

# **Animal rights and wrongs**

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# Preface

Animals were once regarded as things, placed on earth for our use and enjoyment, to be treated according to our convenience. This is no longer so. All thinking people now recognise the gulf that exists between sentient and non-sentient beings and almost all recognise that we have no God-given right to ignore the suffering that we cause just because the victim belongs to some other species. Some, however, go further than this, extending to animals the rights that have until now been reserved for humans. In 1965, Brigid Brophy published ‘The rights of animals’ in the *Sunday Times*, consciously harking back to Tom Paine and the *Rights of man*; in 1975, with the publication of *Animal liberation*, the Australian philosopher Peter Singer outlined the case, as he saw it, for a complete rethinking of our relations to other species. Meanwhile, Richard Ryder had introduced the term ‘speciesism’ in order to imply that, like racism and sexism, our attitude to other animals is a form of unjust discrimination, lacking both rational basis and moral title. These writers have so changed the climate of opinion that no thinking person could now treat animals as our ancestors did, ignoring their feelings and desires and thinking only of their human uses. In a world dominated by humans and their appetites, animals are now widely perceived as a victim class.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the philosophical case mounted by Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Richard Ryder and others has no real cogency. I do not wish to denigrate their achievement in awakening the world to needless cruelties and in compelling us to rethink so many comfortable prejudices. On the other hand, their single-minded emphasis on the features which humans share with other animals – notably, on the

capacity for suffering – causes them to overlook the distinction between moral beings (to whom their argument is addressed) and the rest of nature. Since traditional morality is based on this distinction, it cannot be revised by arguments which so blithely ignore it. It seems to me, indeed, that the *philosophical* discussion of our duties to animals has recently been conducted at a level which gives no real grounds for any conclusion – certainly no grounds for the quite radical conclusions drawn by Singer, Regan and Ryder.

This is not to say that all is right with our traditional morality. But if we are to know what is right with it and what is wrong, we must explore the roots of moral thinking and try to discover exactly how it is, in such a case, that questions of right and wrong could be decided. In what follows I present a map of the territory. Every issue that I touch on is hotly debated and to explore all the philosophical arguments would be not only tedious to the reader but also destructive of my purpose, which is to help those who are genuinely puzzled by the question of animal welfare to see how it *might* be answered by someone who takes it as seriously as a philosopher ought. At the very least, I hope to show that you can love animals and still believe that, in the right circumstances, it is morally permissible to eat them, to hunt them, to keep them as pets, to wear their skins and even to use them in experiments. The real question is not *whether* we should do those things but *when* and *how*.

Moral sentiment has a natural tendency to seek expression in law. For many people in Britain, it is a scandal that Parliament has barely considered the rearing and training of domestic animals, has shied away from the issue of battery farming and has considered the fate of wild animals only in the context of species protection or in response to single-issue campaigns against field sports. There is no doubt that our Parliament passes too many laws and has too many laws imposed on it by Brussels. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider why, how and to what extent animals should enjoy legal protection, lest hasty legislation, introduced under pressure from lobbyists on one side of a many-sided debate, should worsen the situation of other sentient species and increase the resentment of those on whom their welfare ultimately depends. My argument should therefore be understood as exploring the moral background to a legal question.

I have greatly benefited from discussions with Jim Barrington, Bob Grant, Sophie Jeffreys, Geoff Mulgan, Geoffrey Thomas and David Wiggins. Like many of those who have ventured into this area, I am indebted to creatures who have no idea of the fact – to Puck, who guards the gate, to George, Sam and Rollo who live in the stables, to the nameless carp in the pond across the field, to the cows next door and to Herbie, who has now been eaten.

