the same nature as any hypothetical rational Martians (or wolves). He has not, in short, done enough to overcome the “Kant-type worry”. Any finite rational beings—be they humans or Martians or wolves or whatever—must, for Kant (and so for McDowell) have an understanding structured, as per the results of the Transcendental Deduction, in accordance with the categories, and be subject to the moral law (Thompson, 2013, p. 704).

What this means is that, if we were to identify human nature (as McDowell does) with “self-conscious subjectivity”, we would not really have picked out anything like a *specifically human* nature at all. Rather, we would have identified human nature with rationality in general—distinct from the animals, but not from, say, rational Martians, angels, or gods.

It is to overcome this vestigial Kantianism—which for him results from McDowell’s overly “sophisticated” version of naturalism—that Thompson asserts the claims of his “naïve Aristotelianism”. According to naïve Aristotelianism, human “is in a certain way put on a level with words like ‘Norway rat’ and ‘coastal redwood.’” Ethical reflection is a possibility for the sorts of creatures that we are—human beings. But it is not carried on in relation to anything else immutably beyond us—some heaven of reason, which would show up the same for any sufficiently rational beings. Rather, it is just another function of the human form of life. To put this point in another way: to make sense of ourselves as rational animals we do not, for Thompson, need to posit some supplementary realm of “second nature” which “opens our eyes” to the requirements of reason. Rather, the requirements of reason, for us, are just the first natural ones. So, first nature is all we need.

Of course there is an obvious problem here, one which Thompson is aware of, namely, that any such “naïve” form of naturalism, in which reflection is—necessarily and only—guided by the facts of human first nature, might understandably be thought to imply an “alarming and idiotic moral conservatism” (Thompson, 2013, p. 702). This idiocy would present us with practical syllogisms of the form: “Men dance, dancing is something that belongs to human nature, dancing is what is natural to them—so I’ll dance too.” (Thompson, 2013, p. 705). Obviously, this is also the sort of picture of (natural) reflection that McDowell is looking to avoid, one on which the “free play of reason” is made the slave of whatever, in nature, already exists. So, what resources might Thompson’s naïve Aristotelianism be able to access to avoid it?¹⁵

Thompson’s solution here turns on a distinction which Aristotle makes, but which Thompson accuses McDowell of missing, between two modes of knowledge: *sophia* and *phronesis*. *Sophia* for Aristotle is “like the straight and the white, everywhere the same” (Thompson, 2013, p. 710). It is the mode of knowledge appropriate for things like “the constituents of the heavens” (Thompson, 2013, p. 711). By contrast, *phronesis*—“practical wisdom”—is “like healthy and good—different for man and fish” (Thompson, 2013, p. 710).

To make sense of the object of *phronesis*, Thompson turns to the work of G.E.M. Anscombe. In her *Intention*, Anscombe draws a distinction between practical and observational knowledge (Thompson, 2013, p. 713). Observational knowledge involves a relation to some object independent of the observer. It is, essentially, “scientific” knowledge: to know something observationally would be to know it as it would appear “objectively”, from nowhere.

Practical knowledge, by contrast, is known “from the inside” of some practice that the knower is engaged in—it is thus in some sense “productive of the thing known” (Thompson, 2013, p. 714).¹⁶ We have already seen how, for Marx,

we “produce” the things we need in order to survive. Here our activity manifests itself as an object—thus as something potentially alien to us. What Anscombe means by “production” is related to this, but by no means the same.

One example would be something like the knowledge of how to play a sport. Granted, when a sport is codified, one can write down the rules and someone could study them, without ever playing it. One could even become an expert on the sport, purely as a spectator or a journalist. All of this would count as “observational” knowledge of, say, football. But one would not know *how* to play it, unless one actually played a match. The practical knowledge of how to play football, for instance, is something both realized and sustained by the players, as they play the game themselves. Certain aspects of it might be explicable in the abstract, for example, where the players are supposed to be positioned. But others—like knowing when or how to shoot, how to psych the keeper out in the split-second where he has to decide which way to go when taking a penalty—can only be known in the flow of the moment from within. Armchair observers might believe themselves to have a great deal of expertise, but that does not mean they could manage the England side.

Another example would, according to Thompson at least, be “human”. For Thompson, “human” is something that we (human beings) manifest over the course of our lives—just as, I have claimed, footballers manifest the knowledge of how to play football in their playing it. “Human” is thus, Thompson claims, an (Anscombian) practical concept.

