



“Human” is a Dirty Word: A Defense of Dale Jamieson’s Intepretivism

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Abstract: The title of this paper is inspired by Craig Bowe’s article, “Human’ Is Not a Dirty Word”. In this article, he explicitly claims that he is speciecist. However, this does not imply that he abhors species or beings other than humans. He regards humans as the most important ones primarily because he belongs to this race and in itself he has a natural inclination to act towards the preservation of his own race. He believes that those who engage in condemning human beings in the efforts of teaching about other species are committing to a peculiar kind of anthropocentrism in the long run. In this regard, I thought of deriving the title of this paper from his article by going to the opposite side. “Human” may be a dirty word if this ascription is taken as a symbol of one species’ superiority to others. I will apply this concrete circumstance to the case of knowledge in nonhuman animals. To say bluntly that nonhuman animals and knowledge are two, foreign and separate entities suggests arrogance on the part of whomever it is that asserts this claim.

What I would like to do here is to answer not so much the problem whether nonhuman animals have knowledge but the question, “Can the presence of thoughts in nonhuman animals necessitates knowledge?” Often times, having instincts is associated with them and not having knowledge. But then again, answering this question proves to be a challenging task since one cannot just give an affirmative or a negative answer without probing into the nature of knowledge. In this paper, I maintain that nonhuman animals can know. To go about with the task, I will ascertain first the implications of Jamieson’s views on animal minds to animal knowledge. Then, I will demonstrate the viability of interpretivism. I will reinforce my claim by associating it with Kornblith’s naturalist conception of knowledge.

Key Words: interpretivism; natural conception of knowledge; virtue epistemology

1. INTRODUCTION

The issue whether animals can think or not has been the subject of several disputes since there are some perspectives that do not adhere to the contention that thinking and nonhuman animals are two distinct entities. An example of this is that of Donald Davidson in his article “Rational Animals (1982).” He argues that language is the only thing that can supply the condition for thought (p. 324). If this is the case, it seems that one cannot really speak of capacity for thinking or for having thoughts in the nature of nonhuman animals in virtue of the absence of certain characteristics in them. Thinking or

having thoughts are somewhat associated with features that are inconceivable for nonhuman animals to possess. Davidson in the same article has stated that:

The propositional attitudes provide an interesting criterion of rationality because they come only as a matched set. It may sound trivial to say that a rich pattern of beliefs, desires, and intentions suffices for rationality; and it may seem far too stringent to make this a necessary condition. But in fact the stringency lies in the nature of the propositional attitudes, since to have one is to have a full complement. One belief demands



many beliefs, and beliefs demand other basic attitudes such as intentions, desires, and if I am right, the gift of tongues. This does not mean that there are not borderline cases. Nevertheless, the intrinsically holistic character of the propositional attitudes makes the distinction between having any and having none dramatic (p. 318).

It is implied here that propositional content and even propositional attitude are prerequisites of rationality. Certain basic characteristics such as having the capacity for language highlight all the more the differences between those beings that are endowed with rationality and those that do not have any. For instance, those beings that lack speech or language do not have thoughts and more specifically beliefs. Without any doubts, one has the tendency to associate non-speaking beings with nonhuman animals.

In spite of this, there are still perspectives that say the otherwise. Dale Jamieson has pointed out that one's rejection of thought and reason in nonhuman animals says so much about the human beings themselves who are advocating this perspective.

I will try to show that the reluctance of some philosophers and scientists to embrace the view that animals have minds is primarily a fact about these philosophers and scientists rather than a fact about animals. Our ordinary practices of ascribing mental states to animals are quite defensible. It is the failure

to see this that damages science (Jamieson, 1998, p. 81).

This only means that those who do not rely on the idea that nonhuman animals have minds miss the point. One's association of minds to nonhuman animals is not an unbelievable circumstance since in itself it is a secure and practical perspective.

