Elisa Aaltola

PhD, works as a senior research fellow in philosophy at the University of Eastern Finland. She has published five books, and altogether around 80 papers/essays, on animals and philosophy, and is currently working on a book titled “Ineffable Animals”.
Introduction

Propositional language – language consisting of words and syntax – has been repeatedly used to mark the boundary between human and non-human animals. It often stands as the dividing factor that determines who is to be acknowledged, related to, or seen as a creature of moral significance.

First, propositional language has been posited as a way of knowing the world, an epistemology, via which non-human creatures are to be perceived. Indeed, with the linguistic turn that coloured much of the 20th century, it became the only way of knowing the world. Following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s early philosophy, in which it was famously suggested that language forms the limits of our world, and thus constitutes mentation and understanding, a frequently encountered ethos has stipulated that minds are founded upon layers of language. Concepts and their relations form minds, and are the only way in which we can fathom reality: to form an understanding, even to be capable of perception, requires the presence of language. Following suit, other beings have to conform to the contours of language in order to be recognized, even to be “real”. It is therefore via language that more-than-human animals are also made sense of: they must be lingually explicable, and made to fit into the often narrow ramifications of conceptual sense-making. It is against this background that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s exceedingly famous line “If a lion could speak, we would not understand him,” from Philosophical Investigations is often repeated.

Second, language has been positioned as a way of being in the world, an ontology, which sets humans apart from other animals. If indeed language acts as the basis for a mind, then those creatures incapable of entering into its sphere and of making sense of the world via words and syntax, are mindless. They have no intentions, no beliefs, and it is like nothing to be them. Their world is that of biomechanical processes preconfigured by millions of years of evolutionary tumult. It is here that anthropocentrism with its strident declarations of dualism has its roots: only those beings capable of propositional language have minds and are active subjects, whereas all other creatures fall into the category of passive objects. The former are declared persons endowed with inherent value, and the latter are emphatically portrayed as instinctual, biological matter determined by instrumental value. Of course, concessions have been made: perhaps the more human-like non-lingual beings can feel pain and experience rudimentary emotional states, and perhaps the elite amongst them, so designated by human beings (dogs and pandas, cats and elephants) are beings worthy of affection and protection. However, the potentiality, lingering within these concessions, to threaten the dichotomies that divide humans from other animals on a more general level is willingly ignored. A type of fervent state of collective self-denial, within which humans seek to not know that which they do know (that with pain and rudimentary emotions comes consciousness and therefore a mind, and that our capacity for affection toward dogs and pandas could just as easily be extended to pigs and chicken) maintains a firm hold, and tightens its tentacles whenever uncomfortable questions are raised.

Language as an ontology

Rene Descartes is the infamous originator not only of modern philosophy, but also of modern-era dualism. He posited that only humans are rational beings, because only their “movement” (behaviour, actions) can follow a “will” – the rest of the animal world moves according to a will that is pre-set by higher powers, and their behaviour is thus purely mechanical, automated, predetermined. Thus, the world fell into subjects and objects; active agents capable of reasoned will, on the one hand, and passive biomechanisms blindly following their innate pre-configurations, on the other.

Here, language played a pivotal part. As Descartes, in his seminal work On Method, sought to justify the belief that non-human animals are mindless creatures lacking the minutest shadow of consciousness, he referred to the absence of propositional language as a sure proof. Descartes triumphantly asserted that: “For it is highly deserving of remark, that there are no men so dull and stupid, not even idiots, as to be incapable of joining together different words, and thereby constructing a declaration by which to make their thoughts understood; and that on the other hand, there is no other animal, however perfect or happily circumstanced, which can do the like (…) And this proves not only that brutes have less reason than man, but that they have none at all,” (Descartes 2008, p. 45). It is on these grounds that Descartes made his notorious correlation between animals and mechanisms. He proclaimed: “ Doubtless when the swallows come in spring, they operate like clocks. The actions of honeybees are of the same nature, and the discipline of cranes in flight, and of apes in fighting,” (Descartes 1991, p. 304) before continuing: “It is more probable that worms, flies, caterpillars and other animals move like machines than that they all have immortal souls.” Indeed, for Descartes, animals were “automata” (Descartes 1991, p. 366).
Thus, within the Cartesian tradition, which still lingers all around us, language is made into an integral ingredient of reason, an entity that defines our mindedness, and ultimately our being. It emerges as an ontological element that constitutes the perceived human "essence", and the lack of which constitutes non-human animality. In sum, its presence or absence moulks and dictates the ontology of biological beings, and creates an un-crossable gulf between humans and other animals. Later on, Immanuel Kant, with his emphasis on rational autonomy, added to this the notion of inherent value. The capacity to follow autonomous reason, made possible in part by propositional language, was the glowing fibre from which the value of individuals is formed: only the autonomous could be "ends in themselves", whereas all others were consigned to the category of "means to an end". From this there surfaced the idea of the inherent value of human beings, and the instrumental value of non-human animals: the former were invested with moral and legal rights, whereas the latter were largely perceived as creatures to be utilized for human purposes, at best gaining the protection of minimal benevolence.

