

# BELIEFS AND THE MORAL STATUS OF ANIMALS

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## Abstract

In this paper I evaluate a particular argument by Raymond Frey that attempts to show that animals cannot possess moral status. Frey argues for a view that sees moral status as dependent on the having of propositional attitudes such as beliefs. By showing that animals cannot possess beliefs, he attempts to show that they cannot thereby possess moral status in any genuine sense. My paper will address these issues by showing that such arguments fail in the end, because they neglect relevant alternatives of how we can attribute propositional attitudes such as beliefs to animals in the absence of a concept of belief or linguistic abilities.

## Keywords

Animals; moral status; interests; beliefs; Donald Davidson

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Can animals possess moral status? Can they make claims upon us to treat them in a morally right way? This paper is going to address the sorts of conditions that have to be met to answer such questions. But it will not deliver definite answers to these questions. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to give a kind of evaluation of a particular argument that already exists in the literature, which argues against the possibility of ascribing moral status to animals. I will hence focus on a particular argument developed by Raymond Frey (1979), and I have two reasons for engaging with this argument:

The first reason is that Frey's argument succeeds in highlighting controversial issues in positions that wish to extend moral status to animals – issues that have to do with the attribution of propositional attitudes to animals. Enthusiasts of the view that animals have moral status all too often brush aside such controversial issues and claim that it is patently obvious that animals are capable of possessing moral status (and propositional attitudes). The second reason is that Frey's argument helps to connect issues discussed in the larger field of philosophy of mind with recent developments in environmental ethics. How these two fields connect, will become clearer as the argument progresses. Let me turn first to a broad description of Frey's argument before I move into the details.

Frey (1979) develops a three-step argument to show that animals cannot possibly possess moral status. In a first step, he argues for the view that moral status in general is dependent on the

having of interests. In a second step, he then argues that the having of interests is in turn dependent on the having of beliefs and other propositional attitudes. And, finally, in a third step, he attempts to show that the having of beliefs implies the mastery of linguistic abilities. Now since (almost) anyone will agree that animals do not possess linguistic abilities, this last “flaw” will project back to the other conditions of moral status – beliefs and interests – and thus finally show that animals cannot possess moral status; that is, of course, under the assumption that the premises are sound. The aim of my paper is precisely to show that the premises are not sound. I will particularly focus on one crucial premise of the argument: that the having of beliefs somehow implies the mastery of the concept of belief. Against this premise, I will try to motivate an alternative account that shows how you could have beliefs without thereby needing the mastery of the concept of belief.

After these introductory remarks, let us move into the details of the argument.

In his classic paper “Rights”, H.J. McCloskey (1965) sets out two requirements, which a being must satisfy in order to count as a possible possessor of moral rights. In order to possess moral rights, a being must firstly be able to possess things (a *fortiori* moral rights) and it must secondly be capable of having interests in a relevant sense. According to this view, nothing and no one can count as a possessor of rights who does not satisfy these two requirements simultaneously. Thus things such as parks, buildings, paintings, etc. are excluded: neither are they capable of possessing things nor do they have interests in any relevant sense. Normal adult human beings, on the other hand, are clearly included: they can both possess things (a *fortiori* moral rights) and interests in the relevant sense.

The search for the requirements of the possession of rights has important consequences for how we may treat beings. If, for instance, it could be argued that mentally defective human beings and infants are not the kind of beings who may possess rights, this may lead us to treat them differently from beings that clearly possess them. For it is widely believed in ethics that beings with rights make claims upon others, which ought to be recognised. Not to consider these claims in our deliberations may lead to serious wrongdoings, which may jeopardize their moral status as persons. The same is not equally true for beings that do not possess rights.

But are normal adult human beings the only possible possessors of moral rights? What about animals? Can animals possess moral status? The majority position seems to be reluctant to grant *prima facie* moral status to animals. For while it is commonly agreed that it is true that we should not mistreat animals by inflicting pain on them unnecessarily, they cannot be seen as possessing genuine moral status of their own. A classic Kantian thought, for instance, might claim that being cruel to animals might increase the possibility that we will be cruel to humans as a consequence; but it is only humans that we should recognise as genuine moral persons. Some environmental ethicists, however, have challenged this view as prejudiced and have tried to extend moral status to include non-human beings as well (Regan 1984, Singer, 1976; 1979). The moral status of animals has thus become an increasingly important issue among moral philosophers who are interested in finding an ethically right way of how humans ought to behave towards nature in general and towards animals in particular.

