Indian Philosophical Quarterly Vol. XVI, No. 4.
October 1989

THE MORALITY OF ANIMALS

The idea that of all living creatures man alone has morality is quite widespread in the philosophical tradition. Although we sometimes describe animal behaviour by using expressions which suggest moral qualities (for example, we often speak of dog as a 'faithful' animal, horse as a 'noble' animal, and so on), no serious view is usually entertained with regard to the question of the morality of animals. The present paper attempts to find out whether we are justified in drawing a sharp distinction between men and animals other than men, so far as moral behaviour is concerned.

In the very beginning let me make a cautionary remark about the exact scope of this paper. The present paper will try to explore the issues relating to the morality of animals; it will not be concerned with the question of morality *towards* animals, the question as to whether or not we behave morally with animals. The second question is distinct from the former, although both the questions have to deal with some common issues, say, the senitivity of animals to pain and suffering

Do not animals ever behave in such ways as would suggest morality on their part ? Indeed, many of us would agree that many animals do behave in ways that tends to suggest morality in the sense that similar behaviour on the part of human beings would be explained in moral language. Thus, we would readily agree that many animals show love towards one another, care

Received : 20-11-88

for their young, have respect for figures of authority, refuse to fight if the opponent has submitted, and so on. The present paper does not, by any means, claim that *all* kinds of animals behave morally. My contention in this paper is that the behaviour of *many* animals can, indeed, be said to be approaching moral behaviour in many respects, and that the morality of mankind might very well have its roots in certain basic responses of loyalty, mercy, affection, self–sacrifice etc., as can be found in animals.

Studies in animal behaviour have received a renewed vigour ever since Darwinism became popular. Yet, the idea that morality is something which we possibly share with animals is vehemently rejected. We take pride in thinking that we are radically different from animals so far as morality is concerned, that morality is something that characterizes human behaviour alone. We tend to think of animals as entirely 'animal', and in common parlance animal behaviour is referred to as either lustful or violent or brutal or blindly affectionate. Indeed, there is a strong tendency to describe whatever falls short of human worth as animal–like. Common talk is studded with expressions like 'brutal murder', 'beastly behaviour', 'animal pleasures' etc.

One of the reasons for refusing to consider animals as moral beings is the strong belief in the time–honoured distinction between intelligence and instinct. Animals, it is believed, are moved not by intelligence, but by instinct. If any behaviour on the part of an animal appears as intelligent, it is interpreted as wholly instinctual. The animal, it is believed, follows its instinct, although to us it appears as intelligent. Thus, a rigid distinction is drawn between instinct and intelligence. But can intelligence be sharply distinguished from instinct ? The abilities of intelligence need a strong foundation for their development, and this foundation is

provided by the instinctual apparatus. As Stephen Clark rightly points out :

> We are very fortunate that we do not have to invent the notion of a language for ourselves, and could not possibly acquire the ability to speak a particular mother–tongue without an innate ability to pick out certain sorts of patterns from the sounds that surround us.[1]

The common innate endowment does not, however, rule out different individuals.

It is believed that if an animal trying to solve a problem fails to solve it, it tries the problem again or acts in a confused manner or resorts to random activities This confused behaviour in the event of failure is said to indicate a lack of intelligence. But confusion need not necessarily be a sign of lack of intelligence. On the contrary, such confused behaviour seems to suggest that the animal is desperately trying to find out a solution to the problem. Human beings, too, may resort to trial and error techniques when they fail to solve a problem. (This is not to deny that they try other techniques as well.) Studies in animal learning suggest that some animals do have the capacity to work in more or less novel ways. Consider the case of the macaque who was able to separate wheat from sand by throwing handfuls of the mixture into the sea. By no means can this process of separating one ingredient of a mixture from the other be taken as an instance of a 'blind', 'instinctual', 'merely animal' act. It seems that some animals do find out new ways of solving puzzles even if the various patterns with which they are familiar determine the field of their choice.[2] The idea that no animals are intelligent, that they are moved by instinct alone, does not appear to be a sound one.

