

# Beyond Mankind-- Mind and Value

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**I**MMEDIATE knowledge of living is gained through personal consciousness. Life manifests itself to each sentient individual as an ever-changing stream of sensations, emotions and thoughts—as colors, sounds, tastes, odors, pains, pleasures, desires, hopes, regrets, loves, hates, and kindred states of conscious experience. A human being may think of himself as an organism compounded of certain chemical elements conjoined in innumerable complex molecules, or as an aggregation of cells, tissues and organs, of bone, blood, nerves, and brain. But this kind of thinking always requires an effort. Only when I relax this mental strain do I cease to be an organism and become a pattern of consciousness.

What most interests us in other living creatures is precisely what most interests us in ourselves. We are curious to know what forms sentience takes in them—what life consists of from their own internal viewpoint. How, for example, does it *feel* to be a bird and fly through the air, to be chased by a hawk, to sit on eggs and hatch them, to see one's nestlings swallowed by a snake? This is for most of us the original appeal of the study of other forms of life. Our interest in them is primarily dramatic and esthetic rather than scientific.

Later, we may be taught to think of other forms as organisms composed of cells and tissues, as vortices of energy in dynamic equilibrium with the external world, as members of a complex biotic community. But such thinking requires an effort. After we remit this exertion and obey our natural inclination, other living forms again become



for us conscious beings, each with its own peculiar experiences.

When we attribute to nonhuman creatures the same shade of consciousness that we ourselves would feel in corresponding circumstances, we follow a natural tendency of the human mind. Primitive man ascribed feelings akin to his own not only to animals but also to a certain extent to plants and even inorganic ob-

jects. His world, as we now say, was anthropomorphic. Much of this animism was carried over into the ancient philosophies, and it tinges the cosmology of Plato and Aristotle. With Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, a new point of view appeared. He wished to carry everything back to first principles, and the first problem of philosophy is existence itself. Descartes was sure that he existed, because he thought. *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore, I exist), is the foundation of his system.

But the conclusion would have been equally valid had he said "I am happy, therefore I exist," or "I have a toothache, therefore I exist." In other words, consciousness of our own sensations and feelings is the starting point of knowledge; nothing can be more certain to us than our own conscious states.

When Descartes and his followers began considering the consciousness of animals, they found themselves in a difficult position. The presence of consciousness was not demonstrated by scientific observation nor through induction but by intuition—their whole philosophic edifice rested on this foundation. Hence they were commendably cautious when they developed the theory of animal automatism, according to

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which animals eat without pleasure and cry without pain, because they are mere machines made of flesh and blood instead of metal and wood. From another point of view, the Cartesians were very incautious in concluding that anything at all could be strictly demonstrated, by the methods of science and philosophy, about the existence or quality of consciousness at any point in the universe save in one's own mind.

### **Frustrated Knowledge**

This lack of caution which appeared at the dawn of modern philosophy runs through the works of philosophic and scientific writers down to the present day. One might cite pages of the rashest statements made by respected philosophers, but a single example will suffice. No one would accuse Bergson of being a mechanist, yet in one of his last and most brilliant books we find this passage: "We may presume that pain is much diminished for beings [animals] possessing no active memory, who do not protract their past into their present, and who are not complete personalities; their consciousness is of a somnambulistic nature." . . . One has a strong impulse to look up from the page and cry out: "M. Bergson, how do you know all this?"

At the other extreme, writings, possibly more common a generation or two ago than today but by no means extinct, depict quadrupeds and birds as human beings in feathers or fur, with thoughts and sentiments much like the author's. This point of view is probably just as far from truth on the one side as is the theory of animal automatism on the other; yet I find it much easier to be patient with writings of this stamp than with the above-quoted passage from Bergson and other similar ones.

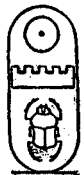
With few exceptions, those who humanize animals have not been trained as scientists or philosophers and are not in the habit of subjecting their views to critical analysis. They at least give us the original, untutored viewpoint; writing from the heart rather than from the head, and we may sympathize with their feelings even if we cannot accept their conclusions as proved. But when one writes as a scientist or a philosopher, it is his duty to think as a scientist or a philosopher.

