

Phenomenology and the Problem of Animal Minds

Simon P. James

February 2009

Contents

Abstract 3
Keywords 3
1. Preliminaries 3
2. The Problem of Animal Minds 4
3. Heidegger on Other Minds 5
4. An Interspecies *Mitsein*? 6
5. Beyond Heidegger 7
6. Cruelty and the Animal’s Gaze 9
7. Undercutting Scepticism 10
8. The Case Against ‘True’ Scepticism 12
9. Conclusions 13
Notes 14
References 14

Abstract

Attempts to determine whether nonhuman animals have minds are often thought to raise a particular sceptical concern; I call it the problem of animal minds. If there are such things as animal minds, the sceptic reasons, they will be private realms to which we humans do not have direct epistemological access. So how could one ever know for certain that animals are not mindless mechanisms? In this paper I use a phenomenological approach to show that this familiar sceptical problem presupposes an account of our relations with others which is both too individualistic and too ‘mentalistic’ to shed interpretative light on our relations with animals. I conclude that although inquiries into how animals experience the world raise a host of difficult problems, they do not raise one big problem, the problem of animal minds, which must be solved before any such inquiries can get off the ground.

Keywords

Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, animals, minds, consciousness, embodiment, phenomenology, solipsism

1. Preliminaries

Do any nonhuman animals have minds? We cannot, so to speak, get inside the head of an animal. How, then, can we know whether there is anything going on there? — The questions require clarification (Which animals are we referring to? What is a mind? What counts as knowledge in such cases?), yet the sceptical problem to which they give voice should be familiar. I shall refer to it as the problem of animal minds.

My primary aim in this paper is, by means of a phenomenological investigation, to show that this familiar sceptical problem presupposes an implausible account of how we relate to others, both human and nonhuman. But before I do this, I need to explain what I mean by ‘minds’, ‘animals’ and ‘scepticism regarding animal minds’. So: to say that a being has a mind is, I will take it, to say that there is something it is like to be that being (even if it is impossible to know *what it* would be like to be that being) (cf. Nagel 1974). In other words, I will be concerned with the question of whether animals have ‘phenomenal consciousness’, and not with more specific questions regarding their ability to remember or their capacity for conceptual thought. Moreover, my aim in this paper is not to determine which nonhuman animals (or for convenience, ‘animals’) have minds. Instead, I focus on those animals that seem most clearly to be minded, namely higher mammals (although I do consider other kinds of animal in the concluding section). Finally, by ‘scepticism regarding animal minds’, I mean any view to the effect that all animals might be or are in fact without minds.

2. The Problem of Animal Minds

The problem of animal minds presupposes the following account of our epistemic situation. I have immediate epistemological access to my own mind; I know, to speak loosely, that there is something going on in my own head. But how can I be sure that beings other than myself are minded? It must be at least logically possible that my dog, for instance, is nothing more than a complicated machine. The problem, then, is one of getting from *here* (my immediate awareness of my own mind) to *there* (the mind of another). Some sort of epistemological ‘bridge’ is needed — an argument from analogy, say, or an inference to the best explanation.¹

Framed in these terms, the problem of animal minds is evidently a special case of a more general sceptical doubt, the problem of other minds. Yet there are reasons for thinking that the problem of animal minds is distinctive, that the attempt to bridge the epistemological gap between a human mind and the mind of an animal presents a special challenge. For one thing, the behaviour of animals, unlike the often more complex behaviour of humans, might appear to be explicable, at least in principle, in terms of non-conscious processes.² For another, unlike most humans, animals cannot tell us what they are thinking or feeling.³ Consequently, evidence that they are thinking or feeling anything at all is often presumed to be lacking (see further, Jamieson 1998:91).

In the face of such difficulties, the sceptic concludes that there is always a chance that any particular animal is mindless and so merely a complicated machine or something of that kind. So whereas it might seem, to most of us, that at least some animals are minded, the sceptic maintains that this is open to question. This kind of scepticism is often associated with Descartes, although its strongest advocate was probably Nicolas Malebranche, for whom animals ‘eat without pleasure, cry without pain, grow without knowing it ... desire nothing, fear nothing, know nothing’ (quoted in Harrison 1992: 219).⁴ It persists in the works of modern writers, too (see the discussions in Jamieson 1998:100–1 and Rollin 2007:270–2). Thus the animal behaviourist J. S. Kennedy denounces what he calls ‘the new anthropocentrism’, and proclaims that ‘although we cannot be certain that no animals are conscious, we can say that it is most unlikely that any of them are’ (1992: 31).

