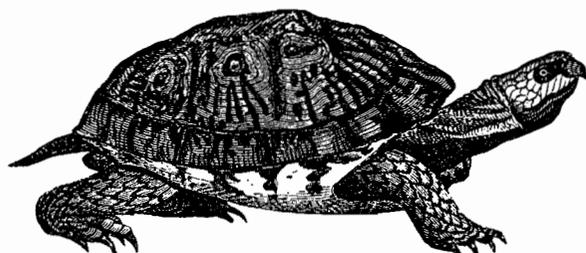


What Do Animals Care About?

Lilly-Marlene Russow
Purdue University



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I am going to argue for a thesis that almost nobody in this audience would dispute: animals have things they care about, and the fact that animals care about them has moral significance. However, the lack of disagreement (in this forum, at least) should not disguise the fact that more work needs to be done, both to answer a recent spate of attempts to deny the thesis and to clarify exactly what "caring about" means, covers, and entails for our moral theories.

It might be more natural to talk about animals' interests, rather than what they care about. Unfortunately, this term has been interpreted in so many different ways that its use invites confusion. On one end of the spectrum, Tom Regan wants to allow for both preference and welfare interests, where the latter can involve things about which the subject knows or understands nothing.¹ On the other end, R.G. Frey associates "interests" with terms such as "wants" and "desires," and further argues that these states require a language.² Rather than try to dictate which of these interpretations more nearly reflects ordinary English usage (a misguided project at best), I have chosen to use a term which I hope (a) has less "baggage," at least in the debate about animals, (b) will allow me to

specify what "caring about" means, and why it is important, and (c) in both ordinary usage and the broader philosophical tradition captures a distinction that is worth preserving.

R.G. Frey is perhaps the most familiar defender of the position that animals cannot have desires. Although he does not use terms like "care about," his conclusion also entails that animals are incapable of caring about things in the sense to be defined below. His argument can be summarized as follows:

- P-1. In order for S to desire O, S must have some beliefs about O.
- P-2. Beliefs require the ability to entertain and accept certain statements as true, and hence the ability to draw a distinction between true and false statements.
- P-3. The ability to draw a distinction between true and false statements requires the use of language, and some understanding of how language represents states of affairs.
- P-4. Animals lack the requisite linguistic abilities.
- C. Therefore, animals lack beliefs, desires, and interests.³

Although this argument is most closely associated with Frey, it has been echoed by Michael Leahy.⁴ Both agree, for example, that Regan's broader use of



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“interest” cannot be sufficient to establish moral relevance, since Regan’s concept of interests would, according to them, entail that tractors as well as can have “interests” in *that* sense.

Many animal scientists also reject talk of animals’ interests or desires or caring, usually preferring terms such as “needs” which seem to them more quantifiable and testable, hence more scientifically respectable. A full defense of my appeal to a concept of “caring about” should address the scientific claim; also Carruthers’ arguments on this subject, and would explore some reasons why Daniel Dennett’s recent account of consciousness⁵ poses a very similar threat to talk of animals’ interests and caring. Although there will not be time to do justice to these themes today, they do indicate the range of serious challenges to the idea that animals do have interests and care about things.

As I have already acknowledged, terms like “interests” have a rather messy history, even within the narrow confines of debates about animals. Very roughly, with many intermediate possibilities left aside, the two opposing interpretations of “S has an interest in O”⁶ would be:

- (1) “S [rationally?] desires O,” or
- (2) “O would enhance S’s ability to fulfill its proper function, role, or *telos*.”

Sense (1) is the one that leads Frey, Carruthers, and Leahy to reject the claim that animals can have full-blown morally weighty interests. Again acknowledging the oversimplification, it would seem that for all three, S’s desiring O entails (a) that there is a way of specifying, fixing, or *correctly* identifying the object of S’s desire, and (b) that S has the capacity to identify O and distinguish it from things that would not satisfy the desire.

The perhaps surprising link with Dennett comes primarily through condition (a), with (b) providing a secondary connection. Although Dennett is generally considered a supporter of cognitive ethology and its references to the intentional mental states of animals,⁷ his more recent championing of “heterophenomonology” gives a special role to language in fixing the appropriate ascription of intentional states.⁸

A tempting, but probably misguided, response to this argument is to treat it as a variant on the problem of other minds: we can never get to the truth of what the cat wants, because the cat can’t tell us in

unambiguous enough terms.⁹ If we interpret the issue this way, we might be tempted to respond: “we can’t tell, but the cat can, and that’s what matters.” This would beg the question: the charge is not simply that *we* cannot properly identify the object of the cat’s desire, but that it cannot *have* any desires without a language in which to express true and false propositions about that object. The charge is that the cat lacks a medium in which to refer to or represent the object of any belief or desire, and hence cannot have beliefs and desires.

