

Beyond Assimilationism and Differentialism Comment on Glock

Geert Keil

In a number of articles, Hans-Johann Glock has argued against the “lingualist” view that higher mental capacities are a prerogative of language-users. He has defended the “assimilationist” claim that the mental capacities of humans and of non-human animals differ only in degree. In the paper under discussion, Glock argues that animals are capable of acting for reasons, provided that reasons are construed along the lines of the new “objectivist” theory of practical reasons.

1. Humans as paradigm cases

It is notoriously hard to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for intentional phenomena such as believing, desiring, having intentions, or acting for reasons. Without any doubt, however, human beings are paradigmatic instances. It cannot turn out that no human has ever held a belief, formed an intention, or acted on a reason. No other animal plays this paradigmatic role.

Paradigm case arguments have often been misused to advance dogmatic assertions. Wittgenstein’s under-argued dictum, “We only say of a human being and what is like one that it thinks”,¹ is a case in point. By contrast, my claim is quite modest. It is simply that humans have various mental abilities while it is at least an open question whether other animals exhibit a similar mentality.

This being said, the question presents itself as to *how similar* and *in what respects* a non-human animal must be similar in order to join the club. Note that this top-down approach to the issue of animal mentality is not biased in favour of “differentialism” and against “assimilationism”, in the sense that Glock uses these terms: “*Differentialists* maintain that there are crucial qualitative differences separating us from animals. *Assimilationists* maintain that the differences are merely quantitative and gradual.”² The *how-similar* approach does not prejudge this issue. Both extreme confidence and extreme skepticism about animal minds remain live options. Other research projects such as the bottom-up question of how cognitive abilities evolved remain perfectly legitimate. The point of the *how-similar* approach is just to circumvent, for the present

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1953, § 360.

² Hans-Johann Glock: “Animal Agency”, in: Timothy O’Connor and Constantine Sandis (Eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Action*, Oxford 2010, 384–392, at 384.

purpose, the intricate project of devising necessary and sufficient conditions for mental phenomena. If any non-human animal should be capable of believing, forming an intention, or acting on a reason, then its abilities must be sufficiently similar to paradigmatic instances, however ill-understood the phenomenon is.

2. On similarities and differences

Similarity comes cheap. Everything is like everything else, and in endless ways. If meant to be informative, a statement of similarity must be related to some point of comparison. Furthermore, in many of the relevant respects, similarity is a matter of degree.

As regards the similarities between humans and non-human animals, we can say a little more. First, a *genus proximum* suggests itself. Both are animals. Second, we have selected, for the present purpose, a point of comparison: their abilities. When comparing the abilities of human and nonhuman animals, we find numerous and striking similarities as well as dissimilarities. Most similarities are grounded in biology. Both humans and other animals have needs, live and die, reproduce, have sense organs, can move around, must show a certain amount of flexibility in their behaviour to stay alive. None of these common features hold for inanimate substances and artifacts. On the other hand, there are striking dissimilarities. Humans have invented science, morality, law, religion, poetry, irony, and philosophy. They transcend their cognitive niche by building telescopes, microscopes, Geiger counters and large hadron colliders. All humans by nature desire knowledge, even where no evolutionary benefit awaits. They know right and wrong, though not always right from wrong. They wonder about animal rights, while no other animal has ever wondered about human rights. Most notably, humans outperform other animals in a respect that marks the fairest conceivable standard: killing and avoiding being killed. Humans have devised means to defend their lives against tigers, rattlesnakes and scorpions. Conversely, the animals have not. Against our weapons, they are deplorably helpless.

Given these long, incomplete lists of similarities and differences, the battle of the giants between “assimilationism” and “differentialism” loses much of its bite. Both the similarities and the differences between human and non-human animals are numerous, striking and relevant. Insisting exclusively on one of the two lists verges on being silly.

3. Differences in kind and differences in degree

Even if a point of comparison has been agreed upon, the problem remains that similarity is a matter of degree. Most or even all mental abilities admit of degrees. A telling sign is the large number of modifier phrases to be found in the literature on animal mentality. Here is a selection, taken from Glock’s and Birnbacher’s papers in this volume: “only in an attenuated sense”, “at least rudimentary kinds of”, “not in a full-blown sense”, “at least simple judgments or beliefs”, “reason in the fullest sense”. These mod-

ifiers grade the degree of possession of mental abilities, and of the applicability of the respective predicates.

