

Phenomenology and the Problem of Animal Minds

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Abstract

Writers such as Jacques Derrida, Simon Glendinning, John D. Caputo and Charles S. Brown have argued that the disposition to regard some nonhuman animals as minded beings reflects a fundamental existential truth about humans. The way of being characteristic of humans, it is suggested, is (or at least can be) a ‘being-with’ nonhuman animals, just as it is a ‘being-with’ other humans.

This paper has three aims: (1) to explain the origins of such claims in Heidegger’s account of ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*); (2) to investigate whether arguments of this kind can successfully undercut the sceptical claim, voiced by writers such as Malebranche, that nonhuman animals have minds; and (3) to show how a phenomenological approach can shed light on the various ways in which we relate to nonhuman animals.

1. Animal Minds / Other Minds

Do any nonhuman animals have minds? We cannot, so to speak, get inside the head of an animal. How, then, can we know whether there is anything going on there? — The questions require clarification (Which animals are we referring to? What is a mind? What counts as knowledge in such cases?), yet the sceptical problem to which they give voice should be familiar. I shall refer to it as the problem of animal minds.

In recent years several writers¹ have argued that the tendency to regard some nonhuman animals (hereafter, ‘animals’) as minded beings reflects a fundamental existential truth about humans. The way of being characteristic of humans, it is suggested, is a ‘being-with’ animals, just as it is a ‘being-with’ other humans. In the early sections of this paper I set out to explain the origins of such claims in Heidegger’s account of ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*). I move on to consider whether appeals to our existential kinship with animals successfully undercut scepticism regarding animal minds. My aim in doing this is not exactly to rebut scepticism regarding animal minds (that might not be considered too great an

¹ Caputo 1993, Glendinning 1998 and Brown 2006.

accomplishment), but rather to elucidate and critically appraise the general conception of our relations with animals that that form of scepticism presupposes.

First, however, I need to explain what I mean by ‘minds’, ‘animals’ and ‘scepticism regarding animal minds’. To say that a being has a mind is, I will take it, to say that there is something it is like to be that being (even if it is impossible to know *what* it would be like to be that being) (cf. Nagel 1974). In other words, I will be concerned with the question of whether animals have ‘phenomenal consciousness’. Moreover, my aim in this paper is not to determine which animals have minds. Instead, I focus on those animals that seem most clearly to be minded, namely higher mammals (although I do consider other kinds of animal in the concluding section). Finally, by ‘scepticism regarding animal minds’, I mean any view to the effect that all animals might be or are in fact without minds.

2. The Problem of Animal Minds

The problem of animal minds presupposes the following account of our epistemic situation. I have immediate epistemological access to my own mind; I know, to speak loosely, that there is something going on in my own head. How can I be sure that beings other than myself are minded? It must be at least logically possible that my dog, for instance, is nothing more than a complicated machine. The problem, then, is one of getting from *here* (my immediate awareness of my own mind) to *there* (the mind of another). Some sort of epistemological ‘bridge’ is needed – an argument from analogy, say, or an inference to the best explanation.

Framed in these terms, the problem of animal minds is evidently a special case of a more general sceptical doubt, the problem of other minds. Yet there are reasons for thinking that the problem of animal minds is distinctive, that the attempt to bridge the epistemological gap between a human mind and the mind of an animal presents a special challenge. One factor commonly appealed to here is the fact that animals,² unlike (most) humans, cannot tell us what is on their minds (see further, Jamieson 1998: 91).

In the face of such difficulties, the sceptic concludes that there is always a chance that any particular animal is mindless and so merely a complicated machine or something of that kind. So whereas common sense suggests that at least some animals are minded, the sceptic maintains that this is at least open to question. This kind of scepticism is often associated with Descartes, although its strongest advocate was probably Nicolas Malebranche, for whom animals ‘eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it... desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing’ (quoted in Harrison 1992: 219).³ It persists, as a pernicious

² In view of recent studies of certain great apes, this, arguably, should read ‘*most* animals’.

