It would be widely agreed that in order for moral concern to be appropriate for some given entity it is necessary that that entity should satisfy certain psychological conditions. The point of dispute is what precisely these conditions are. What kind of psychological being must the entity be if it is to be worthy of moral consideration? What are the necessary and sufficient mental conditions for inclusion in the moral community? We possess a rich system of psychological description—often referred to as "folk psychology"—which we apply to the behavior of human beings, and which is integral to our moral attitudes toward each other. This system runs from the most basic sensations to the most elevated thoughts and emotions. The question is how much of this is strictly necessary for moral notions to apply.

This is not a question about what we can know of the mind of some given entity. I am not asking how we come to know that an entity satisfies the minimal mental conditions for moral concern, or whether we can ever know such facts. So I am not about to debate the issue of whether (say) ants have minds and if so what goes on in them. My question is not about the epistemology of other minds. It is about the ontological foundations of moral concern. I am asking what the psychological conditions are that are presupposed in moral judgements and reactions. What has to be the case, psychologically, before we can treat something as morally significant—whether or not we can ever know, in concrete instances, that these conditions are satisfied? The question concerns what facts are such that if you knew them you would be right to
adopt an attitude of moral concern to the entity before you. Not that I think a skeptical attitude toward the existence of other minds, human or animal, is appropriate—I go along with the common sense view that we can know a good deal about the minds of other beings. I am simply distinguishing the two questions, so that problems attached to the epistemological issue are not mistakenly transferred to the ontological issue.

First, I will put forward what seems to me to be the correct answer to my question, bringing out the true import of this answer. Then, I will look at some of the ways in which this answer can be blurred or misunderstood. Next, some mistaken answers will be contrasted with the answer I give. Finally, certain moral consequences of what I take to be the correct answer will be sketched.

I begin with a quotation from Gottlob Frege, the great German mathematician and founder of analytical philosophy. In the course of a discussion of philosophical idealism, he remarks: “It seems absurd to us that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about the world without a bearer, independently. An experience is impossible without an experient. The inner world presupposes the person whose inner world it is” (Frege, 1967, p. 27). Frege’s point here is that the idea of ownerless experience is incoherent: if an experience occurs, it must be an experience of some subject or self. This is a necessary truth about experience; it follows from what experience intrinsically is. Experience is necessarily experience for someone. Franz Brentano famously maintained that all conscious states must have an object, that is, have intentional directedness to something other than themselves. Frege is insisting that all conscious states must have a subject, which is built into their very structure. Thus, we cannot make sense of the idea of free-floating experiences—experiences that are not experienced by some being. The point is close to the lesson of
Descartes' *Cogito*: the existence of a thinker follows from the existence of thought itself. Wherever there is a thought, an "I" must also be.  

Furthermore, as Frege goes on to argue, the self that is implied by experience cannot itself be an experience or anything of that category. For, if the bearer of an experience [e1] were just another experience [e2], then we would be launched on an endless infinite regress, since the [e2] experience would itself need a bearer of its own. Let that bearer be experience [e3]; then still we need a further bearer for that experience, by Frege's principle. Clearly, there will be no end to the bearers we need in order to sustain a single experience, so that experience would be impossible. But experience is possible—we have it all the time—so it cannot be that the subject of experience is itself an instance of experience. The self must be an entity of a completely different ontological type from the experience it bears. If we analyze an occurrent experience into its qualitative type and the subject that bears it, then these two things must exist at different ontological levels, neither being assimilable to the other.  

A consequence of this, which interested Frege, is that we can deduce the existence of something non-experiential from the existence of mere experience—which puts a big dent in philosophical idealism.

