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Animal Thoughts on Factory Farms: Michael Leahy, Language and Awareness of Death

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Abstract

The idea that language is necessary for thought and emotion is a dominant one in philosophy. Animals have taken the brunt of this idea, since it is widely held that language is exclusively human. Michael Leahy (1991) makes a case against the moral standing of factory-farmed animals based on such ideas. His approach is Wittgensteinian: understanding is a thought process that requires language, which animals do not possess. But he goes further than this and argues that certain factory farming methods do not cause certain sufferings to the animals used, since animals lack full awareness of their circumstances. In particular he argues that animals do not experience certain sufferings at the slaughterhouse since, lacking language, they are unaware of their fate (1991). Through an analysis of Leahy's claims this paper aims to explore and challenge both the idea that thought and emotion require language and that only humans possess language.

Awareness of Death

While the evidence of animal suffering in factory farming is extensive and it is generally held that animals are sentient, some philosophers, such as Michael Leahy (1991), claim that animals either do not suffer through certain factory farming methods and conditions or that the practice poses no moral issues, or both. In light of the evidence of animal suffering and sentience, on what basis are such claims made?

Leahy argues that animals do not experience certain sufferings on the way to the slaughterhouse, and also do not experience certain sufferings when, at the slaughterhouse, animals are killed in full view of other animals. For Leahy, awareness is necessary to experience certain sufferings, or have certain states, like fear and distress. He claims that since animals lack language they are unaware of their fate and, thus, do not experience such states (1991). Leahy argues that only those beings that have language can have an understanding and awareness of death, and only humans possess language. For Leahy, it is not correct to say that farm animals can be afraid or distressed, since this involves having an awareness or knowledge *that* one is afraid or distressed, and involves being *aware* of *what* one is afraid of or distressed about. Indeed, Leahy certainly seems sceptical about claims that farm animals actually do suffer through intensive rearing methods (Leahy, 1991).

However, the claim that animals need language in order to understand and be aware of death is dubious as the behaviour of many mammals certainly suggests otherwise. Animals act knowingly when their lives are threatened. Further, there is substantial evidence to show that during the transportation to the slaughterhouse and at the slaughterhouse animals undergo considerable suffering, whether they are aware of death or not (FAUNA, 2000; CIWF, 2000). In light of the evidence it is fair to say that the behaviour of animals in factory farms is certainly indicative of suffering.

Besides, it may be that animals' senses give them awareness of what is happening, even if they cannot understand what is happening. If they only have their instincts then they may not have the understanding, which is so often used as a coping mechanism in humans. So, if one assumes, as Leahy does, that animals cannot understand the situation, one may also assume that they have no way to deal with their fear, and thus, such a lack of understanding may cause them to suffer more. Also animals' senses are often a lot more finely tuned than humans'. Their senses may make their experiences more intense, particularly if they cannot anticipate the future or remember past events.

It should be said though that animals' thought processes and senses may or may not contribute to animals suffering more than humans in comparable situations.

Contrary to Leahy then, it is just not clear that animals' lack of awareness of death makes them less susceptible to suffering. Leahy merely assumes that animals are not capable of understanding or awareness and that a lack of such capacities makes them suffer less. In fact, he suggests that, due to a lack of awareness of their fate, animals do not suffer at all or suffer very little. And even if we do assume that animals are unaware of death, it does not follow that they do not suffer or experience little suffering.

Leahy argues that in order to be aware of death or believe that one is going to die one must have a concept of death. Raimond Gaita emphasises the difference between the 'practical awareness and the reflective understanding of death' (2002, p.71). Animals, he argues, do have an awareness of death and can have knowledge that they are about to die even if they cannot reflect upon this awareness and knowledge.

Animals can believe or know something without ever having a reflective concept of that something. My dog may sit at his food bowl at dinnertime and hope that his food is coming, or

believe that he will be fed at this time. But in order to believe this, or hope that, he need not wonder whether I will be feeding him chicken or biscuits, or whether I will be feeding him at the same time tomorrow. And he need not have a reflective concept of food in order to know, hope, or believe that I will feed him. Perhaps all he needs is an empty stomach and awareness of my daily routine. If he was hungry and had no belief or hope that I would feed him, then he would not sit by his bowl, but would probably remain hungry or saunter around sniffing out food. There would be no coherent narrative going on.

