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# Is there an animal consciousness?

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A phenomenological approach

**Matt Mazur**

## Abstract

The notion of consciousness, animal or otherwise, has been often discussed throughout the history of human thought. More recently it has become a topic for debate in philosophy with many competing ideas emerging. This paper is an attempt to discuss the nature of animal consciousness using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy with the goal of discovering and describing the true nature of phenomena beyond the human subjective experience of them. Using the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on perception, this paper argues for the acceptance of a form of consciousness in many animals while also seeking a better understanding of animal consciousness from a phenomenological approach. The paper concludes by discussing aspects that the phenomenological approach can add to our limited perspective of animal consciousness.

## Introduction

It's rather easy to consider oneself conscious, the next step up is to consider other human beings, and finally considering the consciousness of other species entirely. Human consciousness has a rich history in philosophy and with the arrival of the scientific discipline of psychology, science as well. The idea of non-human consciousness however has a smaller place in history. Animal consciousness has had a back seat in science and philosophy for quite some time and until recently it wasn't really considered. The rise of various animal rights movements has brought the idea of animal consciousness to the forefront of many issues such in areas such as ethical concerns, ecology and wildlife management. In this paper, I will argue for an interpretation of the consciousness of animals based off of the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and integrating this theoretical approach with the recent work undertaken by the contemporary philosopher David Morris as well as recent scientific developments. In Part I, I will give a brief history of the philosophical groundwork for animal consciousness and scientific debate surrounding the consciousness of animals. In Part II, I will lay out the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Morris involving consciousness and perception before finally making my argument for the consciousness of other animals in Part III.

### I

First I will begin with an overview of a few of the more important voices in the history of philosophy concerning animal consciousness. As is fitting for a discussion concerning a history involving philosophy and science it is best to go back to one of the first great natural philosophers, before the term scientist had even been invented. Aristotle (384-322BC) spoke on a wide range of topics from ethics to politics and was also one of the first to catalog, categorize and discuss animals in a somewhat scientific way. In *On the Soul* Aristotle allows for a small portion of animals to have thinking abilities and all animals to be capable of perceiving and "sense imagination"(434a). All animals are endowed with perceptive sensations to survive but very few are given mental powers of calculation or "deliberative imagination"(434a). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that anything done under ignorance or compulsion is involuntary with an awareness of the "particular circumstances" of the action(1111a). From that argument he goes on to allow animals at least the willingness of their actions arguing "For things done on account of spiritedness or desire are probably not rightly called unwilling acts. In the first place, none of the other animals would any longer do anything willingly,"(1111b). Aristotle had perhaps a better outlook on animal thought and will than what followed him in the Cartesian Revolution.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) exerted extreme influence on western philosophy and many movements in philosophy can be traced back to him. While he may have made many great strides in terms of understanding consciousness with the personal "I" his position on

animal thought was bleak when seen today under a more comprehensive perspective. In the Cartesian system our physical bodies are essentially machines to house the consciousness. There is a duality between mind and body. Under this system of thought animals are reduced to mindless *automata* that merely react to stimuli. His argument for this is contained in Part V of the *Discourse on Methods* in which he claims that because all animals possess the same organs as humans (brains, vocal chords ect) but do not communicate with language they must be lacking in some faculty. They have the organs to communicate but instead do not and therefore must be just *automata* because even the most stupid of humans can at least communicate basic thoughts. Since the animal has the organs needed but doesn't communicate thoughts it must be that they have no thoughts to communicate. The argument follows that because the actions and behaviors of animals can be imitated or described in a machine like fashion they must be analogous to machines and therefore unconscious. This line of thinking has had a drastic impact on the concept of animal consciousness.

The Cartesian formulation of the world ushered in a new wave of thought. The world could now be understood by the use of human reason and rationality alone. Everything was open to understanding through the laws of physics and mathematics and rationality. Knowledge could be found in human rational thought alone and so all the world could be explained and understood. The dualism of Descartes creates a void of meaning for the material objects. Material objects could be described with mathematical formulations and so lacked any true meaning. This also applied to the body which was seen as a mechanical thing with a separate substance of mind driving it around. In relation to animals they were seen as just a mechanical body, without the mind substance and therefore were just unconscious robots. This of course is not the end of the debate as others have argued differently since then.