Contemporary philosophy provides a much more effective response to this concern about the possibility of having an object of belief or desire.¹⁰ The two salient points for our purpose, in their most general form, are: (1) any adequate psychological theory that hopes to explain animal behavior will have to attribute to many animals the ability to receive, encode, recall, and use such information;¹¹ and (2) there is no reason to think that the medium in which the mind/brain encodes and manipulates information is identical with the language (if any) in which one communicates. Hence, the lack of a natural language of communication does not provide good evidence against the hypothesis that a being has a language of thought. And it is the language of thought or something analogous to it, not communication, that provides the basis for propositional attitudes.

The first of these very general ideas drawn from contemporary philosophy of mind is an essential part of a more general demonstration of why Behaviorism simply won’t work. Behaviorism simply has not been able to give an adequate theory which explains the behavior of (at least) birds and mammals simply in terms of stimulus response and positive and negative reinforcements; either because the salient features for explaining the feature may not be present in the environment at the time, or because the feature is not one which can be captured in law-like statements about the environment.¹² In marked contrast to the failures of Behaviorism, theories that work inevitably postulate that complex creatures can carry with them and access internally stored information about the world.

There are important disputes about the medium and mechanisms required to store and use information: does it have syntactic structure? how holistic is it? etc. (Even, in Dennett’s case: in what sense is it real?). The relevant point of agreement for our purposes is that the medium cannot be limited to natural languages such as English. To do so (a) threatens to lead to an infinite

regress of interpretations of linguistic signs, (b) overlooks the fact that a very large portion of cognitive psychology works as well for animals that lack a natural language (small humans as well as nonhumans) as it does for adult language users, and (c) founders on the question of how we can learn a language without the prior ability to form hypotheses. Moreover, the inner representations in this medium, whatever it is, can be accurate or inaccurate, true or false, thus answering another of Frey's concerns.

If the foregoing argument is correct, we have explained how a being can have beliefs and desires without having a language with which to communicate descriptions about the objects of those inner states. Thus, many animals can have beliefs and desires, and satisfy the conditions set forth for having interests in a morally relevant sense.¹³ Moreover, tractors don't have these sorts of inner states, and neither do paramecia.¹⁴ However, we are not out of the woods yet: although tractors and paramecia don't have desires (because they don't have mental representations), computers might well, and it would certainly disturb our reflective equilibrium to find our moral theory generating direct duties to our PC's.

This is where "caring about" becomes relevant. At least none of the current crop of artificial life cares about whether it gets what it wants.¹⁵ I wish to claim that we can identify a sense of "caring about" such that many animals typically do care about getting what they desire, but (at least the current generation of) computers do not. In order to justify that claim, we will have to unpack the notion of caring.

I propose to do this via an indirect approach: by asking if/how we might be justified in saying that one animal is happier or more contented than another. If animal scientists read this paper, they will certainly either cringe or fume at the sloppy, untestable language, but that is exactly why I chose these terms. Despite their lack of direct physiological or behavioral correlates or indicators (or "operant definitions"), terms like "happy" and "content" do have a justifiable place in the scientific study of animals, and they also provide a clearer foundation for investigating what animals care about.

The first thing any self-respecting animal scientist would do at this point is to ask what I mean by "happy," trying to raise the suspicion that there is no real state to be relied on here. The first thing any self-respecting philosopher would respond is that the demand for

necessary and sufficient conditions was well buried with logical positivism; although we sometimes can and ought to offer such conditions, they are not always necessary for knowledge or respectable science. The undeniable fact is that experienced observers can tell quite well when an animal is happy.

On the one hand, books about dog training, horseback riding, animal husbandry of all sorts, are filled with statements like: any good dog owner (dairyman, rider, etc.) can tell whether an animal is happy, fearful, bored, or irritated. On the other hand, at some point in almost any discussion of the treatment of farm or laboratory animal, someone inevitably raises the challenge: "But you can't *really* give us hard scientific data about how to tell whether an animal is happy, can you?" This challenge may be followed with the assertion that it is therefore wrong to demand that we act *as if* a severely confined animal is unhappy (since we don't know for sure that he is), or even the charge that one is committing the eighth deadly sin: anthropomorphism.