After a good many years of fairly close observation of birds and other creatures in their native habitats, my conclusion is that, since we can demonstrate nothing about the sentient states of nonhuman animals, we are not justified in positing any limitations to their consciousness. On the one hand, if we must condemn as unscientific such statements as "The bird sang for pure joy," or "The bird built her nest with happy visions of beloved nestlings," and "The mare was proud of her strong colt," it is equally rash to say "The animal lives only in the present," "Its pain is not as great as ours," or "Its consciousness is of a somnambulistic nature." In discussing nonhuman creatures, the beginning and the end of wisdom is to set no arbitrary limits to their psychic potentialities.

We do not forget that comparative psychology has taught us much about the functioning of the mind in animals of many kinds. It demonstrates that some are slow and others quick at learning, that a few have flashes of insight. Learning is largely the formation of new associations; and we know that this process goes on while we sleep dreamlessly, for we awake in the morning with a bright new "idea," or even the plot of a story or the germ of a fresh scientific theory. Hence we can draw no inferences from mental association to consciousness. Cautious comparative psychologists rather carefully avoid references to the subjective states of the creatures they study; they give us no picture of the *conscious* life of animals.

Are we, then, doomed to remain in utter ignorance of that side of animal life which we are most eager to know? Are all our painstaking studies of the habits of birds, mammals, and other creatures fated to end in superficialities which, although amusing and perhaps of a certain practical importance, are never wholly satisfying? We begin with the hope of revealing the inmost spirit of the creature we watch; must we always be content to end with a tuft of feathers or a handful of fur?

A partial answer to this question is given by considering the nature of our knowledge of the inner life of other men. We observe them in certain situations; they make various gestures, utter sounds, or write certain words. We in-



fer that they feel as we do when we make the same gestures, utter or write the same words. We reconstruct within ourselves, by the exercise of imaginative sympathy, the probable state of consciousness of another human being.

The whole process is inferential, not demonstrative; it will not withstand sceptical scientific or philosophical analysis, and our conclusion can never be more than probable. The nearer the other person is to ourself in age and culture, the more likely is our sympathetic representation of his feelings to be correct. An educated man is probably not very successful in his attempts to reproduce the sentiments of a savage, nor is a child in its understanding an old man.

### ***Telepathic Insight***

In addition, there is the possibility of becoming aware of the feelings or thoughts of another being by immediate insight or direct telepathic transmission. This sort of intuition is difficult to demonstrate experimentally, and its study has been neglected by scientists. The telepathic communication of thoughts or emotions seems most likely to take place between persons closely joined by bonds of love and sympathy. When one believes that he has received such insight, it is precious to him and he will not readily relinquish his belief.

These are the only possible ways of knowing the inner life of animals: when we observe them in a certain situation, we may draw inferences based upon the feelings that we would probably have if placed in a similar situation, which is the method of imaginative sympathy; or, we may receive intimations of their feelings through telepathic transmission—a matter of great uncertainty. The closer the animal is to us in relationship and structure, the more likely are our inferences to be correct. It seems probably that our representations of the thoughts of a mammal or a bird are closer to reality than those of an insect or even a fish. However, at present we have no means of proving the correctness of these insights.

Since we understand so little about the subjective states of nonhuman creatures, we cannot know what values life may hold for them. But where posi-

tive knowledge is lacking, it is permissible, and even necessary, to look upon the world imaginatively. When I behold the birds in the surrounding trees, when I hear their blithesome songs, I not only find it easy to suppose that their life is a rich and satisfying experience, but likewise that it contains values of which my human experience gives me no adequate conception. How spontaneous and clean and direct their mode of living is, how free from those economic and social complications which much of the time distract us from our highest aspirations! They are, like the angels it solaces us to imagine, creatures of the light and air to a degree which we can never in this earthly existence attain.