¹ E.g. M. S. Dawkins: ‘no amount of measurements can tell us what animals are actually experiencing. Their private mental experiences, if they have them, remain inaccessible to direct observation... So, if we are to conclude that animals do experience suffering in ways similar to ourselves, then this conclusion has to be based, in the end, on an analogy with our own feelings’ (1980: 102).

² Though Skinnerian behaviourists would no doubt contend that even human behaviour can be explained by reference to non-conscious processes.

³ In view of recent studies of certain great apes, this, arguably, should read ‘*most* animals’ (see, for example, Helds et al. 2005).

⁴ The view that Descartes denied that animals have minds has been challenged by Cottingham (1978). Cottingham’s defence is rebutted in Harrison (1992). Harrison’s measured conclusion is that Descartes ‘did not adamantly insist that animals could not feel... but rather showed that there are no irresistible reasons for asserting that they do’ (227).

3. Heidegger on Other Minds

My aim in this paper is to bring a phenomenological approach to bear upon these issues. To do this I will begin by discussing a case set out in a classic phenomenological text, namely, Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

At first sight, this might seem an odd place to begin. After all, in *Being and Time* Heidegger has nothing to say about animal minds and very little to say about the epistemological problem of other minds. However, I will try to show in what follows that his analysis of 'being-with' (*Mitsein*) (§§25–27) can be brought to bear upon the latter and indeed upon the former as well.

Before considering how the analysis of *Mitsein* may be brought to bear upon these issues it is important to note that Heidegger's aim in *Being and Time* is not directly to address the standard list of epistemological and metaphysical problems concerning other minds, say, or the existence of the external world. His aim is rather to provide an accurate account of what it is to be the kind of being to whom such questions can occur.⁵ In the light of such an account, he suggests, many of these standard 'problems' will reveal themselves to depend for their plausibility on false accounts of what it means to exist as we do (what it means to exist as 'Dasein'). So with regard to the problem of other minds, Heidegger's aim is not to solve the problem, to prove that other minded beings exist, but rather to describe, as best he can, what it is to be the kind of being that can ponder such matters. His conclusion, briefly stated, is that once one sets out, working from one's own case, to do this one will always find that one's description refers to other beings like oneself.

Consider, for example, one's relations to things. Heidegger maintains that to exist as we do is necessarily to inhabit a world (to be 'in-the-world'), which in part is to say that when one describes how it is to be the being that one is, one finds that one must refer to certain items in the world, an 'environmental context of equipment' (1997: 154). Thus to describe how I am right now is to describe the pen I am holding, the notebook on which I am writing, the article I hope to complete, and so on. To describe these things and their various relations to me, however, I must refer to others who are, in certain important respects, like me. The pen is *mine*, which amongst other things is to say that it might once have been the property of someone else. It has a certain function: it is something that one writes with, where this 'one' refers primarily to an anonymous collective of others (*das Man*). The article I am writing will, I hope, be read by others — beings who, like me, are in-the-world. This should not be taken to imply that I first perceive certain items of equipment and then infer the existence of others. On the contrary, the actual or potential presence of others is integral to the presentation of these things. As Heidegger puts it, 'The Others who are thus "encountered" in [an]...

⁵ This is his proximate aim. His ultimate aim is, by way of an analysis of our way of being, to shed light on the question of Being. I do not discuss this difficult topic here. For an accessible introduction to it, see Polt 1999.

environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought...'(1997: 154).

For Heidegger, then, our way of being is a being-in-the-world, which is necessarily a being-with others (1997: §26): 'Dasein is essentially Being-with [*Mitsein*]' (1997:156). This is not to say that we are essentially sociable creatures, since being-with is the condition for the possibility not only for conviviality but also for hostility and sociopathy. Nor does being-with require the actual presence of others. We are of course sometimes alone. Yet such moments count as moments of *solitude* or *isolation* on account of the actual absence of others who might have been present (1997:156–7). Even Descartes' solitary meditations before his stove indicate a particular mode of being-in-the-world and hence a particular mode of being-with-others.

