

2017 Evolution Weekend

Siblings Under the Skin

We can hardly appreciate how horrified British and European society was when Darwin's theory of evolution burst upon the world in 1859.

For Europeans, Darwin's thesis that all animals were related by descent from a common ancestor, a descent that had led to many modifications through natural selection but still traced a continuous line from the very earliest living things, called into question some of the basic tenets of Judeo-Christian belief, specifically the doctrine of special creation of humans.

Of course, part of the belief in that special creation was the belief that humans, and only humans, had been gifted with an immortal soul. Without a soul, the rest of the animal creation was defined as inherently "lesser."

Many other religions and folk traditions, however, don't draw such a bright line between humans and everybody else. Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism frequently include a theory of reincarnation that tends to blur the distinction between humans and other lives. In many Native American mythologies, Coyote, Raven, Deer, Bear, Rabbit, Woodchuck, Bison, Otter, Spider, and other animals interact with humans, often guiding them, sometimes tricking them, and frequently seen, in the case of Deer and Bison, as sacrificing themselves to feed the people – which is why hunters believed it was appropriate to thank any animal they killed for its generosity.

Europeans, on the other hand, devoted themselves to enhancing the wall between themselves and other animals. In the Seventeenth Century, the philosopher Descartes raised this to the level of asserting that animals, lacking an immortal soul, could not have what he called "true consciousness" and were simply biological machines, whose actions did not reflect real emotions such as love, fear, or pain. Hence, there was no moral barrier against cruelty to animals.

It is also noticeable that the same attribution of "other than human" was used to justify white Europeans' behavior to people of color, and to minorities like the Irish. When Jonathan Swift ironically proposed in 1729 that the English

might improve the economic condition of Irish families by buying and eating infant Irish children, he made the connection between “nonhuman” humans and “nonhuman” animals painfully explicit. Similarly, Jeremy Bentham in 1789 wrote “The day has been...in which the greater part of the species, under the denomination of slaves, have been treated...upon the same footing as...animals are still. The day may come, when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny.”

Darwin’s ideas, however, were far more frightening, because they were not just the thoughts of a philosopher, but the work of a scientist, supported by extensive factual evidence and confirmed by other scientists. Darwin himself repeatedly suggested, as in his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, that there was an evolutionary continuity not just in physical characteristics like our bones and organs, but in our emotional actions, such as smiling, and the underlying psychological motivations for those actions.

Mechanistic philosophy, however, was deeply rooted, and much of what evolutionary theory indicated about the similarity of humans and other animals was undermined by the work of psychologists like Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. Skinner, of course, disturbed people in the Twentieth Century by destroying the distinction between people and animals from the opposite direction, suggesting that humans were just as much machines as animals were. That went way too far for most people.

Just about the time Skinner’s behaviorism was at its height, however, more and more scientists were studying behavior outside the lab in natural settings, using the same kinds of observations that Darwin had. Jane Goodall’s observation of chimpanzee societies gradually made us aware that many nonhuman animals lived far more emotionally and socially complex lives than had been realized, practicing cooperation, tool use, social stratification, collective aggression, and deliberate deception, to name only a few behaviors.

Her results, along with those of many other behavioral ecologists, evolutionary behaviorists, and plain old natural historians, have given us, in the last 50 years, a much richer idea of just how similar we are to other mammals and how tightly the interdependent web is woven. Not surprisingly, the breaking down of the

barriers began with the other primates, and extended to elephants, whales and their relatives, and to lab animals like rats and mice as well as less commonly studied animal like coyotes (who, as adolescents, apparently lie awake worrying about their status in their family group) and dogs and cats, and more recently, pigs.

So at this point, there have been enough studies that 4 years ago, a group of scientists published a document named the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, asserting that “all mammals and birds, and many other nonhuman animals possess the neurological substrates necessary to generate consciousness.”

This is pretty much at the opposite end of the spectrum from Descartes. So, if we all, mammals and birds and many other nonhuman animals, have evolved to have consciousness, does that mean we all have souls?

When I started thinking about this, I asked a number of other UUs what they thought the soul was. So far, no one has come back with an answer.

What does seem to be the case is that many of us, and not just UUs, are more and more willing to attribute souls as least to animals we are fond of and whom we recognize as having consciousness (as in, “If my dog can’t go to heaven I don’t want to go either.”) We also tend to have the feeling that it is cruel to impose pain on conscious beings like humans, other primates, elephants, orcas, or dogs and cats.

And we think it’s wrong to eat most of these other conscious beings. The thought of eating dog or cat meat, let alone humans, probably makes most of the people in this room a little ill.

So why is it easier to think about eating other animals? Probably because we don’t know them personally and don’t really think about their similarity to us. A few years ago, Steve and Derek Jenkins were asked by a friend who had just had twins to adopt her “micro-pig” because she didn’t have time for it, promising that it would only get as big as a very large cat. Esther moved in. It rapidly became apparent that she was adorable and housetrainable, but she is actually a breed of pig usually raised for meat, and she was going to get much bigger than even a very, very large cat. However, Steve and Derek loved her and

wound up reorganizing much of their lives around her. Esther now lives with Steve and Derek and a lot of other rescue animals ranging from cats and dogs to donkeys and peacocks on her/their own farm; she was offered a bed in one of the barns but prefers the house, though she opens the door herself when she has to go outside. She has her own FB page, which more than 100,000 people like, and her own biography, which has 4.9 out of 5 stars on Amazon. She recommends healthy vegan recipes on her website, but her own favorite food is cupcakes. (Pigs really are very like humans in an extraordinary number of ways.)

Esther the Wonder Pig is not that different from most pigs, except that she has been much, much more fortunate than most pigs. Knowing Esther personally changed her rescuers' feelings about eating meat; knowing her through social media has apparently affected other people as well.

Knowing something personally is usually much stronger than knowing it intellectually, of course, but in both cases, once you know something, it is harder not to know it. More and more people know that, as biologist Marc Beckoff says, "It's a matter of *who* we eat, not *what* we eat," when we eat animals.

Although evolutionary biology doesn't, as a science, tell us what we should do, it does tell us how things are. As I said earlier in this service, some UUs are taking action to integrate their knowledge and their principles. In a spirit of compassion, you are invited to consider the possibilities.