David Hume (1711-1776) presented another account for the consciousness of animals in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume lays out an argument for animal thought and behavior saying "no truth appears to be more evident, than that beasts are endow'd with thought and reason as well as men"(176). Hume's argument is one of analogy in which he says that animals perform many of the same behaviors as humans and we cannot just assume them unconscious because we want to. According to Hume the mind is a blank slate upon which sense perceptions are the only data to enhance it. The sense data we receive shapes the mind and experiences and molds consciousness. In this way, animals would also receive sense data and experience which would lead to shape their thoughts and behaviors much in the same that humans' experiences would also do.

The modern philosophical debate has exploded with various arguments for different levels of consciousness or states, along with much debate. Robert Lurz has summarized the debate in contemporary philosophy as the contrast between various higher order theories of

consciousness and basic creature consciousness, or simple perceptual awareness (TPAM 5). Michael Antony points out that the current state of writing is saturated with what he labels as different “kinds” of consciousness, different “concepts” as well as different “meanings” that often get thrown around indiscriminately (1). This can cause issues when trying to broach the subject if many people are talking about the same thing using different vernacular. Some modern philosophers such as Peter Carruthers argue for the higher order theories which deny “phenomenal” consciousness to animals (“Animal Subjectivity”). Lurz on the other hand has fiercely critiqued Carruthers and the higher order theories of consciousness (151). Another philosopher Thomas Nagel, coming out of the analytic tradition, argued that we can never move beyond our human subjective point of view to really know the consciousness of another organism because we can only know that “no matter how the form may vary, the fact that an organism has conscious experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism”(303). The modern debate seems to go back and forth with no clear answer either way although one notion that has arisen from the consciousness debate is that consciousness is directed. This means that one cannot be conscious of nothing at all, there is always some “thing” to be conscious of. The scientific side of the debate takes its own variation which is different from the philosophical one.

The scientific debate of consciousness arose with the advent of modern psychology. Psychology, the study of the mind, has had a fruitful yield in the modern era. There has been a lot of good work on the study of human consciousness but this paper is concerned with the notion of an animal consciousness and so that is where the focus shall be. Donald Griffin (1915-2003) the former animal zoologist and Harvard graduate, does an excellent summary of the debate in his book *Animal Minds*, pointing out that the study of animal consciousness has been largely influenced by the behaviorist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Griffin lays out 3 main points of the movement as follow:

Claim 1 is that learning and other factors of an animal’s lifetime account for almost all the behavior of said animal beyond its physical adaptations.

Claim 2 is that we can only consider outside influences and observed behavior to account for explanations of animal behavior.

Claim 3 is that subjective thinking should be ignored for 2 reasons

- 1- They are subjective experiences that cannot be quantified nor verified
- 2- They are just by products of brain activity and do not influence behavior(20-21)

Griffin does go on to state that claim 1 has been largely abandoned by most scientists and that claim 2 has been heavily modified due largely to the “cognitive revolution” which

argues for various cognitive states in psychology (21). Griffin also claims that it is obvious animals process information within their nervous systems but what is not clear is if there is any conscious awareness of this fact (22). Since many processes within human beings also occur at an unconscious level, the assumption is that none of the animals information processing is conscious. The crux of what Griffin points out is that there are many in the scientific community who are hostile to the idea of animal consciousness under the basis that it is hard to identify or measure quantitatively and therefore should not be talked about in a scientific sense. Yet there is more to the story than just the behaviorist perspective.

Many studies have been done on the consciousness of animal by scientists. The field of cognitive ethology, which has the goal of understanding animal behavior empirically with detracting from the ability to make predictions with utility and also including the possibility of internal states of cognition , is also an area of interest within the scientific community (Kamil 21-23). In 2012 a document entitled the *Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness* was signed during the Francis Crick Memorial Conference. This document is a statement about animal cognition which goes on to say that numerous animals possess the same neurochemical and physical properties in which to experience states of consciousness. The scientists analysis states that there are numerous brain systems that are homologous within humans and some animals that react similarly with regard to microcircuitry of the brain. Based on these findings the group of scientists that signed the document concluded that

“The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.” (Low “Cambridge..”)

This statement is of course not the end of the debate surrounding animal consciousness in either the scientific field or the philosophical one.