How does Heidegger's account of being-with bear upon the problem of other minds? To repeat, his aim is not to solve the problem, to prove that other beings *do* have minds, but to develop a phenomenological account of how things are with us. Yet the account he develops suggests that scepticism regarding other minds depends for its plausibility on a false account of being-in-the-world. If one supposes oneself to be in the radically isolated epistemological position of having to infer the existence of anything outside the domain of one's own consciousness, then, to be sure, sceptical doubts of this kind will seem pressing. If, however, one recognises that one's being-in-the-world is 'always already' a being-with others, such doubts are more difficult to uphold. In this fashion, Heidegger *undercuts* scepticism regarding other minds (by rendering problematic the radically individualistic conception of human existence that it presupposes), even if he does not decisively *refute* it (by proving that solipsism is not logically possible).

4. An Interspecies *Mitsein*?

As we saw, Heidegger's proximate aim is to shed light on a particular way of being-in-the-world, that of Dasein. It is tempting to say that while his ultimate aim is to elucidate the question of Being, his first concern is with *human* being, and in support of this suggestion one might note that (adult) human beings do indeed typically exist as Dasein. But the concept of Dasein is not coextensivewiththatofhumanbeing(Schatzki 1992:82; cf. Thomson2004: 401), and being-in-the-world is, to be precise, a being-with-other-Dasein, not a being-with-other-humans. Yet for all this Heidegger himself fails to follow up the implications of his own reasoning, assuming instead that the token others one is 'with' (i.e., 'with' in an existentially fundamental sense) are all of a certain (human) type. In particular, he maintains that although an animal is 'open' to the world, it is not open to the world in the way that Dasein is (1995: §§62). Consequently, he claims, a being-with animals is not possible.

Why exactly is Heidegger unwilling to admit the possibility of an interspecies being-with? Is such a relation unthinkable in the context of his account of *Mitsein*? Or can that account be adapted to encompass our relations with nonhuman others?

One might think that the problem is simply with Heidegger's choice of example. *Being and Time* does not abound with phenomenological descriptions of our relations with animals, but that, one might suppose, is simply because Heidegger chose to illustrate the fundamental structures of being-in-the-world by considering our manipulation of certain artefacts (the famous hammer of §15, for example). I found this a natural place to begin as well, choosing to introduce the concept of *Mitsein* by describing my relations to my pen, my notebook, and so forth. Here, as in Heidegger's own examples, the things are all artefacts and the others referred to all human.

But what if I had chosen a different situation, one centred not on my manipulation of certain artefacts, but on my encounters with certain nonhuman beings?

Imagine, then, that I am contemplating these matters, not sat at my desk, but while out walking my dog. To describe how I am is at once to describe my situation, and my situation is that I am walking through fields near my home, the sun on my face, relishing the space and freedom. Others are integral to my perception of the world. I am walking on the edges of the *farmer's* field. This is the sort of thing *one* does. As Heidegger pointed out, my walking must be understood against a background of shared, public understanding (cf. 1997: 153). Yet this 'public' is not entirely human. My dog, Lucy, is also present, excitedly rooting around in the hedgerow — like me, enjoying the sun. In fact, I perceive the sun as something in which we, Lucy and I, take pleasure. Lying in some nettles is a stick, bearing the tooth-marks that identify it as Lucy's. Her presence is, one might say, written into it. Indeed this entire stretch of field is part of Lucy's walk; her presence (or potential presence) is integral to my perceiving the field as the thing it is. In this situation, the things with which I interact refer, not to a merely human world, but to a wider, interspecies context, including both humans and at least one hairy nonhuman one.

5. Beyond Heidegger

It might be tempting, on the basis of this example, to conclude that we should simply enlarge the boundaries of Heidegger's conception of *das Man*, to grant that the things with which we interact refer, not just to other human Dasein, but to a wider, interspecies public.

But this conclusion should be resisted. The concept of 'the public', like Heidegger's concept of *das Man*, refers to a distinctively human domain, such that talk of an 'interspecies public' is oxymoronic. Indeed, even talk of 'communities', which might, at first sight, seem more amenable to a cross-species interpretation,⁶ is inappropriate. My interaction with Lucy was precisely that: an interaction between one being and another. Efforts to conceive it in terms of the intimation of some kind of interspecies 'public' or 'community' are, at the very least, strained.

⁶ See, for instance, Aldo Leopold's speculations on a 'biotic community' of humans and nonhumans (and even more radically, 'soil, waters, plants ... collectively: the land') (1968: 204).

