THE OTHERNESS OF ANIMALS

Karen Davis
Germantown, Maryland

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What makes other animals truly meaningful to us? What must they be able to do, what traits or potentialities must they show, to gain serious attention: Is sentience enough? Will demonstrated emotions suffice? Or do we demand that, in addition, they display cognitive skills, including an ability to "learn our language" — preferably, one of the formalized symbolic languages scientists use to test them?

Living in a culture obsessively focused, as ours is, on rationalistic modes of perception and communication may make it hard, if not impossible, to resist assessing other creatures' worth according to their scientifically proclaimed ability to "intellectualize," to think abstractly. Without being

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fully aware we may anxiously scan our companion animals for signs of cognition, consciously or subconsciously disturbed over whether our cat or dog is "really smart," and not merely acting by "instinct." For, have we not heard that pigs are smarter than dogs? Some say that cetaceans are smarter than humans. Chimpanzees, reputedly our closest nonhuman relatives, have shown definite signs of thinking the way we do; automatically their value appreciates. The proof comes when authority figures, like Carl Sagan, start raising questions. Impressed by the chimpanzee's ability to use Ameslan (American sign language) and to invent strategies for outwitting chickens, Sagan asks: "If chimpanzees have consciousness, if they are capable of abstractions, do they not have what until now has been described as 'human rights'?" (Carl Sagan, "The Abstractions of Beasts," from *The Dragons of Eden: Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence*).

Concerning Ameslan, it should be borne in mind that the chimpanzee's ability to exercise this language depends on an anatomical feature that resembles one of ours — manual dexterity. Thus, no matter how unique or intelligent, or how willing, any creature having paws, fins, hoofs, or claws cannot learn to use (even if capable of understanding) Ameslan. Similarly, chimpanzees, though not "dumb," appear to be physiologically and anatomically ill-adapted to using (however competent of understanding) verbal language, which is why researchers switched to Ameslan. What happens, though, to animals who for one reason or other cannot, or will not, communicate in our terms? Whose kind of intelligence is not our kind? Whose modes of experience elude us? Must the "illiterate" animal forgo "human rights"?

The problem of speciesism crops up. The film *Project X* offers a case in point. While stressing the chimpanzee's ability to learn Ameslan, it also asks viewers to pay attention to the wealth of nonverbal communication and expressiveness in human as well as nonhuman animals. A bond of fellowship, even of friendship, might be forged here. But the film's reliance on humanosemblance to help carry this message across could have a contrary effect. Audiences are apt to be narcissistically gratified, and relieved of guilt, at seeing a chimp who not only implements a language that we have invented and

imposed, but who seems to want to transcend his chimpanzee nature, to fly like a bird or better yet fly a plane. At such moments the empathic flow levels out to just another space trip, another ego trip.

Ecologists have criticized the animal rights community for extending the boundaries of ethical concern only as far as the human ego is willing to travel. Some of us draw the line at oysters, others... Well, beyond whatever line we draw lies an enormous wasteland of foregone conclusions. "Intellectualizing" the wasteland is one solution. Making it over into Fantasyland, into Frontierland, is another. Animal people need to be on the lookout — the Disneyfication of the Desert syndrome should signal to us a warning. Anxious not to alienate others from our cause, half doubtful of our own minds at times in a world which views other animals so much differently than we do, we are liable to find ourselves presenting them apologetically at Court, spiffed up to seem more human, capable, ladies and gentlemen, of performing Ameslan in six languages...

For whatever reasons we may be tempted to do this, the fact remains: other animals, regardless of how close to us, are not humanoids. They are not phylogenetic fetuses that await our stimulating contact to develop their evolutionary potential, any more than they are failed humans, a kind of vast inferno population whose only hope is genetic redemption through our engineers. To cast them in either of these make-believe roles, to approach them as foregone conclusions, is to miss seeing them, and in doing so, to create blindedness in ourselves and in others.

To avoid contributing to the very attitudes towards other living beings that we seek to change, we have to raise fundamental questions about the way that we, the defenders of animals, actually conceive of them. What must a creature do in order to secure the affection, the compassion, the justice and protection that we humans crave for ourselves? Are we willing to allow other living beings the right to travel on their road, even when it branches off from ours? Is not our willingness to do this what animal liberation, for them and for us, is all about?

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