Whenever an experience occurs, therefore, there is something with a complex structure that brings together a particular subject and a qualitative type of experience. Experience can never exist as a simple unanalyzable quality. The experience is always for something that is not itself an experience. We have a dyadic structure, consisting of a subject and what that subject experiences. The subject is not represented in the content of the experience, of course; it is rather a precondition of there being any experience at all. The self is what has the experience, not something that the experience is about. No requirement of self-reflection is imposed by Frege's principle, only self-existence.
The principle, however, does not guarantee that the self that must exist is a continuous or persisting self. For all the principle says, each experience might have its own momentary self, ceasing to exist when the experience does. But it is highly plausible to suppose that there is a single self that bears successive experiences, so that many experiences are unified in one subject of consciousness. This is even clearer for simultaneous experiences, where again Frege's principle by itself does not strictly imply that my present set of experiences are had by a single subject. Despite that lack of entailment, it is immensely plausible to suppose that my present experiences are unified in this way. The sensations I now have from my different senses are thus borne by a single subject, so that there is no bizarre fragmentation of my self into a multitude of contemporaneous selves. And it is natural, once this point about simultaneous experiences is accepted, to accept also that successive experiences can be unified into a single continuous self—not perhaps for the entire span of one's biological life, but for decently long intervals. At any rate, I shall assume that Frege's principle can be strengthened to allow that different experiences can be had by a single subject, simultaneously and successively. Here, then, is a further reason for distinguishing selves from the experiences they have: the self can persist while its experiences come and go.

What has all this abstract metaphysics got to do with animals and morality? Simply this: the mental structure that is minimally necessary for morality to apply is precisely that the entity in question be an experiencing subject, in the sense just articulated. And the essential point I want to emphasize is that simply by granting experiences to animals we thereby—and necessarily—grant selves to them. This is just a logical consequence of supposing that experiences occur in animals. Animals have, or are, selves—they are subjects for which
experiences occur. This is an important point morally because I suspect that the denial of selfhood to animals is one of the last hold-outs against including animals in the moral community. People\textsuperscript{5} have slowly come to accept that animals have experiences, in just as robust a sense as we do, but they have been reluctant to grant selfhood to animals. Selfhood is the thing that is held to distinguish us from the beasts, to put us on a different moral plane. This matters morally because the primary object of moral respect is precisely the self—that to which experiences happen.\textsuperscript{6} But if Frege's principle is correct, as I think it is, then this is an incoherent position. Animal experiences can be no more ownerless than human experiences, since they are \textit{experiences}. The moral community is the community of selves, and animals belong to this just as much as humans. Of course, the selves that belong to different species of animal will differ in certain respects, and some may have more moral weight than others (compare ants and apes), but still each experiencing organism falls into the same fundamental ontological category, that of subject of consciousness. There is no possibility of maintaining that we differ from other species in being \textit{subjects} of experience and not merely \textit{repositories} of experience. It is not that they are just collections of experiences while we are beings that \textit{have} experiences.

Here it is necessary to grasp clearly a point it is easy to overlook, namely, that experiences have moral significance only because they are \textit{for} someone in the full-blooded sense. So if we deny that there is a self that certain experiences are for, then we deprive those experiences of moral weight. To see this, try to imagine experiences of pain that have no bearer. As we have seen, this is really a metaphysical impossibility, but that does not mean that the idea might not have some hold over the imagination. So consider some allegedly ownerless pains—take that concept seriously for a moment. Such pains would not be felt \textit{by} anybody; they would not happen \textit{to} any self. They would simply \textit{be}, ownerless and alone. But if so, why should it matter that they occur? Pain is bad because it happens
to someone; but if it happens to no one, then no one is suffering, so why should it matter what the quantity of pain in the universe is? We feel compassion for the subject who is experiencing the pain—we think it is awful that this should be happening to them. But if there is no subject, then there is no one for whom to feel sorry. The pain is morally neutral. Increasing its quantity does not make life worse for anyone, and so there can be no moral objection to it. But add subjects for this pain, and the situation changes dramatically, from a moral point of view. It is because there are experiencing subjects, who are not themselves experiences, that unpleasant experiences matter. It follows, then, that if we are to accord moral weight to the experiences of animals, we need to recognize that animals have selves—that they are more, psychologically, than mere collections of intrinsically ownerless mental states. Frege's principle tells us, in effect, that we cannot exploit the point about the moral inconsequence of ownerless experiences to put animals outside the moral community.