A strong argument for such gradation – though not for assimilationism – is provided by the brute facts of biological evolution and ontogenetic development. Mental abilities have not been around for all time, but they now exist. Arguably, they have evolved through intermediate stages. The question as to when exactly an emerging ability *F* began to deserve its name seems otiose. The same holds for ontogeny. On what day of his life did Little Hanjo carry out his first act of deliberation? What was the first action that he did for a reason? There seems to be no fact of the matter. As Wittgenstein once put it: “Light dawns gradually over the whole”.³

I insist that this holistic response as such neither supports assimilationism nor differentialism. Glock seems to think otherwise. He wonders how Wittgenstein’s “holistic lingualism”, can “do justice to the intermediary stages involved in every dawn”⁴, in particular, to the “stages that lie between the human infant, who can neither act for reasons nor reflect on them, and the adult, who can both?” (911)⁵ Now, what would “doing justice to intermediary stages” amount to? Are new terms needed that denote proto-intentions and proto-deliberations? We may say that “proto-deliberation” is such a term. It comes cheap, just as modifiers like “in an attenuated sense” and “at least rudimentary kinds of” do. Contrary to what Glock suggests, the awkwardness involved in finding apt descriptions of the intermediate stages of cognitive development has nothing to do with differentialism or with lingualist assumptions about the mind. Glock’s own account does not fare better. As speakers of a natural language, we are all in the same boat insofar as our intentional vocabulary is tailor-made for the fully developed phenomenon: for the mental capacities and performances of adult specimens of our species. All cases that fall short of the paradigm – infants, severely mentally retarded or handicapped persons, nonhuman animals, robots – put us in a quandary.

This quandary is familiar to us from the debate on semantic vagueness. Vague predicates admit borderline cases and give rise to the paradox of the heap. Where is the line between red and orange, where does baldness begin, what makes a heap a heap, when did Little Hanjo form his first intention? It is tempting to turn the insight that cognitive abilities come in degrees into an argument for assimilationism. But the temptation should be resisted. Continuity as such does not speak for assimilationism any more than the existence of borderline cases speaks for the nonexistence of clear-cut cases. The lesson to be drawn from the Sorites paradox is that the nonexistence of a sharp cut-off is compatible with the existence of clear-cut cases. The difference in hairiness between Telly Savalas and Reinhold Messner is a clear as can be. Obviously, smoothness of transition, and even perceptual indistinguishability between neighbouring ele-

³ Ludwig Wittgenstein: *On Certainty*, Oxford 1969, § 141.

⁴ Hans-Johann Glock: “Can Animals Act For Reasons?”, *Inquiry* 52 (2009), 232–254, at 247.

⁵ Page numbers without further reference relate to Glock’s contribution to this volume, “Animals: Agency, Reasons and Reasoning”.

ments in a Sorites series, can go along with striking differences between starting point and end point. The similarity relation is not transitive.

Assimilationists hold that the mental abilities of humans and non-human animals differ only in degree. Differentialists hold that they differ in kind. Now what exactly is the difference between a vast gradual difference and a difference in kind? Is there a fact of the matter? As long as neither camp has solved the Sorites paradox, the question as to whether a certain difference in a mental ability is gradual or qualitative strikes me as ill-defined.

On closer observation, Glock's own views about animal minds are anything but gradualist. His main criterion for animal rationality is that the animal's behaviour be "plastic, responsive to altering circumstances" (902). Such plasticity is exhibited only by "some higher animals" whose problem-solving strategies "are not innate or result from rigid stimulus-response patterns" (*ibid.*). Accordingly, Glock has a differentialist view concerning the relation between non-rational and rational animals. He just draws the line elsewhere in the animal kingdom, compared to *anthropological* differentialism. Hence he himself faces the hard question of where to draw the line. If primates, cats, dogs and crows exhibit enough plasticity and flexibility in their behaviour while, say, fruit flies do not, then at what point exactly did these features come into existence in evolutionary history? It is very plausible that for any proposed demarcation, the animal kingdom will supply intermediate stages and borderline cases.