It is in this way that he is able to avoid the charge of conservatism. Of course, we are free to reflect on our species-life: reflection is just one of the things human beings do. Given that “human” is a practical concept, we *manifest* our species-life as we reflect on what we ought, or ought not, to do. But we do not do this by relating human beings to the sphere of “pure rationality”—this would only be possible if *phronesis* were like *sophia*, the same anywhere in the universe, at any particular historical moment. Practical reflection is, for human beings, both immanent and internal. In ethical reflection, we only have human things to go by: living, material, human needs, and concerns.

It is with this in mind that Thompson relates his criticisms of McDowell to the early Marx. McDowell, as we have seen, turns to Marx to guard against the possibility that the self-conscious subject is somehow an *over-rational*, disinterested observer in relation to their world. For Thompson, however, McDowell’s invocation of Marx is inopportune—as by implication, all it shows is that McDowell has not realized that the Marx of “Alienated Labour” is in fact a powerful critic of McDowell’s Kant-inflected understanding of the intersection of reason and nature.

The key concept that Thompson is interested in is that of “species-being”—alienation from “species-being” being one of the “four moments” of alienation that Marx discusses in his essay. Thompson defines this thing—species-being—as “the registering of the (first natural) universal one comes under... a condition of all universal representation... a condition of having concepts.” On this Marxist view, then “‘Human’ is, for each of us, the original universal.” (Thompson, 2013, p. 728).

This point does not necessarily come across all that strongly in “Alienated Labour” itself, where Marx defines “species-being” only very vaguely (Marx, 2000a, p. 89; 90). It does however shine forth a lot more clearly when we consider the work of Ludwig Feuerbach—the thinker whose jargon Marx was, back then, largely still employing.

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach tells us that “the essential difference between man and the animal” is “consciousness” (Feuerbach, 2012, p. 97). But he does not mean “consciousness in the sense of the feeling of the self, in the sense of the ability to distinguish one sensuous object from another, to perceive—even judge,” since this sort of consciousness, he takes it, obviously cannot be denied of every animal (*ibid.*).

What Feuerbach really means, he tells us, is the sort of consciousness “given only in the case of a being to whom his *species*, his *mode of being* is an object of thought” (*ibid.*). This is because, as he puts it, “where there is consciousness in this sense, there is also the capacity to produce systematic knowledge of science” (*ibid.*). It is in this way that “human” is able to function, as Thompson has it, as “the original universal.”

“Only a being to whom his own species, his characteristic mode of being, is an object of thought can make the essential nature of other things and beings an object of thought.” (Feuerbach, 2012, p. 98).

We must then think that Thompson would have better luck, if he had tried to mine this concept directly from Feuerbach, as opposed to relying on the early Marx. Nonetheless, this is, Thompson thinks, what he believes the

consistent, enduring point of Marx's work—an elaboration of the concept of “species-being”. Moreover, he thinks that “species-being”, as the original universal, is what McDowell too should have arrived at, when trying to combine Kantian “self-conscious subjectivity” with our “productive life” as lived in the world.

“Marx's claim is an immediate consequence of [Kant's original synthetic unity of apperception], in the presence of our Aristotelian premises” (Thompson, 2013, p. 729).

As soon as one sees the “human” as a practical rather than a theoretical concept, then we must ground self-conscious subjectivity in species-being. This, then, is what Thompson believes—and also what he thinks Marx believed, and what he thinks McDowell *should* believe—distinguishes human from animal life: the fact that we are able to relate to ourselves *as a species*.

Thus, we have seen, so far, how McDowell and Thompson invoke Marx in the context of a discussion of what distinguishes us from other animals in two different ways. McDowell uses Marx to help vindicate his citing of “self-conscious subjectivity” as what distinguishes human life (our ability to relate to ourselves). Thompson, however, uses Marx to, more comprehensively, naturalize McDowell's liberal naturalism, by arguing that self-conscious subjectivity is grounded in species-being (our ability to relate to ourselves as a species). I will now bring this controversy between McDowell and Thompson, back around to Midgley.