This is the point at which certain metaphysical conceptions of experience and the self assume moral relevance. If we try to think of an animal mind as just a locus of intrinsically ownerless experiences, so that experiences occur in the animal rather in the way digestion does, then we lose the idea that these experiences are for someone. But then it cannot matter morally what those experiences are. We have to conceive of undergoing experience in that special and peculiar way that selves undergo experience; it is not enough to think of experiences as selfless in their essential nature and bound together by occurring in the same physical body. We must hang onto the common sense idea that for an experience to occur is for some subject to undergo it. And, of course, this is exactly the way we do commonsensically think of the experience of each other and of animals. I think of my cat's pain as something that he suffers, where this fact is built into the very identity of the pain being suffered. And I include my
cat in the moral community precisely because I recognize that he is a subject of awareness in exactly the sense that I am (though we differ in many important respects). Thus, there is a sense in which the moral community is "ontologically homogeneous": it consists of a certain special category of existent, namely, conscious subjects. However different animals may be from each other in other respects, this is one respect in which we all share a common nature.

Let me emphasize and clarify this point because it is the heart of my argument. Animal species differ along various dimensions: they are anatomically and behaviorally different from species to species, and they are also psychologically different. Bats, famously, inhabit a different phenomenological world from that of humans, so that it is hard—perhaps impossible—for us to empathize fully with a bat's experience, since it has a sense modality we lack. Animal species are phenomenologically heterogeneous. That may make it seem that nothing unifies the class of sentient beings, so that no single trait underpins the idea of a moral community including every member of this heterogeneous group. But this is to miss the point that however different a bat's experience is from a human's, both bat and human are alike in being subjects of experience. We have that trait in common, despite our physiological and psychological differences. So the moral community that includes bats and us is unified by a certain metaphysical fact—that we are all experiencing subjects. Humans may not know what it is like for a bat to experience the world in the way it does, but we do grasp one highly important fact about the bat mind, namely, that it is a subject of those experiences in exactly the same sense that we are the subject of ours. This is a simple consequence of the fact that "subject of experience" is a description that applies univocally to both of us. I know what it is like to be a subject of experience, and the bat also is a subject of experience, so I know what it is like for the bat to be one of those. What I do not know is the particular qualitative mode of experience that the
bat enjoys. We care (or should care) about what happens to the bat, according to my suggestion, because we care about how things are for experiencing subjects, with the emphasis on the word "subject." We have an ontology of subjects that is a direct consequence of the nature of experience, and this ontology is what underpins and warrants the inclusive character of the moral community that encompasses all experiencing creatures. All across the globe, billions of these subjects are now undergoing an indefinite variety of experiences, some good, others bad, and what matters is that there are subjects having these experiences—not merely that experiences occur with different sorts of qualitative character.

I have been taking it as obvious that there is moral significance to the having of experiences by subjects, notably the having of pain. And I doubt that anyone would seriously dispute this assumption. But there are ways of gliding over it, or distorting it, so that we fail to appreciate its moral import. There are metaphysical views that hinder a clear recognition of the moral significance of a subject experiencing pain. Let me mention some of these, which I suspect operate to dim the force of what is plain to common sense.

The first and most obvious way to avoid taking pain seriously is to be an eliminativist about the mind—either for all minds or just non-human ones. Obviously, if we deny that a creature has any experiences, then we shall not need to concern ourselves with moral questions about the occurrence of experiences in that creature. If there is no pain in animals, then we need not worry about causing it. Eliminativism, thus, undermines moral concern in a very straightforward way. But there is a subtler form of the doctrine that I think has more appeal for some people, and which I mentioned earlier—eliminativism about the self. It may be admitted that there are pains but denied that there is any subject that has these pains.
All we can say is that these inherently subjectless pains occur at certain locations—that is all we can legitimately mean by the idea of a self. But this undermines moral concern for the reason I gave earlier, since the "for-someone-ness" of pain is not adequately recorded in this way of conceiving things. It is not enough that free-floating experiences should sometimes gather together at some specific location, forming a bundle of mental states, since this does not yet give us the idea that the experiences are for someone. It merely gives us the idea that they are at someplace. Frege's principle cuts against this eliminativist view of the self by insisting that we cannot make sense of experience conceived as existing prior to the existence of subjects. So there is no conceptual ground from which to claim that animal experience lacks moral weight: if it is really experience, then it must be experience for a subject, and that is what gives it moral weight. To put it differently: realism about experience entails realism about the self, and realism about the self is what generates moral concern. So there is no logical gap between ascribing experiences to animals and respecting them as subjects with moral worth.

