



Anthropocentrism revisited. A Review of Marc D. Hauser's *Wild Minds*

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Hauser (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) seeks to answer the question of whether animals think. Though his attempt is noteworthy for contributing to a reversal of our tradition of bias against non-human animals (henceforth “animals”), he is reluctant to conclude that they are self-aware. I shall argue that he is open to the charge of anthropocentrism, the idea that we view, or assess, other things in terms of human characteristics; specifically, he uses animals' lack of morality to conclude they are not self-aware.

I shall first briefly describe Hauser's view, focusing on his conclusion regarding animal consciousness. Next, I take issue with his claim that animals are not self-aware.

Hauser tells us that the only way to understand what animals think is to see how they develop “mental tool kits” to solve problems in their environments (p. xv). He utilizes pictures to illustrate his point about how the mind deals with problems that are useful and memorable. Yet he also sees a radical difference between human and animal problems: we have rules for behavior and they do not. He claims that animals are moral patients (objects of moral concern) but not moral agents (they do not make moral choices).

We must consider Hauser's argument that animals are only moral patients, since this provides the basis for his thesis that they are not self-aware. His reasons that animals are not moral agents are that they: (a) do not have empathy, being not self-aware; (b) cannot inhibit themselves, being incapable of conceptual change; (c) do not consider the beliefs and desires of others; (d) do not understand how their actions impact others, which requires being able to attribute mental states to others; (e) do not understand duty and responsibility; and (f) do not understand norms of emotions and actions in their societies – further, they have no concept of right or wrong. He offers only a limited acknowledgement of animal consciousness.

What is ironic is that Hauser began by attempting to understand animals in terms of their own environments. The remarkable thing about Hauser's list, however, is that it measures animals against human standards. Not only is his account anthropocentric; it is also highly implausible for

evolutionary reasons. If there has been one big message from Darwin it is that we are part of nature.

As is well known, Darwin and others showed us that humans are animals, differentiated only by species membership and not ontologically different from others. We all sit on a consciousness continuum, though some differences are qualitative. Since all organisms evolved to confront problems in their environments, it would be at least reasonable to think that we all did so in similar ways, and to different levels of sophistication.

In fact, we can take issue with Hauser's list. Having moral emotions is not the same as valuing them. Many animals have moral emotions. Animals have a more limited ability to inhibit behavior, but the ability is not totally lacking.

Further, although there is an issue of degree, it is too uncharitable to think that when humans act they "intend," but, when animals do, it is merely "instinct." To postpone one desire for another happens all the time when animals protect their fellows. In fact, so-called instinctive behavior includes those very moral emotions that underlie ethics.

Animals, many of them, do consider the interests of others. They often understand how their actions affect others, too. We need not have an understanding of duty or responsibility to be ethical. On the face of it, Hauser makes it sound as if we must study Kant in order to be ethical. A duty is a historical concept and, it suffices to say, not the only way to motivate ethical behavior. Responsibility leads us back to the problem of free will. We must consider responsibility in a context. Animals, many of them, are social. They have norms – the proverbial pecking order – and often they have to learn them in the same way we did.

Reading *Wild Minds*, we are left thinking, "Animal's are second-rate humans." But the thesis cuts both ways. If we want to understand animals better we need, I think, to free ourselves of the theological underpinnings that led us to separate us from the rest of creation. Hauser attempts to explore the question of animal thinking scientifically, but falls prey to anthropocentrism in a specific way.

Anthropocentrism is as much about what qualities we think we can ascribe to other (non-human) objects, as what we cannot. So-called human characteristics may not be our province alone. Man is not the measure of all things, but self-knowledge can provide clues about how to interpret the behavior of other animals. Hauser's observations, I have argued, do not substantiate the claim that all animals are not self-aware.

Anthropocentrism is a political charge; animal consciousness is, in part, that sort of issue. It would be impossible, if we aim to be objective, to ignore how we use animals, and how our thinking about them, as not fully conscious, legitimates it. Based on Hauser's own evidence – and in light of the tremendous suffering animals endure at our hands – he does not go far enough in recognizing animal consciousness. Unfortunately, animals may be far more conscious that we have been willing to admit.