Many kinds of birds remain attached to their mates throughout the year, developing we know not what kind of sentiments of love and devotion. While attending their nests and young, they become paragons of self-sacrificing parenthood. Yet when their little ones are devoured by some creature more powerful than themselves, they accept their loss, as far as we can tell, with that resignation and acquiescence which is enjoined by all our most respected philosophies and religions.

### ***Range of Values***

Although I find it easy to imagine these things, I can demonstrate none of them. For all that I can prove in a manner acceptable to science, birds are merely winged automata, devoid of all feeling. Yet the true sceptic rejects dogmatic negations just as zealously as he rejects dogmatic affirmations. He freely admits the possibility that the multifarious living things which share the earth with him may experience countless values of which he lacks knowledge.

It is one of the tragedies of our times that we treat dogmatic affirmations far more harshly than dogmatic restrictions and negations, thereby revealing our poverty of imagination and narrowness of spirit.

In view of this uncertainty as to the values which may be realized by beings other than ourselves and the goals which the world process may be approaching in evolutionary lines other than our own, what attitude should we

take toward the teeming world of living creatures? I believe that we must recognize the possibility, even the probability, that the process which pervades the universe is directed toward the attainment of multiple values, some of which will be realized by our own kind, whereas of others we can form no conception. To treat with disdain the dominant trend of the universe is wicked; to oppose it is futile. Only by co-operating with the process that made and supports us can we satisfy our highest moral aspirations, and find peace through harmony with the encompassing whole.

One who concedes that the world process is directed toward the realization of a wide range of values, only a fraction of which are within reach of humanity, might adopt as his moral ideal and guide to conduct the following maximum: *I must so live that as many things as possible attain the greatest possible perfection.*

By "things" he should understand all entities that possess form or organization, including crystals and rock formations, hills and streams, the creations of human minds and hands, no less than the whole range of living things, vegetable and animal—not excepting oneself. Even those natural objects, useless to man, which are themselves incapable of realizing values may be indispensable to other sentient beings which can realize values; and for this reason they should not be carelessly destroyed by us.

Except for oneself and the other humans for whose development one is responsible, and the articles that one creates with his mind or hands, it is not necessary to define the perfection of the things which the maxim bids us to respect. Each natural entity capable of growth reveals its own perfection in the form toward which it spontaneously tends. In living according to this maxim, one strives to realize to the full his own potentialities of becoming and of experiencing values, while interfering

as little as possible with the free development of other beings of all kinds.

Although I believe that this maxim is an adequate foundation for the whole of ethics, it requires an extended commentary. The more thoroughly we understand our relations to our fellow men, and on the other hand to the natural world that supports us, the better we shall be able to live by this rule. For the detailed information necessary to guide our dealings with the innumerable beings that surround us, we look to the sciences, both social and natural. We need science to help us to live the good life; but without some guiding ethical principle, the rapid accumulation of vast quantities of scientific information is more likely to bewilder us than to lead us aright.

One point is clear. We shall come far closer to the realization of this moral ideal if we cultivate spiritual values than if we amass material goods. Of material wealth, or the stuff of which it is created, our planet contains a strictly limited quantity; and we cannot pile up possessions without coming into conflict with other creatures that need these same materials to support their lives. But on the mental or spiritual plane such conflict does not occur.

For each crumb of food that I eat, there is so much less for other creatures that need it; the clothes that I wear are not available to another man. But I can share my knowledge and spiritual insights with countless others, without diminishing my own fund of them. These things of the mind are the most precious goods available to us. In the cultivation of the spiritual, men reach their highest perfection. When we strive to attain the perfection natural to us, we leave the way open for other beings to reach the perfection natural to them. When we turn our excess energy into other channels, amassing material possessions and accumulating luxuries of every kind, we not only fail to win our own highest good, but we make it more difficult for other beings to perfect themselves.



In the United States nearly 400,000 children under twelve years of age have to care for themselves while their mothers work.

—*Science News Letter*, February 28, 1959.

