THE NEW
ATLANTIS
A JOURNAL OF TECHNOLOGY & SOCIETY

Do Elephants Have Souls?

Caitrin Nicol

> *There is mystery behind that masked gray visage, an ancient life force, delicate and mighty, awesome and enchanted, commanding the silence ordinarily reserved for mountain peaks, great fires, and the sea.*
>
> –Peter Matthiessen, *The Tree Where Man Was Born*

The birth of an elephant is a spectacular occasion. Grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and cousins crowd around the new arrival and its dazed mother, trumpeting and stamping and waving their trunks to welcome the floppy baby who has so recently arrived from out of the void, bursting through the border of existence to take its place in an unbroken line stretching back to the dawn of life.

After almost two years in the womb and a few minutes to stretch its legs, the calf can begin to stumble around. But its trunk, an evolutionarily unique inheritance of up to 150,000 muscles with the dexterity to pick up a pin and the strength to uproot a tree, will be a mystery to it at first, with little apparent use except to sometimes suck upon like human babies do their thumbs. Over time, with practice and guidance, it will find the potential in this appendage flailing off its face to breathe, drink, caress, thwack, probe, lift, haul, wrap, spray, sense, blast, stroke, smell, nudge, collect, bathe, toot, wave, and perform countless other functions that a person would rely on a combination of eyes, nose, hands, and strong machinery to do.

Once the calf is weaned from its mother's milk at five or whenever its next sibling is born, it will spend up to 16 hours a day eating 5 percent of its entire weight in leaves, grass, brush, bark, and basically any other kind of vegetation. It will only process about 40 percent of the nutrients in this food, however; the waste it leaves behind helps fertilize plant growth and provide accessible nutrition on the ground to smaller animals, thus

---

***Caitrin Nicol** is managing editor of* The New Atlantis.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

making the elephant a keystone species in its habitat. From 250 pounds at birth, it will continue to grow throughout its life, to up to 7 tons for a male of the largest species or 4 tons for a female.

Of the many types of elephants and mammoths that used to roam the earth, one born today will belong to one of three surviving species: *Elephas maximus* in Asia, *Loxodonta africana* (savanna elephant) or *Loxodonta cyclotis* (forest elephant) in Africa. There are about 500,000 African elephants alive now (about a third of them the more reticent, less studied *L. cyclotis*), and only 40,000–50,000 Asian elephants remaining. The Swedish Elephant Encyclopedia database currently lists just under 5,000 (most of them *E. maximus*) living in captivity worldwide, in half as many locations—meaning that the average number of elephants per holding is less than two; many of them live without a single companion of their kind.

For the freeborn, if it is a cow, the "allomothers" who welcomed her into the world will be with her for life—a matriarchal clan led by the oldest and biggest. She in turn will be an enthusiastic caretaker and playmate to her younger cousins and siblings. When she is twelve or fourteen, she will go into heat ("estrus") for the first time, a bewildering occurrence during which her mother will stand by and show her what to do and which male to accept. If she conceives, she will have a calf twenty-two months

Right: "Elephant Nature Park" by Christian Haugen, flickr/christianhaugen (CC BY 2.0). Opposite left: "Big ears" by Emmanuel Keller, flickr/tambako; altered with permission (CC BY-ND 2.0). Previous: Shutterstock

Welcome to the world: This newborn hasn't yet stood up and stretched its legs, let alone figured out how to use its trunk.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

later, crucially aided in birthing and raising it by the more experienced older ladies. She may have another every four to five years into her fifties or sixties, but not all will survive.

If it is a bull, he will stay with his family until the age of ten or twelve, when his increasingly rough and suggestive play will cause him to be sent off. He may loosely join forces with a few other young males, or trail around after older ones he looks up to, but for the most part he will be independent from then on. Within the next few years he will start going into "musth," a periodic state of excitation characterized by surging levels of testosterone, dribbling urine and copious secretions from his temporal glands, and extreme aggression responsive only to the presence of a bigger bull, who has an immediate dominance that the young male risks injury or death by failing to defer to. Although he reaches sexual maturity at a fairly young age, thanks to the competition he may not sire any children until he is close to thirty. (Ancient Indian poetry lauds bulls in musth for their amorous powers, even as keepers of Asian elephants have respected the phase as one highly dangerous to humans since time immemorial. Until 1976, it was widely believed in the scientific community that African elephants do not enter musth. This changed when researchers at Amboseli National Park in Kenya were dismayed to note an epidemic of "Green Penis Syndrome," which they feared signaled some horrible venereal disease—until they realized it was nothing more nor less alarming than the very definition of a force of nature.)

Other than this primal temporary madness, elephants (when they do not feel threatened) are quite peaceable, with a gentle, loyal, highly social nature. Here is how John Donne, having seen one at a London exposition in 1612, put it:

> Natures great master-peece, an Elephant,
> The onely harmlesse great thing; the giant
> Of beasts; who thought, no more had gone, to make one wise
> But to be just, and thankfull, loth to offend,
> (Yet nature hath given him no knees to bend)
> Himselfe he up-props, on himselfe relies,
> And foe to none, suspects no enemies.

Donne is not the first or the last to view the elephant in its stature and dignity as a synecdoche for the total grandeur of the universe, come to earth in lumpen grey form. Here he suggests that it represents a moral ideal as well. Animals are often celebrated for virtues that they seem to

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

embody: dogs for loyalty, bears for courage, dolphins for altruism, and so on. But what does it really mean for them to model these things? When people act virtuously, we give them credit for well-chosen behavior. Animals, it is presumed, do so without choosing.

From a religious, anthropocentric perspective, it might be said that while animal virtues do not entail morality for the animals themselves, they reveal to *us* the goodness in creation; as the medieval theologian Johannes Scotus Eriugena wrote, “In a wonderful and inexpressible way God is created in His creatures.” From a more biological view, it might be noted that people mostly do not choose their dispositions either, that behavioral tendencies are more determined than we like to tell ourselves, and that blame and credit for such things are often misapplied in human contexts too.

But the latter idea—that humans, although capable of conscious self-direction, are as mutely carried along by the force of selection as your friendly neighborhood amoeba—simply elides the question, while the former raises many more; the tiger is as much God’s creature as the lamb. In any case, the capacity for “choosing” is a binary conceit that gestures at something much fuller, an inner realm of awareness, selfhood, and possibility. In other words, a soul.

To the ancients, soul was *anima*, that which animates, the living-, moving-, breathing-ness of a biological being. In this sense, not only animals but plants have souls (of different capacities appropriate to what they are). For many religions, by contrast, the soul is specifically incorporeal, perhaps immortal, and believed to be unique to human beings, who are responsible (to a point) for its condition. To modern science it is, if anything, the hard problem of consciousness, also commonly thought to be the province of just one species.

Without either choosing sides or somehow reconciling these three dueling realities with each other, it would be impossible to say what a soul *is*, let alone who has one. But there is a fourth sense in which when we talk about it, we all mean more or less the same thing: what it means for someone to bare it, for music to have it, for eyes to be the window to it, for it to be uplifted or depraved. Even if, religiously, we know by revelation that other people possess them for eternity, we only engage with or know anything about them at a quotidian level by way of the same cues and interactions that a more this-worldly view would take as their sum total: bright eyes, a dejected slump, a sudden manic inspiration or a confession of regret.

Also a matter of conventional wisdom is the idea that human beings are on one side of a great divide while all animals are on the other, subjects of their instincts and our necessities and pleasures. What exactly the divide

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

is, though, is difficult to define. Various contestants have included reason, language, art, technology, religion, walking upright and the use of hands, knowledge of mortality, sin, suicide, and more. In *The Explicit Animal* (1991), Raymond Tallis rounds up a master list of them:

> Man has called himself (among other things): the rational animal; the moral animal; the consciously choosing animal; the deliberately evil animal; the political animal; the toolmaking animal; the historical animal; the commodity-making animal; the economical animal; the foreseeing animal; the promising animal; the death-knowing animal; the art-making or aesthetic animal; the explaining animal; the cause-bearing animal; the classifying animal; the measuring animal; the counting animal; the metaphor-making animal; the talking animal; the laughing animal; the religious animal; the spiritual animal; the metaphysical animal; the wondering animal… Man, it seems, is the self-predicating animal.

As Tallis goes on to explain, any given one of those distinctions is both too narrow, in being an insufficient explanation of what makes human beings human, and too open, in being demonstrably shared to some extent by another species.

Chimpanzees and other large primates, for instance, are so intelligent and personable that they blur many of these boundaries. But since we are so closely connected evolutionarily, it is easy to tacitly view them as way stations toward the human apex, impoverished versions of ourselves rather than somebody in their own right. There is, however, nothing else remotely like an elephant. (Its closest living relatives are sea cows—dugongs and manatees—and the hyrax, an African shrewmouse about the size of a rabbit.) As such, it presents the perfect opportunity for thoughtful reconsideration of the human difference, and how much that difference really matters.

An Elephant Never Forgets

> *To the elephant, our scrap of consciousness*
> *May seem as inconsequential as a space-invader blip.*
> –Heathcote Williams, *Sacred Elephant*

In 1974, Thomas Nagel famously took a stab at one of the great riddles of the universe: What is it like to be a bat? To some scientists and philosophers, he noted, this is an unanswerable question; it is not like *anything* to be a bat because (they believe) the bat does not have enough awareness to subjectively experience itself. Nagel, taking for granted that bats have some kind of experience, also determined that the question is unanswerable because

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

however well we imagine what it would be like for *us* to live as bats, the bat is so biologically foreign that its experience is beyond our mental grasp.