# Metaphysics

## The problem

If we ask ourselves why the question of animals and their welfare should have risen so prominently to consciousness in recent times, we must surely identify the decline in religious belief as a vital factor. So long as people were sure of their status as the highest order of creation, made in God's image, blessed with an immortal soul and destined for judgement and eternity, they had no difficulty in rationalising the difference between themselves and other animals or in justifying standards of treatment for the latter which, if applied to the former, would have been criminal or worse.<sup>1</sup> It is no part of my purpose to argue against the theological view of human life. But the least that can be said is that it is both controversial in itself and of dwindling influence over the thoughts and feelings of modern people. Although the idea of a purely secular morality remains problematic, we cannot hope for guidance in the circumstances of modern life if we do not explore the grounds of moral judgement in terms acceptable to unbelievers. It may be true that the very great moral difficulties that surround us – including this one, concerning our duties to other animals – have come about precisely because of the secularisation of modern society and of the 'Enlightenment project', as Alasdair MacIntyre has described it,<sup>2</sup> of deriving morality from reason alone. But this would make it all the more urgent to address moral questions in terms which make no theological assumptions.

The problems that I shall be discussing arise because we are animals but animals of a very special kind – animals who are conscious of themselves as individuals, with rights, responsibilities and duties, and who

are capable of extending their sympathy to other species. From a biological point of view, the species are grouped under kinds with radically different evolutionary histories and radically different ways of relating to the environment. These biological distinctions greatly influence our responses to the animal kingdom. Towards insects we have little sympathy; reptiles and fish delight us but inspire no affection; mammals in general (or at least the larger mammals) prompt our warm concern. Beneath all those varieties lie forms of animal life, from slug to tapeworm, which appear to us merely as parts of the machinery of nature, to be dealt with according to *our* interests and with no special regard for *theirs*. To suppose that there is a single answer to the question, 'How should we treat the animals?', when both biological science and ordinary sentiment recognise such vast divisions among them, would be to take the kind of mechanical approach to the problem against which people are now in rebellion. At the same time, it is hard to decide whether there is any rational basis for the *moral* distinctions that we seem to make among species or whether we are guided by anything more than anthropomorphic sentiment in looking so coldly on those creatures, like fish and insects, which look coldly on us.

An element of favouritism is bound to enter into our dealings with the animal kingdom and it would be wrong to suppose that this is unjust. Those species which contribute most to our domestic happiness – such as dog, cat and horse, with whom it is almost as if we have long-standing treaties of mutual aid – are bound to secure preferential treatment and it would show a lack of conscience to withhold it. Those which elicit instinctive reactions of disgust will inevitably lose out in the race for human protection. Few people who object to hunting foxes with hounds oppose catching rats with terriers. Despite their intelligence, warm attachments and interest in the surrounding world, rats – who, in modern conditions, are no more of a nuisance than foxes – do not have the right appearance. Try as we might, our instinctive disgust at the sight of their scaly tails, their low-slung bodies and their rapid scuffling movements, neutralise our sympathy. It is only their remarkable proficiency in breeding that has enabled them to hold their own against the accumulated weight of human revulsion.

This is not to condone such discriminations but merely to take note of them as a factor in the moral equation. The higher forms of animal

life depend on us for their survival. It is because we breed them, feed them, preserve their habitats or domesticate them for our uses that they are able to win out in the stiff competition for resources, in a world now dominated by humans. Those which fail to elicit our strongest sympathy must either breed like the rat or sink rapidly towards extinction, like the snakes, lizards and toads that once abounded in our countryside and which are now only rarely encountered. No doubt a fully reasoned response to the moral question will take issue with many of our instinctive sympathies and it is not to be supposed that reasonable people, having taken note of all the relevant considerations, will find their prejudices unchanged. Nevertheless, there are unavoidable constraints imposed by human nature and anyone who defended a moral scheme in which rats, lizards and cockroaches took precedence over cats and dogs would be rightly ignored. Perhaps this means that a fully systematic code of conduct towards the animals will never be achieved. However, it is still possible both to respect our instinctive sympathies and to introduce into them such revisions as may be necessary to ensure that those species which do not attract us will nevertheless find a niche in our world.

In what follows, I shall consider the kinds of animal which attract our normal interest and sympathy. I shall assume that most, if not all, of the stranger forms of animal life – worms, fleas, locusts and so on – are not in the same way suitors for our moral concern. They interest us primarily as species and only rarely as individuals.

