

MacIntyre and Malcolm on the Continuity Between the Animal and the Human

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Cartesian doubt about the thoughts and feelings of humans as well as intelligent animals is unintelligible for MacIntyre – since our knowledge of “other minds” is based on the interpretative knowledge that we share with many animals, knowledge that depends on action and interaction. He is critical of the idea that our beliefs about the thoughts, feelings and decisions of others are wholly founded on inferences from their overt behaviour and utterances. “It is of course true that on occasion we do have to ‘work out’ by inference what someone else must be thinking or feeling. But even in these special types of case we are still relying on a primary and more fundamental interpretative knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of others which *does not have and does not need inferential justification.*” (MacIntyre: 24, my italics.)

In order to show that there is continuity between animal and human rationality MacIntyre points to a continuity between the prelinguistic and the linguistic. For him, identifying the thoughts and feelings of others is a prelinguistic capacity, as is distinguishing between the true and the false. This is important for him because he thinks that if we couldn’t distinguish truth and falsity prelinguistically, it would be difficult to understand how we are able to use the words “true” and “false” as we do. And we have to make sense of this prelinguistic distinction between truth and falsity in order to ascribe beliefs to animals, in order to ascribe to non-language users changes in belief that arise from their perceptions of changes in the world and issue in a change in their activity. It is important because it enables us to say, for instance, that the dolphin can see that its previous belief was false, and change its belief accordingly. (Or, we can say of the dog that “it notices that the cat isn’t up that tree after all”.) We can therefore say that the dolphin, like the child, possesses certain concepts and the ability to apply them, for example, the concepts of “true” and “false”, “pain”. (This is also true of cats and dogs, but it is perhaps most easily demonstrated, he says, with dolphins, gorillas and chimpanzees.) So the continuity between animal and human behaviour, which is to illuminate the nature of human rationality, lies in a similarity in natural capacities. These capacities, in turn, are described as a kind of identification and classification of objects prior to any understanding of language, including a knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of others (MacIntyre: 36, 27, 40).

MacIntyre criticises philosophers such as Davidson for denying that animals have minds. But he agrees with the assumption that leads Davidson to this denial: that ascribing intentions, beliefs and thoughts to a person or an animal is to ascribe to it certain conceptual capacities. The disagreement between the two then, is over whether creatures without language have those capacities, whether they “possess concepts” or not (MacIntyre: 37). Norman Malcolm on the other hand questions the basic assumption at play here, which he calls “identifying thoughts with their linguistic expression”. Malcolm formulates this in terms of the difference between “having a thought” and “thinking”: we would naturally say of a dog, “it thinks the cat is up the tree”, if it stands underneath barking, but we wouldn’t say: “it has the thought that...” since this implies the framing of a proposition (Malcolm 1977: 49). Now, since MacIntyre

(rightly) notes that Malcolm doesn’t deny that animals have minds, he concludes that Malcolm must allow for animals having beliefs:

Malcolm’s dog, it might perhaps be said, believes that the cat is up the tree. It does not need language to express this belief. And of course we humans do not need language to express many of our beliefs either. Moreover the dog then acts on its belief. So it may seem as if we may at least raise the question of whether the belief is not only a cause of the dog’s behaviour, but provides the dog with a reason for acting as it does. Yet here some larger difficulties arise. For we cannot even frame this question, unless we are entitled to ascribe beliefs to the dog. (MacIntyre: 32-33)

But what kind of question is it that MacIntyre wants to frame? Why would we be tempted to say that the belief is the cause or the reason for the dog’s behaviour? It seems that MacIntyre hasn’t understood what Malcolm means by saying that “[g]rammatical form is no index of psychological reality” (Malcolm 1977: 51). I suspect that it doesn’t really matter for Malcolm whether we use the phrase “the dog thinks” or “the dog has a thought” or whether we say it “believes” or “has a belief”. His point, I take it, is rather that when we describe the dog as believing the cat is up the tree (or having the belief that the cat is up the tree, if you will) we are not supplying additional information about the dog’s behaviour, such as, what caused it – we are simply describing what we see, what the dog does. The problem with talking about “having” beliefs or thoughts is that this wording implies that the belief or thought is independent of the action, and so easily misleads us into taking the relationship between the intention and the action in the wrong way. Even if MacIntyre would not argue that having a belief presupposes that one consciously (or subconsciously) frames the relevant proposition (what he is arguing for, I take it, is not the existence of a psychological process), he sees the beliefs and intentions as something preceding the action, separate from it and (at least in some instances) as causing it. In taking beliefs to be characterizable independently of the actions that express them, the dichotomy between the mental and the physical remains. Thus it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the mental is to be inferred or surmised from the overt behaviour of the agent, even if this is something that MacIntyre explicitly denies as being a Cartesian misconception. He therefore ends up saying something quite similar (although in a moderated form since his notion of “behaviour” is broader than merely “bodily movement”, and includes seeing actions undertaken for particular reasons), and he ends up with a circular argument: we infer someone’s reasoning abilities from his actions, reasoning which is exhibited in that very action. So, because MacIntyre argues that behaviour justifies ascribing psychological states to animals, we are left with the image that what we are doing is hypothesizing invisible mental states “behind” the behaviour.

