

# POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY OF THE ANIMAL MIND

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It is my conviction that all animals, including invertebrates, possess a mind. This conviction is not based on scientific evidence. We are unable to observe the mind directly. According to the principle of parsimony, I assume that body and mind are two aspects of the same. This assumption predicts that it will always be possible to find a bodily explanation, implying that it will never be possible to perform an experiment that proves that a mind is present in any animal species, including human beings. As a result, it will never be possible to prove scientifically that my conviction that all animals possess a mind is correct or wrong.

On the basis of similarities in body and behaviour, we may suppose similarities in the mind too. In this way, we are able to study suffering and well-being in animals other than ourselves. That means that this study of the animal mind is based on a combination of scientific evidence and on the conviction that animals possess a mind.

I defended this view 20 years ago at Keble College, Oxford, UK. So far, no experiment has been performed showing that this view was wrong. Why is it still so unpopular?

- i) My view is an intermediate position between two rival positions: the 'masculine', reductionistic, old-fashioned, behaviouristic, objectivistic, rational, scientific position and the 'feminine', holistic, new age, purposive psychological, subjectivistic, romantic, basically anti-scientific position. One is easily considered as an enemy by both sides. For instance, in a book against objectivism (Visser & Grommers 1988 p 45) I was cited as an example of an objectivistic researcher, without mentioning any of my work devoted to animal welfare.
- ii) People interested in research to prove the existence of a mind do not like to recognize that these attempts will be in vain.
- iii) One has the feeling that in my view the free will has vanished. This resistance seems comparable to that against ideas such as: the Earth is not the centre of the universe; man has descended from animals; and evolution has not taken place only to create the white, male gentleman.

Kennedy (1992 p 114) wrote about my view: 'this would seem to be a realistic position to adopt'.

Earlier, I suggested that the described study of the animal mind could make the assumption that animals possess a mind more convincing, or less convincing (Van Rooijen 1997). However, one must realize that in lower animals the mind may be connected with other characteristics of the body than in human beings, in a similar way that locomotion in invertebrates is connected with other bodily characteristics than locomotion in humans. For me, all animals have sufficient similarity with me to stay with my intuitive conviction that they possess a mind.

## References

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