³ The view that Descartes denied that animals have minds has been challenged by Cottingham (1978). Cottingham’s defence is rebutted in Harrison (1992). Harrison’s measured conclusion is that Descartes

undertow, in modern writings. Indeed, still influenced by the unhappy legacy of psychological behaviourism, many scientists regard speculations on animal minds as taboo (Jamieson 1998: 100-101). Thus the animal behaviourist J. S. Kennedy denounces what he calls 'the new anthropocentrism', and proclaims that 'although we cannot be certain that no animals are conscious, we can say that it is most unlikely that any of them are' (quoted in Jamieson 1998: 80).

3. Heidegger on Other Minds

The fact that the problem of animal minds may be regarded as a special case of the more general problem of other (human and nonhuman) minds suggests that some of those arguments that have been brought to bear upon the latter might fruitfully be applied to the former. Taking this cue, let us turn to the attempts of phenomenologists to address the issue.

Phenomenologists have written a great deal on the broad topic of intersubjectivity, much of which is relevant to the problem of other minds. In the following I consider Heidegger's account, as presented in *Being and Time* (§§25-27).

Heidegger's aim in that work is not directly to address the standard list of philosophical problems, concerning other minds, say, or the existence of the external world. His aim is rather to provide a tenable account of what it is to be the kind of being to whom such questions can occur.⁴ In the light of such an account, he suggests, many of these standard 'problems' will reveal themselves to depend for their plausibility on untenable accounts of what it means to exist as we do (what it means to exist as Dasein, in Heidegger's terminology). So with regard to the problem of other minds, Heidegger's aim is not to solve the problem of other minds, to demonstrate that others exist, but rather to describe, as best he can, what it is to be the kind of being that can ponder such matters. His conclusion, briefly stated, is that once one sets out, working from one's own case, to do this one will always find that one's description refers to other beings like oneself.

Consider, for example, one's relations to things. Heidegger maintains that to exist as we do is necessarily to inhabit a world (to be 'in-the-world'), which in part is to say that when one describes how it is to be the being that one is, one finds that one must refer to certain items in the world, an 'environmental context of equipment'. Thus to describe how I am right now is to describe the pen I am holding, the notebook on which I am writing, the book I hope to complete, and so on. To describe these things and their various relations to me, however, I

'did not adamantly insist that animals could not feel... but rather showed that there are no irresistible reasons for asserting that they do' (227).

⁴ This is his proximate aim. His ultimate aim is, by way of an analysis of our way of being, to shed light on the question of Being.

must refer to others who are, in certain important respects, like me. The pen is *mine*, which amongst other things is to say that it might once have been the property of someone else. It has a certain function: it is something that one writes with, where this ‘one’ refers primarily to an anonymous collective of others. The book I am writing will, I hope, be read by others – beings who, like me, are in-the-world. This should not be taken to imply that I first perceive these things and then infer the existence of others. On the contrary, the actual or potential presence of others is *integral* to the presentation of these things. As Heidegger puts it, ‘The Others who are thus “encountered” in [an]... environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought...’ (1997: 154).

For Heidegger, then, our way of being is a being-in-the-world, which is necessarily a being-with others (1997: §26): ‘Dasein is essentially Being-with [*Mitsein*]’ (1997: 156). This is not to say that we are essentially sociable creatures, since being-with is the condition for the possibility, not only for conviviality but also for hostility and sociopathy. Nor does being-with require the actual presence of others. We are of course sometimes alone. Yet such moments count as moments of *solitude* or *isolation* on account of the actual absence of others who might have been present (1997: 156-7). Even Descartes’ solitary meditations before his stove indicate a particular mode of being-in-the-world and hence a particular mode of being-with-others.