So be it. Plausibly, animal rationality and animal mentality in all their dimensions and aspects come in degrees. Still, evolutionary continuity does not suffice to support assimilationist views. As long as the difference between a vast gradual difference and a difference in kind resists analysis, the question of whether the mental abilities of human and non-human animals differ in kind or in degree is ill-defined. Far from supporting one of the parties, the availability of Soritean little-by-little arguments to absurd conclusions shows how futile and unhelpful the large-scale distinction between assimilationism and differentialism is.

4. The case against lingualism: Who is begging the question?

"Lingualism" about animal mentality, according to Glock, "maintains on *a priori* conceptual grounds that their lack of language precludes animals from possessing mental capacities at all, or at least the 'higher' mental capacities required for agency" (900). "Lingualist skepticism about animal mentality"⁶ is the main target of his criticism. Given his definition of "lingualism", all lingualist arguments to the effect that certain capacities are a prerogative of language-users turn out to be question-begging.

Glock construes lingualism as an *a priori* claim. This move is conducive to shifting the burden of proof to the lingualist. But why should a Davidsonian lingualist accept this move? He might invoke Morgan's canon instead and argue that behavioural evi-

⁶ Glock: "Can Animals Act for Reasons?", *op. cit.*, 232.

dence alone does not suffice to ascribe the higher mental capacities required for genuine agency. Being able to communicate one's attitudes to other language users would suffice, but since this ability presupposes sharing a language, it cannot serve for Glock as a touchstone of higher mental capacities. Those who give language-involving capacities centre stage, on the other hand, might well argue that their centrality shows that having a language matters. There is no easy way out of this dialectical situation. In the absence of independent arguments, dismissing a "lingualist" and "excessively *intellectualist* [...] picture of human action"⁷ does not cut much ice. In an undemanding sense, animals can surely perform "actions".⁸

I agree that there is an air of apriorism to some of Davidson's arguments against animal mentality. Pressing the distinction between empirical and *a priori* grounds too hard is, however, unwise. It is known from other cases that firmly established empirical correlations in the long run tend to become entrenched as conceptual connections.

Critics of lingualism hold that animals can entertain those beliefs and thoughts that do not require linguistic representation. Some lingualists claim that this class is empty. Ruth Millikan argues that mental states of a certain kind, namely those with a propositional structure, require the possession of theoretical "unicepts", which only humans have developed.⁹ Similarly, Davidson does not make linguistic capacities obligatory on *a priori* grounds, but because they are required for the ability to grasp propositions: "Language is the organ of propositional perception. Seeing sights and hearing sounds does not require thoughts with propositional content; perceiving how things are does, and this ability develops along with language."¹⁰ For the purpose of pinpointing the anthropological difference, this is the right line to take, I think. The challenge for the assimilationist is that the class of language-involving mental states is so large. It is not just that some thoughts and ideas never occur to non-human animals, in the way that I often think about soccer while my wife couldn't care less. The point is rather that a huge and highly relevant class of beliefs, desires, thoughts, and intentions is beyond the reach of non-human animals, because they do not possess, and cannot acquire, the required concepts.

⁷ Glock: "Can Animals Act for Reasons?", op. cit., 246.

⁸ Here are two polemic analogies: Can brains *compute*? Surely they can. Just rid yourself of the preoccupation that computation has anything to do with manipulating numbers. Does the navigation system in my car *know* anything? Surely it does. Just rid yourself of the preoccupation that knowledge has anything to do with having justified true beliefs.

⁹ "A unicept is a taking or holding as one – it is a capacity which takes in many proximal stimulations and holds them as one distal object, property or kind. [...] Animals too must have unicepts of distal things. My suggestion will be that only humans have theoretical unicepts, however. Other animals have only practical unicepts." Ruth G. Millikan: "What's inside a thinking animal?", this volume, 890–1.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson: "Seeing Through Language", in: John Preston (ed.), *Thought and Language*, Cambridge 1997, 15–27, at 22.