II

I will be drawing on the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as well as the philosopher David Morris for my argument on the consciousness of animals. Merleau-Ponty was a phenomenologist with his major work being *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena in themselves. Modern phenomenology is based on the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), and can be described as an attempt to get to the heart of what a phenomenon truly is beyond a subjective experience or description of that thing. Husserl described this as the *epoché*, the first step in the phenomenological reduction in which we bracket or refrain from judging our thoughts about the existence of the world while

also not taking them for granted. In this way the phenomenological method seeks to strip away the subjectivity and allow the phenomena to present themselves in a true manner.

Merleau-Ponty argues against Husserl in this regard saying that in order to use the phenomenological method we must comprehend the notion that we cannot be fully separate from the world. There is no way that we may become a passive objective observer of a phenomenon because "I cannot conceive myself as nothing but a bit of the world, a mere object of biological, psychological or sociological investigation." (PP ix) In our bodies we are trapped within the world and cannot step completely outside of it to try and investigate it. Furthermore Merleau-Ponty argues that we cannot resort to only empirical methods in order to describe things because "[a]ll my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless" and "we must begin by reawaking the basic experience of the world of which science is the second-order expression" (PP ix). The empirical methods of science can be seen as a "second-order expression" because all the knowledge described by science is a description from a human subjective view point.

To further clarify let us consider an example such as the color blue. When I see the color blue, I experience it myself from my subjective viewpoint. Now with a photospectrometer we can describe blue as being a wavelength of light at a certain frequency, acting in accordance with mathematical principles. That description though, is second-order because those attributes or mathematical derivations themselves are expressions from a human standpoint in an attempt to describe how we perceive blue objectively, and yet they cannot truly be objective since there is no way to step outside the human body and verify them from some other position. This subjectivity does not mean that those attempted objective descriptions themselves are not useful or should be disregarded, only that we must be aware that they are still a subjective description from the human perspective.

Since we are forced into a subjective view of things by our very nature of being in the world there is of course a conundrum, namely that we are unable to step outside ourselves and get an objective third person perspective of experience, yet neither can we only rely on an empirical method such as science because it too is contained in the sphere of human subjectivity. In order to examine this issue Merleau-Ponty turns to perspective itself, as the primary lens in which we communicate with the world. First and foremost we are perceivers of things before anything else. At every moment we are surrounded and bombarded by perceptions from all angles via touch, sight, sound ect. These perceptions are our first contact with the world, and so in order to properly try to understand the world we must first understand perception itself.

In order to understand perception it becomes necessary to talk of the human body, the thing through which we perceive in the first place. Merleau-Ponty argues that the body is rooted in the world and as such "the permanence of one's own body, had only modern psychology analyzed it, might have led it to the body no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it" (106). Seen this way the body is not an object of experience, for that would mean I could step outside and examine it, but rather the body is the subject of experience. I am my body and my body is me, I do not experience my body but rather my body experiences the world through my perception. In this way being is



rooted in a body in the world. Consequently consciousness cannot just be some metaphysical thing as Descartes would argue, but instead must be rooted within the body as well.

Now if the body is the subject of perception the question arises of what consciousness is. Previously I discussed that consciousness is directional, which is to say that one must always be conscious of something. Seen this way, consciousness is a kind of awareness of things, or more properly an awareness of the perceptions we are having at that time. Merleau-Ponty argues in *The Phenomenology of Perception* that “[t]o be a consciousness or rather *to be and experience* is to hold inner communication with the world, the body and other people, to be with them instead of being beside them.”(PP 111) I argue that consciousness is an awareness of the perceptions we are having from the world at any moment on the subject that is our body. Using Merleau-Ponty’s definition being aware of our perceptions allows us to “be and experience” those perceptions. The extent of this awareness may change depending on the situation. For instance I may be so enthralled in a painting that I am not aware of the things around that painting consciously but I am still receiving the perceptions of those things. Those perceptions I am aware of I can say I am conscious of. Once we are aware of the perceptions of the world the question is how to make sense of them and attribute meaning to them. This is how the color blue becomes the color blue, or the distance between me and a chair becomes that distance by the attribution of meaning to the perceptions.

