



## Changing perspectives

Author

### Who do we think they are?

Two thousand years after Aristotle described the octopus's sperm-presenting arm, clergyman Edward Topsell, in his *Historie of Foure-Footed Beasts* of 1607, divided animals into three categories: edible and inedible; wild and tame; useful and useless. It is quite a feat to keep our knowledge of the natural world in the Dark Ages century after century while being surrounded by real live animals. For millennia animals were clueless, without feeling or even consciousness. What a convenience. Various religions drafted animals in as allegories for Good and Evil (mostly evil) – and we believed it. The devil, of course, had animal horns, hooves, hair, and an animal tail. Of all the slanders, the wolf came off worst. Wolves crawl around sacred texts, spring off our churches, they will steal your children and then eat your grandmother. It is hardly a coincidence that the Latin words for whore, *lupa*, and female wolf, *lupa*, are the same.

The nature of belief is that it is not about facts. We hang adjectives on creatures which they cannot shake off. Sly. There is nothing *deceitful* about a fox, for he must eat, and he must feed his cubs. In the same way that we dehumanise our human enemies before we ask our young men to kill them, we *demean* animals. Vermin implies wicked, filthy, detestable; say 'vermin' and you are absolved. Of course, animals won't know what we call them, but language directs how we think about them – and what we do to them. Euphemisms are the cloaks we employ to protect our sensitive souls. Control. Manage. Harvest. We know that we do it, but we do it anyway. And why, for Darwin's sake, if an animal has a demonstrable gender, is he or she an it? I mean we are talking quite a different organism, with a different role and morphology. Scientists with the strongest commitment to precision

are prescribed a grammar unfit for purpose. Spiders are 'it', even when the female is triple the size of the male. We make exceptions for the *femmes fatales* to whom we give humanoid pronouns on the basis that they eat their husbands after copulation. Follow the logic of this pronoun exclusion zone, and we can only ask 'What' questions of animals and 'Who' questions of ourselves, when surely today there is more occasion to wonder *who* the animal is, rather than *what* 'it' is. The *Oxford English Dictionary* permits 'who' to be used for an animal 'with implication of personality' ... But *who* will decide this?

Beavers, badgers, wrens, honeybees, cuttlefish, spiders and sardines all vary from individual to individual. Lazier worker bees consistently stay closer to the hive than busier honeybees – and they live longer! A sardine school is made up of individuals, each with its own proclivity, some swimming at the front, some trailing, some who keep their left shoal-eye on their mates and swim on the right side of the pack where they can multi-task by keeping their right eye on the lookout, and vice versa. If it's your turn to scout, you must leave the throng to check if the nearby predator is in hunting mode. Fish life is far more complicated than we'd realised, and a fish's cognitive abilities are far greater, too. This is not the zombie world we might have imagined – glug, glug, aimless swimming, food in, waste out, big fish eating little fish and little fish swimming very fast. We tend to underestimate most animals. Crows can recognise individual human faces. Mice use markers to find their way home. Horses can read *human* body language better than we can ourselves. Most humans can't tie a clove hitch. Even with a YouTube video and a pair of tweezers we couldn't build a Long-tailed Tit's nest for love or money. By ignoring animal-specific skill sets we are blind to many of their cognitive abilities. The cuttlefish has a banquet of signalling variations of which we can

Displaying cuttlefish. Nature Picture Library/Alamy Stock Photo

only dream. The combinations of shapes, gesture and colour have the potential of a language as complex as our own. Their behaviour and radiant expression seem to exceed any biological function. It's possible, yes, that these shimmering shows are just manifestations of electrical activity. More likely, there is more going on than we imagine.

The German biologist Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944) believed any organism that reacted to sensory data should be judged a living subject and considered in terms of their subjective world. To describe an animal's unique sensory surrounding world, he used the term *Umwelt*. This is not an animal's habitat, more their universe, their particular reality, their unique sensory experience, taking into account how a creature perceives the world: with sonic hearing, or zoom vision, or swivel eyes, or long whiskers, or infrared detectors, or electric field sensors, or blind with a pink fleshy snout, or with skin that can change colour, or a lateral line of pressure sensors. Short, tall, strong, fast, a tough hide or three feet of blubber. The permutations are endless.

In 2012 a group of neuroscientists signed the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, which stated that all mammals, birds and many other creatures, octopuses included, are conscious beings with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviour. The extraordinary thing is that it took so long. More extraordinary, perhaps, is that it needed to be stated at all. With the presence of neurological substrates, from brains to ganglia to nerve fibres, consciousness seemed highly likely (I mean, a world of unaware beings unresponsive to their surroundings seems an odd notion to me), but the onus has been on providing

incontrovertible proof, and until then we had to remain agnostic. The burden of proof was the creatures' burden

The boxes we put animals in cannot contain them. Indeed, the whole of nature has been swallowed into a single word: biodiversity. It sounds like a soap powder. Easy to rinse away. Hard to care about. So often used as an adjunct and devoid of all the heart-thumping, glittering psycho-pageant of life. While all around us are the billions of individual selves acting out their dramas in their individual worlds, connecting to bigger and bigger worlds, to the higgledy-piggledy live jigsaw, the gannet colony, the ant hill, the badger sett, the auditory bubble of a female mosquito's rapturous wing-whine, or the green glimmer of a glowworm's light.

Wild animals need their wits about them. Yet we seem perpetually surprised when animals turn out to be smarter than we thought. Animals have friendships, rationality, empathy, and they have culture; humans have long been resistant to this idea. If we could pay closer attention and understand animals better, we might value them not only for their priceless services to ecosystems, but also for the intrinsic value of their individual and mysterious selves. If we could achieve that shift in perception, then we might respect their place, protect their home, and in so doing restore the healthy functionality of the planet. Never has there been a more urgent time to appreciate fully the planet's other inhabitants.

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Long-tailed Tit at nest. Lisa Geoghegan/Alamy Stock Photo