This belief in the primacy of language, and its intricate entwine-ment with both mindedness and moral value, was given a momentous push by the linguistic turn that was to define the 20th century. If language really does form the limits of our world, for those without language, there is no world. These creatures do not feel or intuit, believe or intend, and they ultimately lack the very factor, qualia, of which consciousness is formed, and which render it possible for us to say that it is like something for a human being to exist, to walk, to think, to love. It is on this basis that the end of 20th century still saw many notable philosophers doubting or denying the existence of animal minds (see for instance Donaldson 1985; Carruthers 1992). Although not all the skeptics are Wittgensteinians per se, they are influenced by the continuous accentuation of language to the point of being unable to perceive any mentation outside the use of propositionally positioned concepts.

The most common argument rests on the notion of second-order beliefs: for a being to believe that, say, it is raining, she must be able to step out of the first-order level of apparent experience to the second-order level of reflective analysis, by establishing whether she intuits, infers, or, for instance, senses that it is rain-ing. This, again, requires her to entertain the actual sentence "it is raining", for it appears – or so it is claimed – impossible to go above the first-order level without this being formed into a sentence. Moreover, to ascertain what their knowledge consists of, beings must, of course, have concepts such as "intuit", "infer", and "sense". In short, then, there is no actual (only an apparent) first-order level without the second-order level; no mentation without lingual analysis concerning that mentation. In the absence of language, dogs and chicken could not, therefore, have any inkling of whether or not it is raining. (Carruthers 1992 )
Nor indeed whether sunlight is striking their skin, whether they are hungry or eating, whether they feel apprehension or joy, whether their hooves or paws are touching wet grass, or whether they exist. Language, therefore, is seen as constituting minds: concepts and combinations of them form not only our thoughts, but also our experiences. Outside the borders of language there exists no mentation, no cognition. Even those who are otherwise keen to question humanistic notions, and in particular to erode the Cartesian dualism that divides "subjects" and "objects", have been remarkably keen to embrace language as the dividing line between humans and other animals. For instance, Martin Heidegger, who sought to stridently question the Cartesian tradition, insisted that, due to their lack of language, non-human animals could only be "poor" in the world – in fact, because of language, there is an "abyss" between humans and other animals (Heidegger 1995; 1998). This tendency comes with moral underpinnings. Following the same ethos, Emmanuel Levinas, who valiantly brought non-lingual encounters with "otherness" to the fore, quite peculiarly argued that, as non-lingual beings, other animals cannot be legitimate "others". Levinas's ethics stems from meeting others "naked", outside lingually constructed, pre-determined meanings (which for him constitute forms of "totalitarianism"), in moments at which one's constant flow of egoist intentions is suddenly interrupted by the bare, raw existence of another being, and at which one unexpectedly recognizes that the other has a "face" (Levinas 1969). In less vague terms, ethics thus stems from meeting others outside of language and culturally pre-fixed stereotypes, in encounters that allow us to see beyond them, and to perceive others as individuals, who are violated rather than explained by these stereotypes. However, according to Levinas, we cannot meet a horse or a lizard on a similar footing, because they do not speak in utterances.

Inexplicably, then, the very philosophy that sought to question the validity of humanistic language ends up re-establishing it as the factor that divides human and non-human. Hence, it has been suggested that continental and post-structural thinking, even when ferociously keen to eradicate dualistic tenets, often reiterates those very tenets in the context of more-than-human animals (Wolfe 2003; Calarco 2008). The animal must remain separate, in her own category, far removed from humanity, and indeed far removed from moral concern.

