

Can Animals Share Agency?

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1. Introduction

My aim in this paper is to argue that many nonhuman animals can share agency, and to consider possible moral implications of this idea.

The idea that animals can share agency might seem surprising, since many people doubt that animals are agents at all. Thus, I will begin by making a distinction between two kinds of agency: Propositional agency, which only humans have, and perceptual agency, which humans and nonhumans share. I will then argue that perceptual agency is shareable in the same kind of way that propositional agency is. Finally, I will explore several possible moral implications of the idea that animals can share agency. For example, this idea might imply that animals can share responsibility and rights (to the degree that they have responsibility and rights at all). It might also have implications for human communities, as well as human-nonhuman mixed communities (to the degree that these groups include perceptual as well as propositional agents).

2. Propositional and Perceptual Agency

I begin by making a distinction between perceptual and propositional agency, and showing that many nonhumans are perceptual agents and many humans are both kinds of agent.

First, you act as a **propositional agent** when you act on *normative judgments*. A normative judgment is a judgment about what you have reason to believe, desire, and/or do. So, for example, if you think, explicitly or implicitly, that you should eat a sandwich, and you eat a sandwich on the basis of that judgment, then you are acting as a propositional agent.

Second, you act as a **perceptual agent** when you act on *normative experiences*. A normative experience is a perceptual experience that represents certain objects in your perceptual environment as to-be-pursued or to-be-avoided. So, for example, if you experience the sandwich as to-be-eaten, and you eat the sandwich on the basis of this experience, then you are acting as a perceptual agent.

We have good reason to think that only humans are propositional agents. This is because the capacity for propositional agency requires the capacity for propositional language and thought, and we have good reason to think that only humans have the capacity for propositional language and thought. Of course, this is not to say that only humans have language or thought – nor would I want to say this. Rather, it is to say that only humans have the kind of language and thought that allows us to think about our beliefs, desires, and/or actions, as well as to think about what we have reason to believe, desire, and/or do.

In contrast, we have good reason to think that many humans and nonhumans alike think and act as perceptual agents. After all, you do not need the capacity to think about your reasons for belief, desire, and/or action in order to be a perceptual agent. All you need is the capacity for perceptual experience and belief- and desire-like drives that shape your perceptual experience. And we have good reason to think that these capacities are very widely distributed in the animal community. Thus, for example, I might sometimes eat a sandwich because I think that I should. But I might also sometimes eat a sandwich because I experience it as to-be-eaten. In contrast, my dog Smoky never eats anything because he thinks that he should. But he does, as often as possible, eat things because he experiences them as to-be-eaten.

3. Shared Propositional and Perceptual Agency

I will now argue that perceptual agency is shareable in the same kind of way that propositional agency is.

The standard view is that we share (propositional) agency if we share intentions, and we share intentions if we each intend to participate in a shared activity. For example, consider the difference between walking together and (merely) walking alongside each other. When you and I walk together, we each intend to walk with the other, and we each act on that intention. This means that, if you walk in a particular direction, then I will take that as a reason to walk in that direction too (or try to get you to change your mind); and vice versa. In contrast, when you and I merely walk alongside each other, we are not intending to walk with each other in this kind of way. If you walk in a particular direction, then, all else equal, I will not take that as a reason to walk in that direction too; and vice versa. So, if we happen to be walking next to each other in this scenario, then, all else equal, this is simply an accident.

A few formal features of shared agency are worth emphasizing. First, when you and I share agency, we each have a conception of our shared activity as well as of our individual role in that shared activity. In this case, for example, our conception of our shared activity might be “walking together,” and our conception of our individual role in our shared activity might be “walking with you”. Second, we each intend to play our role in this shared activity, conditional on the other doing the same. In this case, for example, I intend to walk with you, conditional on your walking with me; and you intend to walk with me, conditional on my walking with you. This means that, among other things, we will each try to make our plans with respect to this activity “mesh.” Thus, for instance, if you turn on 4th street, then you will check to make sure that I am still with you before proceeding; and vice versa.

Importantly, shared agency is compatible with many differences between us. We do not need to have the same conception of our shared activity or of our individual roles in our shared activity. We also do not need to have the same reason for participating in our shared activity. For example, I might be thinking of us as “walking to the East River” and

you might be thinking of us as “walking to Alphabet City.” Moreover, I might be walking with you for the conversation, whereas you might be walking with me for the exercise. Still, as long as our intentions and actions overlap enough to have the formal features I have described, we count as walking together.