We have just now seen that we are apt to regard trial-and-error behaviour on the part of animals as ' blind ', ' random ' or ' confused ', although similar-trial-anderror behaviour on the part of human beings is not condemned as stupid or as foolish. Something similar happens when we talk of desires and beliefs. A male robin who prefers attacking a red feather to a camouflaged rival robin is considered to be stupid, but if a human being prefers an appropriate picture to a present person about whose character he is in the dark, his behaviour is not supposed to be blind or mechanical[3]. Moreover, there is a distinction between evolutionary function and individual goal. If the robin only wants to drive off an intruder, then his attack on the red feather proves to be futile; but what have we got to say if the red colour itself irritates him ? Similarly, the use of contraceptives is an individual goal that serves no purpose in the evolutionary process, but the use of contraceptives is never considered to be a proof of human stupidity. The question whether animals do or do not have beliefs is a rather complex one. There are many of us who would outright refuse to admit that animals have ' belief '. But in common talk we do refer to animals as having beliefs : thus, we say that a dog believes that the master is at the door, or that there is a stranger outside. We human beings, too, believe many things even if we do not speak about them. Then there are beliefs which are beliefs in a very strict sense, and which men alone are said to have. These are beliefs in the sense of an attitude of commitment to the contents of beliefs. It is this kind of belief that animals are said to lack, for if an animal cannot articulate a certain belief, how could it possibly have an attitude towards it ? (Infants, too, would be classed with the animals in this respect.) But is this attitude of commitment to the content of beliefs so universal as to be classed as distinctively human ? What about the Pyrrhonian sceptics who refused to commit themselves to any thing ? Moreover, it is not so obvious whether

people generally believe that what they believe is true. Consciously committing ourselves to something which follows from what we believe is too sophisticated a social custom to be labelled as universal.[4]

What about communication on the part of animals ? It seems to be too rash to conclude that just because animals do not have verbal language, they are incapable of communicating to each other. Human infants can communicate their problems long before they can use verbal language properly. Animals like chimpanzees are found to communicate with each other in various ways: they often deceive and entrap their prey. It is true that such behaviour merely amounts to a communication about their own moods, say, a threat or an invitation, and not to any statement about the world. Talk about things of the world is too complex an activity to be carried on by animals, or for that matter, human infants, who do not use verbal language. But there are countless moments in the lives of human beings when they are not worried about stating facts, moments when they are far from being considered as lacking in consciousness, intentional activity and the like[5]. One thing that seems to be lacking in animal communication is a common code, but even in this respect there is an exception: the ' language ' of bees. [6] The well–known dance of the bees upon the face of the honeycomb strongly suggests a similarity with human communication, although one should add that communication on the part of bees is over a restricted range of acts and objects.

Can animals communicate about communication ? Some studies[7] suggest that they do. Some animals are capable of signalling about signals, that is to say, they use signals, but they make others understand that the signals are meant in play and not to be taken seriously. It seems that it is this kind of ' meta-communication ' that contains the roots of our ability to understand the

different meanings of the same object which again involves seeing the object in its conext. Understanding the meaning of any expression apart from the context, that is to say, understanding things in the abstract, proves to be difficult not only for animals but also for men. Difficult though it may be, evidence clearly suggests that animals can abstract in various situations, they show a readiness to form and respond to a particular pattern in the midst of many quickly changing shapes.[8] Some animals can generalize with regard to their expectation of reward or punishment. Rats in a laboratory, for example, can generalize from sight of a horizontal bar to a horizontal row of dots or squares.

It is sometimes said that animals are not moral beings because they do not have self-awareness. Animals, it is believed, do not have a concept of themselves because they cannot talk. But is linguistic ability necessary for forming a concept of oneself as a being in the world ? Human infants, like non-human animals, do not use verbal language, but that does not prevent them from being able to recognize similarity of colours, shapes, smells etc., identity of persons, cause of distress and the like. In other words, they show themselves to be capable of classifying things, although they are incapable of giving names to them. Similarly, lack of linguistic ability need not prevent animals from having a 'pre-verbal' concept of themselves. As Clark so aptly puts it :

> Having a concept and being able to consider it are different things. I may have the concept of redness long before I can talk about redness or relate it to a general theory of perception. I may use the concept of moral accountability long before I can consider what such a thing mignt be.[9]

A close study of animal behaviour suggests tnat animals, mobile creatures as they are, show themselves to be capable of distinguishing in practice, between the world through which their movements take place and their own selves that move through

it. They can re-identify places and things; they can also identify other animals. A recent work on animal behaviour shows that mother vervet monkeys can not only identify the cry of their own offspring, but can also recognize whose offspring (other than their own) is crying, and often try to find out the mother of the crying baby monkey.[10]

The capacity of an animal to distinguish himself from others also finds expression in territorial behaviour. Many animals are very territorial in so far as they lay claim upon a certain area and defend it against rival claimants. This territorial behaviour contains the roots of the consciousness of the rights of possession. Animals intruding upon others' territories do not fight as well as the possessors and are easily discouraged.

