

Letters

Clever Hans and the Humane Movement

I read with interest Susan Fowler's account of the Clever Hans conference (7(6):355-359, 1980). As I was not present I cannot comment on the manners of the participants, but as the editor of a humane magazine to which Dr. Thomas Sebeok frequently contributes, I would like to make a few observations on the matter.

It appears that Fowler overlooks an important issue raised by the ape/dolphin studies. Are we not, in our efforts to make animals utilize our own language (or symbols of it), ignoring the very sophisticated and effective communication systems already employed by all species? Fireflies send flash codes, fishes emit electronic impulses, moths advertise by scent — all kinds of animals communicate to survive, as individuals and as species. The assumption that the human mode of communication is superior (and so should be learned by the "higher" species) is of course speciesism: just because it works well for us doesn't mean that it will work well for them. One might well ask, if a researcher is so intent on communicating with a dog, why does he not learn to bark?

There is something to be said for appreciating and learning about animals as they are, and not for their ability to become like us. Indeed, the philosophical justification for the humane movement is evolving in just this direction. While Victorian animal advocates defended kindness to animals because they perceived animals as being similar to humans, or because cruelty made *humans* more bestial, modern trends indicate an appreciation of animals' basic *right* to humane treatment. (I recommend James Turner's recent book, *Reckoning with the Beast*, on this philosophical development.)

Of course it is fine that retarded children have benefited from the ape

studies. But did we really need captive wildlife to discover that retarded people can use sign language? Why not just work directly with the retarded?

Finally, whether raised tactfully or not, the questions surrounding the Clever Hans phenomenon in ape/dolphin communications must be addressed. The incredibly subtle cues to which the animals respond (some far too subtle for human apprehension) may make it virtually impossible to completely eliminate it from the testing picture. Perhaps we should just admit this, leave dolphins in the sea and apes in the jungle, and study the intricate ways in which animals of all species actually do communicate.

It would not be surprising if Dr. Sebeok, who has devoted years to studying this real animal communication, has become frustrated by the popularization of the talking apes.

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