

## THE RATIONALITY OF PLEASURE-SEEKING ANIMALS

By

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### I

It has been argued that in desiring pleasure and preferring it to pain, animals and human beings are responsible rationally to these feelings. Pleasure is good and worth wanting; there is reason to want it. This view, which I have defended elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> implies that the natural attraction which people and animals have for pleasure, and natural aversion to pain, is mediated in each of us by the intellectual or rational faculty, which guides us in forming these desires.

People who deny that animals are rational will reject this view. They will say an animal's desire for pleasure is not mediated by reason. In this paper I defend the rationality of pleasure-seeking animals. The issue of whether pleasure-seeking animals are responding rationally in desiring pleasure is important to value theory for two reasons. Firstly, we are concerned with whether our desires for ultimate ends are guided by reason. Secondly, the question of whether animals are rational is central to the evaluation of the ethical status of animals. Ceteris paribus, a rational sentient being is more significant ethically than a non-rational being.

I maintain that pleasure-seeking animals are rational at least in this respect: their belief and desire formation is normally guided by reason. Pleasure-seeking animals may be 'irrational' in the sense of 'comparatively unintelligent', but none are totally devoid of intelligence. Usually, we have at least some reason for desiring and believing that which we desire and believe.

It is logically possible that pleasure-seeking animals are conscious automata whose responses are not rational, as it is possible that the figures I consider 'people' are conscious automata. There is no more reason to doubt the rationality of pleasure-seeking animals than the rationality of other people. If someone assumes, as I do, that there is good reason to believe in other minds, he has much the same reason for assigning rationality to pleasure-seeking animals as he does to other persons.

In apparent intelligence and rationality, people and pleasure-seeking animals differ in degree not in kind. That a man trapped in an elevator tries various means of escaping provides evidence to others that he is using reason to find an escape; so, too, that an animal trapped in a box explores different means of escaping provides evidence that he is using reason. That animals respond flexibly and appropriately to problems, adopting means to ends, is evidence supporting their rationality.

The evidence we have that an animal wants pleasure is also evidence of reason. Were there non-rational beings that wanted pleasure and preferred pleasure to pain we would not know it. That an animal avoids situations that cause him pain shows that he recognizes a connection between that situation and the pain. When that prolongs an activity because he finds it pleasant, he assumes, with reason, that the act affects his pleasure. When a mouse avoids a turn in a psychologist's maze after being shocked earlier, this shows that on the basis of perceptual evidence that he recognizes that the shock occurred here and that he has ideas on how to avoid being shocked again. (He knows he felt a particular sensation here; since he does not know what electricity is, he does not know the sensation was a shock). In fearing repetition of the sensation he manifests inductive reasoning.

Some objections to assigning pleasure-seeking animals reason are captured in the following idea assigned to Epicurus: "living creatures, so soon as they are born, are well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the promptings of nature and apart from reason."<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, Epicurus reasoned as follows: since all creatures, including those with the least intelligence, have these attitudes towards pleasure and pain, and since they have these attitudes from birth or early in life when their rational capacities are negligible, their attitudes cannot be contingent on some rational consideration. The desire arises automatically and without deliberation. We do not need to think about the worthiness of pleasure to grow to want it. The desire for pleasure, therefore, must be instinctive not rational.

The desire for pleasure, Epicurus reasons, arises as a 'prompting of nature'. Neither animals nor people choose to desire pleasure. They do not reflect on whether or not they should desire pleasure. The desire is therefore instinctive and non-rational, Epicurus concludes. Many different ideas are entangled in this thinking.

I agree that the desire for pleasure is not 'instinctive' if one means 'without reason', but it is 'instinctive' if one means 'caused' or 'arising involuntarily'. That a desire arises involuntarily is no evidence that it is not grounded in reason. Beliefs

and desires normally arise involuntarily and without being chosen; this is so independently of the degree to which they are based on reason. I do not choose to believe that I am married or that  $2+2=4$ . I do not choose to desire that my children be happy and healthy. I do not choose to desire to produce new philosophical ideas. But this is not to say I have no reason for believing or desiring these things. Actions based on reason are normally chosen, but beliefs and desires based on reason normally are not.

Many actions of pleasure-seeking creatures--even some which may seem 'instinctive'--are mediated by reason. It may seem that when a squirrel scurries around the back of a tree as you approach, it is acting from instinct, not reason. The squirrel's physical endowment which enables him skillfully to climb trees is inherited. But the squirrel's action results from what he saw, i.e., through the evidence of his senses he believed someone was approaching. That the squirrel knows which way to scurry up the tree (i.e., clockwise or counter-clockwise) in order to be hidden from the approaching person shows he uses reason. Perhaps the squirrel is not really 'hiding from a threat', since he may not have the idea that I am a threat to him. But even if he is merely moving to where he cannot see me, and he is doing at least this, he still knows which way to go to keep the tree trunk between himself and me. And this knowledge implies the use of reason. The squirrel's behavior resembles that of a criminal ducking behind a car to avoid being seen. Like the squirrel's responses, the criminal's behavior may be nearly instantaneous and not accompanied by conscious deliberation. Yet, the criminal's action is grounded in reason, and we need not explain the squirrel's action differently.