How does Heidegger’s account of being-with bear upon the problem of other minds? To repeat, his aim is not to solve the problem, to prove that other beings *do* have minds, but to develop a phenomenological account of how things are with us. Yet the account he develops suggests that scepticism regarding other minds depends for its plausibility on an untenable account of being-in-the-world. If one supposes that one finds oneself in the radically isolated epistemological position of having to infer the existence of anything outside the domain of one’s own consciousness, then, to be sure, sceptical doubts of this kind seem pressing. If, however, one recognises that one’s being-in-the-world is ‘always already’ a being-with others, such doubts are more difficult to uphold. In this way, Heidegger’s account of being-with undercuts scepticism regarding other minds.

4. Being-with Animals

As we saw, Heidegger’s proximate aim is to shed light on a particular way of being-in-the-world, that of Dasein. It is tempting to say that while his ultimate aim is to elucidate the question of Being, his first concern is with *human* being, and it is indeed the case that (adult) human beings typically exist as Dasein. But the concept of Dasein is not coextensive with that of human being (Schatzki 1992: 82; cf. Thomson 2004: 401), and accordingly, being-in-the-world is, to be precise, a being-with-other-Dasein, not a being-with-other-humans. Yet for all

this Heidegger himself fails to follow up the implications of his own reasoning, assuming instead that the token others one is 'with' are all of a particular (human) type. In particular, he maintains that although an animal is 'open' to the world, it is not open to the world in the way that Dasein is (1995: §§62).⁵ Consequently, he claims, a being-with animals is not possible.

This conclusion, however, is surely mistaken. There is no good reason to suppose that being-with *must* encompass animals (a point I return to below). But it is surely unreasonable to suppose that it *cannot*.

Consider my earlier example of being-in-the-world. I am, I noted, currently practically engaged with various items (my pen, notebook, etc.), each of which refers to the actual or potential presence of other Dasein (the pen, to the anonymous collective which dictates how it should be used; the notebook, to the potential readers of my book, etc.). Heidegger maintains that my world is a 'with-world' (*Mitwelt*) (1997: 155). To be sure, it contains no reference to potential *animal* others, yet this reflects the fact that I, following Heidegger, chose a peculiarly anthropocentric example to illustrate being-with, one centred on the use of certain tools. If I had chosen a different situation with which to illustrate my being-in-the-world, the 'with-world' might not have appeared so human-centred.

Imagine, then, that I am contemplating these matters, not at my desk, but while I am out walking my dog. To describe how I am is at once to describe my situation, and my situation is that I am walking through fields near my home, the sun at my back, relishing the space and freedom after a hard day in the office. Others are integral to my perception of the world. I am walking on the edges of the *farmer's* field. This is the sort of thing *one* does. As Heidegger pointed out, my walking must be understood against a background of shared, public understanding. Yet this 'public' is not entirely human. My dog, Lucy, is also present, excitedly rooting around in the hedgerow - like me, relishing the sun. In fact, I perceive the sun as something in which we, Lucy and I, take pleasure. Lying in some nettles is a stick, bearing the tooth-marks that identify it as Lucy's. Her presence is, one might say, written into it. Indeed this entire stretch of field is part of Lucy's walk; her presence (or potential presence) is integral to my perceiving the field as the thing it is.

It seems wrong to say that this encounter involves a meeting of *minds*. For my being-with Lucy, if it may be so described, involves an intertwining of bodily intentions, a shared response of two lived bodies to a common situation. True, we share an understanding; but that sharing takes the form of an unspoken dialogue of expression and gesture, more like a dance than an exchange of emails. Lucy's movements make sense to me - I can, so to speak, read

⁵ Heidegger maintains that although animals have access to 'something that actually is', they do not have access to beings *as* beings (see further, 1995: §62).

what they are saying, what she is saying; and I respond to her in kind, by, for instance, bending a little towards her, patting my knees.⁶

If talk of a meeting of minds is inappropriate, then so too is talk of ‘epistemological bridges’. I do not perceive a Lucy-shaped body, only subsequently inferring that that body houses a mind, and I am sure that Lucy does not perform a similar inference in perceiving me. Nor indeed does either of us *assume* that the bodies we perceive house minds. Lucy and I are ‘with’ each other in something like a Heideggerian sense right from the start.

