

In Search of Self

INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES
ON PERSONHOOD

Edited by

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Are Apes and Elephants Persons?

Barbara J. King

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's masterpiece *One Hundred Days of Solitude*, José and Ursula Buendía, matriarch and patriarch of the Buendía family, living in the now-famed fictional city of Macondo, worry about what their marriage may produce. They are cousins; might their love result in a child born with a pig's tail? This anxiety springs up again and again in the family members' consciousness down through the generations.

In his introduction to the novel, Carlos Fuentes notes that *One Hundred Days* speaks to "the desolation and fear of reverting to an anonymous and inhuman nature, the terror of giving birth to a son with a pig's tail and initiating a regression" (1995: xi).

An anonymous and inhuman nature. Here is the idea that animals live dumbly, en masse, and without individual distinction. Humans, by contrast, live expressively and with individual distinction. By extension, humans have selves. Animals are without selves. To become animal is to revert to some primitive, indeed, "anonymous," state. It mustn't happen — at least not outside the special contexts within certain religious traditions, where shamans or other spiritual masters transform at will (though not without dangers) into animals and then back into humans (for examples see King 2007, 2010).

We all recognize this idea of the animal-human boundary. Far from dwelling only in literary worlds, it formed the basis of Descartes' views in the seventeenth century that animals lack reason and language, and thus are soulless, nontinking organic machines. This stark summation of what it is to be animal is by no means dead. To take just one example, in 2008 the

Washington Post published an op-ed whose author contrasted reasoning humans with "irrational and immoral" animals, including apes (La Valle 2008; for a response see King 2008, and for related reviews see Bekoff and Pierce 2009, Bradshaw 2009).

Increasingly, scientists and theologians, as well as philosophers, are pushing back against this supposed dichotomy. This blurring of animal-human identity goes beyond the obvious fact that we *Homo sapiens* are animals too. It goes further because animals refuse to toe the line. They live neither dumbly nor en masse. Rather, they live vocally, with individuality, and with self-awareness. They always have, but more and more this fact rises to humans' notice.

A Quintet of Squid

In the book *Kinship with Animals* (2006), Anthony L. Rose retells a story offered by his friend Randy Harwood. Harwood went diving in the waters off the Solomon Islands, accompanied by one other person. In shallow water, the pair encountered five squid — possibly, judging from their sizes and behaviors, a mother and her offspring.

As the two divers approached, the squid began to change colors. (Cephalopods such as squid and octopus communicate through color change.) Over some minutes, a parade of hues came to life before the divers' eyes, with the smaller animals matching the bigger one in sequence. The divers "hung motionless, unable to respond." At one point, the larger squid broke off and communicated directly with the smaller ones.

Then — and here I quote Harwood's words as written by Rose — "All five went transparent and slowly, tentacles first, approached us. At four feet distance they stopped and as a group, large and small, repeated the brilliant displays of the first encounter. It was incredible! They had discussed us and decided to try again. In all the colors of their rainbow, five self-aware aliens from another world talked to us. As they repeated the inquiry with exquisite precision, the message boiled down to a simple one — *Hey stupid, who are you?* It was magical — if only we could have replied."

Harwood's frustration at the trans-species communication barrier seeps through his words. With a chimpanzee, or with a dog, we may look a fellow mammal straight in the eye and offer words and other gestures that have a reasonable chance of being comprehended, at the level of voice tone or content or both. By comparison, squid and other cephalopods, though undeni-

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ably intelligent, really fit that word *alien* so well. How can we possibly communicate with them?

I have no idea if squid can feel frustration, but if they can, this quintet may have experienced it. Given the level of nonresponse from the divers, in Harwood's judgment they "got bored and slowly drifted off." Despite its unsatisfactory nature, that close encounter affected Harwood deeply. He felt a connection with animals that normally don't connect with humans. He concluded that the squid "have individual feelings [and] personalities."

I love this story and urge reading it in the original; it encourages us to imagine how active, how alive, how purposefully communicative other creatures may be as they go about their daily lives, even beyond the loyal dog or the cuddly panda, beyond the apes and elephants that form the focus of this chapter. Yet, as a scientist, I find no evidence within the story to conclude that squid have individual feelings and personalities that they express as self-aware creatures. We may find ourselves wishing to map those things onto the squid, because of the evidence for purposeful communication the story contains — and because of the story's magic.

Yet to seek animal selves — to seek evidence of the expression of individual feelings and personalities in other self-aware species — we need to look for more than purposeful communication. We need to discover which self-aware animals express preferences, or show emotions, in different ways, one from the other. This point is not a taxonomic one; it may well be that squid and other cephalopods indeed do those things. But we need to look.

