

Al Albergate

IS THERE AN EPISTEMOLOGY FOR ANIMALS? INTRODUCTION

My interest in animal thought has been stimulated by epistemological and ethical considerations, as well as my status as a pet-owner (not necessarily in that order). The popular interest, at least as portrayed in popular media, usually deals with the ethical aspect. Do animals have rights? That seems to be the question. Any further probing begs questions about what is the basis of an animal's rights. Some insightful stories, such as recently appeared in the *New York Times*¹, delve into the philosophical issues concerning animal suffering and cognition. The question of whether animals are even capable of suffering, in the same sense as we humans, is an old question going back at least to Descartes. Do they function at a conscious level that would warrant us to say that they experience pain and suffering?

Many pet owners would be tempted to call this a “no-brainer”. Our six-year-old pit bull, Terra, might be typical. If there is any doubt that a dog can at least appear to be depressed, just watch the obvious drop in Terra's mood when we pull out the suitcases in preparation for going on a trip; she knows from experience that it will mean that she either will be left alone in the house or with a stranger. There's also the obvious anxiety with which she greets each unhappy occasion for a bath. And then there's that look she gives me on walks when we reach a fork in the path. She stops, indicating she wants to go one way, but she knows from experience that I'll probably want to keep going straight. Terra gives me that look as if to say, “OK, your way or mine?” There's some kind of thought process going on here.

My purpose in this paper is to explore the epistemology of animal thinking, rather than the ethical consequences that flow from such arguments. I will argue for the view that animals, particularly the more intelligible mammals such as dogs, do experience cognitive states in which

they learn from experience, and develop some level of belief and knowledge. In order to back up my view on animal cognitive states I will draw both on my direct experiences with Terra and on the Master of Arts thesis presented successfully by Robert C. Jones here at California State University, Los Angeles, in 1998. Jones' approach is to challenge two philosophical positions, one about the standards necessary to have a belief, and, second, that animals lack conscious experience.

The major portion of my paper will deal with the question of whether there is any existing theory of knowledge to confirm my view. I will show that a good part of the historical reliabilism position produced by Alvin I. Goldman does appear to open the door to the idea that animals can have some level of justified beliefs. Saving the details for later, I will use Goldman's externalist views in that article, including that justification depends upon the reliability of those processes that produce beliefs, although at times the belief may be false; justification requires neither purposeful action nor conscious activity on some levels; and the thinker need not know that the belief is justified.

Next I will examine some of the strong arguments against the externalist point of view put forth by Keith Lehrer in "Externalism and Epistemology Naturalized." Lehrer draws a clear distinction between the acquiring of information as compared with justification. Unlike Goldman, he says we must be aware of the relationships by which we acquire information for it to amount to knowledge. I do not propose to overcome this hurdle, as the standards he sets for knowledge may just be too high for animals. Ironically, I did find a ray of hope for my view at the very end of another piece by Lehrer in his spirited defense of skepticism ("Why Not Skepticism?"). I found no hope for knowledge *per se* in the article, for Lehrer denies there is any. But at the very end, Lehrer says we don't really need knowledge in the way epistemologists

think of it. We humans function just fine with subjective probabilities based upon sense experience. By effectively denying knowledge to humans and animals, he's sort of put us in the same boat. I argue that he's given me an opening to strike a blow for animal cognition and beliefs possibly on his own terms.

ANIMAL COGNITION

Since I have already given several examples of what I take to be thinking by my dog, Terra, I want to briefly outline some important points in the M.A. thesis by Robert Jones.

Jones first challenges the argument of Donald Davidson that denies non-human animal thought. Davidson argued that thinkers must have a concept of objective truth, and that truth requires language. Since non-human animals lack language in the human sense, they lack thought.

First, Jones argues against the claim that it is necessary to have a concept of belief in order to have a belief, using the example of the dog chasing a cat up a tree. The dog thinks the cat went up one tree, however, the cat actually is in an adjacent tree. Davidson uses the coherentist argument that the dog can't have a belief about the tree without many general beliefs about trees. I think Jones correctly points out that although the dog may have a different concept about the tree than do humans, it does not mean the dog can't have any belief about the tree. The dog may not know what a tree is in the ordinary human sense, but it believes the animal object it was chasing ran up a vertical object with branches and leaves. I also like Jones' example of a child initially learning language. He questions how it is possible for the child to begin to think if it must already possess a web of belief as Davidson seems to insist.