Of course, this ontological emphasis on language faces insurmountable problems. In regard to second-order thinking, the obvious conundrum is: there is no second order without the first order. Without experience on the first-order level, there is nothing with which to reflectively analyse, nothing to which to ascribe the terms "intuit" or "refer". That is, the second-order level does not legitimize or bring into the existence the first-order level — rather, the first-order level holds primacy, stands firm as the ground of mentation, whether or not second, third or tenth-level analyses are ever constructed on the basis of it . Put simply: we can reflect on whether we "believe" or "know" that it is raining only because we have the experience of rain, and the latter exists independently of the former. The question that thus arises is, why ought one to step onto the second-order level? Why would reason and will, let alone experience, of necessity require propositional language?
The possibility of pre-lingual and non-lingual mindedness is all too often sidelined. What it is to be a sensuous, perceiving, intending, intuiting, grasping being on the level of immediacy (the felt, lived “now”), is something that constantly eludes many standard definitions of cognition and mentation. Could mentation not consist of the swirling, pulsing immediacy of the first-order level? Indeed, is the insistence on language not, in itself, revealing – does it not point toward a discomfort about facing immediacy and the animal way of being? Could it be that the question of immediacy, the notion of mentation that flows in sheer, raw immanence, is itself not only uncomfortable, but frightening? Perhaps the emphasis on propositional language ultimately lends a sense of safety, a sense of existence above that which can, in its ability to engulf us in the realm of contiguity and ambivalence (the lived “now” is never logically ordered, nor mathematically controllable), be nothing short of dazzling, bewildering, seemingly risky and ultimately intimidating. A sense of false security – a security that disconnects us from ourselves, and enables “humans” to deny their own “animal” nature. (See Forkasiewicz 2012)

This talk of immediacy is not just theoretical. Advances in cognitive ethology, on the one hand, and in psychology, on the other, have revealed that a significant part of mentation takes place beyond, below, or above language. Intuiting, intending and feeling can all be pre-lingual and non-lingual. They linger in immanence, something that language may affect, but which it does not constitute. Rationality understood as goal-orientated planning on the basis of inference, is also available to non-lingual beings. Even concepts and beliefs are possible without the use of propositional language – they too can reside in immediacy, and can be based on visual associations and memory connotations rather than on sentences. Communication, too, can take place – in a stunningly nuanced, complex manner – outside of propositional language. Most certainly, the key ingredient of mindedness – consciousness – is found in a spectacular variety of non-human, non-lingual beings. (See for instance Dawkins 1998; Rogers 1997; Bekoff 2002) The linguistic turn, with its eagerness to push language forward as the essential and necessary constituent of a mind, is therefore profoundly mistaken – as was Descartes. Language does not constitute our world. There is a world before and beyond language, and a mind capable of grasping it without resort to propositionality.

It is therefore not surprising that studies show how a plethora of non-human animals, ranging from fish to birds and mammals, and probably far beyond, are minded beings, who can act intentionally, intuitively and rationally, host an astounding variety of emotions, and construct concepts and beliefs. (Ibid.) Of course, this is not a novel suggestion. For millennia, those, who have lived in relation to non-human animals, have known that they have minds: that it is like something to be a squirrel or a seagull. This has also been evident to many philosophers. The famous empiricist David Hume argued, contra Descartes, that the minds of other animals are plain to see – indeed so plain that when recognition of this is lacking, something must be wrong with our own minds. Hume states succinctly: “Next to the ridicule of denying an evident truth, is that of taking much pains to defend it; and no truth appears to me more evident, than that beasts are endow’d with thought and reason as well as men. The arguments are in this case so obvious, that they never escape the most stupid and ignorant,” (Hume 1969, III xvi). The core ingredient of dualism – denial of animal minds on the basis of language – is thus foundationally faulty.

Most importantly, more-than-human animals do have languages – even if their languages do not take on a propositional form. They continually communicate their emotions and intentions, their fears, their love, their beliefs, to others. This communication may consist of bodily movements, glances, the raising of hairs or the baring of teeth; it may exist in hissing and purring, howling and screeching, or it may linger in smells and vibrations, touching and the display of astonishing colours. To perceive language only in the word limits our grasp of the world, and ultimately the scope of our minds. Paradoxically, therefore, the linguistic emphasis restricts rather than augments mentation: it is a hindrance in the way of acknowledging animal minds and animal language, and an obstacle that prevents us from listening to and communicating with other animals. Instead of constituting, it constricts reality. And most of all, it deafens us to one obvious fact: The lion can speak.