It might be said that self-awareness on the part of animals is doubtful in so far as they cannot acknowledge past actions as their own or plan their future. But can it be said that *all* human beings are capable of connecting the past with the present ? We do often doubt our past actions and find it hard to recognize our previous self. Planning of long-term future actions is also not true of all human beings, and even if planning of future actions is quite common, it seems to be more due to social conditioning rather than to anything inherent in human nature. [11] Are all non-human animals incapable of acknowledging their past actions ? An Ameslan gorilla called Koko is said to have expressed regret for biting her teacher three days ago.[12] Another case is that of Toto, a gorilla, who, too, regretted for having broken her owner's wrists.[13] Then, what about the planning of future ? Is animal behaviour marked by its total absence ? It seems not, though impossible it might sound to some ears. It is true that long-term future plans are difficult to be found among non-human animals, but it cannot be said that prefernce to future goals is completely unknown to them. Animals who live

in a changing environment do not always behave in stereotyped ways; they sometimes deviate from the routine behaviour and act in such a way that they would benefit in future. So it seems plausible to maintain that they take note of changes and try to learn from them.[14]

Can non–human animals be said to distinguish between what is good for them and what is good for others ? In other words, is it possible for them to be egoists or altruists ? But first of all, let us make it clear whether any animal, human or non–human, can be said to be capable of ' genuine ' altruistic behaviour. Many biologists would make us believe that behaviour which we commonly consider to be altruistic, as promoting the good of another being, even at one's own cost, is not ' genuinely ' altruistic, because to be a ' genuine ' altruist is to act in such a way as to have the consequence of diminishing one's genetic fitness. This means that if anyone is a ' genuine ' altruist, he is diminishing the chances of there being 'genuine ' altruists in the next generation. Judged from this point of view, neither parental care, nor concern for siblings or cousins would be considered to be an act of ' genuine ' altruism. But if ' genuine ' altruism is so rare, ' genuine ' egoism too would be rare, because a ' genuine ' egoist would be one who prefers his individual good at the cost of his own genetic fitness. So the truth rather seems to be that showing concern for one's own good is not a simple attitude but one that requires considerable sophistication. What is good for me depends on my needs and wants, and I may actually need and want happy companions and friends. So the biological argument we have just considered should be interpreted as suggesting that we have the needs and habits that we have because in the past such needs and habits made our ancestors act in such a way that (in that situation) they succeeded in leaving in leaving more descendants than those who did not act in that way.[15]

There is no doubt that many non–human animals behave in such a way as to earn themselves the label of 'altruists.' Many animals defend and rescue young who are not their own; some again may adopt orphans. Dolphins and elephants help and rescue adult members of their own species. Some wild dogs are reported to have fed sick and injured adults. Again, there are some activities which seem to benefit not the agents but others. The mother bird who gives warning cries and thus diverts predators from her brood is running a risk. Finding new homes or sources of food also involve taking risks. But however altruistic these activities might appear to be, it is doubtful whether these altruistic activities are consciously aimed at, that is to say, whether they are acting with any view to helping others. So how do we explain this 'altruistic' animal behaviour? Could it be that the animal's awareness, things they are capable of attending to, and the manner in which they are capable of reacting — all had something to contribute to such altruistic behaviour? Sensitivity to the sufferings of fellow members of the same species is something that has a wide range, being negligible in some species, while quite strong in some others. Some social species of animals might have that sensitivity to such an extent that it quickly paves the way for a drastic action. The above examples of animal altruism are not induced by example, precept or training. Nor are they backed up by conscious calculation. Giving warning cries or rescuing a fellow sufferer seem to be due to adaptation. So such altruistic behaviour seems to have, on the whole, a selective advantage. In other words, from the evolutionary point of view it 'pays' to be such an altruist.[16]

What light does caring for the young, on the part of animals, throw on their morality? It may be noted at the outset that caring for the young does not mean caring for one's own offspring alone. Like human beings, non-human animals too care

for others' offsprings. Many barren female animals have been found to shower maternal love upon foster children. We have already mentioned that babysitting is not uncommon among many animals. Among birds, caring for the young is carried on by both male and female partners. (Among sparrows even incubating the eggs is done by the male parent.) Among many fishes, the male parent takes charge of the eggs after they have been fertilized. Soon after fertilzation has taken place he drives away the female so that she may not eat up the fertilized eggs. The father protects the eggs from any possible intrusion. Some of them even build a kind of protecting nest around the eggs and some others again carry the developing eggs in their mouths or in abdominal folds.[17] Among higher mammals, however, it is the female who is more adapted to the nurture of the young. Sometimes there is a rivalry to get hold of a young animal, a fact which suggests that animals do not find caring for the young to be a function forced on them; rather, caring for the young seems to be something they are very much inclined to do. Caring for the young of other animals is carried on not only by females but also by males. Among some apes, baboons and monkeys, this is quite common. It should be noted, however, that this kind of caring, on the part of males, generally takes the form of protection rather than nurture.

