BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Articulating Animals: Animals and Implicit Inferences in Brandom's Work

ABSTRACT

Brandom denies animals implicit reasoning by emphasizing their inability to make inferences explicit, and in so doing, denigrates animals by likening their behavior to that of machines and artifacts. With disturbing regularity and ease, Brandom equates pigeons and parrots to machines and thermostats in their inability to express implicit/explicit inferences: neither the pigeon nor the machine can "provid[e] reasons for making other moves in the language game." I contest, however, that animals are paradigmatically more than any similarity or analogy to mechanical processing, just as humans are paradigmatically more than any reductive analogy to animals. The human/animal distinction need not come at the cost of ignoring the difference between animals and artifacts, and I believe we can largely subscribe to Brandom's differentiation of the human in terms of expressionism if we allow that animals can make implicit inferences without making them explicit.

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*As distinguished from the extantness of material things
and from the existence of humans, we call the mode of
being of plants and animals: life*

—Heidegger 1997, 14

Introduction

Robert Brandom refers to humans as concept-using animals, distinct from other animals in their discursive practices, namely in their ability to articulate inferences, and he convincingly shows how concepts are commitments that are articulatable within a web of reasons. This web links implicit and explicit inferences, and, Brandom claims, is inherently linguistic. If we grant Brandom's definition of linguistic discourse as unique to human cognition (thus precluding discussion of putative non-human language and discourse, let alone infants and severely impaired humans who cannot articulate reasons), we still run into a problem concerning nonhuman, higher-order animals (hereafter "animals"), for Brandom lumps animal cognition with mechanical computation throughout his major opus, *Making It Explicit* (1994), and its abbreviated form, *Articulating Reasons* (2000). He often speaks of parrots as a kind of thermostat reacting reliably to stimuli and nothing more. The problem has two dimensions: counterintuitive conclusions and their corresponding (im)moral implications.

There seems to be an obvious categorical difference between animals such as parrots and artifacts such as thermostats, so Brandom's insistent grouping of the two together fails to correspond to our (or at least my) intuitions of reality. Brandom usually associates animals and artifacts when he is emphasizing how human perception exceeds mere stimuli—we see red in a web of inferences, such as blood, wine, stop, rage, etc.

Insofar as Brandom is exaggerating the mechanical aspect of animals in order to more clearly contrast them with the discursive aspect of humans, we can grant him rhetorical license. The ease and frequency of this reductive gesture, however, suggests otherwise.

Brandom's philosophical categorization of humans leaves little doubt that he actually views animals as biological machines. What would be nondiscursive (pre-linguistic) inferences in humans are analogous in animals to the nondiscursive deductions of computers. That is, Brandom draws a sharp line between humans and nonhumans: only humans make inferences. If animals are no more than machines, we have no more moral duty towards animals than we do towards machines.

Brandom admits that his project "risks being beastly to the beasts" because it focuses on "the fanciest sort of intentionality"—ours—"that involves expressive capacities that cannot be made sense of apart from participation in linguistic practices" (1994, 7). He claims that his project depends on "the lower grades of intentionality," presumably of animals, inasmuch as he hopes to show how "linguistic abilities arise out of nonlinguistic ones" (7). That this pseudo-apology follows a discussion of "Descartes' seminal demarcational story" (6) should clue the reader into the fact that Brandom in truth views animals and artifacts in the same light—both without intentionality except in the basest form, such as iron rusting (33-34; cf. Okrent 2007, 81). The mechanistic logic that denies mental content with language in animals, as found in Descartes, runs throughout Brandom's work.

The implications of this Cartesian gesture go against our moral intuitions that recognize some responsibility towards

animals based on their cognitive faculties, emotions, ability to feel pain, etc.; but even if this moral intuition, however deeply rooted, is nothing more than an argument from analogy, as Peter Harrison claims (1991), there is still the problem of categorically treating animals as machines, at least in the Heideggerian sense of enframing (1993). That is, the intuition that harming an animal is categorically different than “harming” an artifact goes beyond mere analogies between humans and animals—we humans evidently recognize that the difference between a live animal and a dead animal is not the same as the difference between a functioning machine and a defunct machine. I contend that we categorically view *living things* as having inherent value apart from any imputed value we may attribute to animals and artifacts alike.

