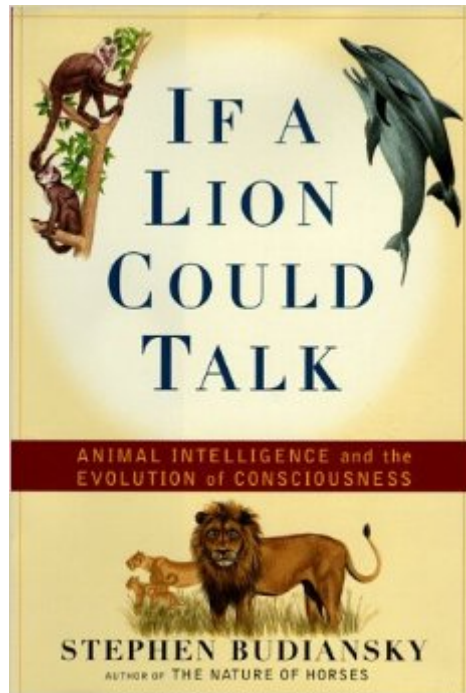


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If A Lion Could Talk: Animal Intelligence And The Evolution Of Consciousness



Synopsis

How many of us have caught ourselves gazing into the eyes of a pet, wondering what thoughts lie behind those eyes? Or fallen into an argument over which is smarter, the dog or the cat? Scientists have conducted elaborate experiments trying to ascertain whether animals from chimps to pigeons can communicate, count, reason, or even lie. So does science tell us what we assume-- that animals are pretty much like us, only not as smart? Simply, no. Now, in this superb book, Stephen Budiansky poses the fundamental question: "What is intelligence?" His answer takes us on the ultimate wildlife adventure to animal consciousness. Budiansky begins by exposing our tendency to see ourselves in animals. Our anthropomorphism allows us to perceive intelligence only in behavior that mimics our own. This prejudice, he argues, betrays a lack of imagination. Each species is so specialized that most of their abilities are simply not comparable. At the mercy of our anthropomorphic tendencies, we continue to puzzle over pointless issues like whether a wing or an arm is better, or whether night vision is better than day vision, rather than discovering the real world of a winged nighthawk, a thoroughbred horse, or an African lion. Budiansky investigates the sometimes bizarre research behind animal intelligence experiments: from horses who can count or ace history quizzes, and primates who seem fluent in sign language, to rats who seem to have become self-aware, he reveals that often these animals are responding to our tiny unconscious cues. And, while critically discussing scientists' interpretations of animal intelligence, he is able to lay out their discoveries in terms of what we know about ourselves. For instance, by putting you in the minds of dogs or bees who travel by dead reckoning, he demonstrates that this is also how you find your way down a familiar street with almost no conscious awareness of your navigation system. Modern cognitive science and the new science of evolutionary ecology are beginning to show that thinking in animals is tremendously complex and wonderful in its variety. A pigeon's ability to find its way home from almost anywhere has little to do with comparative intelligence; rather it is due to the pigeon's very different perception of the world. That's why, as Wittgenstein said, "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him." In this fascinating book, Budiansky frees us from the shackles of our ideas about the natural world, and opens a window to the astounding worlds of the animals that surround us.

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Customer Reviews

A new class of science writer has emerged in recent years. Where science journalism was once an effort to bring often arcane material to a wider reading public, there is a new approach - debunk science whenever possible. Budiansky, in his opening to this book, is quite open about his agenda. Science, particularly the studies of animal behaviour, is actually driven by New Age animal protection schemes. This must come as a shock to those who have spent years of field and laboratory work trying to understand why various animals, including humans, act as they do. Budiansky takes us through numerous animal studies, particularly that of primates. His theme is begun with the story of a zoo gorilla who purported(ly?) "saved" a child. That the media hype over this story is based on the fallacious assumption that these huge animals are a threat to humans never seems to have occurred to him. He is only concerned over whether it is "natural" for gorillas to "save" children. Are scientists, as Budiansky charges, over enthusiastically applying human values to our animal relatives? From a false starting point, he continues with copious accounts of behaviour studies. Each is presented as if the research teams had claimed far more than they actually have done. This is precisely the kind of selective quotations technique others have used in attempting to refute evolution by natural selection. It's the use of whole paddocks of straw creatures that clearly lack substance or value. It also demonstrates that Budiansky is devoid of understanding how science works. Research builds up snippets of information from a great deal of work. In cognition, we're still learning to ask the proper questions, never mind the completeness of the answers.

The point of this book is to "prove" that only people think. Anything a non-human, be it a bacteria or a gorilla, does that looks like thinking actually isn't. It's all programmed by evolution. He cites study after study to prove his point, even when the study appears not to prove it at all. Some examples of

anthropomorphism, of course, are clearly erroneous - the famous example of the counting horse, and the way evolution seems almost spooky in its apparent "intelligence." Certainly he's right in saying that it's hubris on our part to compare animals intelligence solely in terms of ours. And it's not very accurate either; at a wolf refuge in Washington state, called Wolf Haven, they tell you that researchers have determined that a German Shepherd dog is as intelligent as a 4-year old child, but a wolf is as intelligent as a 12-year old. There are very few four-year-olds, or 12-year olds, for that matter, who could survive and thrive in the wild, hunting their food successfully and finding safe places to sleep, avoiding predators and hunters along the way. But then he jumps from those errors, with a few bashes at Descartes along the way, to the conclusion that only people think. There is little difference, he says, between the behavior of a simple computerized model of a cricket and a real cricket. And, by extension, there's little difference between that computer toy and a chimpanzee, at least in terms of its behavior. Bernd Heinrich, in his fascinating book *Mind of the Raven*, discusses his frustration at being unable to publish articles with results that appear to demonstrate raven's abilities to figure out problems. It didn't matter how carefully he was able to construct the studies, and how accurate the results appeared, the scientific community doesn't want to hear it.

This is a very slippery book on a very slippery subject. What Stephen Budiansky is trying to do is demonstrate from his reading of the literature, including experiments published in peer-reviewed journals, that there is a distinction to be made between the minds of humans and all other animals. Budiansky seems not to believe that intelligence and consciousness are matters of degree, but matters of threshold. Following philosopher Daniel Dennett he attributes this nearly absolute difference between us and them to our ability to use symbolic language. The reason the subject is so slippery is that an adequate definition of both intelligence and consciousness is lacking. The reason the book is contentious naturally follows from this, but additionally Budiansky seems to have an agenda or, call it a thesis. He writes: "Consciousness is a wonderful gift and a wonderful curse that, all the evidence suggests, is not in the realm of the sentient experiences of other creatures." (p. 194) How true or not his statement may be really depends on the definition of consciousness. Unfortunately Budiansky does not give one, and so all his conclusions about the differences in consciousness between humans and other creatures are murky at best. The closest he comes to a definition is on page 193 where he asserts that "...language is so intimately tied to consciousness that the two seem inseparable." Using this "definition" it is only a matter of demonstrating that animals do not have language in order to demonstrate that they don't have consciousness. However even in this I don't think Budiansky is successful. Much of the book is given over to showing how so

many experiments using chimps and monkeys, pigeons and dogs, etc.

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