It does seem that some animals can believe, hope and know whether or not they are capable of complex conceptual thought. Unlike Leahy's claim to the contrary, farm animals can be aware of death. They do not need to have a reflective understanding of death in order to be aware of it.

Language as Conceptual

Leahy, then, follows Wittgenstein in arguing that language is essential for thought and emotion and for the possession of certain concepts. For Wittgenstein, the phenomena of hope and grief are modes of a life with spoken and written language. They are different from bodily sensations like anger, happiness, or sadness. The latter exist independently of whether the being who has them can master a language. Mental states though, like hopes, beliefs, and grief, are connected to the formation of language and their existence is dependent, not only upon mastery of language, but also upon a life of a being that uses the language of humanity (Wittgenstein, 1958).

Animals, he argued, can have physical sensations, but they cannot have mental states. For an animal to have the latter a life with language is necessary, and they do not have such a life. Not only this, but a life with language consists of a life of certain thoughts, and having such thoughts requires concepts and related emotion.

It follows that, for Wittgenstein, animals, lacking language, lack thought and emotion too, since thought and emotion are phenomena that are dependent upon having a life with language and having certain concepts. In order to hope or believe one must possess concepts, and for one to possess concepts one must have a language. Animals, for Wittgenstein, have neither of these.

But is it really the case that animals lack the thought and emotion necessary for certain conceptual thoughts? The evidence suggests otherwise. Some animals do have the ability to form sortal concepts and the concept of sameness and difference. Such abilities should be an indication that some animals do have thoughts and emotions, and, therefore, do have a life with language even if that life is not our life with language. And if animals do possess concepts then, on the Wittgensteinian view, it is not out of the question that they can also have hopes, beliefs, grief or language.

Besides, research conducted by Jean Mandler reveals that babies can think and form concepts long before they acquire language. Her studies also reveal that babies can make inductive inferences and remember past events (Mandler, 2004). This suggests that the acquisition of language is not necessary in order to think logically or have memories.

That animals can express their emotions or feelings through their behaviour makes commonsense when we look at evolutionary theory. Darwin certainly believed that animals could convey their feelings and emotions through their behaviour and facial expressions (Darwin, 1872).

It should be said then (in response to the view that language is necessary for thought and emotion) that the behaviour of many animals indicates that they do have thought processes, whether or not they possess the capacity for language. Indeed, it is impossible to fathom how

animals could interact with other beings if they could not think. It should also be said that much animal behaviour is not only indicative of thought, but of emotion and feeling too.

Animal Communication

There does often appear to be a problem in describing animal communication as language; the problem being that these communications will be prone to be compared to the spoken and written language, and will then be deemed unfit to be called 'language'. But communication need not be defined in terms of linguistic skills. After all language is a means of communication, and there are other ways to communicate, ways that we may or may not understand.

Contrary to Leahy, animals' capacity for understanding and awareness is neither limited nor nonexistent. Many animals have complex communicative skills, which allow them to acquire knowledge and understanding. Leahy shows a complete unawareness that the communicative skills of animals have a direct impact on what they can know and understand. Of course, different species use their own species-specific forms of communication, but this does not mean that certain forms of communication are necessarily unique to the species that use them.

Marc Hausler points out that if 'human language represents a fundamentally unique form of communication… then we are presented with a significant evolutionary challenge in uncovering its origins' (1999, p.458). He suggests that we approach this challenge by looking at 'whether animals have the conceptual apparatus needed to acquire language even if they can't acquire the formal structure of language, its semantics and syntax' (1999, p.458). He believes studies, particularly those conducted by Tetsuro Matsuzawa (Matsuzawa, 1999; Hauser, 1999), provide evidence that chimpanzees have the capacity to understand concepts like sameness and difference, number and colour, symbols and the ability to produce symbols (Hausler, 1999). Evidence provided by these studies, and others, such as Pepperberg's research on grey parrots

(Pepperberg, 1999), certainly does suggest that animals have the conceptual equipment needed to acquire language.