For people hoping nonetheless to comprehend the lives of elephants, there is an astounding wealth of information about them, a tiny fraction of which appears in the sidebar on page 36, a slightly larger fraction on my office shelves, and a realistically inexhaustible fund in libraries, databases, and oral histories around the world. The best of these come out of an ethological renaissance kicked off with Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton's *Among the Elephants* (1975) and continued in such works as Cynthia Moss's *Elephant Memories* (1988), Joyce Poole's *Coming of Age with Elephants* (1996), Katy Payne's *Silent Thunder* (1998), and more, with longitudinal findings compiled in the magisterial volume *The Amboseli Elephants* (2011). The result of a close-knit, crack team of researchers who have been patiently and creatively observing the same elephant families for decades, this work combines the power of concrete study with the power of story and narrative.

Powerful for us, that is, onlookers from the outside. What is it like to be an elephant? Is it like anything? How would we know?

One of the major clues that elephants have something we would recognize as inner lives is their extraordinary memories. This is attested to by outward indicators ranging from the practical—a matriarch's recollection of a locale, critical to leading her family to food and water—to the passionate—grudges that are held against specific people or types of people for decades or even generations, or fierce affection for a long-lost friend.

Carol Buckley, co-founder of the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, a retirement ranch for maltreated veterans of circuses and zoos, describes the arrival of a newcomer to the facility. The fifty-one-year-old Shirley was first introduced to an especially warm resident of long standing named Tarra: "Everyone watched in joy and amazement as Tarra and Shirley intertwined trunks and made 'purring' noises at each other. Shirley very deliberately showed Tarra each injury she had sustained at the circus, and Tarra then gently moved her trunk over each injured part." Later in the evening, an elephant named Jenny entered the barn—one who, as it turned out, had as a calf briefly been in the same circus as Shirley, twenty-two years before:

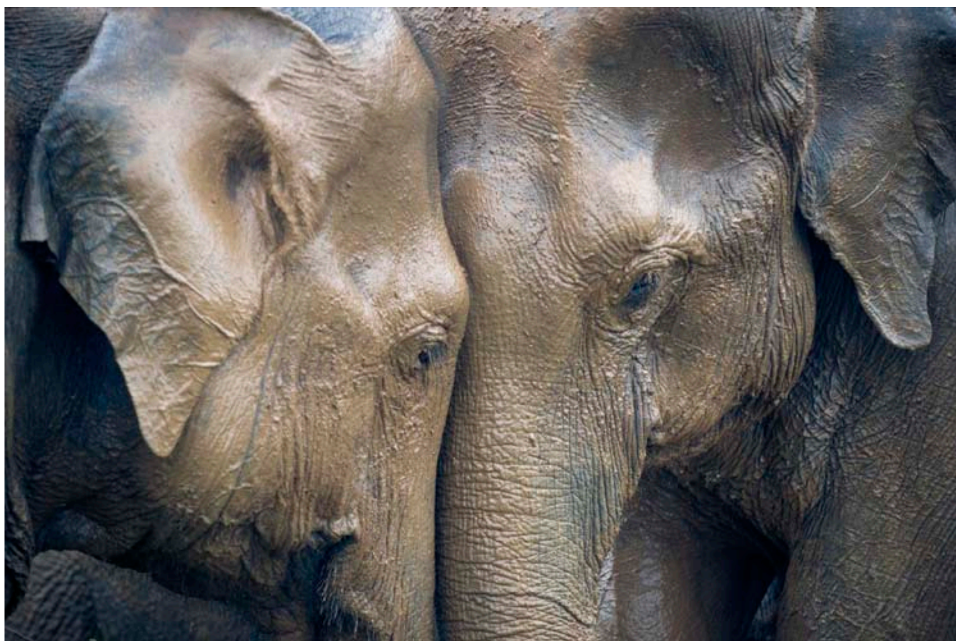
> There was an immediate urgency in Jenny's behavior. She wanted to get close to Shirley who was divided by two stalls. Once Shirley was allowed into the adjacent stall the interaction between her and Jenny became quite intense. Jenny wanted to get into the stall with Shirley desperately. She became agitated, banging on the gate and trying to climb through and over.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> After several minutes of touching and exploring each other, Shirley started to ROAR and I mean ROAR—Jenny joined in immediately. The interaction was dramatic, to say the least, with both elephants trying to climb in with each other and frantically touching each other through the bars. I have never experienced anything even close to this depth of emotion.
>
> We opened the gate and let them in together.... they are as one bonded physically together. One moves, and the other shows in unison. It is a miracle and joy to behold. All day... they moved side by side and when Jenny lay down, Shirley straddled her in the most obvious protective manner and shaded her body from the sun and harm.

They were inseparable until Jenny died a few years later.

More stories of kind mentoring in a new home come courtesy of another elephant rescue site, this one in Kenya, where orphans are raised to be reintroduced as adults into the wild. This is a big adjustment, not often attempted for animals who have lived for some length of time in a captive or domesticated setting, but the new releases are helped by older elephants who have gone through the same thing themselves (especially important in welcoming them into a herd that is not their blood kin). In a 2011 report in *National Geographic,* head keeper Joseph Sauni recounts how an adventurous little one named Irima ran away to try out his independence early. After a few days, a trumpety clamor was heard at the gate.


iStockphoto

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

"Irima must have told the group that he still needed his milk and orphan family and wanted to go back," says Sauni, so Edo, a graduate of the center, walked Irima home. "The keepers opened the gate, and Edo escorted Irima all the way back to the stockades. Edo drank some water from the well, ate some food, and took off again. Mission accomplished."

Such solicitude is not limited to their own kind. In *Coming of Age with Elephants*, Joyce Poole tells the story of a ranch herder whose leg was broken by a matriarch in an accidental confrontation with her family. When his camels wandered back without him in the evening, a search party was sent out. He was eventually discovered under a tree, attended by a female elephant who fiercely prevented anybody from approaching. As they were preparing to shoot her, the herder frantically signaled for them to stop. When they were finally able to draw her far enough away for them to go and get him, he explained that

> after the elephant had struck him, she "realized" that he could not walk and, using her trunk and front feet, had gently moved him several meters and propped him up under the shade of a tree. There she stood guard over him through the afternoon, through the night, and into the next day. Her family left her behind, but she stayed on, occasionally touching him with her trunk. When a herd of buffaloes came to drink at the trough, she left his side and chased them away. It was clear to the man that she "knew" that he was injured and took it upon herself to protect him.

From whence come these altruistic actions? Are they the product of blind instinct in the animal, the residue of ancestral behavior benefiting kin, whereas for humans they would be a generous and morally commendable choice? Or is the truth somewhere in between, some combination of the two, for both of us? Poole illustrates how the standard framework of evolutionary theory is problematic in describing even highly survival- and reproduction-oriented interactions:

> As a behavioral ecologist, I have been trained to view non-human animals as behaving in ways that don't necessarily involve any conscious thinking and that their decisions have been simply genetically programmed through the course of natural or sexual selection. But in the course of watching elephants, I have always had a sense that they often do think about what they are doing, the choices they have, and the decisions that they are making. For example, when a young musth male is threatened by a high-ranking musth male, his usual response is to drop out of musth immediately. He lowers his head, and urine dribbling can

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> cease in a matter of seconds. Many biologists would explain this phenomenon simply by arguing that males who behave in manner X live to produce more surviving offspring than males who behave in manner Y, and thus the trait for behaving in manner X is passed on to future generations. Thus, male elephants today automatically behave the way they do because they have been programmed through the successful behavior of their ancestors to do so.

It is worth noting that selectively, the decision tree here can go both ways: drop out of musth, avoid the fight, and live to try again another day; or don't, and make the best play you can to pass your genes on then and there. It is easy to see how either behavior might be rewarded and reinforced by reproductive success over time, either explained just as handily. But the bigger problem is the assumption that in a way, the choice is already determined prior to the interaction, even prior to those two elephants' births, because as an encoded response there is no room for it to be a choice at all. This automatically excludes a key factor in the scenario, as Poole continues:

> Although I rely on such explanations myself, as I have gotten to know elephants better I have been more and more convinced that they do think, sometimes consciously, about the particular situations in which they find themselves. In the case of the young musth male, I believe that he may actually consider his options: to keep dribbling, stand with head high, and be attacked, or to cease dribbling, stand with head low, and be tolerated. In other words, the male may in fact have some *conscious* control.... With dominance rank between males changing on a daily basis, a male needs to be able to adjust his behavior accordingly. From past experience he knows the characteristics of his rival's body size, fighting ability, and how that rival normally ranks relative to him, but if his rival is in musth he also needs to assess whether he is in full musth and what sort of condition he is in. All of this information must be assimilated on a daily basis and gauged relative to his own condition. Can so complex an assessment be carried out without thinking? And I wonder whether the more parsimonious explanation wouldn't be that they think.