To deny this moral obligation humans have towards living things is to label any sentiments towards animals as no different from those we may have towards artifacts (a wedding ring, for example). That is, such sentiments could be dismissed in pursuit of, say, science: live vivisections of animals would be like tinkering with a running machine. This, as in Descartes’ day, goes against our moral intuitions about life and about responsibility towards living things.

If we believe there is something that makes animals and artifacts ultimately incommensurable, namely *life*, can we make sense of the distinction of living/non-living in light of Brandom’s human/nonhuman distinction? That is, would modifying Brandom’s initial distinction between humans and nonhumans create room for the distinction between animals and artifacts? Or, keeping Brandom’s initial distinction, what further distinctions need to be made to separate animals from artifacts?

We need to briefly go over how Brandom's theory of inferentialism works before we can hope to locate or create a space within the theory for animals. We also need to show how animals differ from non-animals in order to group them with humans in opposition to mere things.

Differentiating Humans from Animals

Both *Making It Explicit* and *Articulating Reasons* are about the "use and content of *concepts*" especially as regards "the nature of *language* [in] . . . us rational, indeed logical, concept-mongering creatures" (and since the latter is the shorter, condensed version of the two, most of my references are to *Articulating Reasons*) (Brandom 1994, 1; 2000, xi). Moreover, in the Introduction to *Articulating Reasons*, Brandom lays his cards on the table, showing where he stands on nine philosophical issues that bear on his inferentialism. The Introduction makes clear his disingenuous position on animal minds, and by looking at the first five methodological stances, I hope to pinpoint where his theory could be altered so as to create a space for animals as distinct from artifacts.

His first foundational philosophical position, siding with "differentiation" over "assimilation" (prioritizing "*discontinuities* between discursive and nondiscursive creatures") bears most directly on the topic at hand (Brandom 2000, 2). Brandom is not just showing his differential approach towards "creatures"; already—on page 2—he is showing his indifference towards nonhuman animals by assimilating them with artifacts: "the judgments and actions of *concept users*, on the one hand, and the uptake of environmental information and instrumental interventions of *non-concept-using organisms and artifacts*, on the other" (3, my emphasis). The crux of this assimilation of animals and artifacts is that Brandom opposes them both as

non-concept-using to humans, who are, by definition, concept-using.

The implicit reason for rejecting conceptual ability in animals lies in Brandom's second stance as a pragmatic functionalist, rather than a "platonist." The "platonist," here, is one who explains the "use of concepts in terms of a prior understanding of conceptual content"; Brandom, however, "seeks to explain how the use of linguistic expressions, or the functional role of intentional states, *confers* conceptual content on them" (4, my emphasis). The platonist would consider what conceptual content might or must be and then locate it, presumably by degree, in higher- and lower-order animals. For Brandom, however, our unique ability to make "*explicit* propositions or principles form the direction of what is *implicit* in practices" indicates, or rather consists in, our unique capacity to have, through participation, (linguistic) conceptions of reality, and defines us as sapient creatures (4). According to Brandom, one's conception of reality (as concepts) is an all or nothing game.

Animals and artifacts don't have conceptions of the world, according to Brandom, because they do not have language as such, they only have "a primitive kind of practical taking *of* something *as* something" (1994, 33-34). For Brandom, neither the mind nor language is the locus of intentionality—his third philosophical position. "Concepts are applied in the realm of *language* by the public use of sentences and other linguistic expressions," says Brandom, "[and] are applied in the realm of *mind* by the private adoption of and rational reliance on beliefs and other intentional states" (2000, 5). Since animals don't have a public language, and "concept use is not intelligible in a context that does not include language use," then they can't have beliefs and intentional states (6). Even "[o]ur mammalian

cousins, primate ancestors, and neonatal offspring,” though “sentient and purposive but not discursive creatures,” don’t have concepts and intentional states (1994, 276). We may interpret them derivatively as having intentionality, but they do not. If our infants and evolutionary forefathers can’t make implicit inferences, then certainly there’s no room for animal intentionality.

