CHAPTER 2: WHAT ARE (SOME) ANIMALS LIKE?
ANIMAL MINDS AND HARMs TO ANIMALS

Overview

If any animals have minds, and thus are conscious, then they can be harmed, and thus how they are treated raises moral issues. And, arguably, there are moral obligations towards animals only if they have minds, so questions about animal ethics very much depend on what animals are like. This Chapter we will get an overview of the scientific and philosophical literature on whether any animals are conscious, whether any are sentient (i.e., capable of sensation or feeling, especially of pleasures and pains), and so whether various species of animals have minds and, if so, what their mental, psychological and/or emotional lives might be like. We will discuss how anyone could know or reasonably believe some claim about animals’ minds.

Readings

Note: some of the discussion of animal minds immediately overlaps with ethical questions, but we will attempt to focus this week just on animal minds.


ANIMAL LIBERATION – pp. 9 – 22, beginning “There is, however, one general defense of the practices…”, ending on the first paragraph on 22.

EMPTY CAGES – pp. 53 – 61.

Gruen: 1. Why animals matter (optional)

Recommended Reading on Animal Minds / Cognitive Ethology:


• Marc Bekoff’s web page and books: http://literati.net/Bekoff/


• Scott Wilson, “Animals and Ethics,” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/anim-eth.htm

Being Specific About Species

In the first Chapter on logic, I made these two suggestions about identifying arguments:

- Make the stated conclusion(s) and premise(s) precise in quantity: is something said to be true (or false) of all things (or people, or animals, etc.), or just some of them (and if so, which ones)?
- Clarify the intended meaning(s) of unclear or ambiguous words in conclusions or premises.

These suggestions are relevant to thinking about animals’ minds since the category of “animal” is extremely broad: “animals” range from unicellular organisms, insects, invertebrates, vertebrates, birds, and to mammals of different kinds, including primates (like human beings). Since there are millions of species of animals, so when investigating whether animals’ have minds, the natural questions are, “Which animals?” or, “What do you mean by ‘animals’? Which animals are you referring to?”

Sometimes we forget to notice that these same questions should often be asked about human beings’ mental lives. The mental lives of, e.g., newborn babies, five-year-olds, “normal” adults, cognitively disabled individuals, and Alzheimer’s patients surely differ greatly. So if someone says that (all) animals don’t have minds like human beings’ minds, we should ask which human beings, since many some, if not, many animals have mental lives comparable to, if not richer than, many human beings’ minds. That’s a possibility: whether we should think it’s true, of course, depends on what the research shows about the varieties of animals’ and humans’ minds and mental capacities.

Our readings primarily focus on mammals and birds, although there is some discussion of fish, invertebrates (such as octopi) and even some research on insects. But, again, it seems likely the minds of different mammals (if any have minds) are also different: e.g., a mouse’s mental life is likely quite different from a chimpanzee’s (especially if that chimp has been taught sign
language). Additional research on different kinds of animals’ minds will be discussed in later sections of the course: e.g., research on the minds of chickens, cows, and pigs will be discussed in the sections on animal agriculture; rats and mice, cats, dogs and primates in the sections of animal experimentation, and so on.

How Do We Know? Arguments from Analogy & Inference to the Best Scientific Explanation

Epistemology is an area of philosophy that asks how we know things and what it is for a belief to be reasonable and supported by good evidence. How might we know that any animals have minds, or reasonably believe any such claims? We can call this question “The Epistemological Problem of Animal Minds.”

Before we think about this (hard) problem, it’s worthwhile to mention that philosophers (and some psychologists and neuroscientists) worry about a more general (hard) problem called “The Epistemological Problem of Other Minds” regarding humans’ minds. The problem is that each of us only has “direct access” to our own perceptions, thoughts, and feelings: we cannot directly “see” that anyone else is conscious and has a mind. All we see is external, overt behavior (including speech) and, presumably, somehow infer from this behavior that another individual has thoughts, feelings, and perceptions somewhat like our own. Perhaps this inference is not consciously made, but how else could we know that other people have minds?!

Believe it or not, this question has troubled philosophers for millennia and there is no widely accepted answer. Many philosophers argue, however, that we know that other people have minds either by reasoning by analogy or by reasoning from the best explanation of some phenomena, in this case, the overt behavior.
To reason by analogy is, most simply, to reason like this:

- Thing 1 has these characteristics \(a, b,\) and \(c;\)
- Thing 2 has characteristics \(a \& b;\)
- Thing 2 is relevantly similar to Thing 1;
- Therefore, probably Thing 2 has characteristic \(c\) too.

