

‘THE OTHER SPECIES OF MIND PROBLEM’ *

Knowledge of consciousness in other species (‘the other species of mind problem’ (Allen and Bekoff, 1997)) is often thought to present more difficulties than knowledge of consciousness in human beings, partly because animals cannot tell us (through speech) about their experiences.

Higher-Order (HO) Theories:

‘A phenomenally conscious mental state is a mental state (of a certain sort...) that either is, or is disposed to be, the object of a higher-order representation of a certain sort’ (Carruthers, 2011).

Peter Carruthers’ theory: for a mental state to be phenomenally conscious is for that state to be available to be thought about by the subject (see Carruthers, 1998a, 1998b, and 2000).

‘The term ‘available’ here makes this a ‘dispositionalist’ account, as opposed to an ‘actualist’ which requires the actual occurrence of the 2nd order thought for subject [sic.] to be conscious in the relevant sense’ (Allen, 2011):

‘[A] conscious mental state is one of which the agent is aware... and so to this extent at least it involves self-consciousness’ (Carruthers, 1996, p.149).

Carruthers denies phenomenal consciousness to nearly all nonhuman beings: ‘To think about mental states, one must

* Allen and Bekoff, 1997.

possess concepts for those states, psychological concepts. There is reason to think that no nonhuman animals have concepts like belief, desire, perception, pain and pleasure. So these animals cannot think about their own first-order mental states. So none of their first-order states are conscious. They lack the intellectual resources that are necessary for conscious experiences' (Browne [outlining Carruthers' view], 1999).

Note that Carruthers view entails that infants who cannot have second-order thoughts do not have phenomenal consciousness either.

Objections

- HO theories, especially when viewed in the light of empirical claims about the perceptual powers of animals, conflict with our strong conviction that many animals have phenomenally conscious experiences (see, for e.g., Jamieson and Bekoff, 1992; and Allen and Bekoff, 1997).
- It is far from obvious that higher-order thoughts are necessary for phenomenal consciousness; that such thoughts are needed for consciousness becomes less plausible the more we look at our own behaviour and conscious experiences. How could I have a second-order thought about a particular belief unless I was *already* conscious of the belief in question? Besides this, the behaviour of many creatures suggests that they are capable of such thoughts.

- Considering the complexity of animal life, it is strange to think how one would suppose that animals could survive without being phenomenally conscious. Furthermore, many animals respond to their surroundings in a way that is indicative of their having knowledge and beliefs, even if we assume, for argument's sake, that they cannot have beliefs about beliefs.

First-Order (FO) Theories:

‘According to first-order theories, conscious mental states are those that make one conscious of things or facts in the external environment’ (Lurz, 2009. Lurz cites Evans 1982; Tye 1995; and Dretske 1995).

Mental states are not conscious because they are available to be thought about, but ‘because the states themselves make one aware of the external world. Unconscious mental states, therefore, are mental states that fail to make one conscious of things or facts in the environment—although, they may have various effects on one’s behavior. Furthermore, mental states that make subjects conscious of things or facts in the environment do so, according to first-order theories, in virtue of their effecting, or being poised to effect, subjects’ belief-forming system’ (Lurz, 2009).

FO theorists claim that many animals are conscious and form beliefs about their environment based upon their perceptual experiences and bodily sensations. Their theories align better with our strong belief that animals have conscious states; a belief that we have good reasons for holding.

Carruthers, however, would argue against this, claiming that we do not have any such reasons; there is nothing that entitles us to say that animals have phenomenal states.

But as Robert Lurz plausibly claims,

‘[T]his is surely wrong. It is well known that the brains and nervous systems of many animals are very similar in structure and function to those of adult humans; and since the structure and function of human brains and nervous systems support phenomenal states, it is plausible to suppose that the brains and nervous systems of some animals support phenomenal states too. Moreover, many animals behave in ways that entitle us to attribute phenomenal states as opposed to nonphenomenal states to them. When my dog runs across the lawn in hot pursuit of the neighbor’s cat, for instance, it is implausible to account for his behavior in terms of his having a nonphenomenal visual experience. For such experiences... do not usually elicit purposeful and intelligent behavior. My dog’s behavior, however, is quite purposeful and intelligent: it is aimed at catching the neighbor’s cat, and it is appropriately modified in light of perceived changes in the environment. We seem to have, then, a good reason to believe that there is something that it is like for my dog to see the cat in the yard... Since many animals engage in purposeful and intelligent behaviors upon experiencing an object in the world, we have some reason to believe that their experiences are phenomenal as opposed to nonphenomenal’ (Lurz, 2000).

References

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