### **The minds of animals**

Suppose that we set aside all theological speculation and accept in broad outline the Darwinian theory of species. The animal kingdom then appears as a many-branched tree, with ourselves at the furthest point along one of the branches. Our nearest neighbours, the higher primates, are so like us in appearance and so able and willing to ape our interests that we find it difficult at times not to look on them as we look on human children. Further down the branch we find animals which are remote from us in appearance and, by comparison, intellectually and emotionally impoverished. On other branches we find animals like the ant and the bee, whose collective life surpasses in order and discipline anything that we could achieve, yet to which we

might hesitate to apply words like ‘belief’, ‘desire’ and ‘intellect’ and which display only a metallic caricature of our human feelings. On yet other branches we find animals which have no social life at all or whose social feelings extend no further than is required by the needs of reproduction.

The most pressing question posed by this picture is that of the mental life of our nearest neighbours. To what extent do these animals have minds? Descartes, for whom the mind was coextensive with self-consciousness, found himself compelled to argue that animals are living machines, in which bodily events are accompanied by no mental processes.<sup>3</sup> Neither philosophers nor zoologists would now accept that view; indeed, they would see it merely as one of the many unacceptable consequences of the Cartesian theory of the mind – the theory caricatured by Ryle as that of the ‘ghost in the machine’.<sup>4</sup> The common-sense view, that the higher animals have a mental life which is importantly similar to ours, is now also a commonplace among philosophers. And not only among modern philosophers. Aristotle used one word – *psyche* – to denote the animating principle in all forms of life (including the life of plants). Reason and self-consciousness belong to *nous*, which is the immortal part of *psyche*.

The favoured modern approach is far nearer to Aristotle than to Descartes. Like Aristotle, modern philosophers would argue that human beings are distinguished only by the *level* of their mental life and not by the fact of it. For the mind is the cause of activity and is as much a part of the natural world as the activity which it explains. We understand the mind not by looking inwards but by studying cognitive and sensory behaviour. And we cannot study this behaviour without noticing the enormous structural similarities between human and animal life.

We can arrange mental life in a hierarchy of levels; an animal may exhibit activity of a lower level without displaying the marks of a higher, but not vice versa. Intuitively, the levels might be identified as follows.

- *The sensory*: animals have sensations – they feel things, react to things, exhibit pain, irritation and the sensations of hot and cold. Maybe animals such as molluscs exist only at this level. Still, this

fact is enough for us to take account of their experience, even if we do not weep like the walrus as we scrape the raw oyster from its shell and sting its wounds with lemon juice.

- *The perceptual*: animals also perceive things – by sight, hearing, smell and touch. Perception is a higher state than sensation; it involves not just a response to the outer world but an assessment of it. Our disposition to think of animals as perceiving things is greatly influenced by the fact that they share with us many of the organs of perception, including the eye, the nose and the ear. They also exhibit attention, in which eye, nose or ear are ‘strained’ towards the world in search of information.
- *The appetitive*: animals have appetites and needs and go in search of the things that fulfil them – whether it be food, water or sexual stimulus. They also have aversions: they flee from cold, discomfort and the threat of predators. Appetite and aversion can be observed in all organisms which also have perceptual powers – in slugs and worms, as well as birds, bees and bulldogs. But only in some of these cases can we speak also of desire. Desire belongs to a higher order of mental activity: it requires not just a response to the perceived situation, but a definite belief about it.
- *The cognitive*: some animals have beliefs. There are philosophers who doubt this point. Nevertheless, it is impossible to relate in any effective way to the higher animals unless we take account of what they think is going on in their environment. The dog thinks it is about to be taken for a walk; the cat thinks there is a mouse behind the wall; the stag thinks there is a ditch beyond the hedge and makes due allowance as it jumps. In using such language, I am attributing beliefs to the animals in question. To put it in another way: I am not just describing the animal’s behaviour; I am also making room for an evaluation of it, as true or false. The dog, cat or stag might well be mistaken. And to say that such an animal has beliefs is to imply not just that it can make mistakes, but that it can also learn from them.