Of course, similar mechanistic explanations are now often applied to human actions as well. As Poole acknowledges, they are grounded in something real, but do not allow for the fullest understanding of what is going on. In a way, it may actually be more instructive to look at the flaws in this line of reasoning with an animal example, which helps to avoid some of the metaphysical minefields surrounding the issue. Properly nuanced discussions about animal activity can be soundly *materialistic* without being *reductive.*

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Animal science that describes their real abilities, where they can receive credit for intelligent or compassionate actions driven by more than mere instinct, would by extension elevate man's stature too—not flatten it with animals', but raise them both above the low bar of pure determinism.

This moral question is at the heart of Tarquin Hall's *To the Elephant Graveyard* (2000), a real-life chronicle of the hunt for a rogue bull elephant that reads almost like a detective novel where nothing is as it first appears. The victim is a drunk man plucked from out of his house and impaled in his own yard. The suspect is a large "tusker" who seems to have sought him out in the village for that express purpose, with no provocation, and has done this to thirty-seven previous victims. A marksman is contracted by the Indian government to shoot the bull and put a stop to this behavior. Hall, a journalist based in New Delhi, believes something fishy is up and finagles his way into the search party so he can expose it.

Sure that Dinesh Choudhury, the marksman, is a stone-cold mercenary insensate to the dignity of elephants, probably framing some meek hapless creature for crimes it could not really have committed, Hall pompously lectures him about them—only to have his pretensions flattened by this man who loves and understands the *hathi* (elephants) far better than Hall knew was even possible, and who inducts him into a whole *hathi* universe of deep feeling and sly intelligence and indeed, moral agency.

At one point they catch up with the elephant and Mr. Choudhury steals off to confront him alone—not to shoot, but simply to meet his eyes and give him warning. "I have thrown down the gauntlet. Now the rogue will either mend his ways or I will deal with him," he explains to an astounded Hall. "If a human kills, he is given a fair trial before sentencing is carried out. Therefore, I always give each elephant a chance to redeem himself. I say to him, 'If you stay, you will die. If you go, you will live.'" For a man who *wants* the elephant to take the offer, who hates nothing more than shooting them, it seems an odd profession to go into; but Mr. Choudhury notes that *someone* would be hired to do it, and "at least with me in charge, the elephant has a chance."

Having tracked the *hathi* deep into the northern forest, one night they encounter a legless man who turns out to be his former owner. Many years ago, the man purchased him on a whim, having a lifelong affection for the creatures but not knowing anything about them. Further, being often away from home on business, the owner heedlessly left him in the care of a vicious scamp, returning one day to find him tied up to a tree, malnourished, and scarred from frequent beatings. The keeper (who was nowhere to be found until he was discovered locked up for fighting in a bar) was immediately

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

fired, and a kinder one employed to nurse the *hathi* back to health. But a few weeks later, the old keeper showed up again, belligerently drunk, demanding money from the owner and taunting the elephant. At the sight of his tormenter, the elephant broke out of his restraints and smashed the keeper to the ground repeatedly, crushing the owner's legs on the way out.

"I believe the elephant did this to me deliberately," the owner says. "He wanted me to live in agony. He wanted me to remember him every day for the rest of my life. And so I have done for the past ten years." The elephant, in those ten years, has ranged all around killing dozens of men in like manner—drunks who resembled his old foe. The owner does not want revenge, he says, because he blames himself for what has happened; but if they can shoot the *hathi*, he goes on, they "would be ending a lot of pain and misery. Most of all his."

As a kind of trial, the elephant's chase poses a question familiar from real trials held in courtrooms every day: how much are violent offenders warped by atrocious pasts responsible for what they do? How relevant is this to what becomes of them, when there is a fundamental obligation to protect society?

Like humans, most traumatized elephants do not become violent, but just absorb their hurts in confusion and sadness and respond to them in other familiar ways. In *The Dynasty of Abu* (1962), the zoologist Ivan T. Sanderson recounts the story of an elephant named Sadie, who was practicing but failing to learn a circus routine. Finally she gave up and bolted out of the training ring, causing her to be chastised (not cruelly, he stresses) "for her supposed stupidity and for trying to run away." At this, she dropped to the ground and dumbfounded her trainers by bawling like a human being. "She lay there on her side, the tears streaming down her face and sobs racking her huge body."

> In almost half a century of close association with the Abu [elephants], including and even after reading a substantial part of the vast literature concerning these majestic creatures, I have not encountered anything that has moved me so greatly, and I write this in all seriousness and humility. Its ineffable pathos constantly brings to mind that most famous verse "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). What on earth are we to make of a so-called "lower animal" crying?
>
> If you shoot an animal, you may expect it to make whimpering noises.... That any animal, and especially one weighing 3 tons, should lie down and sob her heart out in pure emotional frustration is something else again. It almost looks as if, despite all that we like to believe, we humans are not the only creatures that possess what we

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> call emotions and higher feelings. In fact, if we insist upon making a distinction between ourselves and other animals in this respect, we will then have to provide a special niche for the Abu.

In Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*—an 1872 work that, together with *The Descent of Man* (1871), applies the principles of evolution to the question of human origins—elephants appear twice: briefly in a note on the way their ears flare when they charge each other for a fight, and more extensively with an inquiry into the phenomenon of captive elephants weeping. Darwin reports the observations of a colonial secretary in Ceylon (Sri Lanka): "When overpowered and made fast, [one newly captured bull's] grief was most affecting; his violence sank to utter prostration, and he lay on the ground, uttering choking cries, with tears trickling down his cheeks." Others, meanwhile, simply "lay motionless on the ground, with no other indication of suffering than the tears which suffused their eyes and flowed incessantly." A zookeeper in London, Darwin adds, witnessed similar occurrences whenever his companion pair of cows were split up. Ever the painstaking naturalist, Darwin latches onto a physiological investigation of the muscles surrounding the eyes—how their contraction may cause or allow for tears, whether they are more likely to be contracted while prostrate, and so forth. He manages to induce a batch of children to squeeze these muscles repeatedly as a test, to very little tearful effect.

What's So Wrong with Anthropomorphism?

> *We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.*
>
> –Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*

Though thanks to Darwin (if not Aristotle) it should come as no surprise that animals seem to experience in some way many of the same things we do, physically and emotionally, in science the supposed imposition of

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

"human" characteristics on non-human animals is a powerful taboo. All of the preceding stories, descriptions of behavior whose meaning would be perfectly obvious if encountered in a person, court trouble with sticklers for "romanticizing" the animals' apparent feelings.

In *Love, Life, and Elephants* (2012), Daphne Sheldrick—founder of the orphanage mentioned above, and inventor of the first successful milk substitute for infant elephants—describes her involvement in writing articles about animal behavior for the Wildlife Clubs of Kenya's schools, and how to her dismay so much of the literature she read for this assignment turned out to be abstruse and off the mark as compared with her and her colleagues' field experience:

> I attributed this to the fact that science precluded researchers from interpreting animal behavior in an "anthropomorphic" way, and as such they came up with complicated explanations as to why an animal was behaving in a certain way, when, in fact, the answer was pretty simple. One simply had to compare it to the likely response of the human animal if subjected to the same set of circumstances.

Researchers are not even supposed to name their subjects, lest the sense of intimacy in a name compromise their objectivity. The primatologist Jane Goodall was among the first to revolt from this convention, and now most elephant ethologists go ahead and name their subjects too; as Iain Douglas-Hamilton has said, "even if you identified an elephant by the number M51, when you saw him coming your way, you would still say to yourself, 'My God, it's *M51!!!*'"

Indeed, Douglas-Hamilton's remark speaks to the very reason why scientists worry about mixing human feelings into animal research: it's practically irresistible. Scientific observation is supposed to be detached, but science after all is conducted by human beings, and human hearts naturally reach out to other sentient creatures; perhaps our affection for them makes us want to see what isn't there.

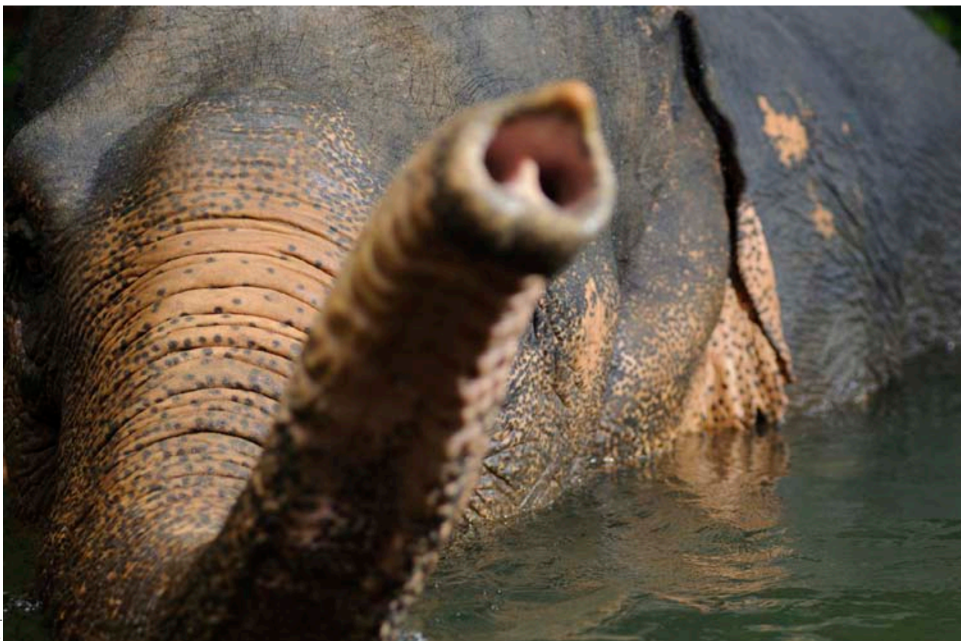
Despite its limits, surely this is a better orientation than that of the British Raj officers of yore, who in the great tradition of Royal Society vivisections and other such doings obtained a wealth of information about elephantine physiology by restraining the animals and applying pain to find the most sensitive pressure points, coldly taking notes on their new knowledge of the nervous system. But the dilemma remains: how to get an accurate understanding of the animals' nature and (if appropriate) emotions, without imposing on them assumptions born of a distinctly human understanding of the world?