The answer to this challenge lies in some fairly straightforward epistemology. On the assumption that we can set aside extreme skepticism (which would mean we would have to doubt not only the mental life but the physical existence of the sow and her crate, as well as the mental lives of fellow humans), there are two widely recognized reliable indications that we know what we are talking about, and that we are describing something real about the world.

The first way to convince you that I know what I'm talking about, that I'm saying something true, is to describe to you a general scientific theory and methodology that allows us to explain, predict, and understand in a fairly deep way, what is going on. If you ask me why stones roll downhill, and I glibly assure you that "it's because of gravity," you probably should probe to see whether I can back up my assertion in this sort of way. You might find out that I know no more about gravity than a nineteenth century biologist who blithely tells us that we move because of our *elan vital*. This, of course, is the ultimate aim of science. We want to know not only what happens, but why it happens. As a result of a better understanding of why things happen, I often also get better at predicting and identifying what happens: as a result of understanding. In the case of happiness, this approach does not look very promising.

However, we often do remarkably well even in the absence of such deep explanatory theories, and we do

so without lapsing into "subjectivity." All of us, to some extent, and some of us to an astounding extent, can recognize features of the world without being able to spell out in any detailed way how we do so. Here are some examples:¹⁶

- (1) Chicken sexers.
- (2) SAT evaluators and others who grade "standardized" essay exams.
- (3) Chess players who recognize significant patterns.
- (4) Any competent English speaker judging the grammaticality of sentences.

The objectivity in such cases is established in two ways. First, predictive success: the success rate of the chicken sexer can be determined quite easily, and good pattern recognizers will win more chess games. Second, where the observers are in fact picking out something that is really there, we find a high degree of intersubjective agreement, at least among skilled, trained, experienced practitioners. These two features provide good epistemic warrant for believing that observers are accurately detecting an objective feature of the world, something that is really "out there." Both features can often be found in judgments about an animal's emotional and mental states.

Predictive success in judging an animal's inner states, including happiness, comes down to whether we can interact as we want to with animals: they do what we want, don't attack us, settle down calmly, thrive without developing "vices," and so on. That's why books on dog training and horseback riding are so filled with talk about the need to recognize when an animal is happy or contented. Learning to recognize these states increases one's success at working well with the animal.

Intersubjective agreement (assuming objective, knowledgeable observers) is less obvious in the case of animal happiness because heavily influenced by preconceptions and the fact that we have been taught to talk about animals in more "rigorous" and "scientific" ways. However, if we focus on people who work and live with animals, the intersubjective agreement soon becomes apparent. Good dog handlers will usually agree about whether a dog is enjoying herself; two shepherds will pick out the same ewe as the one who is uncomfortable; and so on.

Given that reports by observers with a high degree of predictive success and intersubjective agreement are perfectly respectable sources of objective knowledge

claims, and given that we have such a situation with reports about whether animals are happy, content, upset, etc., I conclude that we are justified in accepting those reports as descriptions of animals' actual states. Having done so, we are ready to return to the topic of caring about.

Having argued that we can talk about an animal's being happy or unhappy, and make reliable judgments about such states, I now propose to define what S cares about in terms of what makes S happy (or less unhappy) in the following manner:

S cares about O if S directly desires O,¹⁷ and getting or achieving O contributes to S's happiness.

This definition entails that getting (or being denied) what she cares about makes a difference to the general state of S's experienced well-being. It also allows for varying intensity of caring: some things will matter more than others. Finally, this definition entails that we can be mistaken about what we care about: we can think we care about something, only to discover that we were wrong: when we achieve it, we discover that it does not make us happy. These features combine to delineate a real phenomenon in many humans and many animals. The resulting definition accords well with our ordinary concept of caring about, and helps explain why the objects of caring carry moral significance in a way that more neutral interests may not.

Let me emphasize that I am not claiming that we care about things *because* they contribute to our happiness; we may sometimes do so, but we may have all sorts of other reasons for caring about something. Rather, I am suggesting that a hallmark, a definitive criterion of what we care about (as opposed to what we think we care about) is that it contributes to our happiness or alleviates our unhappiness.