A subtler error that might be made is this: it might be agreed that Frege's principle forces selves upon us, but then the "for-someone-ness" of experience is misunderstood by modeling it upon ordinary property instantiation. If we think of the undergoing of experience as essentially the same, structurally, as a physical object having a physical property, then we shall not register the distinctive sense in which an experience is for its subject—and, hence, we will not see why this relation has moral significance. This is a difficult point to articulate clearly, but I think the intuitive thought should be fairly plain. My pain matters to me because it is pain for me, but my physical properties are not for me in this sense. But now if we insist on assimilating the "for-me" relation to the relation of property instantiation, so that a subject's having an experience is not logically different from a body's having a shape, then we will not be in a position to appreciate properly why pain really
matters. In our own case, we are not apt to make this assimilation, because we are directly aware of the "for-me-ness" of the pain; but we are more prone to it for other animals, because we cannot so easily project our own phenomenology into them. This will produce a subtler variant of the ownerless experience view of animal minds, where now we conceive the relation between self and experience in a way that is too external. Only if we keep firmly in mind the *sui generis* character of a subject's having an experience can we hold onto the moral significance of experience. The experience is something the subject *undergoes*; it is not merely something that *attaches* to the subject, in the way one's physical characteristics do. So we not only need to be realists about experience and about the self in order to sustain moral concern; we also need to recognize the unique relation that holds between these two things. The self does not merely instantiate experiences; it is, as we might say, confronted by them.

A less subtle way of blurring the moral status of experience is to adopt a behavioristic view of the mind—a view that has been dominant in animal studies for most of the twentieth century and before. Suppose we identify pain with a disposition to avoidance behavior; then two points will be easy to miss. First, it will be hard to see why Frege's principle should be true: why should the existence of a mere behavioral disposition necessarily imply the existence of a subject of experience? Behavioral dispositions in general do not carry such an implication, since not all of them have an experiential counterpart; so there is nothing in the concept of behavior itself to yield the entailment in question. This is just the wrong sort of concept to invite the application of Frege's principle. Accordingly, behavioral dispositions will not have, or be seen to have, the kind of moral significance that experiences present: they will not give us a subject of consciousness that demands moral respect.

Secondly, it is not clear why having a behavioral disposition should matter anyway. What matters about pain is the way it
feels to the subject, but this is not captured by talk of dispositions. If we are only allowed to describe an organism in behavioral terms, then we omit the very mode of description that is required for moral concern. A mere assemblage of behavioral dispositions is not the right foundation for moral respect. The experiencing subject is invisible in this way of conceiving an animal. Thus, the behaviorist metaphysics of mind is not morally neutral. I think it is no accident that the most unblushing vivisectors have also been philosophically committed to behaviorism and similarly reductive doctrines. Certainly, the psychologists who have done some of the most questionable kinds of animal experimentation have been explicit behaviorists. For if behavior is all that animal mentality consists in, then there cannot be much wrong with the kinds of "invasive procedures" (as they are euphemistically called) that animal experimenters regularly perform. It is much harder to stiffen oneself to the consequences, for the animal, of one's actions if one views it as a full-blooded subject of experience. Perhaps, indeed, part of the attraction of behaviorism is its moral convenience. The outright denial of animal mentality is the quickest way to justify certain sorts of treatment of animals; but, failing that, one tries to conceive of the animal mind in reductive behaviorist terms, thus evading the moral implications of accepting that animals are subjects of experience too.