### 1. A difference of interests

How should we thus go about arguing for or against moral status in animals? As always, the best way is to start with a consensus; and the consensus is something like the already mentioned interest-dependency of moral status: for it is widely believed among moral philosophers that having moral status (or moral rights) is strongly related to having interests (Feinberg, 1974; Frey, 1979; McCloskey, 1965; Nelson, 1956). Thus any arguments for or against the moral status of animals will have to engage with the question of whether animals can possess interests – and if they can, *what* kind of interests they can possess. Now a being has interests roughly if and only if it

has a good that can be benefited or harmed for its own sake independently of whether it is of any use to others. I reckon that this understanding of interests captures our intuitive understanding of it, but I will say more about interests shortly. So, if a being does not have interests in this sense, it may not have moral status, and we do not have to take it into our moral consideration. If we could therefore show that animals can possess interests, we would have at least a tentative reason to believe that they have moral status. A simple argument for the moral status of animals might thus go along these lines:

(P1) All and only beings who possess interests, possess moral status.

(P2) Animals (like humans) possess interests.

(C) Therefore, animals possess moral status.

Peter Singer (1976, 1979), for example, has famously argued for the claim that all sentient beings have interests since interests are rooted in the capacity for suffering and enjoying things, which animals share with us. We should therefore treat all sentient animals as having moral status and we should include them as addressees under the basic moral principle of equality:

(M) The interests of every being affected by an action are to be taken into account and given the same weight as the like interests of any other being.

Frey (1979), on the contrary, introduces arguments intending to show that interests are not only grounded in sentience, as Singer has it, but are also strongly connected with beliefs and other propositional attitudes. We need to retrace his argument here a little bit to understand better his reasoning.

Frey himself makes a crucial distinction between two different kinds of interests that is paramount to the debate.

(1) X can be *in* the interest of some being.

This sense of interest is closely connected with the possession of a good by a being, which can be fostered or diminished by X. Paul, for example, needs water for his survival. So water is clearly *in the interest* of Paul since it is useful for the good of Paul. The relation between X and the being is completely objective; no appreciation on the part of the being is required; it is an objective relation that holds between X and the good of a species of being. But there exists another notion of interests that sharply contrasts with the one above.

(2) A being can *have an interest* in X.

This sense of interest goes much further than the meaning above. Here a being must *want* X; it must be *concerned* about X; *appreciate* it. There is a definite subjective appreciation of X implied in this kind of interest that motivates the being to chase after X. If Paul has an interest in ice cream, he (subjectively) wants it and he is motivated in doing whatever it takes to get it.

It is clear that these two kinds of interests are logically independent of each other. For while, for instance, it is clearly in the interest of Paul to be healthy, he can deliberately decide against it – as when he has an interest in taking hard drugs while knowing that he thereby probably damages his health irreparably. Thus something can be in Paul's interest even though Paul does not have an interest in it – as with health in our example; and Paul can have an interest in something even though it is not in Paul's interest – as with hard drugs in our example.

The question then arises whether animals are capable of possessing interests in any of these senses. It should be obvious that they possess interests in the sense of (1) in so far as they have a good that can be fostered or harmed. Given their evolutionary history and their current environments, there are many things that can benefit or harm particular species of animals and thus be of interest to them in the sense of (1). But interests in this sense are not limited to animals alone. Even artificial things possess interests in this sense: a car needs oil and water to run; in the

absence of this, the car will malfunction or even break down. So it is in the interest of the car to get enough oil and water. But, surely, the car cannot have interests in the sense of (2) since this implies having wants – and cars are not able to want oil and water – or anything else by that matter. The interesting question, therefore, is whether animals can possess interests in the sense of (2).

It is here that Frey strongly disagrees: according to him, animals cannot have interests in the sense of (2). A crucial step in his argument consists in his assumption that interests are dependent upon beliefs. Let me explain briefly how Frey analyses the dependence of interests on beliefs. According to Frey, interests are counterfactually dependent on beliefs. An example might clarify what Frey has in mind. In one of Frey's own examples, his interest in acquiring a rare edition of a bible is based on his belief that such an edition is currently missing in his book collection. The counterfactual dependence of the interest on the belief guarantees that he would not have the given interest if he did not have the belief. That is, if he would not believe that the rare edition of the bible was currently missing in his collection, he would not have formed the interest in acquiring that bible. This dependence of interests on beliefs is obviously weaker than a conceptual connection between the two. As counterfactual dependencies have been used extensively to analyse the causal relation between events, we can assume that Frey understands the connection between interests and beliefs in causal terms. I am not going to focus on Frey's analysis of the connection between interests and beliefs in what follows, but whatever the logical analysis of this connection turns out, Frey wants to claim that a being can possess interests only if it can also possess beliefs that ground them. Once he is granted that link between interests and beliefs, he moves on to argue against the position that animals could have beliefs.