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this paper to offer a complete axiology and to locate "what we care about" in that framework. However, at the very least, the sort of interests highlighted in this new vocabulary of "caring about" carry more *prima facie* moral weight than things that are merely "good for" some being. If one is a preference utilitarian, for example, caring about is a more obvious manifestation of preference than interests in any weaker sense. From a deontological perspective, paying due attention to what a being cares about seems an appropriate way of respecting the individual as a source of valuing, without reducing him/her to a mere contributor to the general good. In any

event the values highlighted by what we care about will be hard to ignore in an adequate moral theory.

In this paper, I have argued for two theses. The first is that arguments such as Frey's and Leahy's fail to establish that animals do not have interests in a morally relevant sense. The second is that we can identify the relevant sense of interests, and at least begin to illustrate its moral relevance, by focusing on the question of what animals care about. There is much more to be said on this topic, of course. The critical side of my argument must be extended to respond more specifically to other skeptics, such as Davidson and Carruthers, and potential skeptics such as Dennett. More work also remains to be done to establish the exact role in our moral theory of what beings care about. However, we have made significant progress in both these directions.

Notes

¹ Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights*, pp. 87-88.

² R.G. Frey, "Rights, Interests, Desires and Beliefs," *American Philosophical Quarterly* v. 16 (1979), pp. 233 - 239.

³ That is, "interests" in a narrow sense, not the broad sense of interests in which something's being in S's interests reduces to that thing's being good in some way for S. The former sense has clear moral relevance for a utilitarian (especially a preference utilitarian), while the latter is unproven as a basis for moral concern. As Frey points out, tractors have interests in the broad sense, but not the narrow. (Frey, 1979, p. 233).

⁴ Michael Leahy, *Against Liberation*, London: Routledge, 1994, esp. Ch. 2, "R.G. Frey: The Case Against Animals." Peter Carruthers, (*The Animals Issue* Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1992, esp. Ch 8, "Animals and Conscious Activity.") might also be placed in this camp, and there are indeed important similarities between his argument against the idea that animals can be conscious of their own mental states and the Frey/Leahy argument. However, there are also important differences that would lead too far off the topic to explore in sufficient depth.

⁵ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1991.

⁶ I leave aside, for the sake of simplicity, the negative counterpart: S has an interest in avoiding O. The same basic analysis applies to this case.

⁷ "Intentional Systems in Cognitive Ethology: the 'Panglossian Paradigm' Defended," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* v. 6 (1983), pp. 343-390 (with commentary).

⁸ *Consciousness Explained*, pp. 446-448.

⁹ I say "probably" for two reasons. First, this may be what some nonphilosophers are worried about. Second, at least in discussion, some of Frey's responses seem to move in this direction.

¹⁰ Although I will present the view in terminology most closely associated with Jerry Fodor's "language of thought," nothing in what I say here implies a commitment to Fodor's rejection of connectionism. Any theory which posits a method of encoding or representing information about the environment, including non-eliminativist versions of connectionism, will support the same conclusion. The two reasons presented in the text are purposely presented as claims that would be accepted by almost any plausible non-eliminativist account of cognitive states.

¹¹ To forestall the inevitable "how far down do you go?" reply, let me point out that these systems can vary in complexity, ranging from highly abstract and complex to so simple as to no longer count as a "language of thought." For more details, see Jerry Fodor, "Why Paramecia Don't Have Mental Representations." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, v. X: Philosophy of Mind. French and Uehling (eds), Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 3-23.

¹² Two classic presentations of this sort of argument, developed in more detail, are D.C. Dennett, "Skinner Skinned," *Brainstorms*, and Jerry Fodor, *Language of Thought*.

¹³ Frey may intend his analysis to provide only necessary, not sufficient conditions. However, since "desire" in his account seems to be at least one sort of real interest, "S has a desire" entails that S also has interests.

¹⁴ See note 9, above.

¹⁵ Cf. John Haugeland's famous dismissal: "The trouble with computers is that they just don't give a damn." The same thesis is developed in more depth by Fred Dretske.

¹⁶ I am purposely excluding "knowing how cases," since we are concerned with the issue of knowing *that* an animal is happy.

¹⁷ "Directly desire" does not mean "desire for its own sake." Rather, it is intended to distinguish those objects internally represented (as discussed above) as objects to aim at, as opposed to things which are essential to one or more of S's desires, but which S does not recognize as such. I refer to some of the latter as indirect desires. Thus, good nutrition may be essential to my dog's desire to feel good, but will at best be an indirect desire.