I have suggested that the existence of an experiencing subject properly understood is what is minimally required for moral concern. The rationale is that this basic structure is sufficient to ground the idea that the organism has states that matter to it. This is a fairly weak condition, though not so weak as the rejected idea that mere ownerless experience might have moral weight. My point has been that the subject-experience duality is sufficient for it to be rational for us to care what happens to the organism in question. Certain obligations flow
from this elementary structure alone—for example, the obligation not to cause gratuitous pain to the organism. But other views have sometimes been adopted, which seem to me to be much too strong and to lack a solid rationale. Let me then mention some of these, indicating why they go beyond what we have seen to be minimally necessary. I will not be able to discuss them fully, but it will be worth seeing how they differ from the proposal I have been making.

Some have held that to be a morally significant entity it is necessary to be a full-fledged moral agent. Only a being who is capable of obligations, of praise and blame, of free action, can count as imposing moral duties on others. This is a very strong condition, excluding not merely all animals but also human infants and many mentally defective human adults. It ignores completely the obvious fact that the capacity for suffering and well-being can exist without having sophisticated moral capacities. One can be a subject of consciousness, with preferences and likes and dislikes, without being a moral agent. And why should moral agency itself have any particular role in determining whether you can be an object of moral concern? Is being tortured (say) worse if you are a being who could himself be blamed for something? The wrongness of torture surely depends on the pain it involves, not on whether the sufferer has such further mental characteristics as a capacity for moral action. The same can be said for the suggestion that moral status depends upon a capacity for language—as if only those who can express their feelings verbally deserve to have those feelings respected. Only if we hold—with massive implausibility—that experience is impossible without language could this suggestion have anything to be said for it. But surely the capacity to suffer does not depend upon the capacity to report one's suffering. I care about your suffering quite independently of whether you are capable of speech.

Some suppose that self-reflection is a precondition of moral significance. This seems to depend on the idea that one has to be capable of thinking about one's experience in order that this
experience should count morally. But that is clearly too strong: all that is required is that the experience be experience for some subject, not that the subject be aware of itself as a subject. Perhaps the self-reflective thesis is a confused version of the thesis I have been defending: it sees the need to bring in the self, but mistakenly supposes that the self has to be part of the content of the creature's thoughts. True, morality requires the self; false, morality requires that the self be capable of reflecting on itself.

More initially appealing is a family of views that stress thinking. Thus, we have the Kantian idea that moral concern requires that the creature be a rational being. This is not a very clear doctrine until we spell out what rationality is taken to involve. Are creatures which avoid painful stimuli and seek beneficial ones to be counted as rational? If so, then the view will coincide with the view I defend, at least in respect of which creatures get included in the moral community. But if it means a capacity for sophisticated reasoning about abstract matters, then surely it is too strong. Why should my facility with syllogistic forms make my pain matter more? Is rationality not quite external to the capacity to feel pain and pleasure? The same can be said of the idea that intelligence is crucial. Again, this notion is vague as it stands; but if it means a flexible adaptability to circumstances, then it is unclear why this should be thought to count for much. If a creature lacks the intelligence to avoid the pain I routinely dish out to it, that is no doubt a sad fact, but it is hard to see why it makes my actions any more excusable. Similarly for the idea that the instinctiveness or reflexiveness of a creature's behavior is reason to exclude it from moral consideration. That in no way undermines the creature's claim to be a self with a potential range of conscious experiences. Even if all my behavior patterns are innate and hard-wired, I may still be capable of sensations, emotions, preferences, and so on. I could, in principle, be an experiencing subject and yet be unable to
learn anything new: why should my ineducability be thought to put me beyond the moral pale?

I think it is clear enough that these suggestions have been contrived with the express purpose of excluding animals from the realm of the moral. It is assumed that animals should not count in the way humans do, and then the question is how to find a characteristic that we have and they do not. The result is a criterion that does indeed exclude animals, or many of them, but also excludes human infants and adults who are impaired in one way or another. Such theories also tend to lack any cogent rationale for the trait that is selected as crucial. The question is always this: if pain matters morally, as it surely does, how can this be so in virtue of other mental characteristics that are not themselves logically necessary for pain to occur? Contrast the account I have proposed, which analyzes the internal preconditions for pain to matter morally: that it be felt by a subject; that it not be reduced to something non-experiential; that the subject-experience nexus be correctly understood. I have proceeded from an analysis of experience itself in order to understand what makes experience matter; I have not looked to some distinct set of mental characteristics and then claimed that these somehow confer moral importance on experiences.

