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Emotions, Illusions

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While beams of light pierce through the body of water which appears to be in a light shade of manganese blue, fishes of various colours and sizes are swimming in all directions in the tanks in S.E.A. Aquarium. While the long fin bannerfish, marked by their signature black, white, and yellow stripes, are certainly the most eye-catching, especially when they move about in shoals, darting in and out of the sea anemones to make a surprise appearance sporadically are the little, lovely clownfish. Dozens of vibrant colours that look dissonant next to each other somehow add a tint of harmony to the mesmerising beauty of the underwater world.

A sudden, instinctive jerky movement directs all attention to a moray eel that would have otherwise blended in extremely well among the rocks with its camouflage. Contrary to its menacing looks characterised by its long, slimy body which resembles a serpent, it twists and turns defensively from side to side as a three-inch long neon goby constantly approaches it and sucks on its skin—in particular, the region surrounding its gills. Despite the disturbance from time to time, the eel remains in the same spot, showing no signs of repulsion from its unwavering stalker. While it definitely seems like a one-sided obsession that is underappreciated by the scary-looking eel, the way it stays calm and composed suggests otherwise. What if it is getting its own body rid of the parasites which the neon goby feeds on, and they are just helping each other out? What if the moray eel actually likes the company of its little friend?

Schooling in the middle of another tank are the glass catfish that seem bleached of colour. The skeletal frameworks beneath their transparent skin are the only feature of them that is conspicuous enough to distinguish them from the water. Against a background of sheltering seagrasses, there is a highly dense area designated for these ghost-like creatures that keep minimal space between one another. The glass catfish's wariness of other fishes becomes prominent as they sway gently within their territory and remained unbothered by their tank-mates, who ride the flow and roam through every corner of the space they have. Perhaps timidity is part of the glass catfish's temperament, and they are taken aback by the peculiarity of the other species' appearance—in the same way xenophobic people can become intimidated by others who have a different skin colour. Consumed by insecurity, swimming in schools could be their way of asserting dominance in an attempt to protect themselves.

After some scrutinisation, it felt almost natural to attribute mental states to the fishes, from basic emotions like fear to something as complicated as love-hate relationships. Maybe it was just fact intermingled with fiction that made up the whole story that I came up with, but it makes me wonder how people could have come to believe that fishes, or in general, animals are sentient beings that are capable of perceiving and feeling things as we humans do. Is there indeed a firm foundation to support the hypothesis that animals do feel?

Historian Peter Harrison (1991) suggested that because animals often exhibit human-like responses in the face of adverse stimuli, people tend to infer from these "pain behaviours" that the animals must have the ability to feel pain (p. 25). Nevertheless, animals' "pain behaviours" do not necessarily translate into the perception of pain, because

with the help of programming, even robots can demonstrate self-preservation, and yet its behaviours "would convey nothing about what it was feeling, for robots, on most accounts, can feel nothing" (Harrison, 1991, p. 27). Besides, "pain behaviours" could simply be a trait that is favoured by natural selection. It is possible that they are just adaptive instincts which animals inherited from past generations, and nothing more than reflexive, automatic responses to the environment (Harrison, 1991, p. 27).

The significance of Harrison's work is this: people could have arrived at the conclusion that animals can feel based on clues that hint at the possibility of animals having mental states. Inferences were made based on how humans decipher each action taken by the animals, for instance, the assumption that an animal refuses to approach or runs away from another vicious-looking creature because of fear. Though the reasoning sounds completely logical, another noteworthy point is that, in philosophical terms, there could exist tons of idiosyncratic possible worlds, each obeying the laws of logic and yet different from one another in its own way. Human beings learn to recognise their own external manifestation of various mental states through experience, and with such knowledge, they tend to decode others' actions in terms of emotions which they believe would lead themselves to behave in the same way in the same situation. However, just because we are projecting our own mental states to animals does not give them the ability to feel. In other words, imposing our opinions on animals does not really help us understand them better; by doing so, we are merely looking through a filter that we created ourselves.

According to Hal Herzog (2017), a professor of psychology at Western Carolina University, "Human beings are natural anthropomorphizers, meaning we naturally tend to [ascribe] all kinds of thoughts and meanings to other things in our lives" (as cited in Rebolini, 2017). Furthermore, based on the findings of a study conducted by Epley and colleagues in 2008, individuals who felt lonely and sought social interactions described their pets more often with words such as "thoughtful, considerate, sympathetic," suggesting their little companions were capable of providing emotional support (as cited in Rebolini, 2017). Arianna Rebolini (2017) a writer of *The Atlantic*, built on this idea and claimed it is possible that lonely pet owners could have taken the initiative to engage their pets in conversations because "they like to believe the animals understand."

Rebolini's view of the topic provides us insight into how human's beliefs could have stemmed from their own needs. In times of hardship, most, if not all, people would need someone to talk to in order to bring closure to the negative feelings that have been building up inside. However, people do not always get what they want, no matter how desperately they yearn for it. In cases where this need of theirs becomes overwhelming, they have no choice but to resort to creating an imaginary friend— in this case, animals or more specifically, pets—that they believe could understand what emotions people are trying to express through words and relate to people. By doing so, they now gain an advantage of having an emotional outlet which is essential for their mental wellbeing; but the fear of losing something this important to them could also undermine humans' rationality. Even in the face of evidence that prompts reconsideration, chances are humans would probably still retain their position which supports the claim that animals do feel, since changing their attitudes towards animals would mean finding themselves back at square one and having no one to turn to.

Although humans do have control over what they want to believe in, and no one should judge them for having a different opinion, getting too immersed in imagination to the point where people just shut out every contrary opinion they come across is not helpful in improving their understanding of the world. The wise adage "What is now proved was once only imagined" by English poet, William Blake (n.d.) certainly stresses the importance of utilising our imaginative powers. But the first half of it also implies that we need evidence to back up the theories that we came up with before they can be considered as truth. Therefore, because of the lack of empirical evidence as well as how humans' emotions could have clouded their judgments, it is safe to conclude that humans' imaginations do not provide a firm foundation for us to believe that animals are indeed sentient beings that feel as we humans do.

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References

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