The question is: Can perceptual actions have the same kind of coordinated, mutually dependent structure? I think that they can. Specifically, I propose that we share perceptual agency if we “share normative experiences,” and we share normative experiences if we each experience a shared activity as to-be-participated-in. For example, consider the difference between walking together and (merely) walking alongside one another. When my dog Smoky and I take a walk, we each experience the other as to-be-walked-with, and we each act on that perceptual experience. This means that, if Smoky walks in a particular direction, then I will experience a “pull” to walk in that direction too (or try to get Smoky to change his mind); and vice versa. In contrast, when one of the many cats in my neighborhood and I walk alongside each other, we are not experiencing each other as to-be-walked-with in the same kind of way. If the cat walks in a particular direction, then, all else equal, I will not experience a “pull” to walk in that direction too; and vice versa. So, if one of these cats and I happen to be walking in the same direction in this scenario, then, all else equal, this is simply an accident.

Note that shared perceptual agency, as described here, has the same formal features as shared propositional agency, as described above. First, Smoky and I each have a sense of our shared activity, as well as of our individual role in that shared activity. In this case, for example, we each experience ourselves as (collectively) walking together, and as (individually) participating in that shared activity. Of course, one might worry that, in attributing to Smoky a sense of our shared activity and of his role in our shared activity, I am engaging in a bit of speculative mindreading. And, this is true to a degree. But, unless we are skeptical about animal minds in general, we should not regard this case of speculative mindreading as particularly controversial. After all, the experience that I am attributing to Smoky does not require the kind of theory of mind that, we have reason to believe, nonhuman animals lack. Instead, all it requires is the kind of implicit social cognition that, we have reason to believe, many nonhuman animals have. Indeed, this kind of implicit social cognition is, many cognitive ethologists and comparative psychologists believe, precisely what allows nonhuman animals to coordinate with each other in the absence of a capacity for propositional language.

The second formal feature of shared agency is that Smoky and I each decide to participate in our shared activity, conditional on the other doing the same. In this case, for example, I experience Smoky as to-be-walked-with, conditional on his walking with me, and I act on this experience. Similarly, Smoky experiences me as to-be-walked-with, conditional on my walking with him, and he acts on this experience. As before, this means, among other things, that Smoky and I will each try to make our approaches to this activity “mesh.” In this case, for example, if Smoky turns left, then he will check to make sure that I am still with him before proceeding; and vice versa. Of course, as before, in attributing to Smoky an aspiration to make our approaches to this activity “mesh,” I am engaging in a bit of speculative mindreading. But, also as before, this case

of speculative mindreading is not particularly controversial. We have ample reason to believe that social animals aspire to mutual understanding of shared activity. (Again, this is not to say that they have this aspiration or this understanding explicitly.) For example, dogs engage in a wide range of rituals during play – bowing, tail wagging, rolling over, and so on – precisely in order to indicate a shared understanding of their shared activity. And anyone who has a relationship with a dog can confirm that they aspire to shared understanding of shared activity in other situations as well, ranging from walking to running to sleeping.

Of course, there are many important differences between me and Smoky when we walk together. We do not have the same sense of our shared activity, nor of our individual roles in our shared activity. Nor do we have the same reason for participating in our shared activity. For example, I might be experiencing us as “walking around the block” and Smoky might be experiencing us as “walking to all the good pee spots.” Moreover, I might be walking with Smoky in order to get him to pee, whereas he might be walking with me for the company and adventure. But as we established in the case of shared propositional agency, as long as our experiences and actions overlap enough to have the formal features I have described, we count as walking together.

Thus far, I have argued that Smoky and I can share perceptual agency: We can each be acting as a perceptual agent, and our experiences and actions can have the kind of coordinated, mutually dependent structure that suffices for shared agency. I now want to claim that we can share agency across kinds of agency as well. That is, I can be acting as a propositional agent (or, as is usually the case, moving back and forth between propositional and perceptual agency) and Smoky can be acting as a perceptual agent, and our actions can still have the kind of coordinated, mutually dependent structure that suffices for shared agency. For example, I can intend to walk with Smoky (and then, when I get into the flow of the walk, experience him as *to-be-walked-with*), and Smoky can experience me as *to-be-walked-with*, and we can each act on these intentions / experiences, with the upshot that we walk together, making sure to stay alongside each other the entire way.

I think that this last point, that we can share agency across kinds of agency, is important for human shared agency as well. After all, whether we are acting individually or collectively, it is rare that we act purely propositionally. There might be cases where we act purely perceptually, for example if we experience a brawl or riot as *to-be-jumped-into*, and we jump into the brawl or riot on the basis of that experience alone. Or, there might be cases where we make plans propositionally and then implement those plans perceptually, for example if we decide that we have reason to jump into a brawl or riot and then, once we get into the flow of the activity, we let our experience of people as *to-be-punched*, trashcans as *to-be-thrown-through-windows*, and so on take over. In each of these cases, it seems plausible that we are acting together rather than merely acting alongside each other, and the account of shared agency that I am developing here vindicates that idea.

4. Moral Implications

I have argued that our standard account of shared agency, coupled with the distinction between perceptual and propositional agency, implies that animals can share agency. We can now ask whether or not this implication matters. Does it impact our moral thinking about our relationships with, and treatment of, nonhuman animals?