This, moreover, is not to postulate some empathic kinship between us. As Heidegger points out, talk of empathy ‘suggests that we must first “feel our way into” the other being in order to reach it. And this implies that we are “outside” in the first place’ (1995: 203). By contrast, Lucy is not, as it were, *over there*, on the far side of an epistemological gulf – she is already *here*, in the Da of my Dasein. There is no question of me proving that she has a mind, since her mindedness is presupposed in an account of my being-in-the-world.

5. Undercutting Scepticism

I am not the first to have suggested that we can be ‘with’ animals in this sense. Following a suggestion from Derrida (1989: 57), Simon Glendinning explores the possibility of an ‘original Mitsein’ between humans and animals (1998: 72). Likewise, John D. Caputo chastises Heidegger for having ignored the possibility of ‘a kind of Mit-sein ... a way to be “with” animals’ (1993: 127), while Charles S. Brown defends the notion of a human-animal ‘being-with-others’ (2006: 15). All of these writers suggest that we are ‘with’ animals, in something like a Heideggerian sense, even if (as they all acknowledge) we are not ‘with’ them in the same way that we are typically ‘with’ our fellow humans.

A more careful and detailed study would be needed to prove that we⁷ can be ‘with’ animals in this sense. But let’s assume for the sake of argument that Glendinning et al are correct and that a being-with animals is indeed possible. Does this suffice to undercut scepticism regarding animal minds?

The sceptic would contend that it does not. For however much ink is spilt in an attempt to demonstrate our being-with animals, she would no doubt maintain that it remains logically possible that all those beings I seem to be ‘with’ lack minds, that the human-shaped ones are ‘zombies’ and the animal-shaped ones mechanisms.

There is something to the sceptic’s objection. It might indeed be logically possible that the animal-shaped beings with which I seem to share the world are mindless machines. However, the phenomenological account was never meant to prove that those animals we feel

⁶ See further, Merleau-Ponty 1996: 353-4; Abram 1996: 21; Caputo 1993: 126-7.

⁷ This ‘we’ might sound presumptuous. I discuss this point below.

in the presence of must therefore have minds. Its aim was not to solve the problem of animal minds, to prove that animals do in fact have minds, but rather to undercut the scepticism of which that 'problem' is an expression.

This is a significant blow against scepticism. Yet there are reasons for thinking that it is not fatal.

Consider, once again, the phenomenological 'undercutting' of scepticism regarding animal minds. As we saw, it relies on an appeal to 'the phenomenology' of our relations to animals. The sceptical attack is alleged to depend for its plausibility on an erroneous account of what it means to be in-the-world. In the light of a better account of 'the phenomenology', one that reveals our being-with animals, such scepticism is de-fanged.

Now as we saw, this kind of strategy effectively undercuts scepticism regarding other minds. The sceptic questions whether other minds exist. The phenomenologist reveals that her being-in-the-world necessarily takes the form of a being-with others. Indeed, since being-with is an essential structure of being-in-the-world, any sincere espousal of solipsism is shown to involve what might be referred to as a phenomenological contradiction, where what one *claims* is at odds with how one *is*.⁸

Scepticism regarding *animal* minds, however, presents a different case. For whereas being-with is an essential feature of being-in-the-world, one shared by all Dasein, being-with animals is not. Therefore a sincere espousal of scepticism regarding animal minds need not involve a phenomenological contradiction. In many cases, no doubt, it does involve such a contradiction.⁹ Yet there is no good reason to suppose that it must do so. Consider, for example, Nicolas Malebranche. On the one hand, he championed the notion that animals were bereft of consciousness. On the other, his passion for vivisection suggests that it is at least possible that he was incapable of being 'with' animals in a Heideggerian sense, but really did relate to them as if to mere things. Malebranche, one might say, did not merely profess scepticism - his scepticism was an expression of his mode of being-in-the-world.