A Quintet of Apes

As a biological anthropologist, I turn naturally to the consideration of our closest living relatives, the great apes, when thinking about animals' selves. To some, this turn will smack of speciesism. Yet for me it's a natural reach and makes no statement about where else we might — indeed, where else we should — look to find animal selves.

Chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas, and orangutans are highly intelligent, self-aware, and social creatures who recognize each other as individuals, who relate emotionally with each other, and who communicate in ways that are dynamic and creative. It is now beyond question that they intersect with the world as creatures who are aware of their existence. These great apes express grief and empathy, and they may take into account another's perspective even when it differs from their own; they make meaning together in

ways that go beyond simple exchange of survival-related messages; and they solve problems using abstract reasoning. In other words, they consciously feel and think about their social world (Boesch and Boesch-Achermann 2000; Byrne 1995; Goodall 1990; King 2004; Russon, Bard, and Parker 1996; Segerdahl, Fields, and Savage-Rumbaugh 2006; de Waal 2006). Some scholars see morality (Bekoff and Pierce 2009) or even incipient spirituality (Goodall 2006) in ape behavior.

A paragraph of scientific summary conveys facts about various ape species, and their capacities, but it tells us nothing about ape selves. For that, we need data and, especially, narratives about ape selves. For this reason, I invite you to meet five apes.

(1) In Gombe, Tanzania, lived a chimpanzee named Flo. She was brought to the world's attention by Jane Goodall, and, upon her death, she merited an obituary in the *London Times*. Flo was a calm, caring mother; she raised her offspring with a sure hand and passed along her maternal competence to her daughter Fif. The Flo-Fif pair became famous, especially because they brought home in concrete terms the notion of the chimpanzee personality. These confident and effective mothers made a vivid contrast with other chimpanzee females who were neglectful of their offspring or even outright violent with others' infants (Goodall 1990).

Flo's last offspring, called Flint, became well known in his own right for a sad reason. When Flo died, Flint, age 8, became ill and died as well. Grief was, Goodall feels sure, a major reason for that premature death, for Flint was old enough to care for himself. What he couldn't survive was his own tide of emotion at his loss.

(2) Across the continent, at the Tai National Park in Cote d'Ivoire, lived an equally illuminating chimpanzee called Brutus. Brutus was a hunter of exceptional skill, who carried out what Christophe Boesch and Hedwige Boesch-Achermann (2000) call *double anticipations*. That is, he was able to anticipate not only the movements of the monkeys he hunted as they fled through the trees in advance of a chimpanzee hunting party but also those of his fellow chimpanzee hunters. Over and over again, Brutus subtly adjusted his own moves to those of his prey and his hunting confederates; in this way, he drove up the rate of hunting success and affected the entire chimpanzee community.

For years now I have written or spoken about Brutus for another reason. When a young chimpanzee of his community died of a leopard bite, Brutus headed the community contingent that stayed near the body. As community leader, he kept away all infants except one: the dead female's juvenile brother.

The brother was allowed to sit at the body, and he pulled at the hand of his dead sister. This anecdote moves me because it illustrates not only the depth of chimpanzee emotion, but also the ability of one ape to recognize and act upon emotion in another ape. Can it have been a coincidence that Brutus allowed only the dead female's brother through to the body? Is it not more likely that Brutus grasped the emotion the youngster felt and enabled him to express it?

(3) Washoe was a chimpanzee pioneer in the study of ape language. Studies in teaching aspects of American Sign Language to an infant named Washoe graced the pages of the journal *Science* over four decades ago; Washoe went on to make scientific history when she used elements of ASL effectively with other chimpanzees as well as with her human caretakers.

When Washoe died in 2008 at the age of 42, I was asked to write an ap-praising article for the journal *Sign Language Studies* and an obituary (though it was termed a "death notice" upon publication) for the American Anthropological Association's *Anthropology Newsletter*. These two requests hint at Washoe's impact on academe, but perhaps more significant were the numerous newspaper articles and online tributes dedicated to Washoe's impact on how people thought about apes.

In the ways she expressed her language skills — which were by any measure significant — Washoe led people to recognize apes as animals with individual feelings and personalities. Washoe routinely made up new terms for objects for which she had no term in her gestural vocabulary. Confronted with a refrigerator, for instance, she created the term "open food drink." She taught some signs to her adopted son, in some cases by molding his hand into the appropriate shape as she herself had been taught, a feat no other ape has been seen to do. She signed with empathy ("Hurt there, come" — followed by a kiss to the injury) when her closest human friend broke his arm. When she sneaked into a room she was forbidden to enter, she signed "quiet" to herself.