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

The taboo against anthropomorphism exists for three basic reasons. First of all, we as human beings are prone to mistake the thoughts and feelings of *each other*, even the people we are closest to—how much more so is this a risk in speculating about members of another species?

Even supposing that the elephants were our equals in intelligence, their life differs from ours so fundamentally that trying to infer their perspective from our own experience is bound to miss the mark in many ways. For one thing, as a rule elephants have poor vision—but their sense of smell is exquisite, revealing a whole olfactory landscape that we are contentedly closed off to. Also, they do not fall romantically in love (that we know of; that their behavior indicates). Think how many other aspects of our lives are profoundly influenced by good sight and deep eros, and ask yourself what might loom equally large in an elephant's world that we ourselves would have very little grasp of. And of course there are a variety of other differences—where they live, how they live, the fact that from birth to death a female (unless something has gone wrong) will *never* be alone and after a certain point a male mostly will. How might these things shape a psyche?

Meanwhile, on our end, we the human race are masters of projection, from the teddy bears (or in my case, stuffed raccoons and walruses) that we befriend as children to the humanoid robots that we may build or


iStockphoto

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

purchase as adults, engineered to cue us to respond to them like sentient beings. We like to feel that these inanimate objects have reciprocal affections for us, although we always know at some level that they do not.

For real sentient beings, though, the truth is more complex. They are not us, but to look into their eyes is to know that *someone* is in there. Imposing our own specific thoughts and feelings on that someone is in one sense too imaginative, in presuming he could receive the world in the way we do, and in another not imaginative enough, in not opening our minds to the full possibilities of his difference. The philosopher and theologian Martin Buber called this "the immense otherness of the Other," reflecting on his relationship with a family horse as a child. As he stroked the mane, "it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin"—"something that was not I," he notes, but was "elementally" in relation to him. There was an existential connection between them in their improbable blessing of breathing, beating life. And not only life, but the particularity of sentient individuals, as the horse "very gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal meant to be recognizable only by his fellow conspirator: and I was approved."

Of course, there is no way to know what the horse was really thinking here. But as to what Buber was thinking—notice how he moves from their *shared* primal vitality, realized by touch, to their *distinct* seats of awareness, and the possibility of coming together in faux conspiracy. Consider how any empathetic connection forms. You begin with some point of commonality with your own life, something as elaborate as a similar identity or experience or as simple as a feeling everybody knows firsthand, such as pain or affection. From what is same, however basic, you can begin to bridge the difference to what is other, and learn something new through someone else's eyes.

This leap will always involve some element of imagination, as we cannot *know* exactly what someone may be feeling on the other side. Thus our empathy and irrepressible imagination are not merely impediments to clear understanding, but may instead offer new avenues toward it.

The second reason for the taboo is that in modern Western science, the whole concept of life is so mechanical that, if you look closely, not even people are supposed to be anthropomorphized. Emotional, holistic terms such as *love*, *sorrow*, and *concern* have no place in an impoverished language of chemical transactions at the micro level and selection pressures at the macro. Not that chemical transactions and selection pressures are not essential influences, because of course they are—but from our

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

current knowledge of them, they are acutely inadequate to describing the subtleties of lived experience.

This framework goes back to Descartes, whose dualistic universe of absolute mind at one end and absolute matter at the other admitted nothing in between. Indeed, Descartes reasoned that since animals are not rational, they are not conscious, and since they are not conscious, they cannot even be aware of pain; their piteous howls during the horrible experiments he conducted on them were to him mere reflex, the unfelt expression of material reactions akin to the shrieking of a teakettle.

This idea was long ago debunked, but the philosophy it came from lives on in various ways. Early developers of artificial intelligence, for instance, focused on programming mightily rational functions such as chess and advanced mathematics—tasks that are ideally suited to computers, but also, as M.I.T.'s Rodney Brooks quips in *Flesh and Machines* (2002), that "highly educated male scientists found challenging," which therefore must be the pinnacle of cogitation. In fact, Brooks realized, while "the things that children of four or five years could do effortlessly, such as visually distinguishing between a coffee cup and a chair, or walking around on two legs, or finding their way from the bedroom to the living room were not thought of as activities requiring intelligence," they represented the real challenge for programming. Never mind small children—there is not a robot in the world that knows the things a puppy knows.

In a 1990 paper serendipitously titled "Elephants Don't Play Chess," Brooks observes that evolutionarily, "the essence of being and reacting"—that is, "the ability to move around in a dynamic environment, sensing the surroundings to a degree sufficient to achieve the necessary maintenance of life and reproduction"—was a far more difficult development than reason-centered capabilities, as impressive as they are. More importantly, the latter emerged in continuity with the former, not as a detached occurrence with an unrelated meaning.

This is an important corrective to the abstraction of thought from embodiment, and ought to indicate that mental and emotional experiences we know *we* have might well be shared to some degree by fellow creatures, our evolutionary kin; discerning them is not imposing *human* attributes on animals but just acknowledging the results of a common heritage.

To be sure, this field comes with its own pitfalls, the retroactive just-so stories that speculatively explain the evolutionary heritage of any behavior, as Poole discussed above. But in any event, today we have readmitted into respectable science a whole spectrum of biologically-based feeling, though this is actually because we are leaving behind the mind for just the matter.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Pure conscious rationality, instead of the one sure thing, is by some accounts an elaborate delusion. That is a subject for another time, but for here and now the lesson of Descartes is this: to deny obvious suffering based on a preconceived idea is as unscientific as it is heartless. Believing that the appearance of boredom, loneliness, frustration, and grief in animals is simply an anthropomorphic projection is to labor under a forced ignorance that is protested by our own intuition as well as all the evidence. Even as new developments offer more insight into the distinctions between their feelings and ours, we have to grant the benefit of the doubt that they are feeling *something*.

A third objection comes not out of science but from culture and politics: the idea that acknowledging even faintly human-seeming qualities in animals will ultimately serve not to affirm the moral worth of animals but to debase the worth of human beings. The example of Peter Singer shows that this fear is not unfounded. Singer's classic 1975 manifesto *Animal Liberation* is a passionate call for the protection of feeling animals, and in many ways the founding document of the animal advocacy movement. (He eschews "rights" talk, although this has mostly been lost on his followers and critics alike.)

But Singer is equally well known for promoting reprehensible ideas about the treatment of vulnerable human beings—the young, the old, the ill, and the disabled. The insidious connection between these two stances is a philosophy that attaches value to specific *capacities* rather than *beings* as a whole: If a certain level of intelligence or other properties means animals should be accorded more value, conversely, to Singer the absence of those properties in some people makes those individuals worth less.

In contrast to this kind of utilitarian, *à la carte* moral value, there is a kind of animal advocacy that promotes a radical leveling of species: as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals founder Ingrid Newkirk famously said, "When it comes to pain, love, joy, loneliness, and fear, a rat is a pig is a dog is a boy." While Newkirk grounds her claim in core emotions (which all those species do have), others take the position to what they see as its logical conclusion, equating *any* kind of life with any other—a spider, a bacterium, a child—a concept whose practical implications must either be nonexistent or paralyzingly exhaustive.

Though based on nearly opposite standards for how to value living beings, both these approaches basically annihilate human equality as a special ideal, that self-evident truth that somehow in all times and places has been shockingly hard to defend. Hence valiant crusaders against assaults on this front, such as bioethicist Wesley J. Smith (author of a 2010 book titled after Newkirk's statement), smell danger in any discussion of animal

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

sentience and emotion. Think of the beautiful stark simplicity of the "I Am a Man" banners carried in the civil rights marches; what if, instead, they said "I Am an Organism," whose rights are either contingent or unenforceable? This is the moral universe that people suspicious of animal advocacy fear.

Animal *welfare*, rather than animal *rights*, is the proper locus of our concern, they seek to remind us (Smith commonly makes this distinction throughout the book and in his blogging and articles about "human exceptionalism"); it is not the animals' stature as living beings but ours as moral agents that obligates us to relate to them kindly. Whatever the philosophical merits of this stance, it is certainly true at a practical level that people have power over animals in most situations and so it is up to us to set the standard for their treatment.

So what does animal welfare entail? One approach is outlined in *Dominion* (2002), Matthew Scully's rigorous critique of various industrial and sporting practices based on known evidence of animal sentience and emotion—a straightforward if gruesome argument not that we are offending our equals but that we are failing our dependents.

