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Talk To the Animals: A Short Comment on Wolfgang Welsch's "Animal Aesthetics"

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Abstract

I voice some concern about Wolfgang Welsch's defense of the theory that animals can feel aesthetic pleasure. My first concern is epistemological: it is hard to see how we can find out whether they actually feel such pleasures. My second concern is conceptual: aesthetic pleasures have intentional objects and are woven into fallible judgments. It is hard to see that animals have such objects and can perform such judgments.

Key Words

Welsch, Darwin, animal aesthetics, aesthetic pleasure, emotions, intentional objects, fallible judgments

1. Welsch's theory

In the Forum on "Science in Aesthetics?" in *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Wolfgang Welsch tries to rejuvenate Darwin's old contention that animals feel aesthetic pleasure.^[1] Welsch actually maintains that they can perform aesthetic judgments. He defines "aesthetic judgment" in the following fashion: "Aesthetic judgment is essentially a judgment based on pleasure -- not on a concept or on objective analysis. The appearance as such must be experienced as pleasurable -- without any need for knowledge of why this is so." The peahen's excitement at the peacock's display of his plumes is a case in point. She takes delight in the beauty of his ornament and performance and nothing else. She performs an aesthetic judgment. Her delight cannot be reduced to her evaluating the peacock as being fit and therefore a suitable mate. In actual fact, a slight variation of the peacock's ornament can reduce or even destroy the peacock's chances of mating. These slight changes can hardly mean that the peacock's fitness all of sudden diminishes dramatically. This points in the direction of the peahen's perceiving beauty in the ornament and not only a sign of fitness.

These are very interesting arguments, certainly inspiring, but alas! not too convincing. Actually, I have two concerns. The first concern is an epistemological one: the question is, Can we know that an animal feels aesthetic pleasure? The second concern is conceptual. The question is, What is the nature of the concept of aesthetic pleasure? Is this pleasure of such a kind that it is likely that an animal can have it?

2. The epistemological concern

I will start by voicing my first concern. Welsch does not explain how we can know that animals feel aesthetic pleasure. And frankly, I think that is not an easy task. After all, we cannot talk to the animals, in stark contrast to the kind Dr. Doolittle. Even assuming that the peahen's excitement is not only caused by signs of fitness, I cannot see why we ought to draw the conclusion that the peahen performs an aesthetic judgment. Maybe there is an unknown X operative in the peahen and other animals that is neither a reaction to signs of fitness nor a feeling of aesthetic delight.

My question is: How does person P (or any other person) know

that animal A (or any other animal) feels aesthetic pleasure? P's knowledge must of course be inferential. Obviously, the same holds for P's knowledge about the aesthetic delight of other persons. Now, how does P (or any other person) infer that person Q (or any other person) is feeling aesthetic delight? P does so partly by observing the behaviour and the situational setting of Q, partly by imputing to Q the same/analogous/related emotions that P himself has felt in such settings and when P is reacting/behaving in a manner which reminds him of Q's reactions/behaviour. It seems intuitively likely that P would have to use the same procedure in order to determine whether A is feeling aesthetic delight. But the problems here are in the first place that however difficult it is for P to imagine how Q experiences aesthetic delight, common sense tells us that it is even more difficult for him to imagine how A experiences whatever aesthetic delights it might feel. How do we know how it feels to be a bat? Well, there are always the twin problems of if and how we can know the minds of other persons. The question of how we know whatever passes for an animal's mind cannot be any less difficult to answer.

Second, when P determines that Q is feeling aesthetic delight, the cues that P has are cues closely connected to faces, hands and language. Let's look at the faces first. We often show aesthetic delight by ways of smiling, closing our eyes, crying, having a certain gleam in our eyes, etc. Cues related to the movement of hands can be the clapping of hands or the rhythmic movement of a single hand. With the exception of monkeys, animals neither have faces nor hands; they can neither smile nor cry. To be sure, they have eyes, but what would count as an aesthetic gleam in the eyes of an animal? As I hinted at, linguistic acts can also be telltale signs, for instance, the uttering of "How beautiful!" in a certain tone of voice. Sighing or letting out jubilant cries can also be among the cues. The question is, Has anybody ever heard an animal give a jubilant cry? As far as we know, animals do not possess propositional language and can therefore not perform linguistic acts of the kind mentioned.