It is here that I will rely on the work of David Morris to further clarify my position. In order to talk about meaning I will refer to the description of Morris in which he argues that we should “draw on Merleau-Ponty, who discovers that human meaning is at root a bodily phenomenon that emerges from the way the body fits into and is oriented by a situation beyond and prior to what is meant”(329). To illustrate this concept Morris references the French word *sens*. *Sens* deals with direction and sensation, which is to say that we make meaning out of our sensations. Morris argues this is a shift from meaning to sense, in which we expand the concept of meaning beyond just being attributed “in our heads”. If our first communication with the world is through perception it follows that we add meaning to these perceptions with our sensations of them. Morris argues that “Sense entails differences that make a difference”(329). In this way, sense, or meaning, can be constructed as differences in experience that make an actual difference to the perceiving subject. Morris uses the example of glucose and a bacterium. The presence of the glucose makes a difference in the behavior of the bacterium (it swims toward it), and the presence of gold does not. The difference (presence of glucose) therefore makes a difference to the bacterium and so the glucose molecules have meaning to the bacterium and the gold would not. If we “don’t find that difference making a difference, you have a dead bacterium (or one not sensitive to glucose).”(330). Here Morris is making an argument on our understanding of ontology, the study of being, and arguing for a new way to conceive of the world as having meaning already inherent in many things through differences that make a difference. I am going to extend this argument from meaning inherent in reality to the way we consciously construct meaning using the same mechanisms of differences that make a difference. For clarification, I will use an analogy of a human example: a person wearing a wedding ring. If I were single and saw a wedding ring on a person I found attractive I would be less willing to ask them on a date assuming they would say no, being married. Now if I come across someone not wearing a wedding ring I find attractive I would be more willing to ask them on a date. The difference

here is the presence of the wedding ring and the meaning (datable or not) is constructed by me as a subject of this experience, as I perceive the difference. So the difference in experience is what allows me to construct meaning to the perceptions of that experience.

To summarize, we are born into a human body that is subject to experiences through perceptions and rooted in the world. We cannot step outside this body, or the world, and so must accept that we are grounded in our body as a subject to the perceptions of the world around us. This is our first line of communication with the world and indeed how we build the meaning of things around us. Consciousness as it is must be subject to something, for we cannot be conscious of nothing at all. Consciousness is then seen as directed by the perceptions we receive as a body subject to the world since these are our first lines of communication with the world. Taking these perceptions or experiences into account, we then make meaning out of them consciously with the identification of differences that make a difference to our perceptions. So my body which is embedded in the world is subject to perceptions of the world around me of which I then am conscious of through perception and I then make meaning of those perceptions and therefore subjectively construct the world around me through my experience.

### III

With consciousness embedded in the body-subject in the world, a transition to animal consciousness can be made. First and foremost, there has been some issue of animal consciousness in the early writings of Merleau-Ponty. Ted Toadvine discusses this in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Nature* by saying "While Merleau-Ponty's approach retains these echos of the sharp divide between human and animal already sketched out in the work of his predecessors, in his own thinking the human-animal relation, or more generally the relation between life and mind, remains a point of significant tension"(83-84). Toadvine argues that there are issues in which Merleau-Ponty drew a sharp distinction between human and animal consciousness such as the "peculiar ontological role that the human being plays, throughout Merleau-Ponty's work, as being's means of self-expression"(84). Toadvine is pointing out that in some earlier works Merleau-Ponty held the condition of being human as ontologically significant in the way being it itself could express itself. While this would seem to present a problem to my argument, Merleau-Ponty's later thoughts on the subject did change significantly. An example of this change is found in *The World of Perception* which is a compilation of written radio lectures by Merleau-Ponty in 1948. In that book Merleau-Ponty argues in that "in fact this world is not just open to other human beings but also to animals. . .who dwell in it after their own fashion; they coexist in this world"(WP 70). This change in thought opens up the world of perception to the animal and recognizes animal consciousness.

I argue that animals, having a physical body rooted in the world with similar morphological structures to allow for perception of the world, would be constituted as a body-subject of the world and as such have a consciousness of those perceptions in which they create and discover meaning and so construct their subjective view of the world. Many animals

have a very similar physical body structure as the human being. While they may take various shapes and forms, they have the same basic structural components that allow them to navigate the world. They have sensory organs such as ears, eyes and noses ect. Even Descartes noted that animals have all the same basic features of human beings. From the same basic make up comes the idea that the animal is itself also another body-subject of the world just as is the human being.