The denial of intentional states with external language in animals corresponds with Brandom’s fourth preference for expression over representation as the genus of concepts. The project of “representation,” contra Brandom’s project, assumes that “simpler forms of [representation] are exhibited already in the activity of non-concept-using creatures, and on that basis elaborate ever more complex forms until one reaches something recognizable as specifically *conceptual* representation” (7). For Brandom, however, expressions (“making *explicit* what is *implicit*”) and concepts are necessarily related (8-9). The assumption, again, is that only humans can do this unique thing, namely “turning something we can initially only *do* into something we can *say*: codifying some sort of knowing *how* in the form of knowing *that*” (8). (“Initially” seems to apply to pre-linguistic humans, i.e. infants, not evolutionarily pre-human animals, e.g. orangutans.)

The fifth stance, viewing the conceptual as inferential, not intentional, is a major fulcrum of Brandom’s theory and, perhaps equally so, of my criticism. (Accordingly, this is the last of the nine stances I will discuss, the other four being less pertinent.) He says, “[W]hat distinguishes specifically *discursive* practices from the doings of non-concept-using creatures is their *inferential* articulation. To talk about concepts is to talk

about roles in reasoning” (10-11). The key to Brandom’s inferentialism is that :

It understands *expressing* something, making it *explicit*, as putting it in a form in which it can serve as and stand in need of *reasons*: a form in which it can serve as both premise and conclusion in *inferences*. Saying or thinking *that* things are thus-and-so is undertaking a distinctive kind of *inferentially* articulated commitment (11).

Brandom’s inferentialism, therefore, encapsulates his “constitutive, pragmatist, relationally linguistic, conceptual expressivism” that differentiates humans from animals and artifacts (9).

My criticism is that Brandom unjustly ignores the difference between animals and artifacts by ignoring the minimum (though profound) similarity between humans and animals as living creatures. He fails by his own account:

Of course, wherever the story starts [assimilation or differentiation of the conceptual], it will need to account both for the ways in which concept use is like the comportments of non-discursive creatures and the ways in which it differs. Theories that *assimilate* conceptually structured activity to the nonconceptual activity out of which it arises... are in danger of failing to make enough of the difference. Theories that adopt the converse strategy [differentiation]... court the danger of not doing justice to generic similarities (3).

Brandom simply does not do justice to the generic similarities of humans and animals, thereby trivializing what distinguishes animals from mere things.

Differentiating Animals from Artifacts

In a rare and all too brief section of *Articulating Reasons*, Brandom distinguishes animals from artifacts:

Sentience is what we share with nonverbal animals such as cats—the capacity to be *aware* in the sense of being *awake*. Sentience, which so far as our understanding yet reaches is an exclusively biological phenomenon, is in turn to be distinguished from the mere reliable differential responsiveness we sentient beings share with artifacts such as thermostats and land mines. Sapience, by contrast, concerns *understanding* or intelligence other than irritability or arousal (2000, 157).

According to Brandom, the pigeon and the thermostat are alike in their ability to reliably respond to stimuli, only pigeons do this biologically and thermostats mechanically. I'm afraid that would be Descartes' position as well.

But even if animals have no mind similar to humans (no sapience), the reduction of animals to mechanical operations implies the difference between animals and artifacts: what is amazing about a dog performing a trick is that it is performing a trick, that it is trained; the specialness of dog training as opposed to computer programming is made apparent when the dog gets confused and messes up. Machines don't get nervous or distracted by crowds of people; they don't suddenly become more interested in an observer's hat or shoe than in their master's voice or treat. That is, the ability to mechanize animals (imperfectly) only reveals the fact that they are not machines.

Consider this typical, inhumane comparison of a thermometer and a parrot: "The difference between a tape-triggering ther-

mometer or a parrot trained to utter 'It's getting warmer' when exposed to suitable changes of temperature and the human observer's... lies... in the *understanding* of the classificatory significance attributed to those responses," i.e., lies in the human's understanding of the meaning of "it's getting warmer" and the thermometer/animal's lack of understanding (1985, 32).

Now let us conceive of the situation differently and see how Brandom's conclusions fare. Let's keep the thermometer and the human observer from off the street, but instead of a parrot let's use a foreigner who can't speak the native tongue, but whom we taught to successfully announce when "it's getting warmer" without teaching her what the words mean.

That "the [American] observer does and the instrument does not grasp or attribute such a signification to its own response" (32-33) still is true in the adapted situation, but what about with the foreign observer? Are we to assume that even though she doesn't have the linguistic analogues to "it's getting warmer," she wouldn't (or couldn't) grasp the implicit meaning of her response to stimuli, namely that *it's getting warmer*?

