

## **Animal Minds, Human Minds**

### **Eric Sidel**

... every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of ... any other body cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind.  
(Descartes 1984:33)

### **What do Minds do?**

My research in animal cognition is centered on questions about the role(s) representations play in causing animal behavior. I ask if animals represent the world, or if they simply respond to it, and then, for those that do represent the world, if those representations -- specifically the content of those representations -- are implicated in their behavior. Exactly why I ask these questions, why I take the approach I do towards answering them, and what I think the questions and answers have the potential to reveal about all animal minds -- not just the minds of nonhuman animals -- is an involved tale.

Philosophers typically answer questions by asking questions. When asked if animals have minds, or about the nature of animal minds, the philosopher will want to start by asking what a mind is, for only when we know what a mind is can we know if animals have minds, or what animal minds are like. But, the answer to that question is, at best, an ending point, not a useful starting point. Consider a similar question.

Is Duchamp's Fountain (a signed urinal, like any other factory-made urinal except for the signature) a work of art? In order to answer this question we might examine paradigm examples of art for common properties and then ask if Duchamp's Fountain shares these properties. But this could lead us astray by focusing our attention on shared properties that are irrelevant. More importantly, the paradigm examples of art are paradigms not simply because they are clearly works of art, but also because they don't challenge our preconceived notion of what an artwork is. This method would not permit challenges to that preconceived notion to be ratified as art. Another way to answer the question would be to theorize about what property (or properties) an artwork has that makes it an artwork. But this approach is too essentialist; it makes an object a work of art if it has one (or more) essential property. It might be the case that an object is an artwork if it has some of a range of properties, none of which are shared by all artworks. Furthermore, our choice of property is going to be determined largely by what we think are the paradigm works of art. For example, if we are strongly influenced by the Old Masters, we might think that having the right subject or meeting certain formal standards is necessary for being a work of art. The conclusions we draw are determined by the paradigm works of art with which we started. Still another way to answer this question would be to ask what it is that a work of art does or is supposed to do. Then things that fulfill that function are works of art. Call this a "functional definition of art." Such a definition has the advantage of freeing us from the constraints that are invariably concomitant with definitions of art that are driven by examining paradigms. This allows challenges to our preconceived notion of what an artwork is.

The pitfalls we face when trying to define "mind" are similar to those we face in trying to define "art." We might start by looking at what we think of as the paradigms of being a mind: human minds. And then we might claim that an object is a mind if it is sufficiently similar to these paradigms. But this raises several problems similar to those described above: any paradigm-driven definition is going to be a slave to the properties shared by the paradigms, it won't be able to countenance things that differ strongly from the paradigms. It may be that things that are wildly different from human minds are not minds, but we should not begin our investigation into the nature of animal minds by assuming this; this should be something we discover as a result of our empirical work rather than a boundary condition that we impose on our empirical work at the outset. Nor should we adopt the second approach: picking properties that are essential for being a mind. This also binds us to our preconceived notions of what is