Learning involves acquiring and losing beliefs on the basis of a changed assessment of the situation; it involves *recognising* objects, places and other animals; it involves *expecting* familiar things and

being surprised by novelties. An animal which learns adapts its behaviour to changes in the environment: hence, with the concept of belief come those of recognition, expectation and surprise.

Learning is therefore not to be thought of in terms of the ‘conditioning’ made familiar by behaviourist psychology. The process of conditioning – the association of a repeated stimulus with a ‘learned’ response – can be observed in forms of life that have not yet risen to the cognitive level. Conditioning involves a change in behaviour but not necessarily a change of mind. It has been abundantly shown that the higher animals acquire new behaviour not merely by conditioning but in innovative ways: taking short cuts to the right conclusion, making intuitive connections, swimming to a place which they had known only through walking or recognising with their eyes the prey that they had been following by nose.

When describing behaviour of this kind – cognitive behaviour – we make unavoidable reference to the content of a mental state: the proposition whose truth is in question. The terrier believes that the rat is in the hole, it is surprised that the hole is empty; it sees that the rat is running across the floor of the barn and so on. In all such cases the word ‘that’ – one of the most difficult, from the point of view of logic, in the language – introduces the content of the terrier’s state of mind. The use of this term is forced on us by the phenomenon; but once we have begun to use it, we have crossed a barrier in the order of things. We have begun to attribute mental states which are ‘about’ the world and which are focused upon a proposition. The term ‘intentionality’ (from Latin *intendere*, to aim) has been adopted to describe the ‘aboutness’ of our mental states – not because there is any agreement concerning its explanation but because it calls out for a name. Without going further into the matter, it seems to me clear that intentionality introduces not merely a new level of mental life but also the first genuine claim of the animals upon our sympathies and our moral concern. For it distinguishes those animals which merely react to a stimulus from those which react to the *idea* of a stimulus. Animals of the second kind have minds which importantly resemble ours: there is a view of the world which is theirs, an assessment of reality which we ourselves can alter. It is therefore possible to relate to a creature with intentionality, as we do not and cannot relate to a creature without it.

An animal with intentionality is one to which we can appeal and which therefore can appeal to us.

This partly explains the great difference between our response to insects and our response to the higher mammals. Although insects perceive things, their perception funds no changing store of beliefs but simply forms part of the link between stimulus and response. If the stimulus is repeated, so too is the response, regardless of the consequences – as when a moth flies into the candle flame, not out of stupidity or heroism, but because this is what happens when it perceives the light. Moths learn nothing from this experience and have no store of information as a result of their past perceptions. They end life as they began it, in a state of cognitive innocence from which no experience can tempt them.

By contrast, dogs, cats and the higher mammals have an understanding of reality which motivates their behaviour. They learn from their perceptions and we can share parts of our world view with them. We can even join with them in a common enterprise, as when a shepherd and his dog work side by side.

### *Desires and emotions*

All animals have appetites and drives; but only some animals have desires. Desire, like belief, belongs to the cognitive level of mental life. Desires are intentional states – aiming at a goal and inspired by thought. The horse which desires to regain its stable is not the blind victim of a compulsion – unlike the mussels which ‘slope their slow passage to the fallen tide’. For one thing, the desire of the horse can conflict with other desires and lose in the contest – as when the horse sees its stable-mate trotting in the opposite direction and gives up its schemes to make for home. Moreover, the horse’s desire is goal-directed. It will choose different routes and strategies depending on its assessment of where it is, of how determined is its rider to resist it and of what obstacles bar its way.

Desire depends upon belief and belief is expressed in desire. From the combination of the two springs emotion, by which I mean a motive which is also a feeling. Fear motivates me to flee; it is also something that I feel in the face of danger. While insects are averse to predators, their aversion is of the stimulus-response variety and involves no

assessment of the danger. An antelope which sniffs a leopard is suddenly 'alert to the danger'; its store of information is revised and with it its desires. No longer concerned only to eat the shrubs in front of it, it tenses its limbs for flight and has one all-consuming desire – to be where this danger is not. This is a paradigm case of animal emotion and it shows the way in which emotions like fear are composed from beliefs, desires and the general readiness of the organism to protect its vital interests.