Jones makes the point that much dog behavior is unintelligible without the assumption of beliefs and desires. For example, dogs can exhibit surprise such as when you play fetch with

their favorite ball and then trick them by pretending to throw, but hold onto the ball. The dog may turn around and look at you, as if to say “Well, where is it?” It seems that the dog had a belief based on past experience that a ball would appear from your arm when you make a throwing motion in that situation. Jones also challenges the notion only beings with language can have the concept of objective truth and, therefore, beliefs. He says that a type of communication does exist between animals and humans “and that the most plausible explanation for their behavior is the ascription of intentional states to them.”² He concludes that Davidson’s standards for thought are too stringent, and animals clearly do think.

Next Jones tackles the Carruthers argument that non-human animals suffer no pain because they lack conscious experience; animals can not reflect upon their thoughts. Jones brings up various examples to challenge the distinction between conscious and non-conscious experiences. Essentially, he says that an experience need not be thought about to count as consciousness. He concludes that section with a similarity argument to show that non-human animals have the requisite physiological structures to experience pain.

SUPPORT FROM EXTERNALISM

As for actual theories of knowledge, I find support for my views about the cognitive states of non-human animals in “What is Justified Belief?” by Alvin I. Goldman. This is at a point in his thinking, Goldman says, after he has switched to the position that justification on some account is necessary for knowing. Although he adds some conditions later in the paper, he states his basic proposal as:

“The justificational status of a belief is a function of the reliability of the process or processes that cause it, where (as a first approximation) reliability consists in the tendency of a process to produce beliefs that are true rather than false.”³

Earlier in the paper he had staked out his position as an externalist by comparing the latter with internalist views. Justification on the internalist account consists in an argument, defense or set of reasons that can be given in support of a belief. The thinker knows what is justified, knows what the justification is, and can explain that justification. I am pretty sure my dog, Terra, can't qualify for knowledge on that account. After all this requires not only a great deal of awareness about her own thinking processes, but a human-like ability to communicate that awareness.

But Goldman gives us hope on the externalist version he is building in this article because he makes none of the above assumptions. He leaves an open question as to whether, when a belief is justified, that the believer knows it is justified. Also left as an open question is whether the believer can give or state a justification for it. Goldman does not even assume that when there is justification, the believer actually possesses something that can be called justification. But he does have positive standards.

"I do assume that a justified belief gets its status of being justified from some processes or properties that make it justified."⁴ But he does not require the believer to possess any argument or reason at the time of belief. Terra and her fellow dogs definitely possess a learning process from past perceptions stored away in memories, which they communicate through behavior. Fortunately, by the above definition she need not argue her case, or write a philosophy paper about it.

As Goldman continues to build his argument he requires that the belief-forming process be reliable, but it's OK with him if it sometimes makes errors. If the process is mostly reliable, it still confers justification. Tendency is the key word. He wants to capture the ordinary conception of justification, and since that is vague, he accepts vagueness. I'm not sure whether

this further opens a loophole for non-humans, but it certainly holds out more hope for we humans who would like to believe we have knowledge.

What is important to Goldman is the process which produces the beliefs, regardless of whether the knower is conscious of or remembers the process. The process provides the justification. The processes involve perception, remembering, good reasoning and introspection. And animals, such as dogs, exhibit at least two of these: perception and memory.

I believe Goldman provides further hope for justification in animals when he talks about the cognitive processes. He limits belief-forming processes to events within the organism's nervous system. Justifiedness seems to be how a cognizer deals with environmental input. He requires the process to be good or successful, yet he says it doesn't require purposeful action or conscious activity. Humans and non-humans still seem to be in the ballpark for knowledge here. Goldman further loosens the requirement when he states that the knower need not have access to her justification. One can know without knowing why, such as when someone has forgotten the original evidence supporting the belief.

This seems to be about as far as I can utilize Goldman's historical reliabilism to support the idea that animals have justified beliefs, i.e. knowledge. I must stop at that point near the end of the article where he makes some final adjustments (models 10 & 11) in his definition. It is where he talks about potential cognitive processes, and *ex post and ex ante* justifiedness, that Terra and I should get off the train. I know that those concepts are beyond the limit of what I'm willing to attribute to Terra. Overall, I'm satisfied that Goldman has given me enough to support my thesis. I can't say the same for Lehrer.

