

Obtuseness

Pretty much as far back as I can remember, I've been appalled at the crassness of humans, the coarseness of some, the apparent blindness of others. The hurt we impose on others, the pain we inflict, sometimes unthinkingly, sometimes deliberately. The single-mindedness with which we push each other aside, allow, even empower some to trample on others, so often close our eyes and stop our ears to injustice, inequity and just plain meanness.

Aware before I got out of high school that though we are ignorant about what consciousness, like life itself, is, where they come from, where they go, what they're for, why we have or (as some less possessively ask) *are* them; we nonetheless batter, squander and throw them away as a matter of course.

As I grew older, I came to recognize the seeming ubiquity of "man's inhumanity to man," a self-serving characteristic whose depth was only partly explained by my reading in history and broader acquaintance with our current practices, in which not only individuals but castes, classes, nations, sects, churches, governments — the whole panoply of societal divisions — decide on the basis of arbitrary hierarchies that one or another of our kind is not only undesirable, to be despised, mentally or physically inferior, but not even human.

The atrocities of Vietnam were only the nadir of disillusion and loss of respect for flag and country that for me began years earlier, witnessing the debasement of workers and the poor, the dehumanizing humiliation and discrimination that gave cause to the civil rights movement.

Parallel to my growing awareness of and objection to widespread intra- and intermural prejudices based on differences of race, ethnicity, gender, affiliation, geography, economic condition and so on, I've also become more aware, more sensitive to the even more demeaning attitude of humans toward non-humans, a self-aggrandizing selectivity that far from the leveling concepts of Hindu *ahimsa* or Buddhist *maitri* and *karuna* (i.e., compassion) or "one under God" aspiration, relegates our fellow inhabitants of the planet to the status of automata, essentially mindless constructions of meat and bone (or the invertebrate equivalents) devoid not only of consciousness, let alone anything like soul, but of emotions and feelings, not only unable to think but even to feel pain (a particularly perverse belief that in the modern, post-Cartesian heyday of rational humanism — which still dominates in many quarters — led esteemed scientists and technicians to practice vivisection and similarly repulsive forms of laboratory torture).

The vileness of our inhumanity to mankind (our continuing willingness to be part of what Cummings called "manunkind"), our deadly competitive self-other, us-them, king-of-the-mountain war-games, has become more apparent to me over the years — the obvious fact that we do such things not because we have to but because we can; because we so desire; because we are born and bred in an acquisitive culture that, subordinating everything and everyone to the cash nexus, doesn't let us consider when enough is enough; because we are too juvenile to practice restraint; because we are socially, psychologically, morally lazy.

But even more disturbing, more disgusting as I come closer to the end of my passage, is the

overweening ignorance in the face of all the evidence, the egotism, the obtuseness, the ugliness of the refusal of a great many humans to recognize the consciousness, intelligence, personality and essential equality of our fellow earthlings. While this is certainly not true of everyone, it certainly is of many, perhaps most of us, and is a wilful ignorance compounded by narcissism, indifference and apathy.

In the past 50 years or so, breaking away from the obstinate strictures and mechanistic, positivistic presuppositions of rigid behaviorism while avoiding the pitfalls of naive anthropomorphism, science has shown unequivocally, what anyone who has lived close to nature or has had an intimate (not just utilitarian or control and command or Pavlovian stimulus and response) relationship with pets has always known or intuited: that many animals (from fish and amphibians to birds and mammals) share the so-called earmarks of humanness — language, tool-using, feelings, emotions, empathy, individuality, sociability, problem-solving, ability to generalize and think abstractly, a sense of fairness, of personal dignity, playfulness etc. That they are in fact not merely sentient, certainly not just instinctual machines but like us, conscious. And in some ways more conscious, more sensitive to the environment, including its other conscious beings, more competent in many ways (for instance, receiving and transmitting at split-second rates on sensory channels humans can't detect with our merely human physiological apparatus — supersense researchers call it) than we supposedly superior humans.

And as science begins to look closely at other denizens of the biological world (as for the most part it has begun to do only recently), we are learning that intelligence and its related processes characterize not only zoomorphic vertebrates and invertebrates, but plants and other so-called insentient beings.

Octopi think, deductively and inductively, slime molds solve problems, plants communicate — not just metaphorically, but actually, as defined by the same kinds of rigorous laboratory experiments and field observations that we use to define our own mental capacities and incapacities.

At the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, the "new science" of electromagnetic physics initiated a widespread change in our way of seeing the world, fostering a vibrational/radiational view of reality that posited notions and images of various waves and rays. A century later, the new science is advanced biology, which brings with it metaphors and images that are more physiological than physical, more organic than mechanic. While we continue to try to catch up to our cosmic and atomic landscapes, our quantum entangled mathematics, we are simultaneously trying to come to terms with a squishy world where vast fungal networks underlie whole continents, our very bodies are constituted by interdependent communities of microbiota, our every breath inhales untold legions of living beings. Our notions of autonomy and identity are challenged by realities of interdependence, relationship, interaction, community.

The implications of this "new science" (cognitive ethology, neuroscience, psycholinguistics, plant physiology, behavioral biology, etc.) are sobering. In some ways they confirm what many indigenous cultures have long held, and what has long been felt but expressed only tentatively, surreptitiously, insanely or intoxicatedly by those Western society has tended to label as deviants,

weirdos, fools, mystics, witches, saints, addicts, and the like.

The findings of the new bio-science strongly reinforce changes already being instituted in response to worldwide movements for animal rights and the rights of nature. But even more fundamentally, they suggest that our socio-political and socio-economic structures, the hierarchies of our psychologies, everyday attitudes and beliefs, need to be radically revised, that our basic notions of self-definition and self-evaluation, practical living and life-purpose, need to be radically reformed, that in this time of ecological crisis (brought about thanks to human, all-too-human notions of human exceptionalism) we need to reject our outmoded anthropocentrism and start looking seriously into our commonality with the other lives who share this earth.

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This morning among the trees and flowers of this beautiful high desert spring, verdant and bourgeoning (a happy result of the first wet winter in more than a decade, and who knows when or if we'll see another), I seem to be drawn even more than usual to the songbirds and insects calling and flying about, the young cottontails who hesitate almost until I might step on them before they spring away, the jackrabbits who race off before I get within a hundred feet or so, the redtail watching from the dead branches at the top of the cottonwood, the buzzard circling high overhead, the black of its wings and those of the talkative ravens against the pure blue spring sky. Life all around. The web of life. The living world we part of not apart from.

The number of studies on animal intelligence, cognitive ethology, has grown exponentially in the past two decades. Many can be found with simple internet searches, from popular anthropological memoirs of talking apes and other congenial primates, to cuddly quarupeds, to dry accounts of calculating and communally-minded invertebrates.

A good place to start is three older books that debunk a good deal of the inherited wisdom about birds being birdbrains:

M.S. Corbo and D.M. Barras, *Arnie, the Darling Starling* (1983)

Robert Franklin Leslie, *Lorenzo the Magnificent: The Story of an Orphaned Blue Jay* (1985)

Theodore Xenophon Barber, *The Human Nature of Birds: A Scientific Discovery with Startling Implications* (1993).