On the other hand, it is hard to say what Smith considers an acceptable limit on human needs and desires when balanced against animals'. He characterizes Scully's book as "outrageously anthropomorphic," and describes some of the writings of Jane Goodall, the world's leading animal scientist, as "pure figments of [her] imagination"; Goodall "almost screeches as she anthropomorphizes away." In Smith's view, Scully and Goodall go wrong by inferring emotional states from animals' observable behavior. Smith also criticizes an elementary-school primer on farm animals as "propaganda," not only for the admittedly ridiculous inclusion of the names of vegan celebrities, but also for "anthropomorphically aimed" items such as this: "Cow Fact: Mother cows separated from their calves by a fence will moo loudly and seem very upset. They'll wait through hunger, cold, and bad weather to be with their calves." Smith does not dispute that the mooing actually takes place; if there is anything about animal psychology that would seem to be pretty well established, it is mothers' attachment to their young. But apparently the suggestion that this behavior indicates the presence of recognizable emotions is a dangerously anthropomorphic idea to be putting in the heads of children.

Denying the obvious is a bad way to go about promoting causes, even (or especially) very good ones. And the emphasis on human exceptionalism—as Smith asks, "What other species builds civilizations, records history, creates art, makes music, thinks abstractly, communicates in language, envisions and fabricates machinery, improves life through science and engineering, or explores the deeper truths found in

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

philosophy and religion?"—in a vein that Raymond Tallis calls "a misconceived, panic-stricken desire to preserve human dignity by distancing man from the animals," somewhat misses the point.

Ingrid Newkirk does not claim that rats and pigs can make machinery or ponder metaphysics, but that they feel emotions, and that taking those into account, we should not degrade or harm animals in the ways that matter to them—not by being denied suffrage, say, but by being bored or scared or separated from their families. Their worth need not be pegged relative to anybody else's to acknowledge this.

For that matter, Smith's line of argument serves to undermine his more important point. The vulnerable and disabled people whom he spends most of his time fighting to protect are themselves often unable to do a good portion of the exceptional things he praises—which is just the sort of limitation that causes Peter Singer and his crowd to question their "personhood." Arguing from the height of human activity may not be the most persuasive way to make the case for those who cannot hope to reach that height.

On the other hand, as these capacities do have a bearing on the stature of the species overall, it ought to follow that other species with heightened abilities should be accorded value for those things as well. In any case, tactically speaking, one would think that sensitivity and respect for life at different levels would find themselves in common cause. We can all recall examples from human history in which people's natural sympathies

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

towards others, whom they knew deep down to be like them, were closed off by feats of ideology—and of still more examples where the baseline of those natural sympathies left much to be desired. Our natural sympathies represent an invaluable kind of moral insight to be nurtured rather than squelched wherever they do appear. Without establishing equality *per se*, this surely applies to our relationship to animals as well.

Staff members at the Elephant Sanctuary told me of an incident with one of their "girls," who spotted a fallen bird outside her barn and ran right over to it, utterly distraught. She crooned and stroked it and did not settle down till it had been properly laid to rest. What did this mean to her, exactly? We don't know. But she was clearly very moved by a fellow creature's woe and had no trouble seeing it for what it was, different life forms though they were. How sad when we, "higher" animals who share this gift, convince ourselves to dull it.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31). If a single little bird is worth the all-consuming grief of Dulary the Elephant and the cosmos-animating mind of the Father of Creation, and human worth surpasses that, then what is there to lose in holistically appreciating the life of this one bird, even insofar as it resembles ours? And how much more than the bird an *elephant*, which by its own extraordinary nature shows that all species are not equal—but is a portal to the world of non-human life, and the possibilities therein.

Tool, Image, and Grave

The proper study of mankind is man, but when one regards the elephant, one wonders.

–attributed to Alexander Pope

If the core elements of life, sensation, and emotion are so widely distributed as to encompass a huge swath of the animal kingdom, what *is* the moral difference between a species with higher capabilities and one without? In his thoughtful 1985 essay "Tool, Image, and Grave," the philosopher of biology Hans Jonas takes up three activities attributed solely to humans and explores their deeper implications. As it happens, given what we know today, elephants arguably meet all three tests. Jonas's standard is worth revisiting in this light—not to diminish its significance for *Homo sapiens*, but to consider what it means for the one other animal, at least, that might share it.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Jonas selects these particular traits on the basis that they are known to have existed even in prehistoric man, and even in their most incipient forms are indicators of important mental and spiritual qualities that would seem to make him unique. The first example is the tool, which Jonas notes is "very closely connected with the realm of animal necessity." And yet, a tool is an artificial construct, not an extension of organic action but a separate object, often crafted with another object, and most importantly necessitating a *concept* of what it and its purpose will be in order to be crafted.

On one count, elephants fail the tool test, for they do not make artifacts they then reuse (and obviously have not developed the kind of technology that has completely unleveled the odds in our efforts to hunt or trap or train them or encroach upon their habitat). However, they do *use* objects as intermediaries between them and their environment, such as sticks to scratch between their toes and remove bugs from other areas, or twisted clumps of grass like Q-tips to clean inside their ears or whisks to swat at flies. As J. H. Williams recounts in *Elephant Bill* (1950), work elephants in Asia collared with bells have been known to plug up the bells with mud so that they can go and steal bananas in the middle of the night unnoticed—a purposeful modification of someone else's tool. Elephants dig holes for water, cover them with plugs of bark and grass, and return later to their secret stash. Elephants learn by trial and error what sorts of materials do and do not shock them in their efforts to break through electric fences—and in at least one recorded instance (described in Lawrence Anthony's *The Elephant Whisperer* [2009]), followed the buzzing of the fence all the way around to its origin, the generator, which, having been stomped to smithereens, allowed them to untwine the fence and go their merry way.

All these behaviors *are* oriented directly toward fulfilling basic animal wants and needs, and all are similar to the kind of instinctual modification of self and surroundings—hoarding, nesting, sneaking, grooming—that any animal does to survive in the world. The sophisticated actions that animals carry out thanks to the instructions of "instinct" are really quite amazing, and difficult to comprehend for we who rely so much more on conscious reasoning; how much does the animal "know," and how can it do what it's doing if it doesn't? In any case, these complex elephant behaviors would seem to show a great degree of intelligence, an awareness of cause and effect, and some grasp of the multiple possibilities inherent in the properties of their surroundings—that is, what Jonas calls the power of imagination, a grander power than the cold (though equally applicable) contemporary phrase "high cognitive capacity."

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Jonas's second example, image-making, is a capability which "displays a total, rather than a gradual, divergence from the animal's." The activity is biologically useless, he notes, and requires sufficient mental abstraction to distinguish between reality and representation—that is, between the sensations of the present moment that all animals experience and the form of something else in memory or the imagination. Image-making is the transference of this metaphysical idea onto a physical substrate; even for a portrait or some other picture modeled on something real and present, the copy is distinct from the original but linked to it by a nonmaterial concept.*

It is worth noting that making images as well as tools depends on not only sufficient mental abstraction, but more practically *hands*, or some kind of hand-like appendage, such as a trunk, something that allows for a special kind of active engagement with environs. In fact, given their prehensile facility, elephants can be trained to make representational paintings—of flowers, balloons, and elephants, mainly—just as they can be trained to perform many other sophisticated tricks. (Given their intense boredom in captivity, where almost *any* activity can be appealing, it is not only a crowd-pleaser but seemingly fun for the elephants, whose work is then sold to fund their care and other conservation efforts, otherwise known as win-win-win.) Some elephants, however, make art of their own accord—mostly, as it appears, abstract, but some bordering on representational. Ruby, who spent almost her entire life at the Phoenix Zoo and was given paints for recreation after her keepers observed her always doodling in the sand, would commonly select paint colors that matched events around her, such as visitors' shirts outside her cage or the red, yellow, and white of a fire truck that had pulled up with flashing lights earlier in the day.

The best documented example, however, is Siri of the Rosamond Gifford Zoo in Syracuse, New York, who was observed in 1980 by her

* More poetically, this idea appears in the 2005 novel/2010 movie *Never Let Me Go*, concerning a group of human clones raised for organ donation. As children in school, they are encouraged to draw pictures that are spirited away to a "gallery" whose purpose they don't know. Various rumors arise to fill the vacuum, among them that the artwork may be used to match you to your soulmate and perhaps defer your fate, because it "revealed what you were like inside… [it] revealed your soul." When two of them as adult lovers, desperate to have this confirmed, track down the madame who had taken custody of all their pictures, she tells them the art was not so much to reveal their souls as to *"prove you had souls at all."* They are taken aback that anyone would think they didn't, but that is as naïve as the madame's belief that it would mean anything if she could prove they did: the society that produced them to exploit their bodies is emphatically uninterested in the inconvenient matter of their souls.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

keeper to be drawing with a pebble on the floor of her enclosure—all alone, often at night, entirely of her own volition. The most striking of these markings was a little design that looked for all the world like the Chinese character for Buddha; the keeper, David Gucwa, bestowed on it the cheeky and evocative title "To Whom It May Concern," and from that point on began to supply her with paper and pencil. He would sit quietly with sketch pad in his lap and pencil sitting nearby, and without any prompting or guidance Siri would draw.

Many of the drawings—collected in a lovely 1985 book titled after that first etching, cowritten by Gucwa and reporter James Ehmann—actually do somewhat resemble corporeal entities: a butterfly, a bird, a person. This is likely happenstance, though; by and large the drawings are much more emotionally than rationally expressive. Be that as it may, clearly there was something in Siri's inner life she felt compelled to bring forth. The question of what to make of it is a revealing example of the cryptic expanse between the intent of the artist and the significance to viewers.