## 2. The concept of belief versus the function of believing

Frey's central assumption concerning beliefs is that beliefs are mental states that have sentences as their proper object. So to say of someone, for example, that he believes that this wall is red is for him to believe that the sentence "this wall is red" is true. It is obvious that this analysis of belief would exclude animals from the class of believers. For to say of a cat that it believes that the door is locked would be to say of it that it believes the sentence "the door is locked" to be true – and there is no reason to think that a cat could do that. For Frey, therefore, it is clear that animals cannot have beliefs.

The contentious thesis, needless to say, is the thesis that to believe something is to hold true a sentence – namely the sentence that follows the that-clause of the belief-sentence. Now Frey outlines three reasons to support his thesis as follows:

(1) It is not clear how a being can possess the concept of belief, if it cannot draw the distinction between true belief and false belief.

But if a being can draw the distinction between true belief and false belief, there must be something that can be true or false about their beliefs.

Since states of affairs, the things that correspond to beliefs, cannot be either true or false because states of affairs can only be either the case or not the case, we are forced to postulate a language to assure that there is at least something that can be assessed as true or false about beliefs, namely sentences.

(2) To draw the distinction between true and false beliefs, a being must therefore possess an awareness of how language relates to the world so as to make the sentences true or false.

(3) It is not clear, however, how a being can possess an awareness of the relation between a language and the world, if it does not possess a language.

(4) Animals do not possess language.

(CON) Therefore, animals cannot possess beliefs.

In the following I will concentrate on reasoning (1) since the other claims depend in obvious ways on the success of it.

Let us look at the first step of the reasoning in (1). Frey starts his argument with an analysis of the conditions a being must satisfy in order to possess the concept of belief. Now it seems reasonable enough to claim that a being that possesses the concept of belief, and hence can conceptualise its beliefs *as beliefs*, must possess the ability to draw the distinction between true belief and false belief. For beliefs are the kind of mental states the having of which requires an understanding of the possibility of being mistaken, which requires, in turn, a grasp of the contrast between true belief and false belief. Beliefs, therefore, carry with them the potential of being frustrated, and a conceptualisation of belief as beliefs must mirror this fact about their nature.

An opponent of Frey, however, might object to this argument as inappropriate. The question is not whether animals can possess *the concept of belief*, but whether they are capable of having *beliefs tout court*. And it is not at all obvious that in order to *have beliefs* one also has to have *the concept of belief*. In a similar vein, it is not at all obvious that in order to have pain a being must also have the concept of pain. What Frey has shown at most is that the possession of the concept of belief implies the possession of the ability to draw the distinction between true belief and false belief as a necessary condition for the possession of that concept. But so far he has not shown that animals cannot possess beliefs at all. In order to prove such a claim, Frey would have to present an argument showing how the having of beliefs alone requires the mastery of the concept of belief.

Putting this in slightly different terms, we can say that Frey has shown that the ability to draw a distinction between true belief and false belief is a necessary condition for the possession of the concept of belief, but he has not shown that this ability to draw the required distinction is also a sufficient condition for the possession of the concept of belief. Frey himself does not provide such an argument in his paper since his argument already starts from an analysis of the *concept* of belief. Are there such arguments that can improve on Frey's attempts?

There exists a very prominent argument in the literature that attempts to move from the having of beliefs to the concept of belief, which goes back to a set of seminal papers by Donald Davidson (1982, 1984). In 'Rational Animals' (1982), for instance, Davidson argues that the having of a belief requires the possibility of being surprised, which involves, in turn, the belief that one's previous belief was false. According to Davidson, beliefs are mental states that carry expectations about how the world is. But expectations can go wrong sometimes in the case when the world does not turn out to be as we expected it. Thus, it is characteristic for expectations that they carry with them an awareness of possible frustration. This awareness is expressed in the agent's *surprise* when the world is not what she thought it to be. For Davidson, *surprise* then shows an awareness of a contrast between what the agent once believed and what it now comes to believe on the basis of new facts. So what it comes down to, according to Davidson, is that showing surprise is correlated with commanding, however tacitly, the distinction between true belief and false belief. So far, Davidson's argument reaches the same conclusion as Frey's.

