

What About Animal Consciousness?

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The late evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould concluded that consciousness has been “vouchsafed only to our species in the history of life on earth” (1997, p. ix). Is Dr. Gould correct? Or do other creatures possess self-awareness as well? Certainly, the answer to such a question hinges on the definition one assigns to “consciousness.”

One way to approach the problem is to define consciousness with the broadest possible stroke and in the simplest conceivable terms. Steven Harnad, editor of *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, did exactly that when he defined consciousness as “the capacity to have experiences” (as quoted in Lewin, 1992, pp. 153-154). Roger Penrose followed suit in *The Emperor’s New Mind* when he said of animals: “I do not ask that they are ‘self-aware’ in any strong sense. ...All I ask is that they sometimes **simply feel!**” (1989, p. 383, emp. in orig.).

If these are the sole criteria for defining consciousness—the capacity to “just have experiences” or to “sometimes simply feel”—then animals obviously possess consciousness. The problem is that such simple definitions of consciousness are woefully inadequate. And, by and large, those within the scientific and philosophical communities have acknowledged as much. Robert Ornstein, in his book, *The Evolution of Consciousness*, noted: “**Being conscious is being aware of being aware.** It is one step removed from the raw experience of seeing, smelling, acting, moving, and reaction” (1991, pp. 225-226, emp. added).

That “one step” is a mighty **big** step, however! The difference between merely “being aware” (i.e., “just having experiences” or “simply feeling”) and actually being “self-aware” (i.e., **knowing** that you are having experiences, and **knowing** that you are feeling) is colossal—a fact that appears to have eluded some who wish to imbue “other species” with the trait of consciousness. Are other species “self-aware”? Ian Tattersall admitted:

I have already said that nonhuman mammals are far from being automatons, and this is clearly true; but does it necessarily follow that they have a concept of self that would be broadly familiar to us? The answer to this is almost certainly no; but it has to be admitted that the degree to which nonhuman primates may or may not have an internal image of self is a devilishly hard question to approach (2002, p. 63).

Do other species “think about themselves” in “productive and adaptive” ways? Remember: we are not asking if animals possess instinct. Nor are we asking if they can “adapt.”

We are inquiring as to whether or not they are **self-aware**—to the extent that they actually “think about themselves.” Sir John Eccles concluded: “It has been well said that an animal knows, but only a man knows that he knows” (1967, p. 10). Nick Carter said that we might think of animals “as beings that have extension and sensation, but not thought” (2002). In the context, he was speaking specifically of “higher thought”—i.e., the ability to think, to think about thinking, and to let others know we are thinking. Humans not only possess such self-awareness and thought capability, but also **the ability to let other humans know that they possess those two things!**

Paul Ehrlich confessed (from an evolutionary viewpoint): “[H]uman beings are also the only animals that seem fully aware of the consciousness of other individuals and thus have been able to develop empathy, the capacity to identify emotionally with others” (2000, p. 111). Nowhere is this more evident than in the human response to death. Theodosius Dobzhansky concluded: “Self-awareness has, however, brought in its train somber companions—fear, anxiety and death awareness.... Man is burdened by death-awareness. A being who knows that he will die, arose from ancestors who did not know” (1967, p. 68).

But consider (to choose just one example) the animal that evolutionists contend is our closest living relative—the chimpanzee. Paleo-anthropologist Richard Leakey admitted:

[C]himpanzees at best seem puzzled about death.... The chimpanzees’ limitation in empathizing with others extends to themselves as individuals: **no one has seen evidence that chimps are aware of their own mortality**, of impending death. But, again, how would we *know*?... Ritual disposal of the dead speaks clearly of an awareness of death, and thus an awareness of self (1994, pp. 153, 155, italics. in orig., emp. added).

Dobzhansky, et al., also addressed this point.

Ceremonial burial is evidence of self-awareness because it represents an awareness of death. **There is no indication that individuals of any species other than man know that they will inevitably die** (1977, p. 454, emp. added).

The information contained in the two quotations above can be summarized as follows: (1) chimpanzees are unaware of their own mortality, and have no ability to empathize emotionally with others (a peculiarly human trait, according to Ehrlich); (2) in fact, there is no

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indication that individuals of **any** species other than humans know they will inevitably die; (3) death-awareness arose as a product of self-awareness; and (4) ceremonial burial is evidence of self-awareness because it represents an awareness of death.