Even philosophers and scientists who are professionally sceptical about animal minds engage in these everyday practices when interacting with their animals and orally presenting their research. It is when publishing their official views that they purge mentalistic language from their vocabularies (1998, pp. 82-83).

Jamieson has placed into consideration the importance of practical matters when it comes to one's attribution of mental states into nonhuman animals. In this regard, it only goes to show that the whole idea of nonhuman animals having the capacity for mental activities is not really inconceivable since most human beings do this on account of the former's activities with the latter. Consequently, "nonhuman animals" and "mind" are reconcilable units.

2. A QUESTION ON WHETHER ANIMALS CAN KNOW OR IS IT SOMETHING ELSE?

During the advent of this paper, one of the things that I had to deal with was to take a stand on the issue whether nonhuman animals can know. But as I progress with this task, I inadvertently maintain that they indeed have this capacity. So the issue is not really on



upholding or refuting knowledge in nonhuman animals but it is more about linking the presence of thoughts in them as a prerequisite for the assertion that they have knowledge. Since I subconsciously affirm that nonhuman animals have knowledge, I feel the need to highlight the link between having thoughts and having knowledge in nonhuman animals. Using Jamieson's Interpretivism, I come to an understanding that the presence of thoughts is not alien to them. I consider this as a point of departure in relating their thoughts to having knowledge. However, it is important to know what sort of knowledge do nonhuman animals have. It is essential to raise this concern since the inability to do so may stir problems and confusions to those who are not open to such a claim.

For me to be facilitated, I will rely on Hilary Kornblith's naturalist conception of knowledge which can be found in nonhuman animals. This perspective offers a different look at knowledge and the role it plays in its formation once it is applied in nonhuman animals. Furthermore, I will also look into Sosa's distinction between animal knowledge and reflective knowledge as an additional factor that can strengthen the thing that I would like to do here. After this, I will proceed directly to my main task which is to show how the presence of thoughts necessitates knowledge in nonhuman animals. This paper is to be concluded by summarizing the points made in this paper and highlighting the viability of interpretivism in ascribing minds to nonhuman animals and consequently, knowledge.

3. INTERPRETIVISM: A MISSING LINK BETWEEN HAVING THOUGHTS AND KNOWLEDGE IN NONHUMAN ANIMALS

Dale Jamieson, in his article, "What do animals think (2009)", believes that most people are committed to this pair of propositions (p. 17) namely: nonhuman animals think and the belief that what they think cannot be characterized. He offers to resolve the tension between the two propositions through his version of Interpretivism. More or less, this is about whether and what nonhuman animals think is deeply connected to whether we find it useful to attribute thoughts to them (p. 10). He states that the tension between these two propositions is the fundamental problem most human beings face. He presents several perspectives that try to address this issue. The first perspective is Eliminativism. It is implied in this perspective that it rejects the claim that animals think. He mentions different versions of the same perspective but among them, Davidson's version is the most sophisticated. In general Eliminativism is about rejecting the first pair of proposition through the second proposition. Its presence is already a sufficient basis to sever the first proposition (p. 20).

The next perspective is Wet Eliminativism. This perspective does not reject altogether the first proposition. What it does is to accept at one point the first proposition in a weaker form while rejecting it in a stronger form (p. 23). There is an apparent paradox that is going on here.

The idea here is that something belief-like goes on with



many animals and that is why we find it natural to say that they have beliefs: they behave in a goal-directed way, they discriminate between various stimuli, and so on. But the fact that these apparent beliefs cannot be reliably characterized indicates that they are not beliefs in the same sense in which humans have beliefs. Hence animals “a little bit” have beliefs and “a little bit” do not, and animal thinking is “a little bit” eliminated and “a little bit” not (p.23).