So how as a phenomenologist is one to understand my interactions with Lucy? Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein* might not be the best place to start. For although in his accounts of solicitude (*Flirsorge*) Heidegger gestures towards an analysis of interpersonal, 'face-to-face' relations, his main concern is with social relations, or, more precisely, with the anonymous collective of *das Man*. As Sartre explains, 'Heidegger's being-with is not the clear and distinct position of an individual confronting another individual [as in Hegel, for example]... but the mute existence in common of one member of the crew with his fellows, that existence which the rhythm of the oars or the regular movements of the coxswain will render sensible to the rowers and which will be made manifest to them by the common goal to be attained, the boat or the yacht to be overtaken, and the entire world (spectators, performance, etc.) which is profiled on the horizon' (1991: 246–7).⁷

This noted, how are we to understand my interactions with Lucy? It is, I would suggest, misleading to say that this encounter involves a meeting of minds. On the one hand, such talk evokes the radically individualistic, Cartesian conception of human being that was (arguably) undermined by Heidegger's analysis. On the other, talk of a meeting of minds is, to speak loosely, too 'mentalistic' to capture my interactions with Lucy. My being-with Lucy, if it may be so described, involved an intertwining of bodily intentions, a shared response of two lived bodies to a common situation. It certainly cannot be understood on the basis of a model that is merely cognitive.

To capture the bodily dimension of our relations with animals, it is helpful to leave Heidegger's analysis of *Mitsein* and turn instead to Merleau-Ponty's account of the 'lived body'. Indeed Merleau-Ponty explicitly pitches his account of interpersonal relations against those that employ the idiom of 'meeting minds'. 'To begin with', he writes, '[others] are not there as minds... but such for example as we face them in anger or love — faces, gestures, spoken words to which our own respond without thoughts intervening' (1964a: 181).⁸ To be sure, Merleau-Ponty is referring to other humans, rather than to animals. But his analysis could be applied to animals as well. So, for instance, with regard to my relations with Lucy, it is true that she and I share an understanding; but that sharing takes the form of an unspoken dialogue of expression and gesture, more like a dance than an exchange of emails (cf. Ruonakoski 2007: 77). Lucy's movements make sense to me - I can, so to speak, read what they are saying, what she is saying; and I respond to her in kind. She executes a 'play bow' (drops down onto her forepaws, tail up), and I respond to her unconsciously, bending towards her, patting my knees. I mimic her movements, and she mine, through a kind of pre-reflective 'postural impregnation'.⁹

⁷ Interestingly, Heidegger later came to endorse Sartre's view that the analysis of *Mitsein*, as presented in *Being and Time*, did not do justice to the phenomenology of interpersonal relations (Zahavi 2001: 158, n.7).

⁸ Merleau-Ponty is here describing Husserl's view, which on this topic he endorses.

⁹ See Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 145. See also Merleau-Ponty 1996:353–4; Abram 1996: 21; Caputo 1993: 126–7. To say that I am 'with' Lucy is not to say that my communications with her are always

If talk of a meeting of minds is inappropriate, then so too is talk of ‘epistemological bridges’. I do not perceive a Lucy-shaped body, only subsequently inferring that that body houses a mind, and I am sure that Lucy does not perform a similar inference in perceiving me. Nor indeed do I *assume* that the dog-shaped body I perceive houses a mind. I am ‘with’ others in an existential sense right from the start, and there is no good reason to suppose that the others I am ‘with’ do not include Lucy.

This is not to postulate an empathic kinship between man and dog. As Heidegger maintains, talk of empathy ‘suggests that we must first “feel our way into” the other being in order to reach it. And this implies that we are “outside” in the first place’ (1995: 203).¹⁰ By contrast, Lucy is not, as it were, *over there*, on the far side of an epistemological gulf, to be bridged, perhaps, by an argument from analogy or an inference to the best explanation. No, she is already *here*, in the Da of my Dasein. There is no question of me proving that she is a minded other, rather than a mere thing, since her being a genuine other to whom I am related is presupposed in a rigorous account of my being-in-the-world.

6. Cruelty and the Animal’s Gaze

I am not the first to have considered the possibility of a being-with animals. Following a remark from Derrida (1989:57), Simon Glendinning speculates on an ‘original Mitsein’ between humans and animals (1998:72). Likewise, John D. Caputo chastises Heidegger for having ignored the possibility of ‘a kind of Mit-sein ... a way to be “with” animals’ (1993:127), while Charles S. Brown defends the notion of an interspecies ‘being-with-others’ (2007: 94). All of these writers suggest that we are ‘with’ animals, in an existential sense, even if (as they all acknowledge) we are not ‘with’ them in the same way that we are typically ‘with’ our fellow humans and even if they tend to assume — wrongly, as I have argued — that such interspecies interactions are best conceived on the model of Heidegger’s account of interpersonal relations, rather than that of Merleau-Ponty.

