

Homer's Rational Animals: Theory of Mind in Early Greek Thought

Philosophers of “Mind” in the Anglo-American tradition are often troubled with what to make of animal intelligence. Norman Malcolm (1972-1973) and Donald Davidson (1982), for instance, both note the difficulty of attributing “beliefs,” “fears,” “desires” or other such propositional attitudes to animals because they seem to lack a language by which such attitudes could be confirmed (cf. Sorbaji 1993).

I contend that Davidson's arguments fail to explain the situation we find in Homeric epic, however. I claim that in the *Iliad*, especially in similes, we find *rational* animals motivated by goals and acting with intent, as for instance *Il.* 12.299-308:

[Sarpedon] went to go like a mountain-raised lion, one who has gone in need of meat for a long time [ὄς τ' ἐπιδευῆς δηρὸν ἔη κρειῶν], and its courageous *thumos* urges it to make an attempt at sheep [κέλεται δέ ἐ θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ μῆλων πειρήσοντα] and to go into their close-kept sheepfold. And even if it should find ox-herding men beside them standing guard about the sheep with their dogs and spears, it would not think to hasten away from the pens without making an attempt, but it certainly either leaps upon and snatches one or is itself struck among the foremost by a spear from a quick hand. Just so then his *thumos* drove godlike Sarpedon to rush at the wall [ὥς ῥα τότε ἀντίθεον Σαρπηδόνα θυμὸς ἀνήκε τεῖχος ἐπαῖξαι] and to break apart the battlements.

The Homeric narrator, describing Sarpedon's desperate attack at the Achaean wall, likens him to a ravenous lion. The lion acts with intent: it has a specific drive (τ' ἐπιδευῆς | δηρὸν ἔη κρειῶν, 299-300) and object of desire (μῆλων, 301), such that given an opportunity to achieve the desired object (πειρήσοντα, 301), the lion springs to action (cf. Nussbaum 2001: 267). I argue that when

early Greek narrative attributes thought to animals, it employs something researchers in cognitive psychology call “metacognition,” namely, the ability to make judgments about what others seem to think and how it affects their behavior based on an observer’s own knowledge about his or her own mental states (Metcalf and Kober 2005). The attribution of thoughts, beliefs, fears, desires, and other motivating mental attitudes to others—whether humans or animals—helps us explain the actions we observe.

Homer’s account represents intentional action generally in a skeletal form to be worked out in detail later on by Aristotle in *On the Soul* (III.9-10; 432a15-433b30), *On the Movement of Animals* (ch. 6-7; 700b4-701b32), and his ethical treatises (cf. Nussbaum 2001: 264-289).

Aristotle uses the term ὄρεξις, a desire that specifies an object, as part of a general theory of the purposive motion animals (and humans) make toward an intentional object—what Aristotle calls “that for the sake of which” (τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα, *De Motu Animalium* 6, 700b16). If an animal has both a goal-directed desire (*orexis*) and notices (*noēsis*) that the intentional object is in fact present and available, the animal, like Homer’s lion, and Sarpedon, too, decides and acts to achieve the intentional object (cf. *De Motu Animalium* 6, 700b19). The process, Aristotle argues, works like a syllogism:

For whenever a creature is actually using sense-perception or *phantasia* or thought towards the thing for-the-sake-of-which, he does at once what he desires. For the activity of the desire takes the place of acting or thinking. “I have to drink,” says appetite [ἡ ἐπιθυμία]. “Here’s drink,” says sense-perception or *phantasia* or thought [ἡ αἴσθησις ... ἢ ἡ φαντασία ἢ ὁ νοῦς]. At once he drinks. This, then, is the way that animals are impelled to move and act: the proximate reason for movement is desire, and this comes to be either

through sense-perception or through *phantasia* and thought. (*De Motu Animalium* 7, 701a29-36)

“I’m hungry”—“here are sheep to eat”: the lion wants, notices, and springs into action. Though it may be called an error of pathetic fallacy to ascribe feelings and thoughts to animals, I argue it is precisely what we all do, Homer included. It is the very basis of telling a good story.

Works Cited

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