Washoe signed, too, to her dolls. This self-chatter shows that language became part of her interior life; it meant far more to her than a mere technique for pleasing her human caretakers and thus obtaining some reward (Fouts 2001). Washoe used her language skills to express her likes and dislikes. Famously, she was persistently intrigued by shoes, and even shoe catalogs!

(4) Michael was a western lowland gorilla who, like his well-known companion Koko who lived at the same facility, also communicated by using elements of American Sign Language. Michael was seized from his wild

home in Cameroon at age 2. Until his death at age 28, he lived a life in the United States enriched by "synergistic relationships, multi-species communications, and artistic enrichment" (Patterson, Tanner, and Rose 2009).

Here I will remark upon a single aspect of Michael's life, his intense pleasure in rhythm and music (Tanner 2009). Michael enjoyed listening to classical music and visibly relaxed as he listened; Pavarotti was a favorite. He participated with others in music-making in a variety of ways, as when he coordinated his foot-tapping in sync with a human companion's or when he hit sticks together and hit sticks on PVC pipe.

Most intriguing, Michael developed a penchant for creating gorilla guitars! They were quite definitely guitars, in fact, and these objects showed Michael's inventiveness and creativity. He didn't merely make one sort of instrument and strum it in the same way over and over again. Instead, at different times he employed materials of rope, branches, or blanket strips; he stretched the strings from teeth to feet, from hand to hand, from chin to foot, or from foot to foot; he fashioned two variations in string length and thus in pitch; and he vibrated the strings in different ways, by finger-strumming, fist-hitting, and teeth-plucking.

Gorillas' proclivities for percussive rhythm in the wild and in captivity — including their iconic chest-beating — have long been known, but with observations of Michael, our understanding of apes' capacity for pleasure in music listening and music-making has taken a leap. His enriched or, as the term goes, "enculturated" life has apparently allowed this basic sensitivity to rhythm and sound to flourish.

(5) The bonobo Panbanisha enjoys music too; a bit of her — and her brother Kanzi's — music-making behavior is included in a seventeen-minute video: http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_savage_rumbaugh_on_apes_that_write.html

Panbanisha is a bonobo who — like Kanzi — was raised to converse with humans using not ASL but computer symbols called lexigrams. Panbanisha understands a fair amount of spoken English as well. Along with all the apes I have so far considered, she expresses her distinctive self through her behaviors. When I met her, Panbanisha suggested (through lexigrams) that I hide behind a large pile of debris, and she didn't seem particularly eager for me to emerge again! She enjoyed, too, asking me for ice on a hot day and watching me serve her. The philosopher Per Segerdahl has woven into an account of Kanzi and Panbanisha's language skills his own encounters with Panbanisha's forceful personality (Segerdahl et al. 2006).

Flo, Brutus, Michael, Washoe, and Panbanisha — each of these five apes is a distinct being, an emergent self with emotion, memory, and imagination

at work. Flo's case is a little different than the other four, for my description of her, unlike my description of the other apes, includes no direct evidence for emotion, memory, or imagination at work. This is an important point, for it is the totality of what we know about apes in the wild and captivity that allows us to interpret Flo's personality fully, to understand that her behavior isn't just an example of statistical variation around a mean of maternal behaviors. The accumulated data point us toward an inescapable conclusion, a conclusion we are in no position to reach with squid: *every great ape is a unique, self-aware, thinking, and feeling self*. Apes live in protected reserves in Africa and Asia, or out in forests under attack by loggers and poachers; apes live in research centers and sanctuaries and excellent zoos where their welfare is paramount, and in roadside zoos and biomedical centers where their welfare is anything but a priority compared to tourist or research dollars (Siebert 2009). Wherever they live, these apes collectively and individually are the antithesis of *an anonymous nature*.

Elephants

Like apes, elephants are long-lived, highly social, intelligent, self-aware, and emotional creatures. Matriarch-led elephant groups are highly charged social units, marked by joy trumpeted when individuals reunite, and an emotional response we don't entirely understand when kin or companions die. Stories of elephant graveyards are apocryphal, but at least some of the stories of elephant mourning are true. Elephants recognize the bones of their dead kin and companions, and caress them — whereas they don't do this with strangers' bones (Moss 1988).

Elephants illustrate in an exceptionally clear way the costs that come along with living as distinctive selves. What elephants may feel is connected to elephant history at the hands of humans and goes beyond grief at the natural cycle of life and death, to include felt pain, both physical and emotional, at the infliction of great trauma. Gay Bradshaw (2009) has described the pain endured by young elephants who watch their mothers killed by poachers or farmers, or by wildlife managers who wish to thin a herd. These accounts make for gut-wrenching reading.

