



*Self-Awareness in Domesticated Animals:  
Proceedings of a Workshop held at Keble College, Oxford*  
Edited by D. G. M. Wood-Gush, M. Dawkins, and R. Ewbank.  
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This slender volume contains the papers and (edited) discussions of a July 1980 workshop. Small print makes possible the inclusion of more content than the number of pages would suggest. The editors' introduction states that

[t]he aim [of the workshop] was to bring together people from a variety of disciplines to discuss the problems of defining, describing and investigating the concept of 'self' in animals, particularly farm animals (3).

In doing this, the workshop was an evident success. The editors also tell us that the primary motivation in convening the workshop was the belief that the experimental investigation of the mental lives of nonhuman animals "is a particularly important undertaking in the context of animal welfare" (*ibid.*). Here the workshop was less fruitful; little mention is made of issues pertaining to the welfare of nonhuman animals. The title of the volume also occasions some disappointment: farm animals are not the topic of any of the papers, and only in the second of two general discussions is more than passing attention explicitly given to them.

Nonetheless, the papers (and discussions, which include comments from the audience—largely of ethologists) unfailingly make for interesting reading. Donald R. Griffin argues that communication among nonhuman animals can provide important evidence about the mental states of such animals, and he examines the ethological grounds for attributing self-awareness to such

animals. Stephen R. L. Clark argues, in a somewhat Wittgensteinian fashion, that attributions of mental states make sense only in the context of behavioral criteria and that, accordingly, we are fully justified in ascribing such states to nonhuman animals. D. M. Vowles and David Bowsher report on interesting physiological research—Vowles on neuropharmacological work that he believes may point to "a rudimentary type of self-consciousness" in rats (20), and Bowsher on recent studies of pain, most of which follow up on the important Melzack-Wall "gate-control" theory of pain (known to many from Ronald Melzack's eminently readable *The Puzzle of Pain* [New York: Basic Books, 1973] and Melzack's and Patrick D. Wall's more recent *The Challenge of Pain* [New York: Basic Books, 1982]). Guy Woodruff presents intriguing results, obtained in collaboration with David Premack, concerning chimpanzee communication and its bearing on chimpanzees' sense of self. (Those interested in the work of Griffin, Woodruff, and Premack will want to consult their articles, and the replies to them, in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 1, 4 [December 1978].) N. K. Humphrey defends the intriguing ethological speculation that the expressive behavior of nonhuman animals is a reliable indicator of conscious feelings not because such behavior and feelings are directly connected, but rather because both are independently correlated with the needs of animals that lead highly social lives and rely heavily on intraspecies communication. Finally, Roger A. Mugford closes with some ethological observations about dogs.

At several points, questions arise in the papers that one wishes the workshop participants had jointly pursued in discussion. For example, Humphrey's argument that expressive behavior and mental states arose as distinct reactions to common evolutionary pressures relies on his view that the only adaptive value consciousness has is to enable creatures to understand and communicate with other members of their species. Clark, by contrast, advances the more radical view that conscious states have no adaptive value in terms of evolutionary biology (14). Clark also holds that ascriptions of mental states require a context of (possible) expressive behavior, and that claim conflicts with Humphrey's conclusion that mental states and expressive behavior are connected only by having both resulted from the same causal factors. It would have been useful if, in discussion, Clark and Humphrey had focused on the connection between the adaptive value of consciousness and the issue of how mental states and expressive behavior are related. Is Clark's belief, e.g., in the evolutionary idleness of conscious states connected with his Wittgensteinian view that we can ascribe mental states only against a background of expressive behavior?

In his admirable study, *The Question of Animal Awareness* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1976; revised edition, 1981), Griffin has argued that conscious mental states do have adaptive value apart from expediting social communication (1976: 84; 1981: 144-5). Indeed, there and in the article cited above, he argues that the best explanation of complex behavior patterns of nonhuman animals is often that those animals are in conscious mental states. One wishes that he had, in discussion, joined issue with Clark and Humphrey.

The participants often remark on

the importance of distinguishing between awareness and self-awareness, and of being sensitive to the spectrum of kinds of awareness that can occur. But the question of whether a particular kind of creature has self-awareness is usually discussed as though self-awareness were simply a special case of a creature's being aware of things—the special case in which the creature itself is the object of its awareness. So the evident "lack of agreement [among the participants] over the meaning of 'self-awareness'" (46) tends to be treated as a disagreement about what kind of object one must be aware of to count as being aware of one's self. It is likely that self-awareness is a more complex notion than that sort of approach suggests. To be self-aware, one must to some degree be aware of being in the mental states one is in, and that kind of awareness deserves independent, detailed discussion. Being aware of being in one's mental states is not merely a special case of being aware of one sort or another.

