

[Nature: Animals Have Souls and Feelings, Just Like We Do](#)

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Amy the deer and Ransom the dog are close friends: Animal buddies star in the November, 2012, PBS Nature film *Animal Odd Couples* documented a number of cross-species relationships that inspired millions with the message that “love knows no boundaries.”

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NATURE

Animals Have Souls and Feelings, Just Like We Do

Discoveries about other animals’ consciousness challenge the arrogance of *Homo sapiens* and call for greater compassion and nonviolence in our relations

BY MATTHEW MCDERMOTT, NEW YORK

THE WORLDS OF BIOLOGICAL RESEARCH and animal rights advocacy are becoming more closely aligned with traditional Hindu views on the relationship between animals, humans and existence itself.

Scientific studies are showing us that many animal species have rich emotional lives, complex social interactions and advanced cognitive powers. Some even have a sense of fairness, and of right and wrong. The traditional Western scientific view—that animals are little more than unthinking, unfeeling biological machines, sharply distinguished from humans—is being upended. Though that process is certainly far from complete, last summer a conference of neuroscientists at the University of Cambridge, UK, produced “The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness.” Publicly proclaimed on July 7, 2012, it basically states that animals and humans are conscious and aware to the same degree as one another. The signing of the declaration by the conference attendees was memorialized by CBS 60 Minutes. See fcmconference.org to download the full declaration.

The evidence calls for a new paradigm in our relationships with other creatures, one that is rooted in the ancient Hindu values of ahimsa and karunya—nonviolence and compassion.

Traditional Hindu thought has never erected a high wall between human existence and animal existence, while recognizing that there are important distinctions between the two. Swamini Svatmavidyananda, resident acharya at Arsha Vijnana Gurukulum in Georgia, explains:

“In the vision of the Vedas there is only one presence, one source of consciousness, known as Brahman, which is limitless and all pervasive, and which is the truth of one’s self. All that is here, known and unknown, is pervaded by this consciousness. Without undergoing any change, this self-evident consciousness manifests as the very presence in all things sentient and insentient. The air we breathe, the light of the sun, oceans, rivers, mountains and forests, are all Ishvara, God. Animals are also manifestations of Brahman, as are humans.

“Seen from this view, there is no difference between the two. However, from the standpoint of the forms themselves, there is a difference in the extent of self-awareness, in terms of free will. Although animals are self-aware, and some even appear to have a moral compass, this awareness is rudimentary compared to that of human beings.”

Professor Arvind Sharma of McGill University in Montreal notes that some confusion arises because in English we often use the word soul to describe what in Hindu thought is expressed with multiple words. On one hand, soul can refer to the atman. From this perspective humans and animals, as well as inanimate objects, are not different. But soul is also often used to refer to the subtle body.

“When we come to the subtle body, to the mind, then we can say that the human mind is more developed than the animal mind,” Sharma says. “You might say then that the human soul is different than the animal soul.”

Sharma succinctly compares mainstream Western thought with the Hindu perspective on animals: “In Western thought the distinction between the animal and the human is maximized, whereas in Hindu thought it is minimized.

This even applies to moksha, liberation. While a human incarnation is the state from which liberation is most accessible, that doesn’t mean that animals too cannot achieve liberation—even if, because they are often too concerned with the business of living and dying, with expressing their animal instincts, to achieve this state.

One famous example of this is the cow Lakshmi, who lived at Ramana Maharshi’s ashram in Tamil Nadu. She died in the presence of the great sage, who proclaimed, to the somewhat surprise of his disciples, that Lakshmi had become liberated. Asked if he was using the term literally or metaphorically, Ramana Maharshi replied that he was indeed using it literally.”

Ultimately though, Swamini Svatmavidyananda reminds us, “Each incarnation is a journey for the individual, the traveling jiva. The same jiva can be in a human body in one life and be incarnated as an animal in the next. Whether one has a human or an animal incarnation is due to one’s karmic residues. So long as one is mired in separation caused by self-ignorance, one will continue to go through endless incarnations, breaking this cycle only through gaining the knowledge that all that is here is one limitless whole.”



Swamini Svatmavidyananda: Resident acharya of the Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam, Georgia, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. See www.arshavm.org

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Though the modern animal rights community differs in many respects from Hindu thought, both share the basic understanding that the distinctions between humans and other animals are really a matter of degree rather than of kind.

HINDUISM TODAY asked several leading thinkers to share their views on humanity's ideal relationship with animals (see below). The over-arching tone in each message is that there should be respect and compassion towards animals.

Marc Bekoff, an eminent biologist and ecologist from the University of Colorado, Boulder, summed it up succinctly, "The ideal relationship with nonhuman animals would be one of mutual and peaceful coexistence."