This means that P would hardly be able to know whether A experiences aesthetic delight. A does not seem to have the means (faces, hands, linguistic skills, etc.) to express such a delight. And if it had some means, unknown to P, to express it, it might not be given unto P to understand the nature of the expression.

Now someone might object to this argument by pointing out that babies have hands and faces and express delight with their aid. Many of them show consistent preference for certain shapes or sounds. I have actually been told that most of them show preferences for regular shapes over irregular shapes, soft melody/sound over harsh melody/sound. Is not there anything aesthetic involved in this response? If not, what drives the babies to such consistent preferences, my critic might ask. The trouble with this argument is that we might as well maintain that the baby's preference for his/her mother's breast over a lot of other objects is aesthetic. Does that really make sense? The only thing that we can be certain about when it comes to babies is that they show preferences for certain objects. But it is pretty trivial that preferences as such are not necessarily aesthetic. When it comes to grown up people, we discriminate typical aesthetic preferences over others reasonably well (I do not doubt that there is a large grey zone between aesthetic preferences and other kinds of preferences). If Joan shows all signs of being curious about the way a complex computer

works and no other side of the machine, we would infer that her interest in it is not aesthetic.

3. The conceptual concern

This brings us to the very concept of aesthetic pleasure. Unfortunately, Welsch does not discuss the concept in any depth. He does not tell us what kind of feeling aesthetic pleasure is, aside from it being non-conceptual. Therefore, we must try to provide a rudimentary answer ourselves. There are at least two important types of feelings according to the so-called cognitive theory of emotions. Its followers differentiate emotions on the one hand from sensations on the other. [2] The latter are raw feelings such as pain or the feeling of intense well being. The former is supposed to be a much more complicated phenomenon.

In contrast to a sensation, an emotion cannot be localised in space. If I have a pain, I feel pain somewhere in my body, but if I feel fear it would be wrong to say I feel fear in a given place in my body, though a sensation in, say, my stomach might arise whenever I feel fear. [3] Emotions are in the first place intentional and therefore have intentional objects; secondly they have a propositional content; thirdly they are about something in the world that can be conceptualised. The upshot of this is that emotions have a cognitive component. But the cognitivists have different views concerning the nature of this component. There are, for instance, some who maintain that this component is a belief, others think that it is a construal, i.e., the seeing of something as something else. [4]

Let us look at an example. If I am angry my anger is directed against someone or something, which is the intentional object of my anger. If I am angry with John for having allegedly stolen my car, then the object of my anger is, as Robert C. Solomon points out, irreducibly that-John-stole-my-car. The object is not the alleged fact that he stole the car since he may not have done so. [5] This means that my anger has a propositional content; it is about something in the world, if not the real one then at least the world of my fancy. My anger is a propositional attitude towards a fact expressed in the proposition 'John stole my car.' This proposition obviously contains the propositional content of my anger. Notice that we cannot have propositional attitudes unless we master certain concepts. In my case, being angry with John for having stolen my car is not possible unless I master such concepts as ?car? or ?theft.?

In contrast to this, we can have a sensation like pain without being able to conceptualise it. Further, a pain does not have an intentional object; it simply is. The same holds for other sensations, so knowledge does not play any important role in our sensations.

The cognitivists are definitely on the right track. And I do not think that there is any doubt that aesthetic pleasure is an emotion. The having of a pleasurable sensation alone does not give us any information whether the pleasure in question is aesthetic or not. We can feel the pleasurable sensation to kingdom come without being able to find out what nature the pleasure has. The same holds for observing the behaviour of others (including animals), whom we think are experiencing such a pleasure.

In order to be a pleasure of the aesthetic kind, the feeling must be a part of a way of experiencing an object (real or imaginary) as being objects of a certain kind. The object must be

experienced as being, for instance, beautiful, elegant, gracious or even exciting, entertaining, thought provoking or inspiring. But if it is experienced, for instance, as being solely a handy tool, then it is hard to see how it can count as being an intentional aesthetic object. You might say that it is easy to find intentional objects, which are not aesthetic. But delimiting aesthetic objects in a clear-cut manner from other kinds of objects is a hopeless task. However, there might be some typical aesthetic object. But this is not our main concern now. Our basic point is that aesthetic emotions (including pleasure) get their identity partly from their intentional objects. This also means that aesthetic pleasure has a judgmental moment. We will have to judge that the intentional object of the aesthetic pleasure is of a certain nature. However great the pleasure we might get out of seeing the instrumental value of a tool, that pleasure is hardly aesthetic.