5. Acting for reasons – can objectivism about practical reasons help?

Glock's main concern in his paper is the capacity to act for reasons. He claims that many non-human animals share this capacity and he tries to support his view by invoking the new "objectivistic" account of practical reasons, according to which reasons are facts or states of affairs, rather than beliefs or belief-desire pairs. The objectivistic theory, according to Glock, "*removes an important obstacle* to crediting animals with the capacity to act for reasons" (907).

This move strikes me as audacious, since the objectivistic theory has a number of well-known shortcomings in its original application to human agency. It would be quite surprising if these shortcomings could be remedied by extending, or misapplying, the theory to new cases.

The new theory is opposed to the received view, as held by Hume and Davidson. Here is a concise expression of the received view: "Your stepping on my toes neither explains nor justifies my stepping on your toes unless I believe you stepped on my toes, but the belief alone, true or false, explains my action".¹¹ Glock calls the received belief/desire theory "subjectivist" and depicts the objectivist alternative thus: "In so far as the reasons for which an agent acts can be said to be beliefs and desires at all, they are not subjective states of believing or desiring, but *what is believed* or *what is desired*" (905).

In the remainder of this comment, I shall argue that objectivism about practical reasons does not help to defend the claim that non-human animals can act for reasons. My views are the following:

- (i) The ontological question as to what practical reasons essentially are, either mental states or facts, sets the debate on the wrong track.
- (ii) Both the objectivist and the subjectivist theory have both absurd and acceptable readings.
- (iii) On the readings that make them acceptable, both theories converge.
- (iv) On these readings, animals cannot act for reasons.

I cannot explain and defend these views in detail here. To begin with, let us take a look at how Glock advances the objectivist view: "My reason for Φ -ing is what I would or could specify in a sincere response to the question 'Why are you Φ -ing?'" (906). I agree. Reasons are answers to why-questions. (Should I add that animals do not put and answer such questions?) Then Glock provides a piece of linguistic evidence: "And this answer typically takes the form 'Because p ' rather than 'Because I believe that p '" (ibid.) Agreed, again. The agent would however not answer "Because p " unless he believed that p . Remember Davidson's vignette: The mere fact that someone stepped on my toes does not explain my vengeful mood, but my belief does. The crucial point is that in giving the answer "Because p " it is tacitly understood that I believe that p . It would be redundant and, for Gricean reasons, even inappropriate for me to mention my belief

¹¹ Donald Davidson: "Actions, Reasons and Causes", in his *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford 1980, 8.

rather than the believed fact. Hence, the proffered piece of linguistic evidence does not at all speak against the belief/desire theory.

Glock continues: “My reason for taking an umbrella is that it is raining, *not* that I *believe* that it is raining; for it is the weather rather than my own mental state that makes taking an umbrella good in my eyes” (ibid.). As is generally known, “belief” is multiply ambiguous. In the present context, the ambiguity between *what is believed* and *the mental state of believing* is relevant. Objectivists typically use the content-state ambiguity in order to portray the subjectivist theory as absurd. Glock is no exception. He claims that Davidson holds the following: “In Davidson, for instance, *A*’s reason for Φ -ing is roughly speaking *A*’s mental state of believing that *p* will lead to *q*, in combination with her mental state of desiring that *q*” (908). This is *very* roughly speaking. Glock resolves the content-state ambiguity in an uncharitable way, and actually at odds with what Davidson explicitly says in many places.

In Davidson’s theory of action explanation, mental attitudes play a dual role. They both cause and rationalize the action. On closer inspection, though, the item that causes and the item that rationalizes fall apart. It is the *occurrence* of the attitude, i. e. the mental event, which causes the action, while it is the *content* of the attitude which rationalizes the action. The causal relation holds between two occurrences, that is, between the mental event and the bodily movement. The relation of rationalization holds between the *propositional content* of the mental attitude and the *description* of the action. In the slogan “reasons are causes”, sometimes regarded as the hallmark of Davidson’s theory, these subtleties get lost. But compare what Davidson actually says: “the propositional contents of the explaining attitudes and beliefs must bear a certain logical relation to the description under which the action is explained”.¹² The undisputed fact that propositional contents and action descriptions cannot be causally related creates serious trouble for the alignment of the causal part of Davidson’s theory, but this is not our topic today.