I think it is fair to assume that, given human intellect, humans can understand implicit meanings even without any ability to make explicit (in the English language, for example) what they understand implicitly. That is, the foreigner would understand that it is getting warmer, and that getting warmer corresponds to the sounds "ts gtng wôrmr"; she would be able to understand the semantic correspondence to the stimulus no matter whether she were trained to say "es wird wärmer" or "plank slab block." We know this because, as Brandom points out, humans can understand inferences theoretically. If we grant that animals can't understand *theoretical* inferences, on what

grounds besides presumption does Brandom assert that animals have no more implicit understanding of *practical* inferences than artifacts such as thermometers do? Mark Okrent is able to give a compelling account of animal rationality grounded in teleology while still maintaining a unique kind of linguistic rationality in humans (grounded in their self-determining teleology) (Okrent, 2007). That is, even if Brandom is right to assert that humans alone can perform theoretical inferences, Okrent shows again and again how animals perform what can only be called practical inferences.

Okrent works off Donald Griffin's description (1984, 88-90) of the plover bird's "broken wing display," a creatively variable defense mechanism used by other bird species as well, and perhaps also by fish (Ruxton, Sherratt, and Speed 2004). The plover feigns injury to distract predators away from the bird's nest, but not in a programmatic way; rather, the bird behaves in a richly versatile way, adapting to the changing situation, taking into consideration, so to speak, variable environmental factors and actions of the predator, what Michael Wheeler might call flexible, adaptive richness (2005). Of note to Okrent is that the bird isn't merely responding to given stimuli according to biological programming (if you will) or innate goals, as lower-order animals do. The *Sphex* wasp, for instance, displays a kind of rationality that adapts to changes in its environment, but it adapts in a predictable, systematic way when an experimenter moves the food for its eggs, a caterpillar, as the wasp checks the burrow before adding the caterpillar (Okrent, 2007, 7; working off a description by Wooldridge 1963, 82). Okrent comments,

What the plover does is *more* versatile and adaptive than what the wasp does in a wider range of circumstances. The plover can deal with the presence of ex-

perimental intervention [of a scientist or a predator] far more effectively than the wasp can, for example. And the plover is far more capable of adjusting her behavior in light of what seems to be a recognition of the failure of a previous behavior to achieve its proximate end than is the wasp. You won't find a plover endlessly repeating a failed subroutine in the way that the wasp in the example does. For those reasons, among others, we say that the plover's behavior is more *rational* (8).

By more rational, Okrent means that lower-order animals only have an instrumental rationality (teleology), whereas higher-order animals act according to goals that are determined by their rational beliefs and desires (though they lack mental awareness of intentionality). Okrent's contention that higher-order animals act on (non-conscious) intentionality is a stronger claim than I am making, that animals make practical inferences. Okrent shows that animals act according to the general principles of their teleology (innate goals), and in ways that are "flexible, versatile, and appropriate in novel ways" (intentionality) (166), and this intentional teleology fits—if not exceeds—Brandom's description of the "intrinsically motivating preferences or desires" of practical inferences and rational action (2000, 31), thus showing that practical inferences are prior to, or at least separable from, theoretical inferences.

Therefore, to return to the thermometer parrot story, the parrot is more like a foreigner than a thermometer in saying that it's getting warmer, for they are both recognizing and acting upon a desired goal, a practical inference, as opposed to the thermometer which simply responds to "merely external factors," as Okrent would put it (2007, 81). Though neither the parrot nor the foreigner understands the semantics of the Eng-

lish language, they both recognize the inference that when it gets warmer, they say “it’s getting warmer,” whereas the thermometer can’t make practical inferences. Thus, rather than showing animals as reducible to biological machines, Brandom’s example actually highlights the similarities of humans and animals as distinct from artifacts.

Synthesizing Animal Implicit and Human Explicit Understanding

Although Brandom’s anti-animal rhetoric in *Making It Explicit* and *Articulating Reasons* pervades his very system of inferentialism, the task of creating a space in his theory for animals to make implicit inferences may be easier than it seems. In fact, an earlier work of his gives us a rubric for incorporating animal inferences into his schema.