4 | MIDGLEY'S DISMISSAL OF MARX

When Midgley launched her critique of SDF in the 1970s, she obviously was not addressing either McDowell or Thompson directly. She does, however, use her critique to explicitly target Marx. Indeed, Marx is cited by Midgley as a paradigmatic example of someone who held a version of SDF, and who was led, as a result of it, to say some rather implausible things. Here is how Midgley begins her dismissal of Marx:¹⁷

“... early in *The German Ideology*, Marx said: ‘Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence... By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life... As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production.’ In what sense do other animals *not* produce their means of subsistence?” (Midgley, 2002, p. 199).

At first glance, this point might seem fair enough. If by “producing” is meant “the processing of materials, rather than simply gathering them,” then—as Midgley states—“bees, beavers, and termites do at least as well as the simple hunting-and-gathering human tribes.” “Which shows,” as she then states, “that you have to consider *which* animals you are distinguishing yourself from” (ibid.). “Producing” cannot do enough work to separate us from the animals.

But this, Midgley goes on to explain, is not the only understanding of what “producing” means that Marx might have had in mind. He could also, she says, have meant the “free and deliberate planning of what one does, whether it be gathering, processing, or anything else” (ibid.). The problem here, however, is that while this way of understanding “producing” as the single factor which distinguishes human from animal life does indeed seem to put man “in a special position,” “but then he is so for everything he does, not just for production” (ibid.). In short, the problem with this reading, is that it seems to turn “producing” into something like McDowell's free “self-conscious subjectivity”. Perhaps this is a better distinguishing factor (although, of course, Thompson would disagree), but it is not the one that Marx appears to cite in *The German Ideology*.

Midgley then precisely discovers this criterion of “self-conscious subjectivity” in “Alienated Labour”, and likewise moves to dismiss it. Here, she claims, the “main emphasis” is not on production, but rather on “free conscious choice.”

"This," she comments, "is something found over a much wider range of activity than mere production, and certainly is a human structural characteristic, though by no means our only one... Man is, indeed, essentially rational for Marx but his reason is actualized in productive activity." (Midgley, 2002, pp. 199–200).

Midgley thus seems to be reading Marx as McDowell does—it's just that she doesn't think the resulting position works. For Midgley, Marx's whole approach is misguided because he insists, perversely, on holding SDF. "If another species were... found which did just what Marx meant by producing, it would not damage his argument about the structure of human life at all" (Midgley, 2002, p. 200).

We can thus reconstruct Midgley's argument as follows. Marx and McDowell both attempt to cite "self-conscious subjectivity" as an SDF. This cannot work—the story has to be at least somewhat more ambiguous and complicated than that.

Midgley, then, might seem at this point like she would (or should) be in agreement with Thompson. Implicitly, at any rate, her understanding of how human life is related to the rest of nature might be thought to commit her to an Aristotelianism that Thompson would recognize as being laudably "naïve."¹⁸ Thompson, likewise, still thinks that human beings are distinguished, at least in part, by our ability to operate "free conscious choice." But this capacity does not, as such, cleave off a wholesale distinction between us and other animals—since it is, for Thompson, a first-natural thing that we do; inherently limited by the fact that we manifest our species-nature through it. "Man" is the original universal and thus it not only liberates, but also limits us.

But on consideration of Thompson's reading of Marx, it seems clear that any tentative alliance between himself and Midgley, against McDowell, would be unsustainable. Thompson, with Marx, thinks what distinguishes human life is our ability to relate to ourselves as a species: that we have what he calls "species-being." Midgley, however, as per the quotes given above, only seems able to read Marx's early "species-talk" as asserting the existence of some sort of simple, universal human essence.

Interestingly, this is an aspect of Marx's early thought that he is usually thought (if not by Thompson) to have rejected. In "Theses on Feuerbach" VI, Marx writes that Feuerbach "resolves the religious essence into the human essence. "But," he says, "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx, 2000c, p. 172).

Feuerbach is thus, Marx claims, "compelled... to abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract—isolated—human individual" (ibid.). For this reason, "essence," in Feuerbach, "can be comprehended only as 'genus' [*Gattung*], as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals" (ibid.).

Marx, then, might have been an SDF theorist in 1844, when he wrote "Alienated Labour." But by April 1845, when he wrote the "Theses," he was not. It is therefore *prima facie* rather odd that Midgley started her dismissal of Marx's understanding of what distinguishes human life with a quote from *The German Ideology*—which was written around a year after the "Theses". Did Marx simply regress (rather quickly) from the high point of the "Theses"? Or is there something deeper going on here?