One of the chief merits of a phenomenological approach is that it can shed light on *how* precisely we are ‘with’ animals. For if it is granted that we can be ‘with’ animals, then it must also be granted that we can be ‘with’ them in a variety of ways. It is true that our being-with animals is expressed in our relations with our pets, for instance.¹¹ Yet such observations, illustrated with tales of faithful dogs and the like, should not

undistorted. On the contrary, we regularly *misread* animal behaviour (when, for example, we greet dogs by making eye contact, bending over them and patting them — actions which, to dogs, tend to signal hostile intent). I see no reason, however, why being-with a particular creature must involve one’s communicating with that creature in a ‘pure’ or undistorted way.

¹⁰ For an alternative view of empathy, see Painter 2007.

¹¹ Interestingly, both Glendinning and Brown illustrate what it might mean to be ‘with’ an animal by describing their relations with their pet dogs (see also, Shapiro 1997). I too found this a natural place to begin.

encourage one to conclude that being-with animals necessarily takes this form. For being-with is also the condition for the possibility of our feeling alienated from or hostile towards animals and, as such, is evident, not only in our warm relations with such creatures as pet dogs, but also, for instance, in our capacity (or the capacity of some of us) to mistreat animals.

This point is often overlooked. Caputo, for instance, is correct to note that a key mode of being-with is compassion, and we do indeed often understand animals' suffering (1993:127).¹² But it is important not to romanticise our dealings with animals. After all, Caputo lives in the United States, not in the Spanish village of Coria in which a bull is ritually beaten, shot and stabbed to death, presumably as some form of enactment of the reality of human suffering (Ferry 1995: 43). This cruelty is also an expression — albeit a perverted one — of our being-with animals. It is possible precisely because we do *not* relate to the animal as a thing but are rather 'with' it in an existential being-with (Ferry 1995: 53). If the animal were regarded as a thing — a bull-shaped lump of beef or whatever — the ritual would not inspire such fascination.

Furthermore, our being-with animals is evident not only in how we see them, but also in how, as it were, we feel their eyes upon us. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre discusses the existential significance of being seen by others, suggesting that the 'relation' 'Being-seen-by-the-Other' is integral to one's being-in-the-world (1991: 257). His argument is convoluted, and I will not explain it here. His conclusion, however, is that feelings such as shame and pride testify to our being-with others and thus militate against solipsism, for in such feelings one 'live[s]... the situation of being looked at' by the other (1991: 261).

Now Sartre, like Heidegger, does not countenance the possibility of a being-with animals, and this is reflected in his decision to focus on the feelings of shame and pride. One can, arguably, only feel ashamed or proud before another human (and perhaps God). But there is no good reason to suppose that the others by whom one can be seen must all be human or divine. In the forest at night the feeling of being watched can be palpable, sometimes overwhelming. Yet here the gaze one feels is not human. One's being-with others takes the form of the primeval understanding between predator and prey (see further, Hatley 2004). There is no good reason, in the light of such situations, to suppose that *Mitsein* can only encompass human others.

7. Undercutting Scepticism

It is not my aim to prove that we¹³ are 'with' animals in this sense — that would require a more careful and detailed study. My aim is merely to suggest that it is unreasonable to assume that *Mitsein* can only incorporate our relations to other humans.

¹² As they sometimes understand ours (see Glendinning 1998: 142).

¹³ This 'we' might sound presumptuous. I discuss this point below.

But let's assume for the sake of argument that Glendinning et al are correct and that we are 'with' animals. Does this suffice to refute scepticism regarding animal minds?

The sceptic would contend that it does not. She might employ a narrow definition of 'mind' — one that refers to higher-order thoughts about thoughts, for example¹⁴ — and conclude that, however much ink is spilt in an attempt to demonstrate our being-with them, the hypothesis that animals are minded in this sense of the term remains unproven. Or she might insist that it remains logically possible that all those beings I seem to be 'with' lack minds, that the human-shaped ones are 'zombies' and the animal-shaped ones mechanisms.

The sceptic has a point. It might indeed be logically possible that the animal-shaped beings with which I seem to share the world are mindless machines. However, the phenomenological account sketched above was never meant to *refute* scepticism regarding animal minds. Its aim was not to solve the problem of animal minds by proving that animals do in fact have minds. Its aim was rather to *undercut* that variety of scepticism by showing that it presupposes a false conception of our being-in-the-world. And just as Heidegger undercut scepticism regarding other minds by showing that it relies on a false, radically individualistic conception of human being, so the phenomenological approach of Glendinning et al undercuts scepticism regarding animal minds by showing that it presupposes a conception of human being which fails adequately to account for our unreflective lived relations with animals.