But Davidson pushes the argument further than Frey in claiming that an agent who is surprised forms a belief that her original belief was false: the agent thereby forms second-order beliefs about first order beliefs to the effect that they are wrong. Surprise, according to Davidson's analysis, turns out to be a belief about a belief, and thus requires reflective thought. Put differently, we can say that the agent possesses a concept of *belief* in virtue of which it can conceptualise her beliefs *as beliefs*. Evidence of the important theoretical role surprise plays for Davidson is found in the following passage:

'Surprise requires that I be aware of a contrast between what I did believe and what I

come to believe. Such awareness, however, is a belief about a belief: if I am surprised, then among other things I come to believe that my original belief was false. I do not need to insist that every case of surprise involves a belief that a prior belief was false (though I am inclined to think so). What I do want to claim is that one cannot have a general stock of beliefs of the sort necessary for having any beliefs at all without being subject to surprises that involve beliefs about the correctness of one's own beliefs.' (Davidson 1985, p. 479)

Accordingly, Davidson believes that these considerations can help to motivate the move from the having of beliefs to the possession of the concept of belief. To master the concept of *belief*, and thus to know what beliefs *as beliefs* are, is to grasp the contrast between objective truth and mere subjective opinion: true belief and false belief.

But as we have seen with Frey's original argument, Davidson's argument suffers from a similar kind of weakness: is it really so obvious that the ability to draw a distinction between true belief and false belief is a sufficient condition for the possession of the concept of belief? I do not think so, and it is interesting to see why this is not the case.

To start, there is surely consensus about the fact that beliefs require sets of cognitive mechanisms that can:

(1) Monitor whether or not a particular belief is adequate in representing reality.

(2) Initiate some sort of self-corrective behaviour that results in the revision of one's beliefs if they are found to be inadequate.

This much is implied by the very nature of beliefs: for beliefs are mental states with a mind-to-world direction of fit (Searle, 1983), where the function of beliefs is to adequately represent the world. Beliefs are thus distinguished from other propositional attitudes such as desires, which have a world-to-mind direction of fit, where the agent attempts to change the world to fit its desires. Given this analysis of the function of beliefs, they need to use cognitive mechanisms such as the ones outlined above to fulfil their task. For if beliefs did not have these kinds of cognitive mechanisms, they might get out of tune with reality, and agents might thereby end up with "crazy" belief-systems that might lead them astray.

Davidson clearly thinks that these cognitive mechanisms are conceptual or reflective activities, i.e. second-order thoughts that tell us what we ought to believe in the face of conflicting evidence. But is Davidson justified in assuming that the cognitive mechanisms are conceptual in this way?

He apparently fails to notice an important alternative: namely the possibility that the animal grasps the contrast between true belief and false belief implicitly through its self-corrective behaviour (Carruthers, 1992, ch. 6; Searle, 1994). We may say that an animal is aware of the possibility of mistakes if it is somehow capable of revising its beliefs in the light of contradicting evidence. But this belief revision need not involve consciously reflecting upon the beliefs in question. Belief revision may be driven instead by implicit (first-order) procedures that are capable of assessing the success or failure of particular mental states. Animals understand when their occurrent desires are thwarted by circumstances, so they may also understand when some of their beliefs are not satisfied by how the world in fact is.

Rats, for example, may be able to demonstrate the required abilities of self-correction. As has been shown in experiments over and over again (Dickinson, 1980), when rats are repeatedly exposed to the contingency of pressing a lever followed by food, they easily form an instrumental belief that pressing a lever brings about access to food. If the contingency changes so that the rats gain access to food independently of pressing the lever, rats adjust to the new contingency immediately and stop pressing the lever. They have, therefore, revised their belief system to achieve a better fit in the mind-to-world direction of fit. Presumably they are able to do this because they have cognitive mechanisms that can detect when a mismatch between their mental states and

their environment occurs. But as I already noted, none of this requires that rats need to employ reflective activities that involve a conceptual understanding of beliefs.