There is one piece of evidence that deserves to be looked at more closely, as it may serve to highlight some of the biases humans have with regards to animal communication. Kanzi is an ape whose communications were discovered by accident when his mother, Matata, was sent to a different location. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and her colleagues had been training Matata and Kanzi had always remained on the sidelines. In the absence of Matata, Savage-Rumbaugh noticed that Kanzi had learned everything she had been trying to teach Matata. Kanzi began using the computer keyboard to communicate his needs and intentions, and to name things (Savage-Rumbaugh et al, 1998). As he got older he began to use combinations of symbols to indicate his desires and ideas (Savage-Rumbaugh et al, 1998). Kanzi's communication skills, including his ability to understand grammatical sentences, were shown to be as good as, if not better than, a two and a half year old child, Alia (Savage-Rumbaugh et al, 1998).

Kanzi could understand spoken language by being exposed to it at a young age. The communicative abilities of Kanzi show that humans do not have their own language that is exclusively human, and they are not the sole possessors of language.

Scepticism

Although the studies of Kanzi do somewhat refute the belief that animals cannot acquire language, many scientists refuse to revise their beliefs about animal communication skills. They refuse to accept that apes have the ability to acquire language skills, and are even less willing to accept that apes have the ability to understand a semantic and syntactical language comparable with a human's.

After the results of the studies of Kanzi's and Alia's communicative skills, why are humans so willing to attribute language to Alia but not to Kanzi? (Savage-Rumbaugh et al,

1998). The person who denied that animals can communicate would be seen as a sceptic, whereas the same person who denied the same thing of other humans would be seen to be devoid of all commonsense. Why is language not so readily accepted in animals, and why are those people who do not accept language in animals not seen as lacking commonsense, as they would be if they denied language in humans?

The answer to these questions firstly lies in the sceptic's claim which is that, while it is possible to know what other humans are thinking and that they do think, it is impossible to know what animals are thinking, or if they do actually think. With regards to knowledge of human minds, we can make the inference that since one knows what one is thinking oneself and that one can actually think oneself then it is probable that other people can think too, and that we can also come to know what they are thinking. Humans are able to tell us through speech that they are thinking and what they are thinking, whereas animals are not able to do this. Certainly, most humans are able to communicate their thoughts and experiences by the use of language. While a person's behaviour can be an indication of his or her thoughts, the shared public nature of language makes it possible for a person to confirm, to another, what he or she is thinking. Thus, the public nature of language gives humans a 'common-world' in which they are able to communicate their thoughts and experiences (Ayer, 1956). The sceptic argues that, with regards to animal minds, we are unable to make inferences, which would allow us to gain knowledge of animal thoughts. It is also argued that while animals' behaviour may be suggestive of thought processes, we have no method by which to confirm that we are justified in this belief, since, unlike humans, animals lack the capacity to use a shared language. On the sceptic's view then we can be certain of the content of human minds in a way that is not possible with regards to the content of animal minds.

In relation to animal minds, it is often argued that all animal behaviour and communication is instinctive, or stimulus-response behaviour, and that this is unlike human communication in that it is not intentional or conscious in any way. But it could be also argued (albeit with comparable implausibility) that all human behaviour and communication can be given a stimulus-response explanation and is not as intentional or conscious as we would like to believe. Both animal and human behaviour can be given a mechanistic and neurological explanation. However, the latter argument is not widely held. But why not? If people are so willing to see all animal communication and behaviour as instinctive why are they not equally willing to see all human communication and behaviour as instinctive?

An explanation for this lies, again, with the sceptic. Introspection, it is argued, whilst allowing us to infer that other humans have mental states, does not allow us to infer that animals have mental states. Knowledge of our own thoughts, intentions, and conscious experiences allows us to infer that other humans have similar experiences and intentions too (Griffin, 1977).

However, this idea that we come to know about the mental experiences of other humans largely through introspection and inference is implausible, as it ignores the importance of human behaviour and the public nature of language in allowing us to talk about the content of other human minds. Not only this, but, contrary to the sceptic's claim, just as we come to know about the experiences of humans through their behaviour, so too can we come to know about the experiences of animals through animals' behaviour, regardless of considerations of linguistic abilities.