**Language as an epistemology**

Language also stands as a way of knowing. As suggested above, it is often defined not only as the medium via which we know the world and ourselves, but also as the very structure, even the content, of that knowledge. Concepts and combinations of them form, so it is suggested, the contents of our beliefs: we perceive foxes, have beliefs concerning foxes, because we have the word “fox”, together with a web of further concepts all knitted together around it. Therefore, when perceiving a specific animal, we perceive it as “a fox”, “a mammal”, “an animal”, “a predator”, “a biological organism”, perhaps “a source of fur”, perhaps an “individual agent”, a “wild creature”. Within the framework of the later Wittgenstein, language is based on forms of life, and revolves around rules which we learn by using words: by applying words correctly, according to the rules configured by our social settings, we begin to perceive the world in a given way. Out of the chaos and constant flux of sensory stimuli there arises a narrative-like structure, as objects and entities suddenly emerge into our consciousness as “trees”, “bodies” or “pigs”. Language opens up a world for us, gives us a world, it is claimed, as if we were suddenly given eyes to see.

Such is the standard interpretation. Within it animals, again, are easily divided into human and non-human, although, this time, with an added twist: language enables humans both to perceive the world as a resource, and to actively render it into a commodity. When Heidegger asserted that it is due to language that humans can properly dwell in the world, it is often defined not only as the medium via which we know the world and ourselves, but also as the very structure, even the content, of that knowledge. Concepts and combinations of them form, so it is suggested, the contents of our beliefs: we perceive foxes, have beliefs concerning foxes, because we have the word “fox”, together with a web of further concepts all knitted together around it. Therefore, when perceiving a specific animal, we perceive it as “a fox”, “a mammal”, “an animal”, “a predator”, “a biological organism”, perhaps “a source of fur”, perhaps an “individual agent”, a “wild creature”. Within the framework of the later Wittgenstein, language is based on forms of life, and revolves around rules which we learn by using words: by applying words correctly, according to the rules configured by our social settings, we begin to perceive the world in a given way. Out of the chaos and constant flux of sensory stimuli there arises a narrative-like structure, as objects and entities suddenly emerge into our consciousness as “trees”, “bodies” or “pigs”. Language opens up a world for us, gives us a world, it is claimed, as if we were suddenly given eyes to see.

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mistake; see Heidegger 1977). With language, therefore, humans gain a world, become subjects not only in, but also of, the world – and, in the process, may begin (as Heidegger warns us) to see the world as a collection of manipulatable objects. Other animals, who are left as creatures with only a “poor” relation to the world, are eagerly cast out into the realm of objects and, ultimately, both perceived as and rendered into commodifiable resources. In short, language enables one to perceive other entities and beings via notions of utility, and to become a better utilizer, whilst more-than-human animals become utilizable objects, creatures of instrumental value.

It is here that we meet the industrial farms of the contemporary era. Animals live in utterly monotonous surroundings, crammed into small enclosures and cages that minimize space requirements and maintenance costs, and restrict energy usage. They are given feed that maximizes growth and production rates, and separated from their young as soon as possible in order to harvest milk and eggs for human consumption, or so as to speed up the process of getting a new generation of caged, tethered pigs and cows growing, and destined for the slaughterhouse assembly line. And their bodies are moulded, manipulated and coerced: they are forcefully inseminated, bred so as to be a particular shape and size, debeaked, dehorned, declawed, castrated, and branded, forced to move with electric prods, beaten when too afraid to move. Finally, technologies are beginning to enable their ever more invasive genetic modification, and as a result the future may bring us pigs with fish genes, hybrid cows with udders big enough to produce hundreds of litres of milk a day, or chimera chickens with incredible growth rates and muscles so large that their vital organs cannot survive any longer than the time required for physical maturation. This is a world of unbridled utilitarian optimization: every last detail of animal production is carefully planned so as to maximize profit and production. The animals remain resources, increasingly reduced to the status of biomechanical objects, biomaterial: they are defined and dictated by language coloured by mechanomorphia, the reduction of sensing, living beings to machine-like, operatable units. And most importantly, this is a world of utter manipulation, coercion and control, a world of commodification. The epitome of the Cartesian ethos of the new science: the active human subject manipulating every last detail of the animal as a passive object, as a biological resource.