6. Dealing with the 'True Sceptic'

The phenomenological approach to the problem of animal minds is therefore undermined, to an extent, by the mere possibility of a 'true sceptic' regarding animal minds, one who is

⁸ 'Contradiction' might be too strong. What I mean is that the professed view is merely *at odds* with a faithful account of the speaker's being-in-the-world.

⁹ Consider, for example, the French poet Louis Racine, who managed to reconcile his fervent denial that animals had minds with a devotion to his pet dogs (Harrison 1992: 220). Or consider Descartes himself. Despite his sceptical attitude towards animal minds he owned a dog, Monsieur Grat, upon whom he apparently 'lavished much affection' (Harrison 1992: 220). One could also discern a phenomenological contradiction in the life of a professed sceptic regarding animal minds who enjoyed causing them to suffer.

‘with’ others and yet incapable of being ‘with’ animals. How, as a phenomenologist, is one to respond?

First, one might want to clarify how human animals are being distinguished from nonhuman ones. After all, it cannot simply be assumed that the true sceptic’s understanding of this distinction maps exactly onto ours. But let us assume for the sake of argument that it does. Let’s assume that if you are ‘with’ both humans and animals, the true sceptic is ‘with’ those beings you understand to be human and yet incapable of being ‘with’ those beings you refer to as animals.

But even if this is granted the phenomenologist should not, perhaps, be too perturbed by the mere possibility of the true sceptic. For any attempt to undermine the phenomenological rebuttal of scepticism regarding animal minds by referring to such a character can also be deployed against a phenomenological rebuttal of scepticism regarding other *human* minds.

Imagine an alien arriving for the first time on Earth. The alien qualifies as Dasein, and his being-in-the-world therefore takes the form of a being-with others. However, the ‘others’ here are, let us suppose, all non-human. He is ‘with’ his fellow aliens in a Heideggerian sense, but he is not ‘with’ any humans. (Perhaps he has internalised the position of an alien equivalent of Descartes, or maybe his interactions with humans have been limited to shopping malls and other places where human behaviour seems disturbingly mechanical and lifeless.) The upshot of this is that, just as Malebranche could both profess and live scepticism regarding animal minds, so the alien could both profess and live scepticism regarding human minds. In neither case is there a phenomenological contradiction.

7. Cruelty and the Animal’s Gaze

I have argued that the phenomenologist can go some way towards undercutting scepticism regarding animal minds. He can show that we (or most of us, at least) are ‘with’ animals, and by doing this he is able to undercut many espousals of scepticism regarding animal minds.

Yet the principal merit of the phenomenological approach is not exactly that it can undercut such scepticism by showing *that* we are ‘with’ animals. Its chief merit is that it can shed light on *how* precisely we are ‘with’ animals. For if it is granted that we can be ‘with’ animals, then it must also be granted that we can be ‘with’ them in a variety of ways. It is true that our being-with animals is expressed in our relations with our pets, for instance.¹⁰ Yet such observations, illustrated with tales of faithful dogs and the like, should not encourage one to conclude that being-with animals necessarily takes this form. For being-with is also the

¹⁰ Interestingly, both Glendinning and Brown illustrate what it might mean to be ‘with’ an animal by describing their relations with their pet dogs. I also found this a natural place to begin.

condition for the possibility of our feeling alienated from or hostile towards animals and, as such, is evident, not only in our warm relations with such creatures as pet dogs, but also, for instance, in our capacity (or the capacity of some of us) to mistreat animals.

This point is often overlooked. Caputo, for instance, is correct to note that a key mode of being-with is compassion, and we do indeed often understand animals' suffering (1993: 127).¹¹ But it is important not to romanticise our dealings with animals. After all, Caputo lives in the United States, not in the Spanish village of Coria in which a bull is ritually beaten, shot and stabbed to death, presumably as some form of enactment of the reality of human suffering (Ferry 1995: 43). This cruelty is also an expression – albeit a perverted one – of our being-with animals. It is possible precisely because we do *not* relate to the animal as a thing but are rather 'with' it in an existential being-with (Ferry 1995: 53).