To some, of course, the whole thing is simply a send-up of the very concept of modern art—"people today pay money to acquire stuff that I would pay money to get rid of," carped one biology professor sent a packet of Siri's work for comment. On the other hand, on being shown the drawings two senior zookeepers immediately resolved to go vegetarian, blown away by this glimpse into an uncharted realm of animal psyches. "I don't even step on spiders anymore," one said, "and I don't like spiders. Nothing is simple anymore." Stephen Jay Gould called the portfolio "fascinating" but cautioned, "I have a hard enough time assessing my own motivations; Lord only knows what goes on inside the brain of an elephant."

Art scholars, for their part—more content than scientists to coexist with endless ambiguity, and indeed to revel in just that kind of clue into the deep unknown—were universally enthusiastic, all remarking on the energy and lyricism and even joy, and affirming certain spatial forms and techniques that indicated the work was more than merely random scribbling. Like the prehistoric cave paintings Jonas points to, it is a creative message defying both meaninglessness and easy understanding, calling across improbable distances of time or consciousness or species to whomever it may concern.

Incidentally, in an entirely different kind of "image test," elephants are distinguished as well: they can recognize themselves in mirrors. Very few other animals have been shown to do this, mainly dolphins and great apes. The test is performed as follows: While the animal is unconscious, some part of its anatomy out of its range of vision is marked with odorless paint, and often for control a corresponding location is marked with a clear

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

version of the paint. When presented with a mirror wherein the mark is reflected, it turns to that location *on its own body* to explore it, indicating both self-awareness and an understanding of the meaning of the mirror. Human beings begin to pass this test at about eighteen months of age.

Jonas's final and strongest criterion is the grave, which would seem to separate man from animal unambiguously. The "commemoration of the dead perpetuated in the cult of the grave" bespeaks an awareness of mortality that is the foundation of metaphysics: "in considering 'the afterwards' and 'the there,' [man] also considers 'the now' and 'the here' of his existence—that is, he reflects about himself. With graves, the question takes on concrete form: 'Where do I come from; where am I going?' and ultimately, 'What am I—beyond what I do and experience at a given time?'" For man, his sense of self, sense of history, and sense of the intemporal, however inchoate, are gestured at with his remembrance of those who have passed on.

But here he is joined by the elephants, the only other known creatures that—whatever it may mean to them—purposively commemorate their dead, in a way Joyce Poole calls "eerie and deeply moving": "It is their silence that is most unsettling. The only sound is the slow blowing of air out of their trunks as they investigate their dead companion. It's as if even the birds have stopped singing." Using their trunks and sensitive hind feet, the ones they use for waking up their babies, "they touch the body ever so gently, circling, hovering above, touching again, as if by doing so they are obtaining information that we, with our more limited senses, can never understand. Their movements are in slow motion, and then, in silence, they may cover the dead with leaves and branches."

After burying the body in brush and dirt, family members may stay silently with it for over a day; or if a body is found unattended by elephants not related to it, they may pause and stand by for some time. They do this with any dead elephant, recently deceased or long departed with only the skeleton remaining. "It is probably the single strangest thing about them," Cynthia Moss writes:

> Even bare, bleached old elephant bones will stop a group if they have not seen them before. It is so predictable that filmmakers have been able to get shots of elephants inspecting skeletons by bringing the bones from one place and putting them in a new spot near an elephant pathway or a water hole. Inevitably the living elephants will feel and move the bones around, sometimes picking them up and carrying them

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> away for quite some distance before dropping them. It is a haunting and touching sight and I have no idea why they do it.

Understandably, for many years it was rumored that elephants had designated graveyards. This has proved essentially untrue, although their skeletons often do collect in the same place, such as near a water hole, where the ailing and elderly tend to stay towards the end of their lives—and as Moss notes, sometimes do get moved around. The mother of a dead baby may drape it over her tusks and carry it with her for days, if she is not standing vigil.

Elephants even react to carved ivory, long divorced from the original remains and altered and handled extensively. Poole writes of a woman

"Eerie and deeply moving": Temporal glands streaming with heightened emotion, elephants stroke and lay brush on a dead friend.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

who came to visit Tsavo National Park wearing ivory bracelets: as an elephant approached, the park warden cautioned her to hide them behind her back; but when the elephant arrived, she reached around behind the woman and contemplatively perused the bracelets with her trunk. Poole then had a friend stage a repeat performance later, and the same thing happened. Conversely, elephants have also been observed to become quiet and pensive in an area where relatives died, even years ago, although the bones have long been removed.

While elephants are unfailingly interested in the remains of their own kind in whatever form, they have occasionally been known to bury dead rhinos, lions, and humans as well. In some cases, the people were only sleeping, and awoke to find themselves trapped under enormous heaps of foliage. Other times, they have been injured or paralyzed with fear by a furious elephantine rampage, which came to an abrupt end when the elephant perceived them lying still on the ground, and switched in an instant from ferocious self-defense to solemnly performing its rites for the dead.

The Half-Reasoning Animal

> *"Creatures, I give you yourselves," said the strong, happy voice of Aslan. "I give to you forever this land of Narnia. I give you the woods, the fruits, the rivers. I give you the stars and I give you myself. The Dumb Beasts whom I have not chosen are yours also. Treat them gently and cherish them but do not go back to their ways lest you cease to be Talking Beasts. For out of them you were taken and into them you can return."*
>
> –C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

For those who find this type of evidence sentimentalized, dubiously interpretable, or otherwise unsatisfactory, there are various nice solid measurements that provide useful but crude indicators of elephants' relative intelligence. At birth, an elephant brain is about a third its adult size. A human brain at birth is a quarter its adult size, whereas for chimps it is half and for most mammals the figure is more like 90 percent. A greater span of growth outside the womb like this accompanies a more important role that nurture and learned skills play in the animal's maturation—as infants they are more helpless and dependent than an average mammal, but as adults there will be much more that they can do. The elephant brain is also notable for its high level of spindle neurons (associated with sociability), very large temporal lobes and hippocampus (the primary seat of memory processing), and convoluted neocortex (linked to general cognitive complexity, common to other intelligent species such as dolphins and higher-order primates).

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Elephant Society

Among the Elephants
By Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton ~ Viking ~ 1975 ~ 283 pp.

Elephant Memories: Thirteen Years in the Life of an Elephant Family
By Cynthia Moss ~ Chicago ~ orig. 1988 ~ 364 pp. ~ $22.50 (paper)

Coming of Age with Elephants: A Memoir
By Joyce Poole ~ Hyperion ~ 1996 ~ 304 pp.

Elephant Biology

Elephants: Majestic Creatures of the Wild
By Jeheskel Shoshani ~ Rodale ~ 1992 ~ 240 pp.

The Flexible Giant: Seeing the Elephant Whole
By Craig Holdrege ~ Nature Institute ~ 2003 ~ 65 pp. ~ $12 (paper)

The Amboseli Elephants
By Cynthia J. Moss, Harvey Croze, and Phyllis C. Lee (eds.)
Chicago ~ 2011 ~ 383 pp. ~ $65 (cloth)

Elephant Language

Silent Thunder: In the Presence of Elephants
By Katy Payne ~ Penguin ~ orig. 1998 ~ 288 pp. ~ $19 (paper)

The Elephant's Secret Sense: The Hidden Life of the Wild Herds of Africa
By Caitlin O'Connell ~ Chicago ~ orig. 2007 ~ 264 pp. ~ $15 (paper)

Elephant Talk: The Surprising Science of Elephant Communication
By Ann Downer ~ Twenty First Century ~ 2011 ~ 112 pp. ~ $33.26 (cloth)

Elephant History

The Life and Lore of the Elephant
By Robert Delort (trans. I. Mark Paris) ~ Abrams ~ 1990 ~ 192 pp.

The African Elephant: Twilight in Eden
By Roger L. DiSilvestro ~ Wiley ~ 1991 ~ 206 pp.

The Asian Elephant: A Natural History
By J. C. Daniel ~ Natraj ~ orig. 1998 ~ 306 pp. ~ $31.50 (cloth)

Elephas Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant
By Stephen Alter ~ Houghton Mifflin ~ 2004 ~ 336 pp.

Elephant
By Dan Wylie ~ Reaktion ~ 2008 ~ 224 pp. ~ $19.95 (paper)

Elephants in Captivity

Love, War, and Circuses: The Age-Old Relationship Between Elephants and Humans
By Eric Scigliano ~ Houghton Mifflin ~ 2002 ~ 368 pp.

Elephants and Ethics: Toward a Morality of Coexistence
By Christen Wemmer and Catherine A. Christen (eds.) ~ Johns Hopkins ~ 2008 ~ 483 pp.

Entertaining Elephants: Animal Agency and the Business of the American Circus
By Susan Nance ~ Johns Hopkins ~ 2013 ~ 294 pp. ~ $55 (hardcover)

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Elephants in Danger

The Fate of the Elephant
By Douglas Chadwick ~ Sierra Club ~ 1992 ~ 492 pp.