It is on these grounds that Jacques Derrida made a rather startling comparison – what is indeed termed the “dreaded comparison” – between animal industries and the holocaust: “The annihilation of certain species is indeed in process, but it is occurring through the organisation and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every supposed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing people into ovens or gas chambers (let’s say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by the means of artificial insemination so that, being more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell, that of imposition of genetic experimentation or extermination by gas or by fire. In the same abattoirs,” (Derrida 2004, p. 120). A process of continuous manipulation and exploitation, although this time without an end.

Posing language as the form and content of perception of the world, of having a mind, can therefore have drastic consequences. By creating an abyss between those who have language and those who do not, beings are also divided into those who can manipulate and those who are manipulated. Here language functions as an epistemological technology: by naming the world around us, we can distance ourselves from it, even alienate ourselves from its realm – a process which ultimately defines other beings as sculptable, malleable, controllable resources. It is here that we find the underlying impulse for Western notions of rationality: rationality as a form of optimizing one’s behaviour in order to gain a given result. Language, then, aids rationality as optimization, rationality as the utilitarian desire to make use of the world around us and render it into a commodity. In short, language quite literally “gives us a world”, reduces it to a possession.

One reason for the ease with which language achieves such objectifying detachment is that, within its domain, others are categorized, subsumed into classes and types, thus losing their specificity: a specific pig becomes a faceless, generic representative of the prototype “pig”. Edmund Husserl argued that it is clinical, neutralizing language that lays the foundations for atrocities (Husserl 1970). Beings of flesh, blood and sentience become neutrally defined, faceless entities, and ultimately meaningless objects within a given system. The standard example is bureaucratic language, which obliterates specificity and treats individuals as instances of the same faceless prototype, itself only secondary in value to the end goals of the system itself. Thus, individuals become expendable in the name of expediency. The same can be said of language used in the context of non-human animals, and particularly the animal industries. It is no longer beings capable of perceiving, intuiting and feeling that one speaks of, but rather milk yields and feed lots, kilograms and pounds, pork and steak, agricultural taxes and investment subsidies, the market rates of the industry.

It was precisely on these grounds that Levinas called for interruptive encounters with “others”, which would take place beyond pre-established conceptualizations: others are to be met naked, outside generic categories. (Levinas 1969) As suggested above, it is only such nakedness that can truly “interrupt” the daily rhythms that lull us into a state of egocistic, generalizing mindlessness, within which we view others via prejudices, thus failing to pay heed to them as their own specific subjects, and within which, instead of their condition, we concentrate on what we want for ourselves that day, that month, that year. And it is also on these grounds that Derrida makes his comparison. For Derrida, language, and especially the rigidity of concepts, can be a form of violence – indeed the most intrusive form of violence there is. Here, the particularity of other beings is simply erased: it is as if it did not exist, and thus as if these beings in themselves never existed. Derrida views the term “animal” as
the most violent of all. Under its rubric, a breathtaking variety
of animality, a plethora of specific species and individuals, is
 glued and lumped together, made homogenous, faceless. (Derrida
2004) How can one speak of “animals” as one category, when
there is an astounding heterogeneity of animality all around us?
It is precisely this concept, and many more like it, that enable
animal industries to pursue their optimizing processes, their
manipulation and control. The living, breathing, sensing, intending,
intuiting specific animals, these and those particular hens and
cows, are quite simply lost and obliterated, never acknowledged,
never perceived. Viewing animals as faceless entities is the first
step toward subjugating them under increasing and ever more
inventive forms of violence.

The question that arises, then, is how do we meet non-human
animals in the context of an interruptive encounter, as specific
creatures, naked from the generic, proto-typing prescriptions of
language. The obvious factor to note is that language is ineluc-
tably difficult to avoid, and perhaps altogether impossible for
adult humans to exist or flourish without (bar for the very few).
Quite evidently, categories enable one to form conceptions of the
world, and existing wholly beyond their reach would render that
world into an arena of continuous sensory stimuli that bombard
us into a state of utter bewilderment and aporia. Perhaps the
surest proof of the need for propositional language is that this
critique of language is also constituted out of the lineaments of
its very object: critiquing language with language. How, then,
are we to encounter other animals outside of language in any
meaningful sense?

