THOUGHT, JUDGMENT AND PERCEPTION*

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Denke nie, gedacht zu haben! Wenn Du denkst Du denkst, dann denkst Du nur Du denkst. Denn das Denken der Gedanken ist gedankenloses Denken. (Never think you think. If you think you think, you only think you think. Thinking thoughts is thoughtless thinking.)

Chess players’ tongue twister

In 2009 Reinhard Brandt published his book Können Tiere Denken? (Can animals think?). Quite rightly this work has played a leading role in recent discussions of the issue in German-speaking countries.1 Two years earlier I had given my inaugural lecture at the University of Zurich under exactly the same title. In that lecture, however, and in some other publications, I have reached conclusions that in many—though not in all—respects run counter to those of Brandt. Concerning the question of the intellectual difference between human and non-human animals (the latter henceforth referred to simply as ‘animals’), Brandt takes a moderate to emphatically differentialist line, whereas I am a moderate assimilationist. In particular I would argue that living beings without language are—at least in principle—capable of certain forms of thought.

However, despite the fact that I undoubtedly have my own opinions on many aspects of this topic, I shall in the following pages concern myself primarily with Brandt’s book. In doing so I shall endeavour to take as my example Quine’s disclaimer in his review of Strawson’s Introduction to Logical Theory, namely that his purpose was not “to invoke [his own] philosophy in criticism of another man’s book” (Quine 1953, 435). Nevertheless, for reasons of brevity I shall be compelled on occasion to refer to works of my own.

Taking Brandt’s project as my starting point, I shall first discuss some methodological issues that arise from his appeal to Morgan’s Canon, and then address his conception of thought as judgment. This involves a critique of his argument

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* This text is a translation by Joseph Swann of my original paper “Denken, Urteilen, Wahrnehmen”.
1. Unless otherwise noted, all page references are to this work.
that the concept of *thought* should be restricted to *judgment*, and an exposition of the contrary thesis, namely that thinking involves more than judging. The next section will concentrate on the aspect of thinking that is best suited to Brandt’s position, namely ‘thinking that such and such is the case’, or belief. Brandt disputes that animals are capable of belief. I disagree with his theses on this matter, which closely parallel Davidson’s notoriously well-known arguments, and adduce two reasons in support of the opposite view, namely that animals possess knowledge and perception, and therefore also belief. Finally I shall consider Brandt’s exposition of the relation between perception, differentiation and comparison. I shall attempt to show that his often behaviouristic conception of animal perception is both tactically and strategically at odds with his well-founded admission at other moments that some animals can make distinctions, and that their behaviour cannot be reduced to simple stimulus-response mechanisms.

1. *Brandt’s project*

The question of the intellectual capacities of animals has for some time played a significant role in the English and French philosophical traditions. That it has now also come to the fore among German-speaking philosophers is above all thanks to the work of Perler, Wild (Perler, Wild 2005, Wild 2008) and Brandt. The fundamental issue in the present discussion is: ‘Do at least some animals possess intelligence comparable with that of humans?’ Brandt’s book, however, starts from a somewhat more specific question: ‘Can animals think?’

The answer to both questions is not just a matter of empirical observation, whether in the field or the laboratory, nor simply of biological theory, but also of how one understands disputed concepts like intelligence and thought. Both in general and at a more concrete level there is a fundamental difference here between two approaches. In the matter of mental capacities *differentialists* see significant qualitative (categoric) differences between animals and humans. *Assimilationists*, on the other hand, maintain that even these differences are purely quantitative: they see the relation between the intelligence of humans and of the higher animals as one of continuity.

Brandt represents a by and large moderate differentialism whose historical roots lie with Aristotle and Kant. He maintains that

- the *psyche* or soul is the seat of the ability to feel and perceive
- it is common to animals and humans (11–20)
- the *intellect*—and with it the ability to think—is a higher mental capacity proper to humans alone