Now, note the logical conclusion that inescapably follows. Death-awareness and ceremonial burial are allegedly evidence of, and products stemming from, self-awareness. But chimps (our nearest supposed relative), **like all animals**, do not comprehend the fact that they will one day die, and do not perform ritualistic burials of their dead. **If understanding death and burying the dead are evidence of self-awareness, and if no animal understands death or buries its dead, then no animal is self-aware!**

The scientist who literally “wrote the book” on animal consciousness, Donald R. Griffin, published the first edition of his now-famous work, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness*, in 1992, and the second edition in 2001. In that second edition, he offered the following assessment of animal consciousness. **“The principal difference between human and animal consciousness is probably in their *content*”** (p. 15, italics in orig., emp. added).

That statement must surely rank as one of the greatest understatements of all time. “Other than your husband’s assassination, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?” “Except for the difference in their content, what’s the difference in human and animal consciousness?” Does anyone besides us see something terribly wrong here? As Tattersall put it:

But comfortable as monkeys may become with mirrors and their properties, it has also been shown that they cannot identify their own reflection in a mirror.... What do we make of all this? First, it is evident that **there is a qualitative difference among the perceptions of self exhibited by monkeys, apes, and human beings** (2002, p. 65, emp. added).

Key in on Tattersall’s reference to monkeys and mirrors, and allow us to explain the significance of his statements. For more than three decades, researchers have tried to concoct a way to test—objectively—whether any given animal is “self-aware.” Griffin noted: “Both reflective consciousness and self-awareness are often held to be uniquely human attributes.” Then, in speaking of animals, he asked: “What sorts of evidence might indicate whether or not they think about their own thoughts?” (2001, p. 277).

Good question. What “sorts of evidence” could lead scientists and philosophers to conclude that at least some animals possess self-awareness? There have been a number of suggestions offered, such as mind-reading (i.e., the ability to comprehend what another animal has in mind to do in order to alter behavior), divided attention (an ability to concentrate on more than one thing at a time), delayed response (acting later, as if on the “memory” of something), self-recognition (the ability of an animal to recognize itself, as opposed to other animals of its kind), etc.

But for the most part, it has been self-recognition that has captured the attention of researchers. In the late 1960s, Gordon Gallup, a psychologist at the State University of New York (Albany), devised a test intended to determine an animal’s “sense of self”—the mirror test. His idea was that if an animal were able to recognize its own reflection in a mirror as “itself,” then it could be duly said to possess an awareness of itself—i.e., consciousness. Dr. Gallup’s report of the experiment, published in a 1970 article in *Science*, has been called “a milestone in our understanding of animal minds” (Leakey, 1994, p. 150). Here is how the test was carried out.

An animal (such as a chimpanzee, a gorilla, or an orangutan) is left in a room to become familiarized with a mirror. After a period of time, the animal is anesthetized, and a dot of paint is placed on its forehead. The creature then is allowed to wake, and the mirror is brought back to see if the animal notices that it now has a dot of paint on its forehead. Most animals will take no notice of the dot, and will continue to treat the image in the mirror as if it were another animal. But certain ape subjects instantly recognize themselves in the mirror, and touch their foreheads as if they know that: (a) the forehead in question is their own; and (b) they do not normally have a dot on their forehead. Most animals in the experiment did not recognize or care about the spot on their forehead, but a few did.

So what do we make of data that suggest certain animals are indeed “self-aware”? Robert Wesson observed:

Self-awareness is different from information processing; even when confused and unable to think clearly, one may be vividly aware of one’s self and one’s confusion. **The essence of mind is less data processing than will, intention, imagination, discovery, and feeling** (1997, p. 277, emp. added).

Dr. Wesson is correct. Self-awareness is different from mere information processing. A chimpanzee or orangutan with a

spot of paint on its forehead may be able to process the information that tells the animal it has a spot of paint on its forehead. But does that mean the animal possesses intention, imagination, discovery, feeling, and all the other things that we normally associate with consciousness and/or self-awareness? Hardly.