Husserl argued that it is specifically mathematizing language – the
type of language that seeks to order the world into algorithmic
categories – which is to blame for the sense of alienation that
is so common in the modern world. This alienation begins with
losing touch with others and with lived reality: a reality filled
with sensing, intending, and experiencing. Mathematizing
language seeks to fit the mould of algorithms onto beings and
phenomena that can never be rendered into a calculable form,
and thus replaces them with detached conceptual frameworks.
Experiences, senses, intuitions, instinct cannot be rendered into
concise categories and patterns – nor can the specificity and
astounding heterogeneity of individual beings. Hence, there is
much to lose, and lose we do. As Husserl argued, ultimately, we
also lose touch with ourselves, and begin to see ourselves from
the viewpoint of neutral, rigid concepts. (Husserl 1970) Here,
“the life world” begins to vanish, and perhaps becomes a thing
perceived as potentially dangerous. Arguably, this results in a
desire to control emotions, to control intuition and instinct, and
to view them all as potential sources of internal upheaval, which
is to be cured by further linguistic constructs and the soothing
detachment they afford. Thus, it is a specific form of language
that facilitates objectification: both by rendering non-human
animals generic and faceless, and by alienating us from the
types of emotion that would instantly recognize the notions
of animal prototypes or animal industries as being abhorrent.

This would suggest that it is specifically mathematizing language
– language that relies on rigidity, logic and detachment that
stands in the way of interruptive encounters. Perhaps proposi-
tional language per se is something we can never fully let go
of, and perhaps, as soon as I meet the “other”, I do recognize
her as a type of being, and cannot help but see some forms of
categories folded and fitted around her – but we can loosen
our grip on mathematizing forms of language, which force those
categories into strict, logical structures that predetermine our
thinking and alienate us from others and ourselves. The differ-
ence is that between loose categories, which allow for alteration,
fluctuation, novelty and heterogeneity, and rigid categories,
which insist on stasis and homogeneity. Perhaps the former can
flow along with our experiences, and be altered by “interruptive
encounters” (allowing, for instance, our perception of a “fox” to
dramatically change at the moment of encountering this or that
specific red-tailed creature), whereas the latter detach us from
those experiences, and blind us to ever witnessing the “other”
fully enough to be interrupted.

This stance is supported by the philosophy of Henri Bergson.
Bergson argued that propositional, scientific language adheres to
the formula of inert matter: of unchanging, static, monotonous
entities. In fact, according to him, this language was constructed
in order to better utilize such matter, to sculpt it into a form
that better serves human interests (precisely this is the language
of dualism – humans as language-using, active subjects, the
world as a passive, manipulatable object). Such language is
rigid, categorical, logical, too stubborn to allow for the type of
ambiguity, novelty, opacity, alteration and multifaceted
indistinctness of which the lived reality – the reality of living,
experiencing beings – consists. Hence, scientific language quite
simply cannot do justice to living creatures. (Bergson 2003) It
is, thus, precisely this – not language as a whole – which is to
be set aside. And also, specifically, it is this form of language
that serves as the logic of animal industries: it is the skeleton
around which animal flesh is forced to mould itself, and which
of necessity not only views, but renders more-than-human
beings into quasi-inert matter. For mathematizing, scientific
language, other animals are inert, and will – in practice – be
treated accordingly as a malleable resource.

The lesson to be learned, then, is that the experiences, mentation
and individuality of non-human animals are things that can-
not be neatly categorized, and which tend to elude scientific,
mathematizing language. The incomprehensible, astonishing
and even sublime in the animal remains unrecognized, as long
as we hold on to the figment of mathematical order. Within
this order, more-than-human animals are seen as primarily
physiological and evolutionary beings, to be made sense of on
the basis of use-value: they are perceived as being milk and
meat, fur and entertainment. Animal mentation, and particularly
animal language, the voices of non-human animals, remain
hidden under the mundane rigidity of words and the ensuing
efforts to control and manipulate.
Empathy and expression

How could one go beyond mathematizing language, become more attuned to the language of non-human animals, and open oneself to interruptive encounters with the pigeons and cows of this world?

One answer lies in empathy. “Empathy” has been defined in a number of different ways (Aaltola 2014), but they all have in common the notion of “feeling with” (rather than “for”) another being. One feels with the fear, suffering, joy, and love of others, is perceptually attuned to other beings. Particularly affective empathy and embodied empathy offer insights into ways of knowing other animals.