Jamieson states that this form of eliminativism is ambiguous in two general views (p. 23). First, it suggests that having beliefs come in degrees. So it means that although both nonhuman animals and humans have beliefs, there are still degrees that distinguish the former from the latter. Secondly, humans are the only ones that have beliefs if this will be taken in an absolute manner. Nonhuman animals may have similar states that are apparently beliefs but only to find out that they are not beliefs after all.

The third one is the brute content view. It weakens the belief that what nonhuman animals think cannot be characterized. This is its way of resolving the tension between the two propositions. In a nutshell, this perspective claims that even if it may not be plausible in practice to characterize what animals can think, it can still be done but only in principle (p. 25). It follows then that on certain situations, what animals think can be characterized. However, difficulties may arise because other factors like empirical circumstances may get in the way of knowing other minds.

Jamieson gives several reasons for not accepting the first three perspectives such as one of them entails confusion, language fails to show that it is a prerequisite to a representational system etc. To solve this problem, he turns to interpretivism for he is attracted to it the most.

Three features of interpretivism are especially important for our purposes. The first is the contrast between interpretivism and the brute content view. Rather than content being written in the brain or dancing before the mind’s eye, it is the product of an interaction between an organism and an interpreter. Second, while much of our thinking about the mind privileges the first-person point of view, interpretivism privileges other points of view. It is from the second- or third-person perspective that we answer questions about what an animal is thinking on a particular occasion. Finally, interpretivism resolves the tension between (1) and (2) in a way that is so simple that it will strike some people as a cheat. Since our reliably characterizing what an animal thinks on an occasion is “deeply connected” with supposing that it is minded, accepting (1) implies rejecting (2) (on at least most plausible interpretations) (p.30).

These three features make an impact on Jamieson. For him it is possible to bridge the gap between the two opposing propositions but the question is how one should do it. He offers a solution



by highlighting the importance of interacting with nonhuman animals. So it means that it is dependent on how the human being sees and interprets the actions of nonhuman animals. Necessary adjustments can be made as a result of such an interaction.

Jamieson mentions two different strands of interpretivism (p. 30-31). But he distinguishes his views from others.

Here my interest in interpretivism is in how it resolves the tension between (1) and (2) rather than in the details of any particular account. For an interpretivist, the question whether an animal thinks is deeply connected to the question whether we can attribute thoughts to the animal on particular occasions. An interpretivist thinks we can. The question is how (p. 31).

Since Jamieson's brand of interpretivism aims to solve the problem between the two common propositions, he does not wish to go into the intricacies that set his interpretivism apart from others. What he is after for is how an interpretivist can do this task. He acknowledges the fact that due to a human's limitation she can never know all the discriminations that a nonhuman animal can make and mind-related activities. It is just a matter of adjusting a human's desire and belief in them that makes their action intelligible (p.31). He anticipates that not all may be satisfied from it but being true to its name, his concern is on how the interpreter finds usefulness of ascribing thoughts to them. In that regard, it invites an air of

subjectivity. It really depends on the perspective on the interpreter on how she would like to assess the behavior of nonhuman animals depending on a given context in which she finds it useful to do so. What I admire about Jamieson's perspective is that it remains to be grounded. His perspective was realistic enough to accept that it will not be easy to give a clear-cut answer whether nonhuman animals have thoughts. This is always dependent on a given circumstance since, as what he says, it would be a mistake to take peculiarities as central to thinking (p.33).

As noted earlier, I am going to use interpretivism to transmit the claim that nonhuman animals have thoughts to knowledge and Kornblith's perspective will be used. Since it is quite different from the usual way of understanding what knowledge is, it should not be a surprise if several perspectives would oppose it.

4. KORNBLITH'S NATURALIST CONCEPTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge, as what Kornblith (1999) has suggested in "Knowledge in Humans and Other Animals", is of a natural kind in relation to cognitive ethology.

What I have in mind here is a large body of work in cognitive ethology. Accordingly, knowledge, and I examine why it is that knowledge is an object of interest in this particular science. I argue that when cognitive ethologists use the term 'knowledge', they really are talking about knowledge, and not just belief, or true belief or, something else (pp. 327-328).