Yet our being-with animals is evident not only in how we see them, but also in how, as it were, we feel their eyes upon us. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the existential significance of being seen by others, suggesting that the 'relation' 'Being-seen-by-the-Other' is integral to one's being-in-the-world (1991: 257). His argument is convoluted, and I will not explain it here. His conclusion, however, is that feelings such as shame and pride testify to our being-with others and thus undercut solipsism, for in such feelings one 'live[s]... the situation of being looked at' by the other (1991: 261).

Now Sartre, like Heidegger, does not countenance the possibility of a being-with animals, and this is reflected in his decision to focus on the feelings of shame and pride. After all, one can only feel ashamed or proud before another human (and, arguably, God). But there is no good reason to suppose that the others by whom one can be seen must all be human or divine. In the forest at night the feeling of being watched can be palpable. Yet here the gaze one feels is not human. One's being-with others takes the form of the primeval understanding between predator and prey (see further, Hatley 2004).

8. Snakes and Other Borderline Cases

Much, of course, remains to be said about how we can be 'with' animals. And much remains to be said about the animals we can be 'with'. In particular, there are problems of taxonomical class and species. I have argued that to reveal that we are 'with' certain mammals is at once to undercut (most) claims that *all* animals might be or are in fact without minds. Yet at first sight this might seem a very modest proposal. After all, very few people seriously doubt that there is something it is like to be a dog, say, or a bear. The important questions, surely, concern borderline cases. In this spirit, one can imagine a critic asking what the phenomenologist

¹¹ As they sometimes understand ours (see Glendinning 1998: 142).

might have to say about the mindedness of a snake, for instance. For there is some evidence to suggest that a boa constrictor, unlike us mammals, has not one integrated consciousness, but three independent ones, corresponding, roughly, to the senses of vision, taste and touch (Sjolander 1993: 3). It is certainly not clear that there is anything it is like to be such a creature.

The phenomenologist can accept that this constitutes a genuine problem, that it really is unclear whether there is anything it is like to be a snake. However – and this, I would suggest, is the important point – he need not accept the conventional account of *why* exactly this is a problem. On the standard account, the problem here is that one cannot, so to speak, get inside the head of a snake, so one can never be entirely sure that there is anything going on there. On the phenomenologist's account, by contrast, the problem is not that the mind of a snake (if such a thing exists) must be conceived as an entirely private arena and one that for us humans must remain radically unknowable. There is a problem determining whether a snake is minded because it is not clear that we can be 'with' a snake in a way that could undercut claims that the snake is not or might not be minded. This is not to say that it is unclear whether we might be able to 'get inside the head' of a snake – being-with an animal does not amount to this. Rather, it is to say that our relations with snakes are typically not marked by the shared pre-reflective understanding, the intertwining of bodily intentions and so on, that marks our relations with creatures such as dogs, and which makes scepticism regarding canine minds so problematic. So whereas my claim that my dog might be mindless involves a phenomenological contradiction, it is not clear that a similar contradiction is involved in my claim that there might be nothing it is like to be a snake.

But perhaps talk of what it might be like to be a snake is itself misplaced. For to say that there is nothing it is like to be a snake is not necessarily to deny that a snake might be, to adopt Heidegger's terminology, 'open' to the world in some way, and so not merely a mechanism (cf. Heidegger 1995: §§45-63). It is not clear that a snake must either be a minded being with its own subjective outlook on the world or else a mindless mechanism. Other, stranger options might be available.

I will not speculate further on this matter here. Yet even on the basis of this very brief discussion, it should be clear that speculations regarding animal minds raise a host of difficult questions for scientists and philosophers. They do not, however, raise one big problem, The Problem of Animal Minds, which must be solved before any such inquiries can get off the ground.

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