5 | MARX AND ENGELS' ACCOUNT OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL DISTINCTION IN THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY

"Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence... By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life... As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production" (Marx, 2000d, p. 177).

As we saw at the start of Section 4 above, Midgley quotes this line from the “Feuerbach” chapter of *The German Ideology* as evidence for the charge that Marx is an SDF theorist—one who believes that humans are distinguished from the animals by “production” (whatever exactly that means). And certainly, when these are the only words from this passage that one cites, it can seem like this reading of Marx is both natural and fair.

Midgley does not seem to have realized this. But there is a lot more to Marx’s account as it is expressed in *The German Ideology* itself. The passage Midgley quotes is from the section of the “Feuerbach” chapter headed “The Premises of Materialist Method”. Here, from toward the beginning of that section:¹⁹

“The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature” (Marx, 2000d, pp. 176–177).

Initially, then, what seems important to grasp is that, while Marx and Engels are talking in this passage about how human and animal life are distinguished from each other, “production” only enters the scene *after* the “physical organisation” of human individuals has in some sense been “established.” The distinguishing of human life through “production”, then, is very much a process that is supposed to be contiguous with the rest of nature (both human and otherwise).

Later in the section, Marx and Engels clarify their understanding of human life as follows:

“Life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to satisfy human life” (Marx, 2000d, p. 181).

It is with this passage, in my view, that Marx and Engels explicitly set out an alternative to the Feuerbachian, “Alienated Labour” account of what distinguishes us from the animals. Whereas in “Alienated Labour,” it is most natural to read Marx as insisting that what distinguishes human productive activity from any animal analogues is that our activity is, at least potentially, conscious and free, in *The German Ideology* what is supposed to make it distinctive is that when human beings produce the things we need in order to survive, we inadvertently produce for ourselves *new needs*.

“... the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act” (Marx, 2000d, p. 182).

Thus whereas—we must suppose—sharks and squirrels, bees and bugs, and so on and so forth, are able to obtain the things they need in order to survive *without* inadvertently producing new needs for themselves, we human beings are not so lucky.

We learn to plant seeds to have enough crops to feed ourselves; then we produce the need for land. We divide up the land among our community to ensure that everyone will have enough to plant on; then some of the land turns out to be bad, and we need more, but it belongs to our neighbors and now we need to go to war. So, we need swords, shields, walls, catapults, barrels full of boiling tar, tanks, and bombs, and the UN, and who knows what else.

If there is indeed a certain sort of practical rationality in operation here—through this grand historical process, after all, we produce pretty much everything we “know”—then it is an *alienated* one: we have no transparent insight into our products. These things—not least, our *needs*—loom horribly above us, urging us ever onward, to do evermore stupid and destructive things, just to satisfy our material wants.

This ever-expanding, evermore complex network of needs, the satisfaction of which produces other new needs, informs the story that Marx and Engels then give of the development of the family and then of society (Marx, 2000d, pp. 182–183). Crucially, Marx and Engels claim that it is only with these developments that “consciousness”—that is, what we have been calling “self-conscious subjectivity” enters the scene (ibid.). Even then, consciousness of this sort never appears in a completely “pure” form. Thought, after all, is for Marx and Engels determined by life (Marx, 2000d, p. 181).

It may well be, of course, that Marx continues to affirm some notion of “species-being”. But if he does, then our “species-being” could not be an *abstract* universal. If in “Alienated Labour”, production was a function of our species, now our species-essence is a function of production.

And this means that Man is, at least to a certain extent, malleable. It is in *The German Ideology* that we get what looks like²⁰ Marx’s most comprehensive account of how history is supposed somehow to culminate in the establishment of some sort of universal communist state (Marx, 2000d, p. 187). But this is a teleology that in no sense assumes the existence of some sort of pre-established human essence (Marx, 2000d, p. 190). Rather, the establishing of communism must be seen to involve a qualitative transformation: “the alteration of men on a mass scale” (Marx, 2000d, p. 195). Under communism, we will be able to produce just as we have been prevented from producing up until now, in the way that “lower” animals do, that is without inadvertently producing new needs. It is, in fact, at this point and only at this point that freedom and activity will, for Marx, genuinely coincide.

As has been established, under conditions of alienated labor we produce *not* through freedom but rather out of compulsion—to obtain the things we need in order to survive. This also, as Marx argues in “Alienated Labour,” forces the division of labor upon us, restricting the scope of our activities. But in communist society, in Marx and Engels’s famous portrayal:

“... society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind” (Marx, 2000d, p. 185).