This is a far-cry from the common understanding of knowledge. He believes that the subject matter of epistemology is not really one's concept of it but knowledge itself (p. 327). It challenges the assertion that knowledge is a justified, true belief since if this is the case; nonhuman animals are not capable of having sophisticated or complex knowledge. He has noted that "many will argue that human knowledge is importantly different (p. 334)." This is so because human knowledge is much more capable of complex and far more sophisticated process than the natural knowledge. In other words, it has a capacity for self-reflection which is inexistent in nonhuman animals. But the thing is, like nonhuman animals, some humans satisfy rarely these requirements of self-reflection (p. 335) which is a requirement for knowledge. This implies that account of knowledge that is present in nonhuman animals is applicable to human beings as well. Again, it challenges a belief that knowledge of two parties involved are different from each other since at times this exists in both of them.

In the same article he has mentioned something about those who are not in favour about it.

My own view about the significance of the debate on the question of whether knowledge is a natural kind is that it is deeply tied to issues about normativity. Clearly, those who believe that there is a fundamental distinction between descriptive and prescriptive phenomena will regard the attempt to view knowledge as a natural kind as one

which would, if successful, rob knowledge of its prescriptivity. This, by itself, is a reason why many, I believe are fundamentally opposed to this particular kind of naturalism (p. 343).

From this, it follows that knowledge may be seen as a social construct i.e. a model that is agreed upon by many. Some are against it because if one subscribes to this idea, knowledge becomes less prescriptive and if this is the case, Kornblith believes that not all are open to this kind of naturalism (p. 343). This perspective jeopardizes the image of epistemology as a legitimate and independent field of philosophy.

I apply interpretivism to this natural conception of knowledge by emphasizing a glaring characteristic that is present in both of them. In interpretivism it invites one to engage in subjectivity when it comes to thoughts in nonhuman animals. Some may say that it is impossible but if one is to look at it more closely, it simply makes sense to believe that nonhuman animals at a certain point may have thoughts. In like manner, there may be oppositions against knowledge in nonhuman animals especially from the conservative ones. This strengthens my perception that anything that challenges a widely held belief will not gain instant acceptance. In applying interpretivism to the natural conception of knowledge, it can be inferred here the usefulness that an interpreter sees when she ascribes knowledge to nonhuman animals. It is quite hard to shun away from instance wherein nonhuman animals may really exhibit knowledge. For instance, in the proposition, "The cat that knows who its



owner is”, “to know” in this context should be understood more closely. If this is taken in a traditional understanding of knowledge as justified true belief, then most likely, it is improper to speak of knowledge in a cat. But then again, the way an interpreter sees this situation may suggest that it is absurd to deny this in consideration of certain factors. Interpretivism comes in when an interpreter finds it useful to associate such a claim to nonhuman animals without paying attention to objectivity or other lofty ideals since at that very instance that is the most convenient thing to do.

5. CONCLUSION

As I noted earlier, it is not my intention here to make a claim on the absence or presence of knowledge in nonhuman animals since I try to maintain that I am in favor of knowledge in nonhuman animals throughout the course of this paper. What I am concerned with is the relation of ascribing thoughts and knowledge to nonhuman animals using Jamieson’s interpretivism. It is viable because it focuses on the usefulness of an assertion about nonhuman animals according to a given circumstance. When related to knowledge in nonhuman animals, similar principle applies. There may be perennial debates about animal thoughts and knowledge, but following

the way interpretivism presents its reasons, it may be practical to shift one’s attention from the content of one’s arguments or claims to the convenience it gives to the interpreter. Following this line of thought, if I were to be asked why I think nonhuman animals have knowledge; I would link this to the convenience that I am getting for such an assertion in a given circumstance. I may not offer an objective answer but I least I am able to give a viable one.

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