The sceptic claims that we can always ask humans what they are thinking to reconfirm our beliefs about other human minds, and that we cannot do this with animals. Relatedly, it is argued that if animals cannot think, they cannot possess language, whereas humans, on the other

hand, can think and can possess language. Language, therefore, is deemed unique to human beings. Of course this argument is circular in that thought is required for speech, and speech is supposedly required for thought. What is more, the increasing evidence of animal communication does suggest that there is a need to reassess the dichotomy we have created, and insist on maintaining, in our thoughts and beliefs about animals on the one hand, and humans on the other.

However, the scientific community still, generally, accepts this pervasive Cartesian view and has, consequently, formed negative or low opinions about the language skills of animals, while forming positive or high opinions about human language skills. But the sceptic's view of animals is difficult to defend when one genuinely considers the growing bulk of evidence of the communicative skills of other animals besides ourselves, skills that are not so dissimilar to our own.

The second reason for the willingness to attribute language to humans but not to animals, and the reason why the sceptic's claim is so readily accepted, can be found by looking at the ways in which humans in modern society use animals. The main use of animals is for food and scientific experimentation. Millions of animals are used everyday for these purposes. Factory farming and many animal experiments involve subjecting animals to considerable pain and suffering. Animals used for these purposes are restricted, if not prevented, from exercising their capacities, whether these be physical capacities or mental ones:

> [R]ejection of that skepticism about animal abilities... would not sit well at all with the ethical presuppositions of our treatment of animals as exploitable sources of food, free labour, clothing, cleaning agents, and so on. How could we possibly believe that Kanzi does in fact have all the abilities that we might 'loosely' speak of him as having... yet continue to treat him as a being without rights and to act as if it is we who have the right to do with him whatever we choose? (Savage-Rumbaugh et al, 1998, p.152).

Animals are used as a means for the production of so many goods in society that to stop their use would mean having to employ other means to produce the same goods: means that would not be free or so cheap. Accepting animals as beings that are able to think, acquire knowledge and beliefs, and communicate would mean having to accept animals as beings that have similar mental capacities to our own, and accepting that humans are not unique in their ability to communicate. If we did accept such things then our present treatment of animals in current practices, like factory farming and animal experimentation, would be seen to be morally problematic, and would have to be, at the very least, reformed.

The sceptic's view then fits in nicely with our current treatment of animals. The idea that animals are mindless beings, unable to communicate, and lack capacities that are anything like humans ones, such as language, is used as an attempt to try and justify subjecting them to painful procedures and a life of suffering. However, if animals are not seen like this, but are believed to be beings that can think, are able to communicate and have their own language then how could we continue to treat them as we do now? The idea that nonhumans are dumb animals could no longer be used as an excuse for using them in experiments or in factory farming. Although it is used as an excuse it is not a justification in the first place anyway.

What then would count as evidence of communicative skills (in animals) for the sceptic, and, indeed, for all the scientific community, that is sufficient to say that an animal understands language? Savage-Rumbaugh el al informatively point out that the criterion of what counts as sufficient evidence of communicative skills must apply to both humans and animals (1998). If a different criterion is used as sufficient evidence of communication in humans, on the one hand, and animals, on the other, then different methods of evaluating are taking place. Human behaviour is being evaluated one way, and animal behaviour is being evaluated another way;

thus the criterion that counts as evidence of communication in humans will be, say, X, and the criterion that counts as sufficient evidence of communication in animals will be, say, Y. It follows that if the criterion used for animals is different from that used for humans then it may turn out that although you are talking about criterion X, and I am talking about criterion Y, we are both actually talking about the same thing, that is, criterion Z. Also when we do not use the same methods of evaluation for humans and animals, criteria become useless. The use of criteria as a sufficient standard of evidence will not make sense.

In an attempt to make sure that this does not happen when making claims about apes, Savage-Rumbaugh et al insist that two requirements must be fulfilled. The first requirement they call the 'Equality Requirement' (1998), which states that when evaluating claims about apes and humans the methods of evaluating must be the same. Not only this but everyone who decides whether or not it is justified to make a certain claim must use the same method of evaluation. There are to be no exceptions. This is called the 'Commonality Requirement' (1998). Savage-Rumbaugh et al only talk about these requirements applying to apes and humans, but I propose that such requirements should be extended to include, at least, all sentient nonhumans; otherwise the same problems arise when people are evaluating communication in other animals. If methods of evaluation are different, criteria for evaluating claims will also be different, with the result that no real assertions can be made. If criteria used for evaluation claims about animals and humans fulfilled these two requirements then it would be difficult to deny a certain claim about animals while accepting the same claim about humans (if both animals and humans satisfied the criteria).

