

Frey On Why Animals Cannot Have Simple Desires

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In his *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals*,¹ R. G. Frey advances a number of arguments which, he thinks, show that animals ‘cannot have desires’ (e.g., p. 101). Some of these arguments turn on Frey’s analyses of desires in terms of beliefs and beliefs in terms of thinking that certain sentences are true (pp. 53 ff.). Other arguments against the possibility of animals having desires are marshalled independently of these analyses. My present interest is limited to these latter arguments.

Frey acknowledges that a critic of his view that animals cannot have desires will protest that, at the very most, the arguments that turn on his analysis of desire and belief show that animals cannot have *some* kinds of desires, not that they cannot have any. ‘Specifically’, Frey writes (p. 101), ‘this critic is likely to have in mind that, however many kinds of desires there are, there is a class of desires—let us call them “simple desires”—which do not involve the intervention of belief . . .’. Thus, for example, Fido may, on the critic’s view, simply desire a bone, and the attribution of this desire to Fido need not imply that Fido has any beliefs about anything. Now, it is, I think, doubtful that anybody, including Frey’s patient critic, believes this of Fido, since it is unclear what it could mean to say that Fido desires a particular bone but that he does not believe anything whatsoever about the object he selects by way of fulfilling his desire. That is, it is unclear how one could make sense of the attribution of desires to some individual, A, while denying that A believes that what A selects to fulfil A’s desire *is* what A desires (e.g., *is* a bone). But let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is possible. We are to imagine Frey’s critic saying that Fido simply desires the bone. Frey, since he believes that animals cannot have desires, must believe that Fido cannot simply desire this. Why?

Those who attribute simple desires to animals, Frey believes, are faced with a dilemma. Assuming that Fido is said to desire a bone, the question arises: ‘Is (Fido) aware that it has this simple desire? It either is not so aware or it is’ (p. 104). In either case, Frey believes, the attribution of simple desires to Fido in particular, and to animals in general, is impaled by a horn of the dilemma he poses. Let us first consider Frey’s argument against those who would attribute simple desires to Fido but who would deny that Fido is aware that he has this desire. Here is Frey’s principal argument against this view.

The dog simply desires the bone but is unaware that it simply desires the bone. It may be thought that there is nothing so very odd in this, in allowing the dog to desire without being aware that it desires; but it seems to me to raise a problem of a difficult order. In the case of human beings, unconscious desire can be made sense of, but only because we

1 R. G. Frey, *Interests and Rights: The Case Against Animals* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980).

first make sense of conscious desire; where no desires are conscious ones, however, where the creature in question is alleged to have only unconscious desires, what cash value can the use of the term 'desire' have? (ibid.)

Part of what Frey alleges here comes to this. From (1) 'Fido desires the bone but is unaware that he desires it' it follows that (2) 'Fido's desire is an unconscious desire'. The inference from (1) to (2) is invalid, however, since it fails to take account of and, indeed, exploits the distinction between being-aware-of and being-aware-that-one-is-aware-of one's desires.

For the greater part of my life as an individual who has desires, I simply have them. I am *aware of* them, and I do not fret much over this fact. Sometimes, however, the circumstances of my life require that I take a step back from my desires, so to speak, and take stock of them. For example, if my desires come into conflict with one another, or if a desire I have offends against an ideal I accept, then I am in a situation where I must think about or I reflect upon rather than just have (experience) them. It is because we sometimes do find ourselves in situations where we think about or reflect upon our desires that we can give a clear sense to saying that we not only are *aware of* our desires but also are *aware that* we have them. To say that we are *aware that* we have them, in other words, is to say that our desiring what we do can itself be something which we think about or reflect upon. For convenience let us say that whenever we think about or reflect upon our desires we are operating at the level of reflective consciousness.¹ When, on the other hand, we simply are aware of our desires—when, that is, we simply are conscious of them, but do not think about or reflect on them—let us say that we operate at the level of simple consciousness, or, if 'simple' seems too coarse a word, let us say that we operate at the level of non-reflective consciousness.