Animal emotions are drawn, however, from a narrow repertoire. The emotions that a creature can feel are limited by the thoughts that it can think. A bull may feel rage but not indignation or contempt. A lion may feel sexual urges but not erotic love. This fact is all-important in deciding on the moral status of animals; for our relations with others depend largely on our assessment of their emotional character. Of course, we have a tendency to read animal behaviour in terms of our own emotions; but this anthropomorphic habit must be set aside if we are to understand the real nature of animal motivation. The wasp is not angry at the violation of its nest and its sting is not an act of revenge or punishment. Nor is it anger that motivates the guard-dog or the rutting stag. For anger is founded on the thought that one has been wronged and this is a thought which lies outside the intellectual repertoire of animals such as dogs and stags.

Animals may nevertheless be prompted by social feelings. A horse will want to run when the herd is running. It may try to be first in the field and display the kind of cockiness, as it muscles its way to the front, that is familiar to us from human teams, gangs and football crowds. Dogs respond in a social way to one another and also to humans. A dog is attentive to its master and seeks affection and approval, often engaging in quite unnatural exploits in the belief that these are required of it. It is almost impossible to observe the social feelings of animals without feeling a deep sense of kinship; when we too are included in the pack, flock or herd, we naturally reciprocate with gestures of fellowship. However anthropomorphic and ill-founded, these gestures make room in our world for the more sociable animals and bestow on them a kind of honorary membership of the human community.

### Rationality

Classical philosophers, notably Plato and Aristotle, describe human beings as rational animals, identifying reason as our distinguishing mark and implying that our mental life exists at an altogether higher level than that of the other animals.<sup>5</sup> Later philosophers, including Aquinas, Kant and Hegel, endorse the suggestion and it is one that is intrinsically appealing. However, it is not easy to say what it means. Definitions of reason and rationality vary greatly; so greatly as to suggest that, while pretending to define the difference between humans and animals in terms of reason, philosophers are really defining reason in terms of the difference between humans and animals. On one understanding at least, many of the higher animals *are* rational. They solve problems, choose appropriate means to their ends and adjust their beliefs according to the evidence of their senses.

Nevertheless, there are capacities which we have and the lower animals do not and which endow our mental life with much of its importance. Unlike the lower animals, we have a need and an ability to *justify* our beliefs and actions and to enter into reasoned dialogue with others. This need and ability seem to underlie all the many different ways in which we diverge from the lower animals. If we survey our mental life and examine the many specific differences between us and our nearest relations, we seem always to be exploring different facets of a single ontological divide – that between reasoning and non-reasoning beings. Here are some of the distinctions:

- Dogs, apes and bears have desires but they do not make choices. When we train an animal, we do so by inducing new desires, not by getting it to see that it should change its ways. We, by contrast, can choose to do what we do not want and want to do what we do not choose. Because of this, we can discuss together what is right or best to do, ignoring our desires.

The ‘punishments’ administered during the training of an animal are therefore not really punishments. We are not seeking confession, contrition or remorse but simply a change of behaviour, regardless of right and wrong. Punishment of a person, by contrast, implies moral judgement. It forms part of the complex practice whereby guilt is assigned and acknowledged and the tres-

passers are first expelled from the moral community and then readmitted, purged of their fault.