To summarise then, criteria that are to count as sufficient evidence to justify a certain claim must apply equally to humans and animals, that is, 'the same methods of evaluation must be applied' (Savage-Rumbaugh et al, 1998, p.155). Also, not only must the same methods be

used for animals and humans, but the same methods must be used by every person who takes on the task of finding out the communicative skills of animals and humans. Most sceptics would not be satisfied with these requirements and would insist that claims about humans and animals are just made differently, and that we can confidently make claims about humans in a way that we cannot about animals.

Finding an agreed method by which claims about humans and animals can be made and assessed, and using this method to assess those claims equally is a hard task when we consider that not only are the claims seen by the scientific community as completely different, but the objects of those claims (humans and animals) are also seen as different. As Savage-Rumbaugh et al say, 'rhetorically the two claims, and so also the two justificational tasks, are quite different. In other words, we "are inclined" to see them differently' (1998, p.156). This problem is a grave one, particularly for animals who get the raw end of the deal. But if studies of Kanzi and other animals prove one thing it is that animals are capable of acquiring language.

However, our continual use of human language as the prototype upon which all other forms of communication are evaluated may be holding us back in our studies of communication. Indeed, an experiment conducted at Cambridge University tested the olfactory powers of dogs. The Cambridge team used urine samples from people with cancer and, by first giving the dogs a sample to smell, they tested the dogs to see if they could detect the samples from people with cancer. Each time the experiment was conducted the dogs detected the cancer eight out of ten times. The Cambridge Team has no doubt that the dogs can smell cancer. They believe that dogs could be used to diagnose cancer earlier and better than current methods (Cambridge Team, 2006). That such a study can be effectively carried out is partly due to dogs' understanding of some characteristics of human language. Training dogs to understand a smell as significant, and

to detect objects, which have that same significant smell, is largely dependent on humans and dogs sharing some of the same aspects of a language (Hearne, 1986).

Conclusions

Knowledge and awareness of the world can, as the above studies show, be communicated through behaviour. In this way, if language is defined as the 'expression of thought and feeling in any way' (Cambridge English Dictionary, 1990, p.231), or 'symbols for communicating thought' (Collins English Dictionary, 1996, p.442), then some animals can be said to have their own species-specific language. As said earlier, animals can have thought processes (whether or not their thoughts are reflective), and their thoughts can be expressed through their behaviour.

Leahy's claim then that animals do not experience certain sufferings, like fear and distress, at the slaughterhouse or during transportation to slaughter, because they do not have an awareness and understanding of death, should be rejected. Leahy has not shown that an understanding of death is necessary for these animals to experience fear and distress when subjected to slaughtering methods and conditions. Indeed, he has not shown that experiencing or having such states (that is, fear and distress) is dependent upon having an awareness or understanding of *that* which one is afraid of or distressed about. Also, Leahy's view that the possession of language is necessary for an awareness of death is implausible. Linguistic skill is not necessary for awareness or knowledge. While his view is based on the idea that language is necessary for the possession of certain concepts, including the concept of death, the communicative skills of some animals suggest that they can indeed form concepts, despite a lack of linguistic skill. Besides, it does seem that some animals are capable of, at least, understanding language.

Leahy concludes that the arguments in favour of the moral status of animals, and arguments which emphasise the immorality of the practice of factory farming, are unfounded

(1991). However, these claims should equally be rejected. There are many humans who do not use language and we would object treating them in the ways we treat factory farm animals. If language was necessary for moral standing we could be justified in excluding marginal humans from moral concern. Indeed, if language were necessary for thought and emotion, as Leahy seems to think, then these humans would be seen as not being able to think or have feelings, and since language, for Leahy, is necessary for having certain states, like fear and distress, it would follow that these humans are not capable of having these states either. However, these humans can have certain states, like fear and distress, which Leahy associates with language users only. They can have thoughts and emotions too. These thoughts may be reflective or may never be reflective. But this is beside the point. The ability to use language may be a sufficient condition for moral standing, but it is not a necessary condition.

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