In Davidson’s theory of reasons explanations, the content-state ambiguity of the term “belief” is resolved in favour of belief contents. Now for the objectivist theory, or rather for Glock’s version of it. Glock does not simply state that reasons are facts rather than beliefs. His views are more subtle: “Reasons [...] are not subjective states of believing or desiring, but *what is believed* or *what is desired*. [...] An agent *A* [...] is capable of acting for a reason iff *A* can act in the light of reasons, that is, in the light of facts (as *A* sees them).” (905)

I fail to see the dramatic difference between this account and a non-absurd reading of the received view. Acting for reasons means acting “in the light of facts”, to which Glock adds the subjectivist clause “as *A* sees them”. The clause accounts for the problem, fatal to crude versions of objectivism, that the mere presence of some unperceived fact in the agent’s surroundings will not elicit, let alone motivate, any reaction from him. Taking Glock’s subjectivist addendum seriously, a better way to express his view would be that, rather than *being identical to* reasons, facts *yield* reasons. Both Glock

¹² Davidson: *Essays on Actions and Events*, op. cit., xii.

and Davidson leave some conceptual slack between the equated items. For Davidson, *giving* a reason is a matter of *naming* attitudes, rather than its *consisting of* these attitudes.¹³ In Glock, the slack is provided by the “in the light of”-relation. What matters is not the ‘illuminated’ entity but the agent’s acting in the light of it, thereby *adopting* the fact as a reason.

I submit that on charitable readings, both theories of practical reasons show a high degree of convergence. But instead of tracing in detail the required exegetical clarifications and refinements, I shall state in my own words why the question as to what reasons essentially are, viz. either mental states or facts, is misleading, and second, why a non-misleading account of what it takes to act for a reason is bad news for Glock’s crediting animals with this capacity.

Reasons are answers to why-questions. Practical reasons are answers to the question of why someone has done something. The question as to which ontological category reasons belong leads us astray. What sheds light on the phenomenon is the practice of *giving* reasons, rather than the thing given. The point of this practice lies not in *what* is being mentioned, but in the relation between what is mentioned and what it is mentioned for. Citing something as a reason is to characterize the item *relationally*.¹⁴

Plausible versions of subjectivism and objectivism coincide in citing *what is believed* and *what is desired*, hence propositional contents, as reasons. A propositional content *is* not a reason, but *becomes* one if it is adduced in the appropriate justificatory context. Facts obtain, beliefs are held, but reasons only come into existence by being *adopted* as reasons.

Now if something along these lines is correct, then the problem with non-human animals is that they are not engaged in the practice of giving and taking reasons. They cannot represent their beliefs, if they have any, as something that speaks for or against an action. The “in-the-light-of”-relation is opaque to them. The light being shed is in the eye of the beholder.

Glock is remarkably close to such a view of practical reasoning when he holds that “what counts instead [of conscious processes of reasoning] is the capacity of the agent *A*, for instance, the ability to justify her beliefs and actions”.¹⁵ This is grist to my mill. What counts is, in a nutshell, the capacity of *logon didonai*. This is bad news for assimilationism, since justifying one’s actions by giving reasons is a capacity that nonhuman animals undisputedly lack. *Logon didonai*, the ability to give reasons, does not only matter for action explanations, it matters crucially for pinpointing the anthropological difference. Insisting, as Glock does, that animals are nevertheless capable of acting for reasons, since “acting purposively or in pursuit of a goal qualifies as acting for a reason” (904), and furthermore, since facts obtain in the light of which their behaviour

¹³ “Giving the reason why an agent did something is often a matter of naming a pro-attitude or the related belief or both.” Davidson: “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, op. cit., 4.

¹⁴ Compare: citing something as a cause is not introducing a new entity, but redescribing an event in terms of its causal role, i. e., by its relations to other events.

¹⁵ Glock: “Can Animals Act for Reasons?”, op. cit., 238.

is purposive, strikes me as a misuse of the phrase “acting for a reason”. Exhibiting behaviour that is evaluable in the light of facts by sensible evaluators is quite unlike being able to make up one’s mind about what speaks for an action and acting on such considerations. Using the same description for such different phenomena is not illuminating.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thanks to Louise Röska-Hardy and to Rory Domm for polishing my English.