Brandom’s 1985 “Varieties of Understanding” delves into familiar categories of understanding, “that which remains *implicit* in practice, and that which becomes *explicit* in principles” (27). Of course, Brandom is interested in “the sophisticated kind of understanding which is explicitly instituted, codified, and communicated in the form of explications” (which are ultimately founded upon *implicit* practice), but he rather candidly (for him) affirms implicit inferences apart from (not merely prior to) explicit understanding, albeit somewhat condescendingly: “Students of animal learning are concerned with the simple kind of understanding which is implicit in the skilled practice of prelinguistic performers whose behavior must be treated as regular rather than rule governed” (27). In contrast with his recent work which emphasizes a differentialist approach to rationality, here Brandom the “pragmatist emphasizes the continuity of human understanding with animal understanding... by contrast to the platonist’s emphasis on the discontinuities marked

by animals' incapacity to act according to explicit principles" (28). Let us discuss his pragmatist approach here before reconciling it with his later, more platonic approach.

The first move of the pragmatist "is to try to explain understanding *that* something is the case... in terms of understanding *how* to do something, and further to understand understanding... simply as being able to do something, to perform appropriately according to some practice" (28). Implicit inferences involve doing the appropriate things appropriately—a cat waiting for a mouse, a man shooing a fly. While this is prelinguistic, I don't see why it mustn't include rationality, broadly construed, perhaps even what we call *phronesis*. We needn't attribute beliefs and desires, as Mark Okrent does, to quasi-rational animals to admit some form of rationality to animals (Okrent, 2007). Simply put, higher-order animals seem to display flexible and adaptive goal-directed behavior, what I want to call *phronesis*, much like we do—but this does not obviate the extreme gap between such shared *phronesis* and the uniquely human rationality of self-reflection, anxiety, soul, conscience, *Dasein*, or, as Brandom would have it, the explanatory understanding involved in making inferences explicit.

Brandom continues: "to describe the form of such an account [of explicit understanding]," however, "is not to offer an account of explicit understanding" (1985, 28). Even if we can give an account of a broken-wing display performing bird in terms of beliefs and desires (as Okrent does), our description does not imply such explicit understanding in the bird (as Okrent rightly points out) (2007, 2). That is, even if the bird is reasoning (adapting to unique situations with unique goals), it is, for all we know, *not* reasoning in a reflective way ("If I do such and such maybe—I hope!—such and such will happen");

rather, it is reasoning only on the implicit level (as we do when we judge whether to scoot our seat forward or back when sitting). When we hail a taxi, it involves some kind of thought or desire (a taxi) and requisite action (signaling), but this thought and action isn't reflective ("I find myself wanting a taxi"); just so with animals—actions, rationality, desires, or what have you, are reflexive, but not self-reflexive.

What distinguishes humans is the ability to make explicit such implicit desires, reasons, etc.—“inferences,” according to Brandom—in an explanatory gesture. Animals, however, can't explain to themselves or to us *how* something is, only *that* something is. This “expliciting,” according to Brandom, goes hand in hand with “impliciting”; but if animals can't “explicit,” how do they “implicit” inferences? The later Brandom seems unable to leave room in his philosophy for animals to be able to make implicit inferences, and so lumps the animals with the artifacts. Nonetheless, I contend that we can redeem Brandom's later two-sides-of-the-coin approach to inferences by appealing to his earlier account of understanding, and so rescue animals from the ghetto of Cartesian objects.

We can allow for animals to have implicit inferences but not the ability to make such inferences explicit, without rejecting the two-sided coin account of inferences, if we allow humans to make explicit animal inferences on their behalf. In order to “turn [implicit inferences] into an [explicit] account one must at least be prepared to offer a pragmatist story about how to build explicit understanding as codified in principles out of forms of understanding which are merely implicit, manifesting themselves only in appropriate practice and not in such principles” (Brandom 1985, 28). Such an explication, however, cannot be mere description, as noted above. For example, such

an explication cannot merely appeal to evolutionary biology or behaviorism. We need a story that goes beyond mere description or ascription.

Conclusion

For now, I hope to have shown how animals can be understood apart from artifacts without undermining Brandom's differentialism, showing how Brandom could reincorporate implicit animal inferences into his thought. Addressing what it might look like for humans to perform explication on behalf of implicit animal inferences, however, remains for a later project.

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