

Why is the Sheep Afraid of the Wolf?

Medieval Debates on Animal Passions

I

Suppose that you are on a hiking tour in the Swiss Alps. After long hours of strenuous walking you take a break and rest on a meadow, surrounded by peacefully grazing sheep. All of a sudden a wolf appears between two rocks. You realize that it is quickly approaching you and you run away, just like the sheep next to you, trying to reach a safe place. Why are you running away? There seems to be a simple explanation. You see that it is not just any animal but a wolf that is approaching, and you judge that it is a dangerous predator that could hurt you. This cognitive activity triggers an emotion, namely fear, which in turn triggers an action, namely fleeing. To put it in a nutshell: there are intimate causal relations between cognition, emotion and action. But why are the sheep running away? One might answer that they are nothing but complex living machines, programmed to run away whenever they receive a certain sensory input – they have no cognition and no emotion. But there is also an alternative answer. Just like human beings, sheep are cognitive animals that are able to apprehend objects in their environment, to compare and evaluate them as either useful or dangerous. This complex cognitive activity triggers an emotion which, in turn, triggers an action or at least a goal-directed behavior. If we intend to explain animal behavior, we need to analyze the causal relations between cognition, emotion and behavior, exactly as we do it in the case of human beings.

Medieval philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition chose the second line of answer. They all subscribed to the thesis that animals have cognitions and emotions because they are endowed with a sensory soul. Thanks to this soul they have two types of capacities: “apprehensive” capacities that enable them to grasp particular objects and their properties, and “appetitive” capacities that make it possible to have positive or negative emotional states, so-called “passions.” That is why it would be mistaken to reduce animals to complex machines. When explaining their behavior, one should appeal to specific sensory capacities, not simply

to material parts, and one ought to explain how and why animals actualize them in a given situation.¹

This well-known theoretical framework raises a number of questions. The first concerns the cognition that is supposed to occur when apprehensive capacities are actualized. What type of cognition do animals have? One can hardly claim that the sheep recognize a wolf or that they even know that a wolf is approaching. Since they lack intellectual capacities, they are utterly unable to form the general concept of wolf and then to apply it to the particular thing they are facing. This is why they cannot recognize the grayish, growling thing as a wolf. Nor do they have the concept of danger. Consequently, they cannot come up with the predicative judgment that the wolf is dangerous, and they cannot justify this judgment by appealing to other judgments. So, in what sense is it possible to say that the sheep apprehend the wolf and that they evaluate it as either useful or dangerous?

A second problem concerns the structure of the emotion that is supposed to be caused by a cognition. In the case of human beings, it seems clear that most emotions have an intentional structure: they are directed at an object under a certain aspect. Thus, the fear you are experiencing is directed at the wolf insofar as it looks dangerous to you. There might be exceptions, for instance states of anxiety or elation that are not directed at a particular object. But in most cases, there is an intentional object that can be specified and distinguished from other possible objects. Are animal passions also intentional? If so, what exactly are they directed at? Obviously, sheep cannot focus their fear on the wolf as a conceptually conceived object. Nor can they specify the aspect of danger if they are unable to form the concept of danger. Does this mean that their fear is simply directed at a set of sensory properties? Or are they somehow able to single out an object and to characterize it in a non-conceptual way?

Finally, there is a third problem that concerns the nature of the relation between cognition, emotion and behavior. In the case of human beings, it is plausible to assume that emotions play an important causal role, but not the only one. Thanks to their intellectual capacities, human beings can assess a situation, modify or change their judgments and thereby modify or change their emotions, which will eventually lead to a change of action. Upon seeing a wolf, you can ask yourself if it is really a wild wolf or an Irish wolfhound. If you come to the conclusion that it is in fact a harmless wolfhound, your fear will gradually disappear,

¹ On the metaphysical background of this theoretical framework, which dominated Aristotelian discussions up to the seventeenth century, see Simo Knuuttila, *Emotions in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 24-47, and Dennis Des Chene, *Life's Form. Late Aristotelian Conceptions of the Soul* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2000).

perhaps it will even be replaced by joy or affection for this wonderful animal. Consequently, you will not flee. Of course, not all kinds of emotions can be controlled or changed in this way. Not all of them are “cognitively penetrable,” as philosophers nowadays say.² For instance, a person suffering from arachnophobia will not make his or her fear disappear simply by judging that spiders are cute and harmless little animals. But in many cases, intellectual judgments do “penetrate” our emotions, enabling us to adjust or correct them. What about animals? Can they assess a situation and arrive at new cognitions that enable them to change their passions and consequently their behavior? Can the sheep somehow reach the conclusion that the wolf was tamed by the shepherd and that it intends to protect them, even though they lack the capacity to make intellectual judgments? And can they thereby influence their fear, or is it utterly impenetrable and therefore unchangeable?

In the following, I would like to discuss these problems by focusing on three medieval philosophers: Avicenna, who famously introduced the sheep example into the debate, Thomas Aquinas and Gregory of Rimini. Of course, I can only cover a small part of the extensive debate about animal passions.³ But I hope my reconstruction and analysis will make clear that there was no unified doctrine, despite the common theoretical framework of an Aristotelian faculty psychology.⁴ I also hope that this analysis will shed some light on how medieval authors explained the nature and genesis of human passions. For it is precisely in their discussions of animal passions that they attempted to explain what is distinctive about human beings who are endowed with rational capacities.

II

In the first as well as in the fourth book of his *De anima*, which had a strong impact on later debates in the Latin West, Avicenna mentions the example of the sheep that is afraid of the wolf and flees.⁵ He pays particular attention to the genesis of this animal passion. On his view, two cognitive activities are required. First, the exterior senses need to apprehend the

² On the limits of cognitive penetrability, see Peter Goldie, *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 74-78.

³ I will neither discuss the medieval attempts to classify various types of animals nor analyze their ways of establishing a taxonomy of animal passions. For a helpful overview of animal psychology in the Middle Ages, see Jacques Voisenet, *Bêtes et hommes dans le monde médiéval. Le bestiaire des clercs du V^e au XII^e siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), and *Micrologus* 8 (2000), a special issue on “The World of Animals.”

⁴ Moreover, the faculty psychology itself was subject to heated debates. For an overview, see Dag N. Hasse, “The Soul’s Faculties,” in: *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by R. Pasnau (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 305-319.