Ndume was a baby elephant living wild with his family in Kenya. When the family wandered from the forest into an area seeded with crops, the elephants were attacked and many were killed by angry farmers wielding spears and arrows. Ndume himself managed to flee. However, he witnessed a

smaller calf near him hacked into pieces and suffered from shock and from the knife gashes he himself experienced.

Ndume was brought to an elephant sanctuary outside Nairobi called the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust. Three months of age at the time of the attack, he began to cry and bellow for his dead mother after his arrival at the Trust. He could not sleep well. Sanctuary experts believe he was reliving the trauma of the attack in his dreams. Then Ndume became depressed.

Because of the Trust's patient and healing routines, during which he was bottle-fed and encouraged to enjoy the company of other elephants, Ndume began to regain some joy in life. As Bradshaw puts it, "Interacting with other elephants worked like an elixir" (2009: 139). She explains: "The free-ranging elephant self is defined through relationships: infant elephant cognition, emotion, behavior, and values are created in plurality" (2009: 137). Bradshaw's book makes clear that elephants recover from trauma (or sadly, sometimes fail to recover) in ways as individual as their personalities. Each elephant is as unique as any ape.

The Relational Self

What's most striking about the apes and elephants considered here — and by extension their brethren in wild and captive settings across the globe — is how they bring to life the idea of the *relational self*. African apes and all elephants live communally, as we have seen; infants develop in the midst of a thriving and socioemotionally structured society. Infants become selves only through interaction; their situation is reminiscent of the pediatrician D. W. Winnicott's famous dictum about our own species: there's no such thing as a baby — only a baby and someone (Small 1999). When, as adults, Brutus the chimpanzee responds with empathy to the grief felt by another self, Michael the gorilla makes music with another self, and Ndume the elephant recovers with elephant and human selves, they are embodying their developmental histories.

During this socioemotional development, young apes' and elephants' brains are sculpted by experience in ways related to what happens with young children's brains (Greenspan and Shanker 2004). In one sense, this biocultural fact is a cause for worry, because negative experiences will have substantial consequences developmentally. Bradshaw's (2009) data show, for example, that traumatized young elephant males living wild may become hyperaggressive. They kill other elephants and may even kill rhinoceroses in

bizarre acts of violence that are inconsistent with what we understand to be elephant culture. Yet the brain-sculpting is also a cause for hope, because it means that when healing action is taken for traumatized elephants and apes, chances of recovery are substantial, as Ndume's case demonstrates.

Humans share our relational selves, and the attendant joys and sufferings that go with them, with other creatures. To be seen to have selves, animals need not express individual emotions, self-awareness, and preferences in ways identical to our own. Indeed, human selves differ in pronounced ways from the selves of apes or elephants or other creatures. We express, and indeed shape, our relational selves in unique ways. We alone create and tell each other sweeping narratives of our past, present, and future; we alone not only feel but also anticipate or revel in or regret or mourn the wonder, compassion, anxiety, and terror with which we act toward others and are acted upon by others.

The statements in the paragraph just above about unique human capacities may seem obvious, but in a chapter on animal selves they must be said. Before I explain why this is so, let us consider a question that follows from the consideration of animal selves.

Are Apes and Elephants Persons?

Apes and elephants are selves — vibrant, thinking, and feeling selves distinct from one another — that come about in relation to other creatures. Does this mean that apes and elephants are persons? This question is hotly debated. Certainly it has been embraced by some who work on behalf of ape or elephant welfare. Rogers Fouts, in writing about the chimpanzee Washoe, does not hesitate to break the link between humans and persons: "I have to accept the Darwinian fact that Washoe is a person by any reasonable definition and that the community of chimpanzees from which she was stolen [in West Africa] are a people" (Fouts 2001; see also Fouts and Mills 1997). Similarly, Bradshaw considers elephants to be persons; she refers to one elephant as "a young woman," for example.

The question of personhood is often closely linked to legal goals involving animal rights. Readers interested in legal challenges may consult Steven Wise's books *Rattling the Cage* and *Drawing the Line* and search online for news articles about ongoing court battles, such as the ongoing one concerning Matthew the chimpanzee, who lives in Vienna, and whether he will be declared a person by the European Court of Human Rights.