Elephant Destiny: Biography of an Endangered Species in Africa
By Martin Meredith ~ PublicAffairs ~ orig. 2001 ~ 256 pp. ~ $14.95 (paper)

Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us About Humanity
By G. A. Bradshaw ~ Yale ~ 2009 ~ 352 pp. ~ $28 (cloth)

Ivory's Ghosts: The White Gold of History and the Fate of Elephants
By John Frederick Walker ~ Atlantic Monthly ~ 2009 ~ 304 pp. ~ $25 (cloth)

Elephant Rescue

Battle for the Elephants
By Iain and Oria Douglas-Hamilton ~ Viking ~ 1992 ~ 386 pp.

By Mark and Delia Owens:
The Eye of the Elephant: An Epic Adventure in the African Wilderness
Mariner ~ orig. 1992 ~ 306 pp. ~ $18.95 (paper)
Secrets of the Savanna: Twenty-three Years in the African Wilderness Unraveling the Mysteries of Elephants and People
Mariner ~ orig. 2006 ~ 272 pp. ~ $14.95 (paper)

The Elephant Whisperer: My Life with the Herd in the African Wild
By Lawrence Anthony and Graham Spence
St. Martin's Griffin ~ orig. 2009 ~ 384 pp. ~ $16.99 (paper)

Love, Life, and Elephants: An African Love Story
By Daphne Sheldrick ~ FSG ~ 2012 ~ 352 pp. ~ $27 (cloth)

Elephant Photography

The Art of Being an Elephant
By Christine and Michel Denis-Huot ~ Whitestar ~ 2003 ~ 220 pp.

Elephant
By Steve Bloom ~ Chronicle ~ 2006 ~ 224 pp.

Walking Thunder: In the Footsteps of the African Elephant
By Cyril Christo and Marie Wilkinson ~ Merrell ~ 2009 ~ 160 pp. ~ $60 (cloth)

Elephant Reflections
By Dale Peterson and Karl Amann ~ California ~ 2009 ~ 288 pp. ~ $39.95 (cloth)

Elephant Documentaries

Echo and Other Elephants ~ BBC ~ 2008 ~ 362 min. ~ $29.98 (DVD)
Reflections on Elephants ~ National Geographic ~ 2010 ~ 55 min. ~ $19.95 (DVD)
Battle for the Elephants ~ National Geographic ~ 2013 ~ 50 min. ~ $24.95 (DVD)

Elephant Organizations

Elephant Voices: elephantvoices.org
The Elephant Sanctuary: elephants.com
Save the Elephants: savetheelephants.org
The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust: sheldrickwildlifetrust.org
The Elephant Listening Project: birds.cornell.edu/brp/elephant

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

But when you ask what these things mean *as lived*, as translated into capabilities and actions, you find yourself back in the mushy territory of observing quasi-mythical or very-human-seeming behavior and trying to analyze its significance from the outside. And in the category of things you might be prone to romanticize, at the very top there is a faculty that also tops the list of features supposed to distinguish man from animal—and that could, if properly deciphered, unlock the rest of elephant experience for us in a way nothing else will. "The Romans fancied that the elephants had reason, and understood the language of men, though they could not answer them," the nineteenth-century historian John Ranking observed. The Romans were not alone. What elephants may be lacking most of all is not language but the Rosetta Stone to prove they have it and clue us in to what on God's green earth they're talking about all the time.

Animal communication is a tricky subject. Even comparatively lowly critters have mind-boggling ways of signaling information to each other. Bees, to convey to other bees the location of home or food or some other desired destination, perform a "bee waggle dance" that simulates the directions in scaled-down form—and there are different "dialects" for this choreography as practiced by the same species in different regions of the world. A mother bat returning to the cave with food for her little one can somehow instantly pick out his specific cheeping from the thousands of others huddled on the wall. There is even just the detailed social profile of all the neighbor dogs your pet checks out from sniffing hydrants on his walk.

However, this sort of thing does not necessarily rise to the level considered worthy of the label "language"—though determining where that level should be is hard to say. Even taking into account the impressiveness of all these forms of interchange, and the fact that there is much about them yet to be discovered and explained, we risk defining the term out of its useful meaning if we stretch it to encompass so much that human (or humanlike) powers of complex abstract discourse cease to be recognizably extraordinary.

"Since time immemorial [speech] has been correctly acknowledged to be man's most outstanding trait," Jonas wrote (though not addressing it in his own essay). There is an intricate philosophical link at least in the Western tradition between language and beliefs and choices, and thus moral reasoning and self-determination. (Cultures with a higher general estimation of animals than ours may not precisely share this view, or may just accept that animals have language that is obscure to people. It is interesting to consider how the everyday proximity to different kinds of creatures may have affected the development of these beliefs. That is, elephants, higher-order primates,

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

and the like are not native to the West, and thus our basic common sense of what "animals" can think or do calibrates at the level of, say, horses and dogs—not to malign the intelligence of horses and dogs, which we tend to underappreciate anyway. But in Asia and Africa, where there's been much more natural interaction between people and *very* smart animals—and not as novelties but as members of other communities—most cultures seem to take a more expansive view of animal potential.)

For a careful analysis of the language question from the Western philosophical perspective, the interested reader may turn to virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals* (1999), which walks through the discussion on this point while focusing especially on the example of dolphins. Reminding us that "much that is intelligent animal in us is not specifically human," MacIntyre goes to battle with some residual Cartesian silliness, and takes care (as many philosophers have not) to locate animals on a spectrum of higher and lesser intelligence—a dog, for instance, may have more in common with a person than with a crab in most significant respects—drawing out the implications at each stage till he arrives at conscious action.

A more distilled, whimsical presentation appears in C. S. Lewis's allegorical world of Narnia, with the contrast between ordinary creatures and the "Talking Beasts." Their animal natures give them certain innate qualities—steadfastness in a bear, valor in a horse—but their speech gives them control over their animal instincts by the powers of thought and self-direction it endows. They are the moral equals of human characters because of this, and anyone who treats them as equivalent to ordinary animals instead is sure to be suspect in other ways.

Late in the Narnia series there is a montage of creation, showing how Aslan, the Christ figure, first drew them out from among ordinary animals and called them into being. They sing: "We hear and obey. We are awake. We love. We think. We speak. We know"—all things that would be impossible without their new awareness.

And Aslan, instructing them, says first and foremost that he *gives them themselves.* In one sense, the power to rise above your instinct is the power to be other than you are, to not be your "natural" self. But in a deeper sense, it is the power to be who you *most* are, to take responsibility for what you think and do and to guide yourself towards the better (or not).

Can elephants do that?

We know they undergo extensive education: babies from their whole doting families, newly fertile cows guided by the more experienced,

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

lately independent bulls tagging along after their more magisterial superiors. In situations where these teaching opportunities are absent—babies orphaned or separated, cows giving birth alone in zoos, teenage males running rampant in places where all the older bulls have been shot for their tusks—their necessity is obvious. As good a guide as inborn instinct is in so many respects, this is one animal for which society, too, makes all the difference in the world.

While much of what it means to be a better elephant is conveyed by example—along with ear flaps, trunk movements, smell signals, and other forms of body language—elephants vocalize prodigiously as well, engaging in elaborate discussions as part of every activity. They have a vocal range of ten octaves (a piano has seven), and up to three-quarters of the sounds they produce are inaudible to human ears. Their infrasonic calls have been studied extensively by Katy Payne, a whale-call specialist who in 1984 found herself at the Portland Zoo observing elephants communicating "silently" through concrete walls. The "throbbing" or "shuddering" in the air reminded her of a bass line on an organ that descended past the point of hearing. In subsequent months at the zoo and years in the field, she recorded and deciphered many of these low frequencies with the help of spectrogram analysis and Joyce Poole, who had already learned to recognize dozens of the rumbles, hoots, trumpets, and whistles that *are* audible: "let's go," "I'm lost," different referents to family and nonfamily members, and more. (Conversely, like other trainable animals, captive elephants have a minimal familiarity with human languages, recognizing many words spoken by their caretakers. Recently, an elephant named Koshik at a South Korean zoo even took it upon himself to learn to articulate human speech sounds: by sticking his trunk in his mouth, he can conform it to say *hello*, *no*, *sit down*, *lie down*, and *good* in Korean. In 1983, there were reports of an elephant in Kazakhstan named Batyr who could say "Batyr is good" in Russian and twenty other phrases, but they were not followed up on scientifically.) The work, tantalizing but in early stages yet, continues at the Elephant Listening Project.

Meanwhile, Caitlin O'Connell-Rodwell, originally an insect biologist, got involved when the Namibian government hired her to attack the perennial problem of keeping elephants from raiding crops. Fences, ditches, sirens, and border rows of chili peppers had all failed to protect local farmers' livelihoods or were impracticable to maintain. O'Connell-Rodwell's solution was to isolate a particular elephant alarm call out of a recording of layered vocalizations and rig it up to play back when they came too close. The reaction was astonishing: with none of the customary

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

iStockphoto

deliberation or signaling from a leader, they instantly flapped out their ears and whooshed away.

Her larger finding, however, recounted in her 2007 book *The Elephant's Secret Sense*, was to prove that they communicate not only infrasonically but *seismically*—through waves in the ground. This radically expanded their known range of contact, indicating that they can keep tabs on who is where and what is going on by footfalls many miles away.

Elephant feet are padded with a kind of fat, similar to that found in aquatic mammals, that is ideal for acoustic transmission. (In fact, it was once used for candle oil, just like whale blubber.) Seismic waves traveling through the ground are picked up by the padding and transmitted up the foot and leg bones to the head, where smaller pockets of the same fat connect to the auditory system.