Or, even more simply: “These two things are similar in the relevant ways, so therefore what is true of one is probably true of the other.” The strength of an argument from analogy depends on how similar to two things are: the more similar, the stronger the analogy, obviously, and more likely the conclusion is to be true. To respond to the “Problem of other Minds,” someone might reason, “I behave these ways, have this kind of biology, and I have a mind. Other people behave in similar ways and have similar biology. Therefore, they probably have minds too.” It’s important to observe that we apparently often use the same kind of kind of reasoning about animals’ minds, as our authors demonstrate.

The second common pattern of reasoning about minds is an argument from the best explanation:

- There is some event that requires explanation.
- Explanation or hypothesis \(E\) best explains that event (i.e., is a better explanation than other candidate explanations in that it makes sense of more of the data/observations, allows predication, is simpler, fits with pre-existing knowledge, etc.)
- Therefore, probably \(E\), and what’s entailed by \(E\), are true.

This pattern of reasoning is often applied to animal behavior: an animal does something (e.g., reacts in some interesting way to new surroundings); we try to figure out if this reaction would be better explained on the hypothesis that (a) this animal is a mindless automaton or (b) this animal has a conscious mind (or some other explanation, perhaps with greater details than \([b]\)). How this reasoning will work out very much depends on the details of the case, but it’s important to note that we use this pattern of
reasoning to investigate both humans’ and animals’ minds.

A Source of Doubts: Necessary Conditions for Having a Mind

Many who argue (or have argued, in the case of historical figures) that animals don’t have minds often claim that there is (or are) necessary condition(s) for having a mind, animals lack that necessary condition, and therefore they are mindless. So, some have claimed that a being has a mind only if, e.g., that being has language, and argued that animals are mindless since they can’t speak. Critics tend to challenge these claims by either arguing that that (some) animals meet this necessary condition or by arguing that it’s false that this condition is a necessary one: a being can have a mind even if it lacks this condition. They also tend to point out that many such principles imply that human infants are mindless, which seems to be false (and perhaps must be false, since such infants do learn language, and that can happen only if they have minds already, before having language).

These are a few central concepts to keep in mind while reading the interesting and informative readings for this Chapter.

Discussion Questions

1. For many philosophical issues, a good place to start is to reflect on “common views” about the issues. Suppose you surveyed a range of people and asked them what the minds or mental lives of various species of animals are like, whether (any) animals are conscious, can feel, can think, can reason, have emotions and so on. What are some of the most common answers that would be given? What reasons would you often hear in favor of these answers? Are these reasons generally good reasons or not? Why?

2. There are historical and contemporary doubts that any animals possess minds. Summarize these doubts. Explain whether these doubts are reasonable or not, in your view.

3. What are animals’ minds like, according to most contemporary scientists and philosophers? What kind of
mental states do (any) animals have, e.g., beliefs, desires, memory, reasoning, planning, expectations for the future, self-awareness, emotions, etc.? Summarize the research, focusing on different mental states for different species or kinds of animals, if appropriate.

4. How would one \textit{know} or \textit{reasonably believe} some claim about the mental states of animals? Explain what kind of reasoning processes and evidence philosophers, scientists and “ordinary people” appeal to when they argue that animals have minds.

5. What is it to “harm” someone? Can (any) animals be harmed? If so, which kinds of animals? How can they be harmed? Explain and defend your answers.

Of course, always feel free to raise any other questions, observations, criticisms and any other responses to the Chapter’s readings and issues.

\textbf{Paper option}

First, please read Jim Pryor’s “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” at http://www.jimp pryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html

\textbf{Assignment}

For an audience unfamiliar with any of the material of this course, write a short paper where you present and discuss the most important arguments for the view that \textit{some animals have minds}. Be specific about what kinds of animals you are discussing, what you mean by “minds,” and explain the variety of reasons why someone should believe that these animals have minds. Although this might seem like “common sense,” people have doubted that animals have minds; therefore, explain the best or most common objections to the view that animals have minds, i.e., arguments that animals do not have minds. Explain what you think people should think about this issue and why.