Thus, no longer will our activity stand as “an objective power above us, growing out of our control” (ibid.)—it will be something we can exercise with all the grace and pleasure that so-called lower animals seem to take in their own movements. And so, at the end of this process, we will have ceased to be the unhappy “rational animals” that we are now: these strange creatures who find themselves subject to all these conflicting compulsions and are yet aware, somehow, that they should not be. The history of our species will culminate, with our finally having transcended our own nature.²¹

6 | CONCLUSION: DIALECTICAL ARISTOTELIANISM

It is here, at the end of this unfortunately rather knotty, winding road, that I have arrived at a position where I am able to spell out the positive point of this paper. Call the position that results from this discussion of Marx (and Engels, Midgley, Thompson, and McDowell) a “Dialectical Aristotelianism”. According to Dialectical Aristotelianism, “Human” is the type of unity that can *never* exist comfortably in the world, in the way that other animals, in their natural habitats, might seem to. “Human” is the type of species-unity that necessarily *lacks* a habitat, that has been doomed to evolve constantly and vertiginously: ever upwards, perhaps, but hardly in a way that “makes us better” in any independent sense.²² Until the revolution comes, of course, and the proletariat rise up, and “the riddle of history” is solved. Perhaps this would be the realization of our nature; on the other hand perhaps it would represent our transformation into a different sort of unity. As of now, the Dialectical Aristotelian can be happy to remain agnostic on this score.

It is my view that Dialectical Aristotelianism can provide us with a robust, *anti-essentialist* account of what separates human beings from other animals—an account of our species’ distinctiveness, that nevertheless satisfies the various

constraints that Midgley would want to put on any such account: no oversimplification; no biologically provincial moral elevation; no cleaving off of “rational” humanity from the rest of nature.

This is something that other, competing accounts are unable to do. While Dialectical Aristotelianism might still point to something analogous “species-being,” it posits our species-essence as something *historical*. What it points to is thus not a *simple*, essential factor—as it is not something that all human animals are supposed to share in the same way over time. The ‘distinguishing factor’ here is one that can change, be transformed, go wrong; if we believe Marx, it can even be overthrown entirely.²³

As yet, of course, there is more work to be done here—this paper only sketches ‘Dialectical Aristotelianism’ as a position and gives us some reason to believe that Marx and Engels, at least at one stage, held it. *Why* does humanity produce in the way that it does? To what extent is this account of human nature necessarily bound up with Marx and Engels’s political aims? And how does it relate to other accounts of human nature that have recently been proposed in the literature (not least the authors listed in footnote 5 above)? All these must remain, for now, open questions. Consider this the seed of a research project.

ENDNOTES

¹ I started writing this paper in the summer of 2018, originally as an attempt to elaborate the *Simpsons* joke that I note in Section 3. It has since evolved radically, after finding itself stuck in basically every kind of review hell going. I persisted with it out of a growing sense that if I have a ‘philosophical project’ of any sort, then what I want to argue in this paper is in some way central to it. This paper builds on my PhD thesis, completed at the University of Essex under the supervision of Fabian Freyenhagen and David McNeill. It has been profoundly influenced by my encounter with the ‘Oxford Quartet’, a group which includes Mary Midgley, which I owe both to my collegial association and friendship with Clare Mac Cumhaill. Clare’s influence on this paper dates back to a job talk I gave (on that occasion unsuccessfully) at Durham in September 2019. I would also like to thank Sasha Lawson-Frost, Andy Hamilton, and an anonymous reviewer from the *European Journal of Philosophy* (who ultimately rejected it) for their helpful comments on this paper. My understanding of Feuerbach was greatly enhanced by discussions with members of my (brilliant) ‘Kant and Other Trailblazers’ class during the academic year 2021–22, especially Nik Land.

² See *Politics* Book 1, Chapter 2.

³ A philosophical joke on this score appears in *The Simpsons*, season 5, episode 8, ‘Boy Scoutz ‘n the Hood’, where Homer comments that “weaseling out of things” is “what separates us from the animals”—only to find himself immediately forced to note that this cannot possibly do enough work to distinguish us from the weasel.

⁴ Paraphrased from McDowell (1996, p. xvii). There, he’s talking about the possibility of renouncing empiricism (as proposed by the likes of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty).