Human beings and animals are born with a predisposition to use reason as they form beliefs and desires. As they form attitudes toward pleasure and pain these attitudes are mediated by reason. For a rational sentient being the 'promptings of nature' are rational; these promptings emanate from a rational disposition. For man it is a "prompting of nature" that his beliefs and desires arise in conjunction with reason. That man's desires arise in association with apprehension of things with merit is a 'prompting of nature'. That man desires what there is reason to desire, what is worth desiring, is a 'prompting of nature'. As Thomas Nagel writes of our aversion to pain, "The desire to make pain stop is simply evoked in the person who feels it... he doesn't have to decide to want it to stop.... He wants it to go away because it's bad."<sup>3</sup> What is true of a person's aversion to pain is also true of an animal's.

Many beliefs and desires which are guided by reason are formed without consciously contemplating the matter. Most people walking the earth right now believe they are wearing clothes, but few reflect on the matter. I may believe that I have a nose without having reflected on the matter and consciously weighed the evidence. In consequence of having been bitten by mosquitoes in a particular area, or barked at by a large dog, I may simply acquire a desire not to walk in a certain place.

In calling pleasure-seeking animals 'rational', I do not say they think in words, deliberate or form arguments. One can reason without doing these things. A person employs reason whenever he forms a judgment based on evidence, and such judgment need not involve deliberation and may even be instantaneous. A rational capacity is involved simply in recognizing something as a 'face' or a 'shoe', since the recognition is grounded in evidence from our senses. Because a comparison is required, reason is employed when an animal recognizes that one smell is different from another.

Using reason is not limited to thinking in words. When a musician composes a song, he thinks about what he is doing, but not all of his thoughts are fully formulated in words and some, no doubt, could not be. When a writer deliberates about which word to use many of his thoughts may not be articulated in words. These thoughts might, however, be rational. When a child learns its first words, it has reason for assigning words the meanings it assigns them; it responds to evidence of what the word means. Since these are its first words, it lacks the ability verbally to explain its understanding of a word.

That children and mice are 'content' with pleasure and 'at enmity with' pain shows that their attitudes are not mediated by sophisticated reason, not that their attitudes are not mediated by any reason. Creatures of elementary intelligence are capable of elementary insights.

Does not a fetus, a spider, or a worm withdraw from a pin prick? Does an amoeba not seek some stimuli and withdraw from others? Is this not an example of an animal devoid of rational insight welcoming pleasure and avoiding pain? In none of these cases it is certain that the living being feel pain. And though we might describe the animal as 'avoiding' something, it is by no means clear that it is avoiding pain. 'Withdrawal' is not proof of aversion to pain or even proof of pain. When kicked, a football 'withdraws' in haste from a foot, though it is not withdrawing from pain or even feeling pain. The response to the pain as such. (Many scientists would claim that a fetus, especially a young one, does not feel pain

or act purposefully.) It is doubtful if an amoeba feels pain. If a fetus withdraws when pricked this might be just a reflexive response caused by the skin being pricked and not an intentional attempt to escape pain grounded in an aversion to pain. Even if we assume the fetus does feel pain and that its reflexive reaction rids it of pain, this would not prove that the fetus dislikes pain. That the reflexive response avoids further pain is accidental, as it would be an accident if I reflexively kicked my doctor when, testing my reflexes, he tapped my knee. That the reaction avoids further pain does not in itself express an aversion to pain anymore than my knee kicking the doctor expresses aversion to the doctor.

Some people underrate the rationality of animals and young humans when overreacting to people who overrate the rationality of animals. A critic would be right to note that a dog lacks a sophisticated concept of bone and so cannot have desires and beliefs about 'bones' as you and I conceive of them. But it would be a mistake to overreact and say that dogs cannot have any concept of bone and so cannot have any desires or beliefs about those objects we call 'bones'.<sup>4</sup>

It might be objected that because animals do not know what reason is, and do not even have a concept of reason, they cannot form desires on the basis of reason or act for reasons. Desiring for a reason is comparable to believing for a reason. In neither case must one know that he has a reason for his desire or belief. A person might have good reason for believing or desiring a thing but be unable to say what his reason is. A person might be unable to say what his reason for believing he is awake, or believing  $2+4=6$ , or believing there is a table in front of him, yet have good reason for believing these things. Non-philosophers might not know how to answer such questions.

When someone desires something for a reason he need not be aware that this is his reason for desiring it, but he must be aware of that feature of the thing that he desires which provides him with reason for desiring it. If a man's reason for slamming on the brakes of his car is that there is an animal in the road, he must be aware of the animal in the road. If a mouse's reason for avoiding the electrically charged grate is the possibility of getting shocked by a psychologist, he is aware of the grate and the possibility of being shocked, and he believes that he may get shocked on the grate. An animal is aware of its own pain, and this pain grounds its aversion, though it is not aware that the pain grounds its aversion.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Why People Prefer Pleasure to Pain," Philosophy, Vol. 55, (1980), pp. 349-62.

<sup>2</sup>Diogenes Laertius, The Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Vol. II, p. 663.

<sup>3</sup>The Tanner Lectures on Human Values (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press), Vol. 1, 1980, p. 109.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Regan defends a similar position in The Case For Animal Rights (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 49-56.