This surely constitutes a blow against scepticism, but not perhaps a fatal one. Consider, once again, the phenomenological 'undercutting' of scepticism regarding animal minds. As we saw, it relies on an appeal to 'the phenomenology' of our relations to animals. The sceptical attack is said to rest on a false account of what it means to be in-the-world. In the light of a better account of 'the phenomenology', one that reveals our being-with animals, such scepticism is allegedly undercut.

Now as we saw, there are grounds for thinking that this kind of strategy may be successfully brought to bear upon scepticism regarding other minds. The sceptic questions whether other minds exist. The phenomenologist reveals that her being-in-the-world necessarily takes the form of a being-with others. In this way the sceptic's position is undercut (though not refuted — the sceptic can continue to insist that solipsism remains logically possible). Indeed, since being-with is an essential structure of being-in-the-world, any sincere espousal of solipsism is shown to involve what might be referred to as a phenomenological tension, where what the sceptic *claims* is at odds with how she *is* - at odds, that is, with a rigorous account of her being-in-the-world. So in this case the tension is between the sceptic's espousal of solipsism and the phenomenological fact that her being-in-the-world is a being-with others.

Scepticism regarding *animal* minds, however, presents a different case. For whereas being-with is an essential feature of being-in-the-world, one shared by all Dasein, it is not clear that the same can be said of being-with animals. And if some sceptics

¹⁴ See, for instance, Carruthers 2000.

are not ‘with’ animals in a Heideggerian sense, then at least some sincere espousals of scepticism regarding animal minds need not involve phenomenological tension and will to this extent be insulated from phenomenological criticisms of the sort canvassed above. In many cases, no doubt, sceptical claims do involve phenomenological tension;¹⁵ yet, arguably, some such claims might be tension-free. Consider, for example, Nicolas Malebranche. On the one hand, he championed the notion that animals were bereft of consciousness. On the other, his passion for vivisection suggests that it is at least possible that he was incapable of being ‘with’ animals in a Heideggerian sense, but really did relate to them as if to mere things.¹⁶ And if Malebranche really wasn’t ‘with’ animals in a Heideggerian sense, then his espousal of scepticism regarding animal minds was not at odds with his manner of being-in-the-world.

8. The Case Against ‘True’ Scepticism

The phenomenologist’s case against scepticism regarding animal minds is therefore weakened, to an extent, by the mere possibility of a ‘true sceptic’ regarding animal minds, one who is ‘with’ others and yet incapable of being ‘with’ animals. How, as a phenomenologist, is one to respond?

First, one might want to clarify how human animals are being distinguished from nonhuman ones. After all, it cannot simply be assumed that the true sceptic’s understanding of this distinction maps exactly onto ours. But let us assume for the sake of argument that it does. Let’s assume that if you are ‘with’ both humans and animals, the true sceptic is ‘with’ those beings you understand to be human and yet incapable of being ‘with’ those beings you refer to as animals.

But even if this is granted the phenomenologist should not, perhaps, be too perturbed by the mere possibility of the true sceptic. For any attempt to undermine the phenomenological attack on scepticism regarding animal minds by referring to such a character can also be deployed against a phenomenological attack on scepticism regarding other *human* minds.

¹⁵ Consider, for example, the French poet Louis Racine, who managed to reconcile his fervent denial that animals had minds with a devotion to his pet dogs (Harrison 1992: 220). Or consider Descartes himself. Despite his sceptical attitude towards animal minds he owned a dog, Monsieur Grat, upon whom he apparently ‘lavished much affection’ (ibid.). The warm relations these men enjoyed with their pets suggests — but does not perhaps prove — that their espousals of scepticism involved phenomenological tension.

¹⁶ Dale Jamieson refers to a strange kind of autism that ‘makes opaque the inner lives of animals, while leaving those of humans open to view’ (1998: 95). And indeed, although it is no argument against scepticism regarding animal minds, it can be noted that tension-free scepticism sounds more like an illness than a position. Of course other forms of scepticism have also been regarded as pathological. Schopenhauer, for example, famously remarked that solipsism, when seriously espoused, ‘could be found only in a madhouse’ (1969:104). For a phenomenological account that treats scepticism in general as a condition in need of treatment, rather than as a position in need of refutation, see George L. Kline’s discussion of the work of Gustav Shpet (1996: 158–9).