While rats and other mammals may use belief revision strategies that are below the conceptual level, this does not obviously preclude other creatures using conceptual abilities to revise their stock of beliefs. Their conceptual understanding of belief may emerge as a consequence of consciously reflecting upon their self-corrective behaviour in belief revision, thereby making explicit what they only implicitly knew when revising their beliefs. Once the explicit or conceptual understanding of belief is reached, revising one's beliefs may become more sophisticated and flexible. But with the introduction of non-conceptually based abilities that grasp the contrast between true belief and false belief, Davidson's argument leading from the having of beliefs to the presupposed mastery of the concept of belief fails.

Incidentally, this outcome of the analysis of Davidson's argument throws more light on a further contentious point in Frey's original reasoning in (1). Remember that Frey tried to develop an argument with the intention of demonstrating that the having of beliefs is somehow dependent on the mastery of linguistic abilities. We have already dispensed with the view that the having of beliefs necessarily requires the mastery of the concept of belief. But there is a somewhat different argument in reasoning (1) that has not yet been addressed directly on the basis of the considerations above, but to which the outcomes of these considerations might prove relevant.

This different argument claims that only in the presence of linguistic abilities are we able to make the constitutive distinction between true belief and false belief. As we have seen when presenting his argument, Frey sets up the argument in the following manner:

*If a being can draw the distinction between true belief and false belief, there must be something that can be true or false about their beliefs*

*Since states of affairs, the things that correspond to beliefs, cannot be either true or false because states of affairs can only be either the case or not the case, we are forced to postulate a language to assure that there is at least something that can be assessed as true or false about beliefs, namely sentences.*

According to Frey, then, our ability to distinguish true belief from false belief would imply that we master linguistic abilities and that we understand what it means for sentences to be true or false. However, given our evaluation of Davidson's argument above, we can easily see that this implication is not obvious at all. Frey's argument rests on the assumption that the predicate 'true' and 'false' can only be applied either to states of affairs or sentences – period. Obviously, his argument would lose its force if there existed other entities to which these two predicates could equally apply. Now a different entity comes readily to mind – the beliefs themselves. Why shouldn't the predicates 'true' and 'false' apply to the propositional states of belief themselves? We already saw that the having of beliefs actually requires a set of cognitive mechanisms that are capable of monitoring and revising beliefs that are out of tune with reality. We might therefore argue that the predicates 'true' and 'false' could function as indicators of whether propositional states such as beliefs fulfil their mind-to-world direction of fit. John Searle has argued for such a position. As Searle (1994, p. 212) remarks, 'true' and 'false' may function as *meta-intentional markers* that 'are used to assess success and failure of representations to achieve fit in the mind-to-world direction of fit...' However, given these observations, one can clearly appreciate that Frey's argument, as it stands, cannot prove what it set out to prove, namely that the having of beliefs requires the mastery of linguistic abilities. Such a conclusion could only follow if the predicates 'true' and 'false' were given a *meta-linguistic* meaning, which, however, has not been shown by any of Frey's arguments.

## Conclusions

Where are we in the argument? Frey set out to introduce an argument demonstrating that animals cannot possess moral status. His argument tried to reach its conclusion in three steps. In a first step, he accepted the thesis that moral status is dependent on the having of interests. In a second step he motivated the view that the having of interests is on its turn dependent on the having of propositional attitudes such as beliefs. And in a final step, he argued for the view that the having of beliefs required the mastery of the concept of belief and linguistic abilities. Since animals clearly do not possess linguistic abilities, this flaw projects back: they will not be able to instantiate propositional attitudes such as beliefs; but without beliefs they cannot instantiate interests in any relevant sense; and, finally, without interests, they cannot have genuine moral status.

The outcome of my evaluation of Frey's argument showed that it systematically neglects relevant alternatives that would allow animals to instantiate beliefs in the absence of the mastery of the concept of belief and linguistic abilities. Neither Frey's original argument nor Davidson's improved argument were able to seriously undermine such alternative accounts of the ability to distinguish between true belief and false belief – in fact these arguments do not even discern such alternatives since they are blind towards them. But given the soundness of these alternatives, the original arguments fail in showing that animals do not possess moral status. In the case of Frey's argument it even follows, on its own accord, that once beliefs might be ascribed to animals, there is nothing to prevent us from ascribing moral status to animals. Obviously, my paper has not shown that animals really do possess moral status. But it has shown that influential arguments claiming to prove that animals cannot possess moral status fail in the end.

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