- The beliefs and desires of animals concern present objects: perceived dangers, immediate needs and so on. They do not make judgements about the past and future, or engage in long-term planning. Squirrels store food for the winter but they are guided by instinct rather than a rational plan. (To put it another way: if this is a project, it is one that the squirrel *cannot change*, no more than an ant could resign from its community and set up shop on its own.) Animals *remember* things and in that way retain beliefs about the past: but about the past as it affects the present. As Schopenhauer argues,<sup>6</sup> the recollection of animals is confined to what they perceive: it involves the recognition of familiar things. They remember only what is prompted by the present experience; they do not ‘read the past’ but ‘live in a world of perception’.
- Animals relate to one another but not as we do. They growl and feint, until their territories are certain; but they recognise no right of property, no sovereignty, no duty to give way. They do not criticise one another, nor do they engage in the give and take of practical reasoning. If a lion kills an antelope, the other antelopes have no consciousness of an injustice done to the victim and no thoughts of revenge. In general, there is a pattern of moral judgement and dialogue which is second nature to humans but which is foreign to a great many – perhaps all – other animals. If sometimes we think we discern this pattern, as in the social behaviour of baboons and chimpanzees, our attitude changes radically: and for very good reasons, as I shall later argue.
- Animals lack imagination. They can think about the actual and be anxious as to what the actual implies. (What is moving in that hedge?) But they cannot speculate about the possible, still less about the impossible.
- Animals lack the aesthetic sense: they enjoy the world but not as an object of disinterested contemplation.
- In all sorts of ways, the passions of animals are circumscribed. They feel no indignation but only rage; they feel no remorse but only fear of the whip; they feel neither erotic love nor true sexual desire, only a mute attachment and a need for coupling.<sup>7</sup> To a great

extent, as I have suggested, their emotional limitations are explained by their intellectual limitations. They are incapable of the thoughts on which the higher feelings depend.

- Animals are humourless and unmusical. Hyenas do not laugh nor do birds truly sing; it is we who hear laughter in the hyena's cackle and music in the song of the thrush.<sup>8</sup>
- Underlying all those, and many other, ways in which the animals fail to match our mental repertoire, there is the thing which, according to some philosophers, explains them all: namely, the fact that animals lack speech and are therefore deprived of all those thoughts, feelings and attitudes which depend upon speech for their expression. Of course, animals often emit noises and make gestures which *seem* like language. But, as I suggest in the section on language below, these noises and gestures lack the kind of organisation which makes human language into the remarkable and mind-transforming thing that it is.

When it is argued that animals are like us in one of the above respects – animals like the higher apes who seem to have a sense of humour, or dolphins who seem to communicate their desires and to act in concert – the arguments tend to imply that these animals are like us in the other respects as well. It seems impossible to mount an argument for the view that the higher apes can laugh, which does not also attribute reasoning powers to them and maybe even language (or at least, the power to represent the world through symbols). It is an empirical question whether apes are like this or can be trained to be like this; but it is a philosophical question whether the capacities that I have described belong together or whether, on the contrary, they can be exemplified one by one. It is my considered view that they do indeed belong together and define a new and higher level of consciousness, for which 'reason' is a convenient shorthand.

### **Self-consciousness**

What exactly do I mean by consciousness? To many people consciousness is the essence of the mental, the feature which makes the mind so important to us and the extinction of which is inherently regrettable in a way that the extinction of life (the life of a plant, say) is not.

In asserting that animals are merely automata, Descartes was denying that they are conscious and a proof that Descartes was wrong will have far-reaching moral implications. If animals are conscious, then they feel things – for example, pain, fear and hunger – which it is intrinsically bad to feel. To inflict deliberately such experiences on an animal for no reason is either to treat an animal as a thing or else in some way to relish its suffering. And surely both those attitudes are immoral.

It is obvious that animals *are* conscious. This is proved by the fact that they are sometimes, but not all the time, *unconscious*. When asleep, anaesthetised or knocked out, a dog is not conscious, as it is when alertly running about the garden. To describe a dog as conscious is to imply that it is aware of its environment, responds to it, learns from it and is sentient. There is consciousness whenever behaviour must be explained in terms of mental activity. The dog has the kind of consciousness exhibited by its mental repertoire – which means that it is conscious as dogs are conscious but not as bees or humans are conscious.

We should be careful, therefore, to distinguish consciousness from self-consciousness. Human beings are aware of themselves and their own states of mind; they distinguish self from other and identify themselves in the first person. They knowingly refer to themselves as ‘I’, and are able to describe their own mental states for the benefit of others as well as themselves. This is what I mean by self-consciousness and it is a feature of our mental life which does not seem to be shared by the lower animals.