Thatâs a pretty close match to the traditional Hindu viewpoint expressed by Swamini Svatmavidyananda:

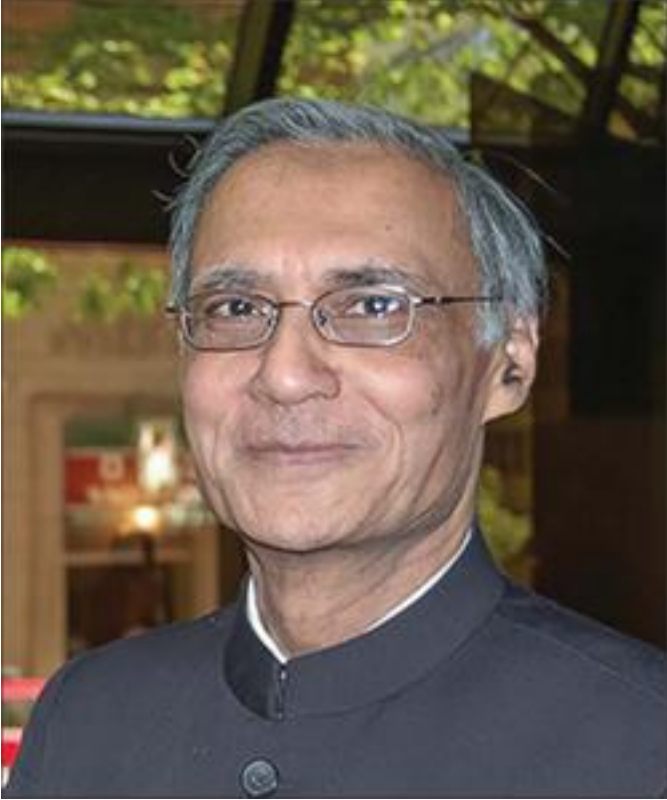
âThe relationship advocated between humans and the natural world is one of harmonic interdependence, whose guiding tenet is ahimsa, noninjury. Since we do not have the power to create, we do not have the right to destroy anything, including our own bodies. We do not even cut a blade of grass used for ritual worship without saying a prayer for forgiveness, what to talk of killing animals for food. The Vedas, which teach about the interconnectedness of everything in creation, urge us to protect animals and plants, as they sustain life.â

Contemporary society falls far short of this ideal, though progress is slowly being made. Laws have been passed attempting to improve the welfare of farm animals around the world, and there is a growing awareness of their plight.

Professor Sharma cites the disconnect between producer and consumer that began with the Industrial Revolution as contributing to the disconnect between humans, animals and with nature as a whole. This is furthered by consumer society and an economy that encourages, both tacitly and explicitly, individual pursuit of instant gratification above most all else.

Asked how we might bridge the gap between the current and ideal human-animal relationship, Swamini Svatmavidyananda clearly expresses the Hindu view that individual unfoldment is the basis of human progress:

âOne has to grow emotionally to extend the same care that one has for oneâs body to all things that are vulnerable and need caring. One grows into a compassionate person to whom nothing is away from oneself. Since everything in creation is interconnected, the well-being of our surroundings is inextricably connected to our own well-being. When we lead our lives with this mindfulness, we are in the flow of a cosmic ecology. We live peacefully, without rubbing against anything. That is the real definition of a Hindu.â



Dr. Arvind Sharma: Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University. Sharma's work focuses on comparative religion, Hinduism and the role of women in religion.

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As it evolves, science discovers humanlike traits in other animals.



1 Birds that Mourn their Dead

That elephants and great apes mourn their dead is pretty obvious. Even if some object to the word mourn, these animals certainly have death rituals for members of their family or group. What's becoming clear now is that such behavior isn't limited to these species. A new study from the University of California, Davis shows that Western Scrub Jays call other Scrub Jays over to the dead bodies of their cousins and conduct cacophonous funerals.

The scientists write: "On encountering a dead jay, prostrate on the ground, jays flew into a tree and began a series of loud, screeching calls that attracted other jays. The summoned birds perched on trees and fences around the body and joined in the calling. These gatherings could last from a few seconds to as long as 30 minutes."

Though the scientists, in typically restrained fashion, are cautious to ascribe emotional or ritual meaning to the event, they aren't ruling it out either, saying we still have much more to learn.



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Bears that Analyze and Count

While the significant mental abilities of chimpanzees and other apes has been well documented, research coming out this past June shows that the ability to count may not be limited to primates.

Writing in the journal *Animal Behavior*, scientists from Oakland University and Georgia State University found that in tests where American Black Bears were rewarded for touching screens with various numbers of dots, "one bear was able to discriminate numerically large arrays of moving dots, and a subset of moving dots from within the larger array, even when area and number were incongruent. Although the bears used area as a cue to guide their responses, they were also able to use number as a cue."

What's even more remarkable, this research demonstrates for the first time that an animal that has not evolved to live socially—that is within groups—can identify individual items.

The scientists conclude, "The pattern of performance was similar to that found previously with monkeys, and suggests that bears may also show other forms of sophisticated quantitative abilities."



3 Monkeys' Intellectual Self-Doubt

Macaques show a remarkable awareness about the limits of their mental abilities. For example, scientists trained these Old-World monkeys to play a basic computer game that rewarded correct answers with edible treats. It also offered the option to skip questions. Scientists found that when a particular test was too difficult, the macaques chose to pass and move on to easier questions and win more treats.