If to be self-aware one must be aware of being in at least some of the mental states one is in, we must ask what it is for a mental state to be a conscious mental state. For the mental states we count as conscious are just those we are aware of being in. The workshop participants tend, however, not to distinguish between 'conscious' as it applies to mental states and 'conscious' as it applies to creatures. The two notions are manifestly distinct: it is natural to count as conscious any animal that is awake and sentient, whereas it is clearly more problematic what makes a mental state a conscious mental state. Failure to distinguish the two uses of 'conscious' can therefore lead to confusion about when to deem that consciousness is present.

Failure to distinguish the two uses can also make some claims

unnecessarily difficult to evaluate. For example, it would presumably be easier to discern the source of Clark's and Humphrey's doubts about the adaptive value of consciousness if the relevant passages in their papers distinguished in a clear way between an organism's being conscious and its being in conscious mental states—i.e., mental states of which it is conscious. Moreover, unless one distinguishes between what it is for an organism to be conscious and what it is for a mental state to be conscious, one will be led to talk, as the participants often do, as though all mental states are automatically conscious states. But that cannot be correct, since we know that even humans are not always conscious of their mental states.

These distinctions are important for assessing the relevance of self-awareness to questions about the welfare of nonhuman animals—a connection that is perhaps more problematic than the editors suggest in their introduction. On the editors' view, self-awareness is important for considering such ethical questions because "it is almost impossible to imagine how any creature could suffer without being aware of itself suffering" (3). But the ability to be aware of oneself being in a mental state of whatever sort is a highly sophisticated matter, far more so than the mere ability to suffer. (For clinical results that bear on the complexities involved in such awareness, see Bowsher's paper, or Melzack, and Melzack and Wall, cited above.) Presumably it is suffering, rather than any form of self-awareness, that is primarily relevant to issues about the welfare of nonhuman animals.

We should not let the difficulty of imagining suffering without thereby imagining awareness of the suffering mislead us into thinking that such awareness invariably accompanies genuine suffering. One cannot, in

general, imagine a mental state without imagining that whatever creature is in that mental state is aware of being in it. But that is due not to the nature of mental states, but to what it is to imagine something.

There is, moreover, a danger that the idea that self-awareness automatically accompanies mental states can distort the way we think about ethical issues. Many nonhuman animals evidently have reasonably rich and elaborate mental lives, but show little or no clear sign that they are aware that they are in the mental states they are in, as opposed to their simply being in those mental states. But, if no mental states can occur without self-awareness, one may be tempted to doubt, or even—as Descartes did—to deny, that such animals have any mental states, properly so called. The dichotomy between self-aware mentality and mere biological response, against which Clark rightly warns us (16), will thereby be reinforced. The idea that mental states are transparent to self-consciousness will thus have a manifestly destructive influence on the way we consider the welfare of nonhuman animals.

Many species of nonhuman animals have elaborate and complex ways of expressing their mental states. But we have now no clear evidence that any nonhuman species has a means of communication, natural to that species, which enables its members to describe, as well as express, their mental states. And it is unlikely that any other sort of evidence can help us determine that a creature is actually aware that it is in a particular mental state, as opposed to its simply being in that state, without also being aware that it is. Thus, although it may well be that many nonhuman animals are aware of being in the mental states they are in, it may also be markedly difficult to come by clear-cut evidence that they are.

There are well-known studies, which help expand our grasp of non-human mentality, in which great apes have learned to use linguistic constructions devised by humans. But care is needed to interpret what the apes say, all the more so since they are learning an alien form of communication. Humans often use mental idioms to describe wholly nonmental matters; 'I think it's raining' is typically not about one's mental state, but about the weather. We would have to be fairly confident that a creature has a good command of mental idioms before concluding that it is telling us about its mental states.

But a creature clearly can have an elaborate array of mental states without being able to describe them. Accordingly, it is reasonable to take apparent expressions of mental states at face value, as reliably indicating the presence of those states. And it is reasonable to do so even when the creature—whether nonhuman or human—cannot describe those mental

states. Moreover, we are evidently justified in taking apparent expressions of mental states at face value, as the workshop participants generally do, whatever the merits may be of special theories, such as Clark's and Humphrey's, about the connection between mental states and expressive behavior. (Descartes seems to have been clear about the need to distinguish between describing and expressing one's mental states. For he takes care to deny that the behavior of nonhuman animals can even express mental states, and not merely that their behavior cannot describe such states.) These considerations suggest that it is wrong to study communication in nonhuman species on the model of human language and, more generally, to model nonhuman mentality on the human capacity for self-awareness, as the workshop participants tend to do. For to do so opens the way, however unintentionally, to an otherwise unwarranted skepticism about the richness of the mental lives of nonhuman animals.

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