Contrast this to what Malcolm says:

A cat watches a mouse hole. It would be natural to say that the cat knows, or believes, that a mouse may come out of the hole. But what does this come to? Are we attributing the propositional thought, 'A mouse may appear'? No. We are only placing this behaviour in the larger pattern of cat-seeking-mouse behaviour. An infant reaches for its milk bottle. Does it 'believe' that what is in the bottle is milk? One could say this. But what does it mean? Just that there is this behaviour of reaching for the bottle from which it has been fed in the past; plus, perhaps, the fact that it will reject the bottle if what it tastes is chalk water. This is *just doing*. In order to understand it we do not have to suppose that this doing rests on some *underlying* belief. The belief is here nothing other than this behaviour in these circumstances; not a *source* of the behavior. In the case of the infant, words and sentences will gradually emerge from such behavior. Not so with the cat. (Malcolm 1995: 71)

What is brought out above is that in these types of situations we would normally without hesitation talk about "knowing" or "believing." This is how we use these mental predicates. And there is on MacIntyre's view nothing wrong with this language use. Also, as pointed out, he would agree that in saying this we are not attributing to the cat or the baby the ability to frame propositions. But to MacIntyre, in attributing beliefs or thoughts to someone we do presuppose that they have certain conceptual capacities or reasoning abilities. Malcolm again wants to question the idea that in making these ascriptions, we are assuming *anything at all* about the intellectual abilities or natural characteristics of the cat: we are simply describing what we see, what it does. This is not to say that what the cat does isn't dependent on it having a certain biological constitution, certain nutritional needs, sensory capacities etc., as well as a certain bodily form and flexibility. If it's injured, its movements will be restricted, if it's senile it might not be clear to us what we should say of its behaviour. But when we say what the cat is doing, we aren't speaking about or assuming what happens out of view, what causes the behaviour we see. When we say that the cat or baby believes, thinks or feels this or that, typically we see the feelings as well as the intentions in the actions, "on the surface." To behave like this is *what it is* to "believe there is a mouse in the mouse hole," the behaviour isn't something that we can separate from the belief: the behaviour makes sense only as an expression of that belief. Or, as McGinn puts it, when we see a cat stalking a bird, the intention is not merely "associated" with the intent look of the cat, its cautious movements and its readiness to spring, but is the *meaning* of all these things (McGinn: 155). This is what the stalking, or the "intention of catching a bird" consists in, the intention is not something that explains the behaviour. Note that this is not to propose a behaviouristic view of mental phenomena, since nothing above suggests that we reduce the mental - the intentions, beliefs or thoughts - to the outer, to the bodily expressions. It is rather to say that the mental and the bodily phenomena cannot be separated from each other in our description of behaviour. Psychological words such as "nervously," "intelligently," "happily" describe behaviour, they are not *interpretations* of behaviour that properly should be described in other non-psychological terms.

Malcolm follows Wittgenstein in describing our response to the cat a "primitive reaction" (Cf. Wittgenstein, Zettel §545, where he calls our language-game a continuation of primitive behaviour, for example when we are certain that someone is in pain.) It seems to me that this notion of primitive reactions is more basic and less intellec-

tualist than MacIntyre's notion of a "primary knowledge" of others. If we accept MacIntyre's characterization, it seems quite natural to call into question (as does Davidson) whether sharing activities and practices really is necessary for gaining this knowledge. Why would interaction be necessary, couldn't we assume that we could know the other's intentions or thoughts by other means? (For example, through comparing their reactions to our own and incorporating the sounds they make into a meaning theory.) On the other hand, what I take to be Malcolm's view is not described in terms of knowledge: this is part of the point in calling it "primitive" and "reaction". This could be seen as the form of interaction itself, not something that the interaction is instrumental in gaining or achieving. What is important is the fact that both the trainer and the dog *respond* to one another, the dog's reactions will depend on the trainer's: its response will be quite different depending on the trainer's behaviour and comportment - gestures, movements, how he breathes and in which tone of voice he speaks will affect the dog, as the dog's comportment will affect the trainer. They both seek contact through looking into each others' eyes, or they purposely avoid eye contact. This is a form of interplay which is itself a kind of communication. It is not merely a delivery of information about their respective interests and intentions, but a forming of new interests, new ways of behaving in a mutual relationship which develops and changes over time. Again, it is of course true that how well we communicate with an animal depends on its natural characteristics: we can teach a dog to sit, but less often a cat. But in order to recognize this, we don't need to draw conclusions about the similarity on an intellectual level (a similarity in classifications and in primitive concepts). We might as well say that similarities like *wanting* to cooperate, looking into each other's eyes, seeking bodily contact, is what in the end is decisive for our ability to do things together and therefore of understanding each other. What makes cooperation possible is perhaps something in the larger pattern of our life and that of the dog, rather than any identifiable cognitive trait.

Instead of, with MacIntyre, describing a continuity in intellectual capacities between animals and humans, the concept of primitive reactions reminds us of the similarity in our responses to human and animal behaviour. So to point to a continuity between the human and the animal does not then need to be an empirical point about the development of language, but rather an elucidation of what we mean by the mental terms we use, i.e., what we mean by ascribing thoughts, beliefs or feelings to someone.

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