Being another body-subject of the world means the animal is also subject to perceptions of the world. This would be the first line of communication to the world just as it is in the human being. Animals then construct their world out of those perceptions and discover the meaning within creating their own subjective perspective on the world. As human beings can experience a difference that makes a difference and discover meaning so too should an animal be able to in its construction of the world. The creation of meaning from perception is the recognition of differences and not necessarily a function of some higher order thought only human beings have access to. (This is not to say no meaning is constructed from higher cognitive functions for certainly this is not the case as we can self-reflect on something and create and apply new meaning and indeed do all the time. I am only claiming that it is not the only way to create meaning) This can be reflected in the animal's behaviors towards its environment, for example my dog may take a liking to a specific ball and exclusively carry around that ball. Then for instance one day I decide the ball is too old and dirty and throw it away. My dog will search endlessly for that specific ball and may even not like any new toys I attempt to substitute it with. As a human being I cannot fully understand the meaning to be found in the ball but from the dog's subjective experience it has discovered a meaning in it and so the difference of its being found or not has a meaning to the dog. Animals communicate with the world and construct and discover their own meaning within from their subjective viewpoint through their perceptions just as human beings do, and so they would also be conscious of the world and their experiences in it.

The argument against the appearance of animals making meaning in the world is that while it may appear so, there is a perfectly good mechanistic explanation of the behavior and so any subjective experience should be discarded. This was outlaid by Griffin earlier in the behavioristic model. The argument is that somehow the human brain is the key difference in that our vastly superior intellect and ability for self-reflection excludes other creatures from conscious experience as they lack ability to inform us of their subjective experiences. Firstly I must point out that the lack of ability to inform another being of a subjective experience does not exclude that experience from existence. For example people with extreme mental disabilities may lack the ability to inform us of their personal subjective experience but we do not simply conclude that they therefor have no interior conscious experiences. Another problem is that this outlook assumes an anthropocentric notion of consciousness, considering only the human subjective experience. Meaning to an animal would be different than meaning

to a human and this is reflected in the behavioral differences. Merleau-Ponty argued that “Thus in spite of what mechanistic biology might suggest, the world we live in is not made up only of things and space: some of these parcels of matter, which we call living beings, proceed to trace in their environment, by the way they act or behave, their very own vision of things.” (WP 75) He goes on to say that if only we were to pay enough attention to and “live alongside” the animal world we could see this to be true. Casting an anthropocentric lens on the study of animal behavior can limit our ability to understand it in any way other than by comparing it to human behavior, and so likewise as the saying goes if we judge a fish by its ability to climb trees we will think the fish very unskilled.

Another argument against this approach to consciousness deals with situations where a subject may still receive perceptions but not appear to be conscious of them like victims of severe strokes. In the case of the stroke victim they would still be subject to the same perceptions *persay*, such as the light in the room or sounds or touches but they may not respond at all to them. So if consciousness arises out of perception then the stroke victim should have a consciousness the argument goes. In response to the stroke victim critique I argue that since perception is a bodily phenomenon, and the brain is wired into the body at every level the consciousness that arises out of bodily perceptions would be altered if there where damage to the body in some way. This naturally includes the brain as the nerve center of the body and the filter through which many perceptions come. In the case of the stroke victim, there has been severe damage to the brain, through which their perceptions are received and likewise it would create a different perceptual world for the victim to have access to. Since consciousness, as previously mentioned, is an awareness of perceptions one must have the proper bodily organ in which to be aware with. So the stroke victim with the damaged brain has a vastly altered perceptual field which accounts for their apparent lack of what we could call conscious activities. Consciousness is still a very physical aspect of our being and as such damage to the physical body would alter the conscious experience.

The phenomenon of consciousness is a very complex and difficult thing to discuss, but phenomenology has shown to add new avenues of thought in dealing with it. The fields of Cognitive Ethology and the Cambridge declaration previously mentioned reflect a subtle shift in the acceptance of animal consciousness in the scientific field. The modern philosophical discussions of animal consciousness present a shift toward new perspectives on the issue. If Merleau-Ponty is correct and consciousness is rooted in the body stuck in the world, and Morris is correct that meaning can be constructed from differences that make a difference, then there is no reason to doubt that animals can also have conscious experience of the world. They are rooted in the same body-subject experience set in the same world of perceptions. Animals also experience differences that make a difference to their subjective experience and allow them to discover meaning in the world. Animals are conscious beings in the world the same as humans are, only from a different subjective experience. Taking a phenomenological approach to the

issue of animal minds opens up new directions in which we perceive the mind of another being and provides new insights into how we understand the phenomenon of consciousness itself.

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