Imagine an alien arriving for the first time on Earth. The alien qualifies as (nonhuman) Dasein, and its being-in-the-world therefore takes the form of a being-with others. However, the ‘others’ here are, let us suppose, all nonhuman. The alien is ‘with’ its fellow aliens in a Heideggerian sense, but it is not ‘with’ any humans. (Perhaps it has internalised the position of an alien equivalent of Descartes, or maybe its interactions with humans have been limited to shopping malls and other places where human behaviour seems mechanical and lifeless.) The upshot of this is that the alien’s scepticism regarding human minds is consonant with its being-in-the-world, just as Malebranche’s profession of scepticism regarding animal minds was (one imagines) in accord with his being-in-the-world. In neither case is there any phenomenological tension.

9. Conclusions

One could say that the true sceptic not only professes scepticism regarding animal minds, but lives it as well. But this should not be taken to imply that the scepticism of one who is ‘with’ animals is merely professed and not, to any degree, lived. To be sure, such a sceptic is ‘with’ animals (even if she is loath to admit the fact). But even her brand of scepticism requires the adoption of a particular practical attitude: it requires her to distance herself from her lived experience, to take up what John Searle has referred to as the ‘epistemic stance’ (Searle 1994: 218). From such a disengaged vantage point it might indeed seem possible that animals are merely complicated machines. But this, I would suggest, is no virtue, for to adopt an epistemic stance is to forget what it is to be in-the-world, in a Heideggerian sense. To quote Searle, it is to forget one’s ‘basic relationships to reality’ (ibid.).

One great merit of phenomenology is that it can elucidate these basic relationships in a way that epistemological considerations cannot. And insofar as these relationships involve animals, it can shed light on these too. So while epistemological reflections can have a disorientating — or better, de-worlding — effect, phenomenology can return us to the world. And by focusing on the existential structure of being-with it can bring us back to those nonhuman beings with which we share it.

Phenomenological excavations of this sort have unearthed and will continue to unearth a host of difficult problems (see, for example, Painter and Lotz 2007). There is, for instance, the question of how exactly we are to understand how different species of animal experience the world. In this paper I have supposed that if a being is not a mindless mechanism then there must be something it is like to be that being. But is this really the case?

Consider the boa constrictor, for example. There is some evidence to suggest that a boa constrictor hasn’t one integrated consciousness, but three independent ones, corresponding, roughly, to the senses of vision, taste and touch. Thus to search for its prey a boa will use its sense of smell, and only its sense of smell, even when its prey is in its field of vision. It swallows its prey head first; however, to locate its prey’s head it

will rely solely on tactile information, even when the senses of sight or smell would do just as well (Sjolander 1993: 3). It is not clear that there is anything it is like to be such a creature (cf. Dennett 1995: 702), and not merely, as talk of the problem of animal minds would suggest, because the mind of a snake (if it may be so described) must be conceived as an entirely private arena and one that for we humans must remain radically unknowable.

Nonetheless, to say that there is nothing it is like to be a boa is not necessarily to deny that the creature might be, to adopt Heidegger's terminology, 'open' to the world in some way, and so not merely a mechanism. In other words, it is not clear that a boa must either be conscious in much the same way that we are conscious or else a mindless mechanism.¹⁷ Other, stranger options could be available (see further, Heidegger 1995: §§45–63; Merleau-Ponty 2003: 139–99, 216–18).

There is insufficient space here to pursue these matters. Nonetheless, it should be evident, even on the basis of this brief discussion, that phenomenological inquiries have the potential to shed much light on our relations with animals. In particular, they can help dispel the false notion that there is one big problem. The Problem of Animal Minds, which must be solved before any such inquiries can get off the ground.

Notes

I presented a condensed version of this paper at the 2007 Joint ISEE/IAEP Conference in Allenspark, Colorado, and I would like to thank my colleagues at that meeting for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to Matthew Ratcliffe for his perceptive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

References

- Abram, David. 1996. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Brown, Charles S. 2007. 'The intentionality and animal heritage of moral experience', in C. Painter and C. Lotz (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: at the Limits of Experience, Contributions to Phenomenology Volume 56* (Springer), pp. 85–95.
- Caputo, John D. 1993. *Demythologizing Heidegger*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Carruthers, Peter M. 2000. *Phenomenal Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ I explore these issues further in James 2009.