Affective empathy refers to resonating with other beings: one instantaneously shares emotive states with others, just as a reef syncs with the movement of waves. It is a state of pure immediacy, intrinsically non-lingual. The often physicalized studies on affective empathy have concentrated on immediate neural imitation (enabled particularly by mirror neurons), which renders possible the ease with which the transmission of emotive states – the communication and sharing of affect – can happen via our bodily responses, before the first conceptualization, even the gist of a sentence, takes place. (Decety & Jackson 2006) However, affective empathy was already celebrated by Hume, who (using the term “sympathy”) argued that it is the most astounding feature of animal (human and non-human) minds: “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own,” (Hume 1969, 367). It was precisely empathy as resonance that Hume was speaking of – for him, witnessing “impressions” (bodily manifestations of emotion) made on others could spark similar impressions in oneself; and ultimately produce the same emotion. Indeed, he argued that minds are “mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other’s emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated,” (Hume 1969, 414).

Affective empathy does not recognize species boundaries. Just as we can empathize with the sorrow of other human beings, we can share the emotive states of non-human animals. In doing so, we become attuned to the embodied manifestations of those states, and immediately – outside the ramifications of propositional language – perceive, for instance, the joy and apprehension of other animals. It is on these grounds that the phenomenologist Edith Stein asserted that: “Should I perhaps consider a dog’s paw in comparison with my hand, I do not have a mere physical body, either, but a sensitive limb of a living body. And here a degree of projection is possible, too. For example, I may sense-in pain when the animal is injured,” (Stein 1989, p. 59). She continues: “thus, too, I can understand the tail wagging of a dog as an expression of joy if its appearance and its behaviour otherwise disclose such feelings and its situation warrants them,” (Stein 1989, p. 86).

But what of the argument, according to which the minds of non-human animals are too different, too alien, for us to grasp? In fact, does one not easily become presumptuous, and project human-like emotive states onto other animals, thus erasing their “otherness” and ultimately their dignity as “different-than” beings? Is the danger of anthropomorphism not forever looming in the background, threatening to render perceptions of pigs and cows into figments of human fantasy?

Embodied empathy offers one answer. Max Scheler, another phenomenologist, posited that the whole question of whether one can “know” the mind of another is misplaced. This is because it is based on an atomistic take on minds, according to which minds exist in complete independence from one another, and which postulates that we are imprisoned in our own minds, forever unable to know with any certainty even a fraction of those of others. It is this atomism which lays the foundation stones for solipsism, the state of tormented seclusion, forever haunted by the possibility that one is alone, completely alone, in the world. Against atomism, Scheler asserts that even knowing one’s own mind does not take place in isolation from others: we constriue our understanding of ourselves in continuous interaction with other beings, in a state of intersubjectivity, wherein we respond to others, and let the responses of those others change us, too. There is no prison, no encapsulated mind separated from others by an abyss: rather, our minds exist in relation to the beings around us, and are constituted via interaction. Moreover, this state of intersubjectivity rests on a unity between the mind and the body: we know ourselves and others as primarily embodied creatures, in whom the mind and the body are integrally entwined to the point of it being senseless, absurd, to separate the two.

As a result, bodies continuously communicate minds – they are inherently expressive of a mind. (Scheler 2007) It is this intersubjectivity and embodied expressiveness that allow for an immediate grasping of the minds of others, they: “present us with a direct and non-inferential access to the experiential life of others,” (Zahavi 2008, 518).

Therefore, questioning the validity of empathy may rely on false premises – at least if one pays heed to the type of empathy one is engaged in. Pure projection may yield nothing more than anthropomorphia, but engaging in intersubjective relations with other animals, becoming attuned and responsive toward them, and refining one’s perception of their embodied expressiveness, can spark empathic states which exist in a state of immediacy, beyond doubt, anthropomorphia and the demand for verification. Thus, it is suggested that: “When I experience the facial expressions or meaningful actions of an other, I am experiencing foreign subjectivity, and not merely imagining it, simulating it or theorizing about it,” (Zahavi 2008, 520). We do not project or infer the mental states of others – we read them via intersubjectivity and the expressive unity of mind and body.
Moreover, empathy does not weaken our grasp of the “otherness” of those around us. For Scheler, embodied empathy is always rooted in an awareness of the difference of the other – an awareness of how much will forever remain hidden from us. Immediate grasping of and feeling with another are thus entwined with recognizing that one cannot know everything, or feel everything; that the other retains some ways of being to herself. Therefore, not only does this conception of empathy allow one to eliminate skepticism about knowing others; it also allows us to recognize radical, opaque difference in others.