One of the things that sets the human mind/consciousness apart from that of animals is **what the human mind can do!** As Anthony O’Hear put it: **“A conscious animal might be a knower...but only a self-conscious being *knows* that he is a knower** (1997, p. 24, emp. and italics added). When Griffin asked, “Can scientific investigation of animal mentality tell us whether animals are conscious?” and answered, “not yet” (2001, p. x), he fairly well summed up most researchers’ opinion of the matter. There are no scientific or philosophical data to date which indicate that any animal “knows it is a knower.” Only humans possess such capability.

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Q Is the Mel Gibson movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, biblically accurate?

A Hollywood rarely, if ever, represents the Bible accurately when it ventures into the arena of biblical history. Its depictions of Bible events usually are adjusted and supplemented with extrabiblical details. Nevertheless, Mel Gibson's blockbuster recreation of the final hours of Jesus' life on Earth depicts the major events quite credibly. The movie is particularly accurate in its cinematic portrayal of the attitude and actions of Pilate, the Jewish hierarchy, and the Jewish mob. Both the scourging scene and the actual crucifixion match substantially the extant historical reports of these Roman forms of punishment and execution—with perhaps one exception, i.e., the placement of the nails in Jesus' hands (cf. Harrub and Thompson, 2002).

However, the movie does contain several nonbiblical allusions. For example, a single squadron of Jewish guards arrests Jesus in the garden, whereas the gospel accounts include a large angry mob with the Jewish officers (Matthew 26:47; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:47). After His arrest, Jesus is shoved off a bridge to dangle from a chain. As He is hoisted upward, He sees one of the disciples (Judas) hiding beneath the bridge. Mary Magdalene is linked with the

adulterous woman of John 8. After Christ's scourging, women sop up Jesus' blood with towels provided by Pilate's wife. Mary, experiencing a flashback to Christ's childhood, comforts Jesus as He transports the cross to Golgotha. Simon of Cyrene, the man chosen by the Romans to assist Jesus with the cross, is given considerable dialogue. Mary is given an exaggerated role, and frequently is addressed as "mother," in keeping with Catholic tradition (Gibson is Catholic). A raven pecks the eye of one of the thieves hanging beside Jesus. Yet the Bible says nothing of these details. Perhaps a more serious deviation is Satan's attempt to discourage Jesus from subjecting Himself to the ordeal. In contrast, the New Testament depicts Satan as a central instigator of the event, apparently unaware of the ultimate spiritual and eternal implications for atonement (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14; Revelation 12:1-5).

Despite such alterations to the biblical record, Gibson is to be commended for achieving his primary purpose: to give the viewer a deeper awareness of the suffering of Christ.

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IN THE NEWS

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonished: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them" (Matthew 7:12). Today, this verse is commonly referred to as "The Golden Rule," and can be summed up as: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

For many years, this golden rule has been a golden thorn in the sides of evolutionists. After all, how can natural selection explain humans cooperating with one another. As Gretchen Vogel observed: "At first glance, cooperation seems to be an evolutionary anomaly" (2004, 303:1128). Anomaly indeed! Humans routinely go out of their way to help or provide assistance for total strangers. But in keeping with their motto of "not allowing a Divine foot in the door," evolutionists finally have conjured up an explanation for the origin of The Golden Rule.

For example, an article titled "The Evolution of the Golden Rule" appeared in the February 20, 2004 issue of *Science*. The article began by noting: "Human and other primates have a keen sense of fairness and a tendency to cooperate even when it does them no discernable good" (303:1128). Vogel continued by noting: "In the 1960s the late evolutionary biologist William Hamilton developed a theory

of kin selection that showed how helping relatives can increase the chances that one's own genes will be passed on through them" (p. 1128). Later, Ms. Vogel speculated: "A sensitivity to 'fairness' may have emerged early in the primate lineage" (p. 1131).

Thus, with one broad stroke, evolutionists have painted The Golden Rule neatly into their evolutionary tree of life. Their idea is that the only reason people perform acts of kindness is because they feel that such acts will help them in some way in the future. Mathematicians Martin Nowak and Karl Sigmund developed a theory called indirect reciprocity. It suggests that people are willing to help someone who won't pay them back—as long as other people witness the charitable act.

So now we find ourselves analyzing theories about why humans act nice. Obviously, these individuals did not read the entire text of Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Mount. Chapter six begins with Jesus warning: "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men"—a concept that hardly fits well with the evolutionists' latest theory.

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