Now, part of Frey's argument against attributing simple desires to animals involves, as we have seen, inferring (2) 'Fido's desire must be an unconscious desire' from (1) 'Fido desires the bone but is unaware that he desires it'. In view of what was just said about reflective and simple consciousness, however, we can explain why (2) does not follow from (1). For Fido can be *aware of* desiring the bone without his having to be *aware that* he is aware of it. Put in other terms, the desire for the bone can be an object of Fido's simple consciousness without its also being, or having to be, an object of his reflective consciousness. Frey, therefore, is quite mistaken in inferring (2) from (1). From 'Fido is not reflectively conscious of his desire for the bone' one cannot validly infer 'Fido is not conscious of desiring the bone' or, alternatively, 'Fido's desire for the bone is an unconscious desire'. There is no reason to believe that Fido, anymore than the rest of us, must be reflectively *aware that* he has those simple desires he has in order to be *aware of* them.

Frey's principal argument against his imagined critic's opting for the first alternative Frey contests—the view, again, that Fido simply desires the

1 I believe it was Dale Jamieson who first called to my attention the need to make a distinction between reflective and simple consciousness.

bone but is unaware that he simply desires it—this principal argument fails. For this argument of Frey's requires that we regard *all* desires attributed to animals as unconscious desires, if Fido is not (reflectively) aware that he has them. Once we recognize that the move from (1) to (2) is fallacious, however, the grounds are removed for supposing that opting for this first alternative commits one to regarding all animals' desires as unconscious. One can, therefore, endorse Frey's claim that (3) 'the dog must be *aware of* at least some of its simple desires, if the term "desire" is not to be drained of all significance' (p. 105, emphasis added), without agreeing that (4) Fido must be '*aware that* it simply desires the bone' (p. 104, emphasis added). And since it is (3), not (4), that is necessary for the attribution of simple desires to animals, we have no reason to withhold this attribution if, as in Frey's case, the arguments for withholding it are directed against (4) rather than (3).

That Frey does fire away at the wrong target becomes even clearer when we turn to consider the second alternative which he allows his critic. Here is the way Frey characterizes this alternative.

The dog simply desires the bone and is *aware that* it simply desires the bone. On this alternative, if the dog is *aware that* it has this simple desire, then it is *aware that* it simply desires the bone; it is, in other words, self-conscious (p. 105, emphasis added).

Now, when Frey says that Fido is self-conscious, if he is aware that he simply desires the bone, what he evidently has in mind is something like the following. In order for me to be aware that I have the simple desires I do, I must be able to step back from them, so to speak, so that *my simple desires* themselves can be objects of my reflective consciousness. But since, in order to view these desires reflectively, I must be able to view them as *my* simple desires; and since to view them thus is (or involves) self-consciousness; it follows that only those individuals who are capable of self-consciousness can be aware that they simply desire what they do. Animals, alas, since they are incapable of self-consciousness, according to Frey, thus are incapable of becoming aware that they have simple desires and thus, so Frey concludes, animals have no simple desires.

Suppose we accept Frey's view that those who are aware that they have simple desires are self-conscious; suppose, further, we grant that no animal is self-conscious. Even granting this much, it does not follow that animals have no simple desires. No animal, any more than any other individual, must be *aware that* it simply desires what it does in order to be *aware of* desiring it. That is, no animal must be able to reflect on its simple desires, to weigh up their competing claims, to think about the desires themselves, in order to be (non-reflectively) conscious of them. Even in the case of those individuals who *are* capable of self-consciousness, in the sense that they can think about (reflect upon) their simple desires, they must be *aware of* these simple desires, at the level of simple or non-reflective consciousness, *before* they can be *aware that* they have the simple desires they do, as viewed from the vantage point of reflective consciousness. (One cannot be aware that one is aware of *X* if one is not first (and independently) aware of *X*.) Thus, since the issue that separates Frey and his critic is whether animals can have

simple desires, it is quite beside the point to contest their possibly having them, as Frey does, by arguing that, lacking as they are with respect to the capacity for self-consciousness, animals cannot be reflectively conscious of their desires. All that follows from their lack of this capacity, assuming that they lack it, is that animals cannot think about or reflect upon their simple desires, if they have any. What does not follow is that they do not or cannot have any simple desires in the first place. Thus, since the issue that separates Frey and his critic is not whether animals can reflect upon their simple desires, but is, rather, whether they can have simple desires, Frey's argument against the second alternative he offers his critic commits the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi*. Frey, that is, simply fires away at the wrong target. Granted, this defence of Frey's critic does not show that animals either have or can have simple desires; it does show, however, that, stripped of his analysis of desires in terms of beliefs and beliefs in terms of believing that certain sentences are true, Frey's arguments fail to show that animals do not, least of all that they cannot, have them.¹

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