Professor John David Smith, one of a team of three scientists that conducted the study, told the BBC, "Monkeys apparently appreciate when they are likely to make an error. They seem to know when they don't know." Interestingly, playing the same game, New World monkeys, that is, those native to the Americas, did not choose to pass.

4 Octopuses Build Coconut Fortresses

The list of animal species observed to use tools, a trait once thought to differentiate humans from other animals, has expanded to include at least one invertebrate species. In 2009 scientists from Australia observed octopuses in Indonesia carrying coconut shells with them and then stacking them up as protection against predators, sometimes hiding inside them, putting two halves of a coconut together to form a shell. One of the scientists notes that while she has observed octopuses hiding in coconut shells many times, "I never expected to find an octopus that stacks multiple coconut shells and jogs across the seafloor carrying them."



Animal rights issues: mutually beneficial relations versus exploitation, the fallacies of hierarchical thinking—we all suffer; we all deserve compassion



Gene Baur

President and co-founder of Farm Sanctuary, an animal protection organization with facilities in New York and California.

Q: Is it possible to have a compassionate, respectful relationship with animals on a working farm, or even with service and companion animals?

A: It all boils down to the relationship. Is it one that is mutually beneficial, or is it one of exploitation where one party takes and the other has something taken from them, without it being their choice or without it being in their interest?

The way things are done now in animal production, it is clearly an exploitative relationship. These animals are being bred specifically for their milk and eggs or to be killed for food. They are treated basically as egg-making or milk-making machines. There is no regard for their welfare.

Going forward, how we relate to other animals is an open question. The standard is to ask, "Is this a mutually beneficial relationship, over generations, or is it one of exploitation?"

When it comes to animals raised for food, it's almost always been based on exploitation. When it comes to domesticated animals kept as companions—cats and dogs—it is not so clear. There are puppy mills that breed these animals and sell them for profit. That's clearly an exploitative relationship. But a lot of the people that are caring for these animals are doing the best they can, providing good homes, or as good a home as possible, to animals in need. They are doing their best with a bad situation.



P eter Singer

The Ira W DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. Author of *Animal Liberation* (1975), widely cited as a foundational book on animal rights.

Q: What is humanity's ideal relationship with animals and how is this changing?

A: One in which we reject speciesism and give equal consideration to the interests of all animals. This relationship is clearly changing, and moving in the right direction, although much too slowly. But we can see many changes. Perhaps the best example is the abolition of some of the worst forms of factory farming across the entire European Union and, in the US, the passing of the referendum in California in 2008 that requires giving all animals space to move around, turn around and spread their limbs without touching another animal or the sides of their cage or stall.

Q: Is there a hierarchy of animals in terms of how humans should treat them?

A: Humans are different because we have higher intellectual abilities but being

less intelligent doesn't mean that you suffer less when you are mistreated. There is a hierarchy in terms of the grounds for believing that there is a capacity to suffer. With vertebrates these grounds are very strong. With invertebrates, for example insects, these grounds are often not so strong.



Marc Bekoff

Professor Emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Author of *The Emotional Lives of Animals*.

Q: In what ways are humans and nonhuman animals different and similar?

A: There are lots of similarities among all animals, as well as a lot of differences—certainly across mammals and birds, and now we're learning about fish, their emotional lives, their sentience, their ability to feel pain and to suffer, and also to feel joy. We humans have tried very hard to separate ourselves, but the only notable differences I see are that we're the only species that cooks food and we're the only species that shows such incredible evil.

As research examines the general field of animal cognition, we're really learning that improbable animals do amazing things. For instance, we used to think of man as the only tool-maker until Jane Goodall discovered that other animals use tools, too. New Caledonian crows are amazing tool users, for example.

And scientists have started to study the sentience of fish. There's tons of research now showing that fish are conscious beings. They are sentient beings. They feel pain. They're very smart. They deceive other fish. They cooperate with other fish. They respond to morphine in exactly the same ways that we do.

Q: Do you think there's a hierarchy of animals?

A: A lot of people set up hierarchies in terms of higher and lower species. They talk about smarter and less-smart species. But as a biologist I don't think we should establish hierarchies; we shouldn't talk about lower and higher species. Animals always do what they need to do to be card-carrying members of their species.

Q: It's pretty meaningless to me, honestly, to ask if a cat is smarter than a dog, or whether birds are smarter than chimpanzees because they can use more sophisticated tools. Do you agree?

A: When a chimpanzee does something a bird can't do, people don't hesitate to say the chimpanzee is smarter than the bird. But when the bird does something the chimpanzee can't do, no one says the bird is smarter than the chimpanzee. Hierarchies are really bad biology, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: How do we humans get to what you would consider to be an ideal relationship with animals?

A: One way to get there is to incorporate children into what we're doing. I do a lot of work with kids because I see them as ambassadors for the future. But I also think that a great way to make progress is to really lay out very clearly what we've been doing to innumerable habitats, how it's not sustainable.

We also need to really stress the importance of compassion that it's OK to be

compassionate; we don't need excuses to be compassionate. I always say compassion begets compassion. We can spread compassion by being compassionate.