I do not feel confident about what we should say about the moral relevance of shared perceptual agency, in part because I do not feel confident about how we should assess the moral relevance of shared agency in general. So instead of developing a specific answer to this question here, I will discuss in general terms the kind of answer that we might explore, by discussing in general terms the kind of moral relevance that people often take shared agency to have.

In general, many philosophers think that shared agency is relevant to our rights as well as to our responsibilities. When you and I act together, we constitute ourselves as a shared agent, with shared rights and responsibilities. For example, we might share a right to a building that we construct together. We might also share responsibility for the environmental destruction that we caused in the process of constructing that building.

Suppose that this is true: When we share agency, we share rights and responsibilities. The challenging question is: How do shared rights and responsibilities distribute among the participants in a shared activity? Different philosophers have different answers to this question. But generally speaking, I think that their goal in developing and defending these answers is to vindicate the intuitively plausible idea that what we have a right to, and what we are responsible for, is (a) *more than* our individual contribution to the shared activity but (b) *less than* the full activity. For example, in a large-scale collective action like the Dresden bombing, it seems plausible to many philosophers that each of the thousands of participants is responsible for more than their individual contribution to the bombings (which, for many individuals, amounted to very little) but less than the full bombing (which caused massive suffering and death for an estimated 25,000 people).

I will not try to say here whether or not I think this project is likely to work out. Instead, I will simply make the claim that, *if* we identify a theory of shared agency and responsibility that strikes this balance, then this theory could have interesting implications for shared perceptual agency as well as for shared propositional agency, especially in large-scale cases.

Of course, we have to be cautious here, since perceptual agents are not responsible for their actions in the same kind of way that propositional agents are, nor do they have the same kinds of rights that propositional agents have. Thus, in order for us to assess what the moral status of *shared* perceptual agency might be, we need to make certain assumptions about the moral status of *individual* perceptual agency. I discuss this issue in detail elsewhere. For the purposes of illustrating what the moral relevance of shared perceptual agency might be, I will take for granted the following conclusions of that discussion:

1. Perceptual agency is not sufficient for moral responsibility understood as praise- or blameworthiness for what we do. However, it is sufficient for other, related attributions. For example, it is sufficient for certain kinds of commendability / criticizability, reward / punishment, and virtue / vice.

2. Perceptual agency is not sufficient for a right to autonomy, understood as a right to make informed decisions or provide informed consent. However, it is sufficient for other, related rights including a right to life, liberty, and property.

3. If and when humans act exclusively as perceptual agents, they have the same kind of moral status as nonhuman animals when they act that way (with several important qualifications that it will not be necessary for us to get into here).

Suppose that we accept these claims, along with a theory of shared agency and moral status that implies that

4. When we act together, each participant is responsible for / has a right to (a) more than their contribution to the shared activity, but (b) less than the full activity.

In that case, our discussion here would have the following kinds of implications:

- When a beaver colony builds a dam, they have a collective right to that dam. And, each participant has an individual right to more than their contribution to the dam, but less than the full dam. So, even if a particular beaver only worked on a particular patch, it would be wrong for us to deny them access to other patches.

- Suppose that I have ten dogs at home, and they “know” not to tear up my pillows. Now suppose that I come home one day to find that they tore up my pillows. In this case, my dogs are collectively criticizable for this destruction, and each dog is individually criticizable for more than their contribution to the destruction, but less than the full destruction. So, even if Smoky only tore up one corner of one pillow, it would be appropriate for me to criticize him more severely than if he had performed this action in isolation.

- Suppose that you and I experience a riot as to-be-participated-in, and we participate in the riot on the basis of that normative experience alone. In this case, we would not be *blameworthy* for our participation in this collective action. However, we would still be *criticizable* for it (as well as, perhaps, blameworthy for past actions that put us in this situation).

- There will also be many cases where we participate in a shared action in different ways, through different kinds of agency and with different conceptions of our shared activity. For example, consider a military unit that includes commanders, soldiers, and dogs. Now suppose that they carry out a strike that kills a family. In this kind of case, we might have to make very fine distinctions in our moral evaluations. For example, we

might regard the commanders as blameworthy and/or criticizable for (more than their participation in, but less than the full act of) knowingly killing a family. We might regard the soldiers as blameworthy and/or criticizable for (more than their participation in, but less than the full act of) unknowingly killing a family. As for the dogs: Whether or not we regard them as commendable or criticizable for (more than their participation in, but less than the full act of) killing a family will depend on how we evaluate the combination of loyalty and aggression that motivated them to participate.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that nonhuman animals, as perceptual agents, can act together. I have also explored what the moral implications of this idea might be, if we make certain further moral assumptions. The question that we have to ask moving forward, then, is whether or not we are justified in making these moral assumptions. Our thinking about the morality of perceptual agency, including shared perceptual agency, is still developing. The more progress we make in these discussions, the more we will learn about the moral significance of the fact that animals can act together.