Again, species boundaries are irrelevant. Our minds are formed in relation to those around us, and do not differentiate between whether the other is a human or a non-human. Rather, what matters is that others respond to us, and we can meaningfully respond to them – it is the becoming of “we” from I and the other, an interactive entwinement of two beings, within which the other is a “you” and not an “it”, that is the key. It is this state of embodied intersubjectivity, which allows others to make a mark, leave a trace, on our own minds, and more-than-human animals are quite capable of entering into these states with humans. The ethologist Barbara Smuts, who has spent long periods of time living with wild baboons, has eloquently described the process of entering into such states with other animals, arguing that it requires a type of epistemological shift, within which one forsakes cortex-driven analytical rationalism, and instead opens up to the level of immediacy, to the sphere of instinct and intuition. When this shift is accomplished, one will be altered by the other animal, perhaps permanently bearing her claw or scale prints in the fibres of one’s mind. (Smuts 2001)

Indeed, this alteration is a process of becoming more open to, more attuned to, the world. Hence, if propositional, mathematizing language risks restricting our perception and limiting mentation, our embodied intersubjectivity with other animals pushes perception toward lucidity, and mentation toward exposure and openness. Smuts clarifies: “Experience suggests that by opening more fully to the presence of self in others, including animals, we further develop that presence in ourselves and thus become more fully alive and awake participants in life,” (Smuts 2001, p. 308) and argues that in this process, she “had gone from thinking about the world analytically to experiencing the world directly and intuitively” (Smuts 2001, p. 299). Thus, forsaking mathematizing language can feed empathy, and empathy again can feed our capacity to reject such language, to be “rich” in the world without it.

Thus, “interruptive encounters” with more-than-human animals, which resist and obliterate the detachment of mathematizing language, can be sparked by affective and embodied empathy. By setting aside cultural stereotypes and utilitarian language, and by entering into states of perceptive, open intersubjectivity with other animals, we may begin to see animality anew, and cows, rats, chicken, salmon and sheep as subjects rather than as faceless resources.

Finally, perceiving other animals as expressive, embodied unities will allow us also to become perceptive to their voices, their language. The type of expressiveness accentuated by Scheler is a form of language, a way of communicating oneself to the world. Empathy with non-human animals cannot, therefore, be mere anthropomorphic projection, let alone anthropocentric fantasy, if one truly pays heed to the animal’s own way of speaking. Fish and sheep no longer remain wholly opaque, inaccessible, incomprehensible, but rather – even whilst retaining an astounding oddity that the human mind can never fully comprehend – they are approached as active agents, capable of communicating their own phenomenality. Subjects, who speak, and who can be understood, if there is a willingness to listen.

Conclusion

Language is often used as a tool of division, the excavator of an abyss between human and more-than-human animals. Ontologically, it is designated the exclusive possession of human beings, and posited as the source of subjecthood and moral significance. Epistemologically, language is used to create a distance from lived experience – a distance not only from ourselves, but also from the mentation of other animals: their intentions, emotions, experiences. Animals are forced to fit into the mathematical order of scientific language, and thereby their agency, their inner lives, are lost. In the consequent dualistic logic; only humans are active subjects, whereas all other animals remain passive objects, biological matter to be used as a resource, as production units in the grim monstrosity of industrial farming.

Yet, both accounts fail. More-than-human animals are creatures of language – their language dwells in the type of immediacy from which most human mentation also derives. Thus, there are forms of language other than those restricted to propositional- and mathematizing order, forms that exist on the first-order level of intent, affect, intuition, perception and instinct. Empathy, particularly in its affective and embodied form, helps one to find these forms. Affective empathy sparks immediacy, as one instantaneously, and beyond conceptual constructs, perceives experiences in other animals, and resonates with these experiences: the suffering of pigs or the joy of hens becomes something that is fathomed from within. Embodied empathy invites intersubjectivity with non-human animals, a state in which they are perceived as subjects, as a "you", and which exposes one’s mind to their different way of being. It also opens one up to the expressive, embodied unity of other animals, to their way of communicating, and to their animal language.
References

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