So much for altruistic behaviour on the part of non-human animals. We may now turn to the question of privacy in the animal world. Can we speak of desire, or for that matter, respect for privacy, among animals other than human beings ? Could it be that man 's reaction to any invasion on his privacy is not peculiar to him alone, but has its origins in the biological processes of all life ? Alan F. Westin [18] , for example, has pointed out that man's desire for privacy does not seem to be distinctively human, but may be rooted in his animal origins. Various studies [19]

in animal behaviour suggest that desire for privacy, be it in the form of periodic individual isolation or in the form of intimacy between a few individuals, is widespread in the animal kingdom. In the animal world this desire for privacy often takes the form of what has been described as the tendency towards territoriality, whereby an animal lays claim to a particular area and tries to defend that area against possible intrusion. Scientists have found that the territorial patterns serve to ensure propagation of the species by regulating density to available resources. Birds like herring gulls, herons and cormorants nest closer together when the nearby sea offers lots of fish. They nest farther apart when fish available is comparatively less in amount. Songbirds. like robins, are famous for marking out their territories during the breeding season. Defending the territories is a task usually carried out by the males, but sometimes even the females may defend the boundaries. As Brown and Herrnstein so aptly put it :

> This does not mean that the birds must steadily patrol their frontiers and spend a lot of time fighting off invasions. Instead, birdsong, which carries no intrinsic threat, is recognized within a species as a signal of space already taken. Birdsong generally coincides with sunrise, not so much because birds are happy to see the sun again, though perhaps they are, but primarily because the recurrent event makes possible a definite limited time during which to warn off potential invaders.[20]

The territorial patterns of animals enrich individual well–being and the intimacy of small groups. As in men, so in non–human animals, one often finds different mechanisms for setting distances between different individuals in a group. Edward Hall[21] has shown how the setting of different kinds of distances are at work both in the animal and in the human world. ' Personal distance ' is said to be the distance that is commonly adopted between one

individual animal and another; a familiar example of this is the spacing of birds on a telephone wire. ' Intimate distance ' is said to be the space held between mates or between parents and their young, significant examples of which can be found among birds and apes. By ' social distance ' is meant that distance which separates different members of a group from one another in virtue of the different roles that they occupy. A minimum need for private space is essential for an animal 's survival. If the animal's ability to smell, court etc. are hindered by overcrowding, they might react in various ways to reduce the overcrowding. They might kill each other or commit suicides, as found with rabbits and lemmings.[22] These studies suggest that non-human animals safeguard their privacy in different ways.

Let us now try to bring the threads of our previous discussion together and consider in what sense we can speak of animal behaviour as moral. Many non-human animals, as we have seen, do behave in ways that suggest morality in the sense that had human beings behaved in that way, that behaviour would have been explained in moral language. The points we have discussed about animal intelligence, communication, self-awareness, altruistic behaviour, privacy etc. suggest that non-human animals tend to react to different situations in much the same way as morally good human beings would. But there seems to be a difference between ' moral ' behaviour on the part of non-human animals, and ' moral ' behaviour on the part of human beings. The difference is that non-human animals do not draw out any principles of action from their own actions. They can hardly be said to moralize about themselves, or to be capable of constructing an elaborate system of moral concepts. But this inability to work out a conceptual framework of moral behaviour does not mean that they are incapable of responding morally to different situations. The ability to *conceptualize* morally is distinct from

the ability to *respond* morally, and a lack of the former does not imply a lack of the latter. If non-human animals care for their own offsprings as well as for the offsprings of others, have respect for figures of authority, safeguard their own privacy, refuse to fight if the opponent submits, and so on, it cannot plausibly be maintained that moral behaviour is completely unknown to them.

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NOTES

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5. Clark, *op. cit*, p. 27.
6. M. Lindauer; *Communication Among Social Bees* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).
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9. Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
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12. *New Scientist*, (30th June, 1977).

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15. *Ibid*, p. 58.

16. Mary Midgley; *Beast and Man* (Methuen, London, 1980), p. 134.

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20. Roger Brown and Richard J. Herrnstein, *Psychology* (Methuen, London, 1975) pp. 225–226.

21. E. Hall, *op. cit.*, pp. 13–37, 39–70, 120.

22. *Ibid*, p. 17.