It is essential to my account that animals be granted selves in addition to mental states of various kinds. My argument for this relied upon Frege's principle, which states a conceptual truth about the nature of experience. This has some nontrivial consequences in the moral sphere. I have already mentioned one: that a moral community consisting of (sentient) animals and humans is ontologically homogeneous, being unified by the fact that all of us are subjects of experience. It is on this basis, and only on this basis, that we can genuinely empathize with other animals: we can put ourselves in their position
because we recognize that they, like us, are conscious subjects. There is a self in there that is experiencing the world. The animal’s consciousness is unified, centered. As we have seen, this implies that no moral dividing-line can be erected around the idea that animals merely experience while we have a self that undergoes experience.

This position also has implications for the morality of killing. Many people maintain that while the death of a human is a great evil, the death of an animal does not matter. No doubt there are many sources for this view, but I suspect that one important source is the belief that animals do not have selves, so that the death of an animal is not the extinction of a self—as the death of a human is. This view seems to depend upon an implicit rejection of Frege’s principle. The underlying thought is that the animal’s mind is just a collection of mental states with no self to back them. But, as I have argued, this is no more plausible for animals than it is for humans. So there is a self that ceases when an animal’s experience ceases. Death is, thus, the same kind of thing for animals as it is for humans—it is the rubbing out of a subject of consciousness. The basic wrongness of killing—that it is the destruction of a subject of experience—is common to both animal and human killing. (That is not to say that the death of a human and an animal matter equally; it is only to say that the two do not differ qualitatively or in principle. There is room for the idea of degrees of wrongness here.)

It would not be morally wrong, so far as I can see, to put an end to experiences that were \((\text{per impossibile})\) inherently subjectless, since these would not be experiences \(\text{for anyone}\); but once we agree that there is a subject that these experiences are for, we must face up to the moral consequences of putting an end to this subject. Killing an animal is snuffing out a self, not simply interrupting a sequence of connected experiences. I suspect that that is something we all know, at least implicitly, but it is sometimes necessary to be reminded of it, especially when the moral stakes are so high.
Notes

1 See also Strawson, 1994, pp. 129–134, to which I am indebted for a lucid discussion of Frege's principle.

2 It is important to notice that this point holds in advance of adopting any particular metaphysical conception of reality in general. It is mandatory for materialists as well as idealists, for advocates of substance or of process. The point holds simply at the level of pre-theoretical description of experience.

3 If experience cannot exist without the self, can the self exist without experience? Frege's principle says nothing to settle this, and the question is difficult. If selves persist during dreamless sleep, then the answer is yes. Given that, we would have an extra reason for denying that the self is an experiential entity. There is no need to take a stand on the issue for my purposes here.

4 Nothing we have said ventures into the question of what kind of thing the self is—whether, say, it is the same as the body or brain or instead a transcendental ego of some special sort. All we are saying is that the self must exist if experience does, whatever its nature turns out to be.

5 I mean theorists of one kind or another, not ordinary folks. The latter seem not to have doubted animal experience for as far back as memory reaches. I note that recently a number of theorists are catching up with them.

6 The proper object of moral respect or regard is the person or self, not the mental states he or she possesses. It is a category mistake to accord respect to the experiences of selves. Thus, it is important that animals have selves if they are to be morally respected.

7 See Nagel, 1979.

8 I do not mean to deny that humans and animals differ with respect to the significance that death has for them. In the case of humans, long-term projects and hopes for the future enter into the loss that death brings; while this does not seem so for animals. I do believe, however—though I cannot argue it here—that the evil of death does not essentially turn on these differences. What matters fundamentally is simply the cessation of an experiencing subject.

9 I am thinking particularly of killing animals for food.
References


Nagel, Thomas, "What is it Like to be a Bat?" in his *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