- Cottingham, John. 1978. “‘A Brute to the Brutes?’: Descartes’ treatment of animals”, *Philosophy* **53**: 551–561.
- Dawkins, M.S. 1980. *Animal Suffering: The Science of Animal Welfare*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Dennett, Daniel C. 1995. ‘Animal consciousness: what matters and why’, *Social Research* **62**: 691–710.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1989. *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, tr. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ferry, Luc. 1995. *The New Ecological Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fields, William, E. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh and Par Segerdahl. 2005. *Kanzi’s Primal Language: The Cultural Initiation of Primates into Language*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Glendinning, Simon. 1998. *On Being With Others: Heidegger — Derrida — Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge.
- Harrison, Peter. 1992. ‘Descartes on animals’, *The Philosophical Quarterly* **42**: 219–227.
- Hatley, James. 2004. ‘The uncanny goodness of being edible to bears’, in B. V. Foltz and R. Frodeman (eds.), *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 13–31.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1997. *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1995. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by W. McNeill and N. Walker. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jamieson, Dale. 1998. ‘Science, knowledge, and animal minds’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **98**: 79–102.
- James, Simon P. 2009. *The Presence of Nature: A Study in Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy*. Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Kennedy, J.S. 1992. *The New Anthropomorphism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kline, George L. 1996. ‘Meditations of a Russian Neo-Husserlian: Gustav Shpet’s “The Skeptic and His Soul”’, in B.R. Wachterhauser (ed.), *Phenomenology and Skepticism: Essays in Honour of James M. Edie* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), pp. 144–163.
- Leopold, Aldo. 1968. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964a. *Signs*, trans. R.C. McCleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964b. *The Primacy of Perception and other essays on phenomenological psychology, the philosophy of art, history and politics*, trans. James M. Edie. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1996. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith. London: Routledge.

- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2003. *Course Notes from the College de France*, compiled by D. Seglard, trans. R. Vallier. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1974. 'What is it like to be a bat?', *Philosophical Review* 83: 435–450.
- Painter, Corinne and Christian Lotz, eds. 2007. *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: At the Limits of Experience, Contributions to Phenomenology Volume 56*. Springer,.
- Painter, Corinne. 2007. 'Appropriating the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein: Animal psyche, empathy, and moral subjectivity', in C. Painter and C. Lotz (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: at the Limits of Experience, Contributions to Phenomenology Volume 56* (Springer), pp. 97–115.
- Polt, Richard. 1999. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press.
- Rollin, Bernard E. 2007. 'Animal mind: science, philosophy, and ethics', *The Journal of Ethics* 11: 253–274.
- Ruonakoski, Erika. 2007. 'Phenomenology and the study of animal behavior', in C. Painter and C. Lotz (eds.), *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: at the Limits of Experience, Contributions to Phenomenology Volume 56* (Springer), pp. 75–84.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1991. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes. London: Routledge.
- Schatzki, Theodore R. 1992. 'Early Heidegger on Being, The Clearing, and Realism', in H. Dreyfus and H. Hall (eds.), *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 81–98.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1969. *The World as Will and Representation (Volume 1)*, trans. E.EJ. Payne. New York: Dover.
- Searle, John. 1994. 'Animal minds', in P. French, T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy Volume 19: Philosophical Naturalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press).
- Shapiro, Kenneth. 1997. 'A phenomenological approach to the study of nonhuman animals', in R. Mitchell, N. Thompson and H. Miles (eds.), *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals* (Albany: Suny Press), pp. 273–291.
- Sjolander, S. 1993. 'Some cognitive breakthroughs in the evolution of cognition and consciousness, and their impact on the biology of language', *Evolution and Cognition* 3: 1–10.
- Thomson, Iain. 2004. 'Ontology and ethics at the intersection of phenomenology and environmental philosophy', *Inquiry* 47: 380–412.
- Zahavi, Dan. 2001. 'Beyond empathy: Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity', in E. Thompson (ed.), *Between Ourselves: Second-Person Issues in the Study of Consciousness* (Thorverton: Imprint Academic).

The Ted K Archive

Simon P. James

Phenomenology and the Problem of Animal Minds

February 2009

Environmental Values, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 33–49. <www.jstor.org/stable/30302114>

& <www.doi.org/10.3197/096327109X404735>

2007 The White Horse Press

Author affiliation: Department of Philosophy, Durham University, Durham DH1
3HN, UK

Author correspondence: s.p.james@durham.ac.uk

www.thetedkarchive.com