A STRONG CRITIQUE OF EXTERNALISM

In “Externalism and Epistemology Naturalized” Keith Lehrer basically rejects many aspects of externalism, both those that require justification, such as Goldman above, and those that do not. Since I used Goldman to defend my position, I will mention only Lehrer’s points that are directly relevant.

His main thesis is that externalism explains the collection of information, but without knowledge. This is the common defect in externalism. “Any purely externalist account faces the fundamental objection that a person totally ignorant of the external factors connecting her belief with truth, might be ignorant of the truth of her belief as a result.”⁵ This points to a stricter standard than Goldman’s; he seemed to prefer reliability with a dash of vagueness.

Lehrer says the attraction of externalist theories stems from their naturalism. They attribute the assimilation of knowledge to natural causal relationships between objects. This sounds very dog-like up until this point. This may suffice for recording information, but lacks the necessary background information for knowledge, he contends. If we are ignorant of the relationship, we lack knowledge. Additional information about the existence of such relationships is what is needed to convert the information into knowledge. And this additional information is exactly the sort required for coherence and complete justification.

Lehrer resorts to two examples, Mr. Truetemp and the thermometer at the gas station. His point is that in both cases correct information can be recorded, but the knower does not know whether it’s accurate. She doesn’t even know if the belief-forming process is reliable. Collecting information and knowledge are not the same. He requires higher-order beliefs about our beliefs; the latter beliefs relating to the truth connection between what we accept and the truth of what we accept. Such beliefs are necessary for knowledge.

It's clear that Lehrer has raised the standard for knowledge, both for humans and non-humans. But is his standard for knowledge too high? Certainly consciousness of the belief-forming relationships and the truth of the knowledge we possess is important. In that sense, Goldman's historical reliability seems a little loose. On the other hand, I think Goldman's view more closely mirrors how humans (and non-humans) actually operate, and that's what he intended. We are not infallible; we make mistakes. But we get by each day on the tendencies of our belief-forming processes to give us correct information most of the time. And this brings me to Lehrer's article "Why Not Skepticism?"

TERRA THE SKEPTIC?

In the second article he argues forcefully that we don't have knowledge under any theory. I am more interested in the concluding section where he suggests that we really do not need knowledge. We just need to assign probability on the basis of sense experience. Instead of knowledge we can have a kind of subjective certainty that he analogizes to betting preferences. "Thus, we may, while remaining skeptics, contend that our beliefs and actions are rational even though we agree that such beliefs are not so completely justified as to constitute knowledge."⁶

Although Lehrer probably wouldn't agree, this sounds similar to the kind of knowledge Goldman said we can have based on the tendencies of our belief-forming systems to give us good information. It also seems to possibly level the playing field on which we compare humans to non-humans in epistemological terms. I do not mean to say that we are equal. It just seems to draw us closer together in some ways. Neither can have knowledge, but both can acquire information through the senses and take actions that help us to survive each day.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons I stated in the section on externalism, I believe Terra and other non-human mammals of the highest intelligence do experience cognitive states, beliefs and knowledge up to certain levels. I do not believe these non-humans have knowledge by Lehrer's standards because they are not capable of the higher-order beliefs required by him. On the other hand, Lehrer's defense of skepticism seems to open another possibility for explaining how animals operate cognitively and significantly, even if we don't want to call it knowledge.

NOTES

1. Michael Pollen, "An Animal's Place," *New York Times*, 11-10-02, 58.
2. Robert C. Jones, *Thought, Language, and Sentience: The Moral Implications For Nonhuman Animals* (Los Angeles: California State University, Los Angeles, 1998) 35.
3. Alvin I. Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?" *Justification and Knowledge*, Ed. G.S. Pappas (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Co., 1979) 10.
4. *Ibid.*, 2.
5. Keith Lehrer, "Externalism and Epistemology Naturalized," *A Theory of Knowledge* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990) 162.
6. Keith Lehrer, "Why Not Skepticism?" *The Philosophical Forum* 2.3 (1971), 298.

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