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Animals think and feel

Précis of *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel* (Safina 2015)

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Abstract: Evolution, brain science, and the logic of behavior in free-living animals all converge to show that to varying degrees many animals have conscious experience, thoughts, and emotions.

Keywords: animal thinking, animal emotion, cognition, consciousness



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(Photo by [Pat Paladines](#))

Another big group of dolphins had just surfaced alongside our moving vessel — leaping and splashing and calling mysteriously back and forth in their squeally, whistly way, with many babies swift alongside their mothers. And this time, confined to just the surface of such deep and lovely lives, I was becoming unsatisfied. I wanted to know what they were experiencing, and why to us they feel so compelling, and so — *close*. This time I allowed myself to ask them the question that was forbidden fruit: *Who* are you?

Science usually steers firmly from questions about the inner lives of animals. Surely they have inner lives of some sort. But a young scientist is taught that the animal mind is unknowable. Permissible questions are “it” questions: where it lives; what it eats; what it does when danger threatens; how it breeds. Always forbidden is the one question that might open the door: “Who?”

There are good reasons to avoid so fraught an inquiry. But the reason we least acknowledge is that the barrier between humans and animals is artificial, because humans *are* animals.

In our estrangement from nature we have severed our sense of the community of life and lost touch with this perspective. And when the science of animal behavior was getting established, there was no scientific way to approach the prospect of animal emotions, or even to pose a question such as “What does an elephant feel when she nurses her baby?” There was nothing to go on. No one had watched free-living animals living their real lives. Brain science was in its infancy. So speculation about their feelings could only draw on our own feelings — leading ourselves in circles. The new scientists insisted on observation, not speculation. Speculation was messy guessing that one had to avoid. We can observe *what* an elephant does. There’s no way to know *how* the animal feels. So just count how many minutes she nurses her offspring for.

My own initiation into formal training included the classic directive to steer strictly clear of anything smacking of attributing human mental experiences — values, thoughts, or emotions — to other animals. (Doing so is called “anthropomorphism.”) I appreciate that. We shouldn’t assume that animals (or, for that matter, lovers, spouses, kids, or parents) “must be” thinking and feeling just as we would if we were them. They’re not us. By not assuming, we open a clearer path to understanding what’s really going on.

But it wasn’t that the question of animal thoughts and emotions awaited better data; it was that the whole subject became verboten. Wondering what feelings or thoughts might motivate behavioral acts became taboo. Description — and *only* description — became “the” science of animal behavior. You could say that a lion was stalking a zebra. If you said the lion *wanted* to catch it, you’d be accused of “projecting your human emotions.” After all, the lion might be an utterly

unconscious machine — you can't know. You could say, "The elephant positioned herself between her calf and the hyena." She knows hyenas are a threat. She wouldn't position herself between her baby and an antelope. But if you said, "The mother positioned herself to protect her baby from the hyena," *that* was out of bounds; it was anthropomorphic. We can't know the mother's intent. And this was stifling.

In establishing the study of behavior as a science, it had originally been helpful to make "anthropomorphism" a word that raised a red flag. But as lesser intellects followed the Nobel Prize-winning pioneers, "anthropomorphism" became a pirate flag. If the word was hoisted, an attack was imminent. You wouldn't get your work published. And in the academic realm of publish or perish, jobs were at stake. Even the most informed, insightful, logical inferences about other animals' motivations, emotions, and awareness could wreck your professional prospects.

Not *assuming* other animals had thoughts and feelings was good science. *Insisting* they did *not* was bad science. By banning what was considered anthropomorphic, the behaviorists perpetuated the opposite error. They institutionalized the all-too-human notion that *only* humans are conscious and can feel anything. Certainly, projecting feelings onto other animals can lead to us misunderstanding their motivations. But denying that they had *any* motivation *guaranteed* misunderstanding it. Denying the possibility that any other animals have any thoughts and feelings reinforces what we all most want to hear: We are special. Utterly different. Better. Best. (Talk about projecting!)

Peculiarly, many behaviorists — who are biologists — chose to overlook the core process of biology: Evolution. Each newer thing is a slight tweak on something older. Everything humans do and possess came from somewhere. Before humans could be assembled, evolution needed to have most of the parts in stock, and those parts were developed for earlier models. We inherited them. Witness, for instance, the journey of jointed legs: A frog's upper rear leg-bone is a femur, no less than in a chicken, as in a child. Thus we trace transformation from amphibian to flying bird to triathlete. A creature that sleeps is sleeping, species notwithstanding. One that sneezes is sneezing. Species differ — but are often not very different. Our brain's provenance is inseparable from other species' brains in the long cauldron of living time. And thus, so is our mind. Our mind arrived with other species' minds in the continuous sweep of Life.

When someone says you can't attribute human emotions to animals, they forget the key leveling detail: humans *are* animals. Human sensations *are* animal sensations: inherited sensations, using inherited nervous systems. Simply deciding that other animals can't have any emotions that humans feel is a cheap way to get a monopoly on all the world's feelings and motivation. Human emotions of pleasure, pain, sexuality, hunger, frustration, self-preservation, defense, parental protection — we see evidence of all these in other species.

We never seem to doubt that an animal acting hungry feels hungry. We can't really claim scientific objectivity when we recognize hunger and thirst while animals are eating and drinking, and exhaustion when they tire, but we deny them joy and happiness as they're playing with their children and their families. Yet the science of animal behavior has long operated with that bias — and that's unscientific.

When animals seem joyous in joyful contexts, joy is the simplest interpretation of the evidence. Their brains are similar to ours, they make the same hormones involved in human emotions — and that's evidence too. In science, the simplest interpretation of evidence is often the best.

If an animal comes to lick you and lie next to you, you assume it "loves" you. And I think that's a pretty reasonable conclusion, especially considering the enormous range of emotions that we label with the word "love." Romantic love, parental love, infantile love, love of community, of country, love of food, of chocolate, love of books and education, of sports, the arts. . . .The word "love" is a catchall phrase for so many different positive emotions. If an elephant sees her sister and calls to maintain contact, or a parrot sees his mate and wants to be nearer, some *feeling* of the bond makes it seek closeness. One word we use for the *feeling* behind our desire for closeness is "love." Elephants and birds don't feel their love for one another the way I feel my love, but the same is true of my own friends, my mother, my wife, my stepdaughter, and my next-door neighbors. Love isn't one thing, and human love isn't all identical in quality or intensity. But I believe that the word that labels ours also labels theirs.

When a dog is scratching the door, a person steeped in fear of anthropomorphism would insist that we *cannot know* whether the dog "wants" to go out. (Meanwhile, of course, your dog is thinking, "Let me out; I don't want to pee in the house.") Obviously, the dog *wants* to go out. And if you insist on ignoring the evidence, have a mop handy.

All the evidence indicates widespread consciousness — the experience of sensations — throughout most of the animal kingdom. So the interesting question now is, "What is consciousness like for other animals?"

I can almost hear some people say, "Not so fast." How do I really *know* that other animals think and feel? I know because when my dog gets up from the rug and comes to me and rolls onto her back to expose her belly, she shows that she has anticipated the pleasure of having her belly rubbed, and knows that I will understand her request and that I can oblige. She has thought, and she has felt. Simple, really, as that.

References

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