Fouts and Bradshaw don't write about ape persons and elephant persons

in direct linkage to legal goals, however. They write instead in order to reshape our thinking about other animals, so that we may reshape our actions toward other animals. Apes and elephants are only the leading edge. They invite us to observe, film, study, and think differently about the possibility of dolphin selves and whale selves; about mice selves and cat selves; about bird selves and turtle selves — indeed, about squid selves (see Bekoff 2007; Bekoff and Pierce 2009). Not all of these species will show the same degree of personality differentiation or of emotional subtlety as apes and elephants do, but that isn't the point. We will not know about the other animal selves on Earth until we look hard for them.

My call for comparative research may still worry some people, who may ask: Why should animals who look to us to have distinct relational selves be more entitled to our care than animals who do not? Let me speak to this point with an example. I don't know if spiders have distinct relational selves. I suspect they do not. But even if I am right about that or even if I never find out, I still won't kill a spider (in our house, we usher spiders outdoors and set them free). As many centuries of religious traditions teach us (Armstrong 2006; King 2010), compassion for all animals may be unmoored from an animal's brainwaves or personality or emotional capacities.

Yet comparative analysis does matter in the real world, as much as academic or legal debates about whether some animals should be declared persons. To understand each species in its environmental, social, and emotional context is crucial as we make decisions about wild and captive management with limited resources. To house an elephant in a zoological park is not the same as to house a spider.

Human Uniqueness and Human Responsibility

Bradshaw (2009) compares elephants who have survived trauma to people who survived the concentration camps of the Holocaust. One of many such passages in her book *Elephants on the Edge* reads:

While life in the circus or zoo has taught wariness — to view change with suspicion — what elephants may feel when coming to the [Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee] is closer to wariness. Elie Wiesel describes the evolution of such wariness and the focused numbness that creeps up as time goes by under the grinding violence of captivity and the past life begins to recede into an unfamiliar reality. (2009: 154)

Bradshaw then quotes a long paragraph from Wiesel's book *Night*. It includes this sentence: "I thought of us as damned souls wandering through the void, souls condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either."

And with this stunning passage about human torment, we are brought back to a point I made earlier: elephants are not humans. Elephants have distinct selves — and the joys and sufferings that go along with those selves. This fact exists and is not incompatible with another series of facts: elephants cannot think about souls, redemption, or oblivion; they cannot grasp what it means to live with a reality that not only their selves but also their extended society is under threat of planned extermination under the cruelest conditions possible. It does no one — suffering elephants included — a service to force elephant trauma and Holocaust trauma into a framework where they are made to become the same phenomenon. Elephants needn't be rendered in Holocaust terms to deserve freedom from suffering.

Bradshaw conflates elephants and humans for a reason. When she writes that we may understand an elephant "much like we would a person from a different culture" (2009: 117), she launches her case for animal rights: "To address elephant breakdown, we must accept that elephants, and other animals, have rights comparable to those of persons" (2009: 127).

Working toward animal rights is one path through which we may reshape our thinking about animals and our actions toward animals. Another, the one I embrace, is to use an understanding of animal selves as inspiration to motivate human communities, including religious communities, to accept — and to act upon — greater responsibility for the conditions in which animals live. If every ape and every elephant were magically anointed "persons" by the courts tomorrow, it would still be humans, and only humans, who could bring about meaningful change in their lives.

Concluding Note

To recognize animal selves is to recognize human responsibility for other animals' lives — in the wild and in captivity. We become fully human — fully vibrant, thinking, and feeling selves — only through our relationship with other animals (King 2010). Our personhood depends on moving beyond a strict human-animal dichotomy, on moving toward a view where compassion for the world's creatures depends neither on a necessary superiority (where we make ourselves entirely different from other animals) nor on

claims of identity (where we make animals entirely like us). Animals are neither dumb anonymous creatures nor humans in some alternative guise. Far more critical than deciding whether to consider them persons, we need to see their relational selves as they are and act on that vision.

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Pretty shaky, useful def. of spirituality p 78, for showing problem in the higher ed. book. spirituality to the rescue!

Neuroscience and Spirituality

Eric Bergemann, Daniel J. Siegel,
Deanie Eichenstein, and Ellen Streit

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely; but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.

Einstein 1972

This chapter focuses on the integration of ideas from the fields of neuroscience and spirituality in their efforts to expand our knowledge of what it means to be human. Utilizing the words of Albert Einstein regarding the "optical delusion of our consciousness," we will explore the ways in which the human brain creates a cortically constructed view of a separate self that we propose spiritual practices strive to deconstruct in a variety of ways. The universal teachings of wisdom traditions and religions throughout the ages reveal the powerful ways in which our species has struggled to create a way of being in which we can find a deep sense of meaning in realizing the true nature of our interconnected relationships with one another and with the larger world in which we live.