⁵ Others would include Matthew Boyle (2012) and Andrea Kern (2020). Boyle’s argument is that it makes sense to distinguish between humans and other animals on the basis of our rationality, because rational life is just a different kind of thing from nonrational life—there is a logical difference between rational and nonrational animals. Kern makes a similar argument, in fact against McDowell and Thompson, by noting its presence in Hegel. There is certainly room to bring the points made by these ‘Aristotelio-Hegelian’ thinkers more into dialogue with the position I ultimately settle on in this paper—but this must remain, for now, simply a direction in which this research project ought to be headed.

⁶ This point being central to McDowell’s *Mind and World* project.

⁷ In this section I will refer to a ‘Descartes-type worry’ and a ‘Kant-type worry’. My use of the word ‘type’ here is, I admit, potentially misleading, as it might for instance imply the type of worry, for example, Descartes might have had. What I mean to indicate is that, for example, the Descartes-type worry is the type of worry we might have with Descartes (there are, of course, many such worries—both philosophical and indeed, when you start to read about the guy, personal).

⁸ See especially CPR B131ff.

⁹ For more on ‘second nature’ see Section 3 below.

¹⁰ Interestingly, Thompson makes equivalent criticisms of Heidegger, who was of course a decisive influence on Gadamer (Thompson, 2013, p. 706ff). Heidegger does not figure in *Mind and World*—though scholars as early as Bowie (1996) have argued that he should have. Bowie even goes so far as to note the early Heidegger has the figure whose view comes closest to McDowell’s notion of a ‘world’ (Bowie, 1996, p. 536, n21). Since *Mind and World*, McDowell came to engage more directly with Heidegger in the context of his debate with Hubert Dreyfus. For a richer reckoning with McDowell and the phenomenological canon than I am able to provide here, see Schear (2013).

¹¹ Marx’s theory of ‘alienation’ names the process through which the worker is estranged from (1) the object of their labour; (2) their productive activity itself; (3) their humanity—what Marx, following Feuerbach, calls their ‘species-being’ (*Gattungswesen*); (4) other humans (Marx, 2000a, pp. 86–87). In this, it anticipates the notion of ‘false consciousness’: the alienated

- worker is prevented, as a result of their real material situation, from obtaining the knowledge of what they really are; from developing (in more explicitly Aristotelian parlance) the excellent characteristic to their form of life.
- ¹² Compare Marx's account of this toward the end of his fragment 'On James Mill' (Marx, 2000b, p. 132).
- ¹³ McDowell later modifies his definition of first nature to include nonlawlike forms of natural-scientific intelligibility. See McDowell (2008, p. 220).
- ¹⁴ See Hursthouse (1999, p. 166).
- ¹⁵ This paper aside, see also what I write on this point in Whyman (2018).
- ¹⁶ See Anscombe (2000), especially Sections 28, 32, and 48.
- ¹⁷ Midgley had independent reasons for being hostile to Marxism, a tradition which she identified with an illegitimate, ideological, dismissive, and reductionist approach to human nature (Midgley, 2002, p. xviii).
- ¹⁸ Perhaps this would be unsurprising, given the explicitly Anscombian heritage of Thompson's ideas, and the importance of Anscombe and Midgley (and their circle at Oxford, including also Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch) on one another's philosophical development. See Mac Cumhaill and Wiseman (2022).
- ¹⁹ We must of course be cautious of treating *The German Ideology* as a canonical text: in any case incomplete and unpublished in its authors' lifetimes, (relatively) recent scholarship by Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank has revealed the extent to which what we know as "*The German Ideology*"—and in particular the famous, seminal chapter on 'Feuerbach'—was a construction by later editors. For both an account of this, and a counterpoint to it, see the 'Introduction' to Whyman (2022).
- ²⁰ Though see footnote 19 above.
- ²¹ An anonymous reviewer for this publication has urged me to clarify that this account only necessarily applies to the early Marx, as represented here by *The German Ideology*. I am happy to qualify the scope of my claims in this way.
- ²² In *Beast and Man*, Midgley at one point images human evolution with the metaphor of a 'bush', in relation to which she also states that a "spreading strawberry plant" might do (Midgley, 2002, p. 152). In both cases the aim is to resist the triumphalist teleology represented by more traditional evolutionary metaphors of a 'ladder' or a 'tree'.
- ²³ Compare Adorno on 'natural-history'. See Whyman (2016).

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