I do not doubt that there are those who would object to my contention that aesthetic pleasure has a judgmental moment. They might say that both people and animals feel such pleasures without necessarily performing aesthetic judgments. Trouble is that such an objection would not help Welsch very much since he has said in no uncertain words that animals perform aesthetic judgments. After all, it is Welsch's theories we are discussing so scrutiny of the aforementioned objection will be put on hold.

Let us return to the intentional objects once can. Let us take a look at an example of the way such objects take part in constituting and differentiating aesthetic emotions. Jim says in dead earnest about Niagara Falls, "The Falls are so cute." He obviously either does not understand the meaning of the word 'cute' or perceives the Falls in strange ways. Perceiving them in a standard way means hearing loud noises, seeing the Falls as being huge in size and the water as streaming with great speed. Contrast this to the standard perception of teddy bear, a typical cute object. Such a bear is perceived as being small, round, and soft. Now, if Jim perceives the Falls in a standard way, it would perhaps be more appropriate to say that he actually thinks they are beautiful, even sublime, and that he misapplied the concept of 'cuteness' (notice the role played by concepts in the judgment, in stark contrast to Welsch's view). Jim has differentiated his aesthetic emotion in a wrong fashion. Actually, pretty much the same would hold even if he had consciously been creating a picture of such a falls by an act of imagination. Judging this daydream falls as being cute would still be wrong. Admittedly, it would be much harder for others to find out whether or not this is true than in the case of the actual Niagara Falls. But Jim could describe the falls of his fancy to others that could decide whether 'cute' correctly applies to the description.

From Jim's way of judging the Falls we can learn that intentional objects take part both in constituting emotions qua aesthetic ones and in differentiating them further into different species of this genus of emotion.

Given that Jim's judgment is a typical emotional aesthetic judgment, then such a judgment is typically fallible. Add to this the alleged fact that aesthetic pleasure has a judgmental moment, then we can conclude that aesthetic pleasure has a fallible moment. I might, for instance, have thought that the pleasure I felt was aesthetic, but on closer scrutiny I see that I just felt pleasure by the fact that a certain object was an obstacle for someone I did not like.

Now the question arises whether animals (or babies) can pass

fallible judgments. Would not passing such judgments require something akin to a propositional language? And would not the conceptualising needed for passing judgments like Jim's likewise require such a language? The question also arises whether animals can have intentional objects and therefore emotions. Is the so-called angry dog really angry or is it just displaying aggression? Is the peahen really feeling aesthetic pleasure or just reacting to sexual stimuli? Well, it is hotly debated whether animals (and babies) can have emotions.[6] Perhaps they could have emotions like fear, anger and joy, but hardly hope and pride. Maybe aesthetic pleasure is an emotion uniquely human like hope and pride. Then again I might be wrong. Possibly animals feel an aesthetic delight different from ours. But how different can it be and still count as an aesthetic delight and not some unknown X? I do not doubt that our aesthetic delights have roots in our animal nature. So do our abilities to do mathematics. It is thought that they have roots in our ability to perform spatial discriminations. Nevertheless, it is pretty farfetched to say that when determining distances, the chimpanzee is actually performing mathematics.

My conclusion is that we do not have any compelling reasons to attribute aesthetic delight to animals. It is difficult enough to prove that grown up human beings can experience such a delight.

Endnotes

[1] Welsch, "Animal Aesthetic," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Volume 2 (2004).

[2] Some philosophers use a slightly different terminology. Robert C. Solomon for instance differentiates between feelings on the one hand, and passions on the other. 'Passions' ranges over emotions, moods (generalised emotions) and desires.

Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions*, Garden City: Doubleday, p. 132 (1976).

[3] Anthony Kenny, *Actions, Emotions and Will*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 57-58 (1963).

[4] Solomon is (or was) in the first camp, Robert C. Roberts in the other. Roberts, *Emotions. An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (2003).

[5] Solomon (1976), p. 184.

[6] See for instance Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought. The Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 89-138 (2001).

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