Someone might ask, ‘How you could possibly know such a thing? Who are you to decide that my dog has no conception of himself, no consciousness of himself as distinct from his desires, beliefs and appetites?’ The answer I propose is that it is redundant to assume otherwise. We can explain the dog’s behaviour without recourse to such an hypothesis and therefore we have no grounds to affirm it.

We can justifiably attribute to animals only the mental repertoire which is needed to explain how they behave. The situation never arises which will compel us to describe a dog’s behaviour in terms of a conscious distinction between self and other, or between the world from my point of view, and the world from yours. We can always make

do with simpler assumptions – assumptions about beliefs and desires, in which the ‘I’ concept has no role.

Occasionally, we find ourselves doubting this; and in certain cases, notably those of apes, dolphins and elephants, our doubts have a persistent character which suggests that they may have a real foundation in what we observe. The interesting fact is not that we should be tempted to ascribe self-consciousness to some of the higher animals but that, whenever we do so, we are tempted to attribute to them rationality, linguistic or quasi-linguistic behaviour, humour, sympathy and even a moral sense. It seems that self-consciousness is another aspect of the higher level of mental activity, for which the term ‘reason’ has traditionally been reserved. It is an empirical question whether we are the only animals that exist at this higher level. I suspect that we are and that our uncertainty about the apes, the dolphin and the elephant stems from a commendable excess of sympathy which leads us to give them the benefit of the doubt. Their behaviour, occasionally and in an uncanny way, recalls the higher reaches of self-conscious emotion, and puzzles us for that very reason – as when we observe the coordinated dancing of the dolphins or the heart-rending mourning of the elephants.

### Language

Much of what I have said in the previous two sections will become clearer if we reflect on the way in which a creature’s mental horizon is broadened by language – by the ability to represent the world through signs.

- Language expresses thoughts about absent things, about past and future things, about generalities, probabilities, possibilities and impossibilities. It emancipates thinking from the here and now and causes it to range freely over the actual, the possible and the impossible. We attribute beliefs to the lower animals; but without language, these beliefs seem to be confined to the here and now of perception.
- Language permits the construction of abstract arguments. It is the primary vehicle of reasoning and the means to adduce evidence for and against our beliefs and attitudes.

- Hence language permits new kinds of social relation, based in dialogue and conversation. It enables people to criticise and to justify each other's conduct, to provide reasons to each other and to change each other's behaviour by persuasion. Thus arises the practice of reason-giving, immediate offshoots of which are inter-personal morality and the common law.
- Language expands the horizon of knowledge and contains the seeds of scientific inference. But it also expands the emotional horizons. No animal is able to fear some hypothetical event; to envy, esteem or cherish an individual whom it has never met; to feel jealous over its mate's past or apprehensive for its future.
- There are also emotions which are outside the repertoire of animals, since only a language-using creature could formulate the thoughts on which they depend. Thus indignation, remorse, gratitude, shame, pride and self-esteem all depend upon thoughts which are unavailable to creatures who cannot engage in reason-giving dialogue. For example, indignation is a response to injustice and injustice in turn a concept which only language users have. To cut a long story short, the higher emotions – those on which our lives as moral beings most critically depend – are available only to those who can live and think in symbols.

Much is controversial in philosophy. But I doubt that any philosopher who has studied the argument of Hegel's *Phenomenology of spirit*, or that of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical investigations*, would dissent from the view that self-consciousness and language emerge together, that both are *social* phenomena and that the Cartesian project – of discovering the essence of the mental in that which is private, inner and hidden from external view – is doomed to failure. Moreover, most philosophers would agree that language requires an elaborate social stage-setting – if Wittgenstein is right, nothing less than a shared form of life, based in a deep consensus, will suffice. It is possible that animals could be granted honorary membership of this form of life – like the unfortunate chimpanzee called Washoe, lifted from her natural innocence in order to compete with humans on terms which humans alone define.

But while there is a growing body of ethological evidence that animals communicate with each other and are able to pass complex