(Because of this enhanced pedestrian sensitivity, the feet are also especially susceptible to distress—sometimes, as Mark Shand writes in his 1999 book *Travels on My Elephant*, when an elephant goes rogue, it is because a stick that it was using to clean between its toes has splintered off and lodged in out of reach. And severe elephant foot problems are depressingly common in zoos and other captive situations, where the animals must stand on concrete so much of the time instead of walking long distances over soft dirt and vegetation.)

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

O'Connell-Rodwell's discovery made immediate sense of any number of strange elephant phenomena: their habit of "synchronized freezing," falling still together to "listen" on tiptoe to an incoming signal; their disturbed behavior just before a major seismic event such as an earthquake or tsunami; the way that bulls, who don't casually intrude on matriarchal groups, would seem to know from far away exactly when a cow was going into estrus and head straight for her. Long before Payne and O'Connell-Rodwell's work, when early ethologists were just getting the lay of the land and using radio tracking to monitor elephant movements, they were baffled by the elephants' ability to seemingly coordinate across long distances and change course near-simultaneously, regardless of wind direction (and thus scent) or any other explanation they could think of. "We didn't mention ESP openly," said Iain Douglas-Hamilton, but "some of us were ready to entertain the idea that these animals were sending bloody mind waves to each other."

With hard work and careful observation, a better explanation was eventually forthcoming, as there may one day be for other elephant-related phenomena that seem a little spooky. Many people, for instance, report a kind of sixth sense about when an elephant is in the area, one they cannot actually perceive in any identifiable way but seem almost never to be wrong about. Poole describes it as "a vibrancy in the air, a certain warmth," or by contrast "a stillness, an emptiness" in the landscape when elephants are absent. Conceivably, this elephant radar may be produced by the talking tremors, felt viscerally rather than audibly—but less obviously explicable is Poole's similar sense of whether she is about to find a carcass with ivory attached.

Lyall Watson's fascinating 2002 book *Elephantoms* is largely devoted to exploring this sort of not-intrinsically-unreasonable event that verges on the uncanny. One of his more straightforward stories concerns an incident witnessed by a ranger in Addo Park, South Africa, home to a line of elephants with special historical reasons to distrust human beings. An effort to repair a fence had resulted in a mother and baby being stranded on opposite sides of it. Becoming very agitated as the workers approached, the ranger said, the cow "stopped, put her trunk through the cables to calm the calf and seemed to be thinking about her next move." He said he could not prove what happened next, nor did the other rangers believe him, but this is what he saw:

> She talked to that kid. She told him exactly what to do, and without any further fuss, he did. He turned out away from her and the fence and went into the deep shade of a tree twenty yards away, where he

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> stood motionless, becoming virtually invisible. I knew exactly where he was, but could hardly find him again when I looked away. I saw her rush down to the gap and out onto the road, and as the truck appeared, she raised a huge cloud of dust, stamping and blowing, making short charges at the vehicle, frightening the crew sufficiently to get them to back off and go away.…And when the noise and confusion was at its height, the calf in camouflage made his move. He sidled over to the fence, slipped quietly through the gap, and went over to wait in the cover of the succulent forest.
>
> I was certain then that the cow's entire performance had been a brilliant diversion, beautifully executed, for as soon as she was sure he had made good his escape, she ignored the truck and its occupants and turned her back, sashaying in satisfaction back to join her calf in the safety of the park.

Evidently it is not uncommon for those who spend their time out monitoring or at least mingling with wildlife to witness occurrences that go beyond conventional assumptions about what animals can know or do. When "elephant whisperer" Lawrence Anthony died in 2012, the two herds of traumatized rogue elephants he had saved and resocialized crossed the vast South African game reserve where they lived, apparently to pay their last respects. The elephants had not been anywhere near the house for a year and a half prior, Anthony's son reported, and the trek across the park could take a day, but within hours of his death they all showed up.

Payne writes of a conversation she had with a senior scout from Ntaba Mangwe park in which she asked him how he speaks of events that seem to be outside normal experience. "*YOU JUST TELL WHAT HAPPENED*," he surprised her with a shout and burning stare. "*YOU JUST TELL WHAT YOU SAW!*"

"You must simply tell what happened," he repeated quietly as she sat there in shock. "Only God knows what it means."

Unpacking this remarkable exchange yields several items of note. First, there is the dynamic presence of the unknown in daily life. Second, there is the question of what to do about it. Because it is unknown does not mean that it is necessarily unknowable—nor that it isn't. The choice to tell about it represents a hopeful effort that it might be understood, though not a presumptive one: there is no undue effort to explain, to impose some kind of theory on it, but an openness to whatever it might reveal. But finally, on the optimistic side of understanding, there is a reminder of the awesome significance of language in the urging to *tell what happened.* What could be more crucial in the search for truth than

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

this ability to translate individual experience into common comprehensibility? You just tell what happened, and someone else will hear it.

The website LettersOfNote.com is a wonderful, weird archive of real epistles between all kinds of people in all times and places. A striking proportion of them, however, seem to be letters from former slaves to their erstwhile masters—some forgiving and generous, some righteously sly, a few burning with revenge, all at varying degrees of written literacy, but uniformly powerful for this reason: they say, *I have a mind. I have an independent soul that never once belonged to you although my labor and all the circumstances of my life unjustly did. You found it convenient to believe that I was not a thinking, feeling person just like you—no doubt supported by elaborate rationalizations from the whole world around us which ought to have known better—but you cannot deny this anymore, because here I am, free and awake. I love. I think. I speak. I know.*

It must be emphasized that the direct comparison here is *not* from the harm and injustice of animal captivity to those of human slavery, but in the ability to command the attention of someone in power who does not want to acknowledge them at all. To the extent that elephants and other animals have thoughts and memories and feelings and experiences that they are capable of expressing in their own tongue, what a disadvantage it is to them that we have not cracked that code. Our failure to understand them means that there is no way we can truly assess the limits of their abilities or say for sure what they are *not* saying, and makes it easy to ignore their validity for anyone with reason to. No animal is going to come forward with a written missive in a humanly comprehensible language detailing wrongs or simply proving in our own terms the scope of its existence—that, at least, is an ability that is distinctly ours. But if they could, they would have a lot to tell.

Of Love and Liberty

> *When I saw this place, I told her that there'd be no more chains. She's free now. And I just thought about, I don't know who was the first to put a chain on her, but I'm glad to know that I was the last to take it off. She's free at last. I'll miss you, Shirley. My big girl.*
>
> –Solomon James, longtime caretaker of a zoo elephant, on her admission to the Elephant Sanctuary after forty-six years in captivity, giving her a bath for the last time

Ironically, it has been the elephant's misfortune that people find it wonderful. An uglier, more boring, or less gracious animal might have been left

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

more alone to live out its life in peace and freedom, although competition for habitat would have eventually become a problem anyway. But because the elephant is so intriguing, it has been dragooned into any number of unhappy circumstances, out of a sometimes innocent, sometimes less so human wish to penetrate or possess its mystery.

My first direct encounter with an elephant took the form of a trunk tip materializing in my lap as I sat in a covered motor rickshaw in downtown Pune, Maharashtra. What do you do with the sudden apparition of a writhing, disembodied nose? Apparently you place a coin inside it. This coin is relayed to the collection of the nose's owner's rider sitting up top and steering his charge through the chaos of Indian traffic, where he gets to make your day by gracing it with an elephant and you get to give him money. I met another elephant a few weeks later, standing outside a temple dispensing "blessings" in exchange for a coin for the handler and, if you felt like it, a banana for the elephant, which would be eaten peel and all. Then, for one magical moment, the trunk was laid across the crown of your head in benediction. I stood in line with coins and bananas getting blessings all afternoon.

These were both thrilling experiences, but looking back, those elephants were conscripted into unhealthy, lonely lives precisely because of the monetary potential in tourists like me. In the same vein but worse, luxury resorts in Thailand keep baby elephants on hand to entertain and delight visitors. Where and how these babies are obtained—and what becomes of them when they are more than a year or two old and no longer useful for the purpose—is a dismal thing to contemplate; and in any case, no elephant that young is well off separated from its mother and family, no matter how lavish the accommodations.

Trained elephants in Asia have a celebrated but disintegrating history. Numerous Sanskrit texts on elephantology reveal tremendous respect for the power and dignity of elephants and the care that was taken to understand and treat them humanely. A "mahout," the elephant's keeper/trainer/companion, would ideally stay with the same animal for life, almost as if in marriage (though the other kind of marriage fit into the picture somewhere, as this was a trade often passed on from father to son).

With globalization, mahout culture is going the way of other old traditions. It is less of a family business, the training is more slapdash, and many of the men who would make the most affectionate and dedicated elephant companions find, understandably, that they have better opportunities elsewhere. As Stephen Alter writes in *Elephas Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant* (2004), this leaves the kind of men who have few

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

other options, but who for the same underlying reasons may not be a good fit with elephants at all. The result is neglect, misunderstanding, conflict and abuse, and bitter frustration on both sides, feeding on itself for more of the same. But the demand for service and show elephants is only going up, and *someone* has to take care of them.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world naturally wants in on the elephant action—who wouldn't?—and so came the diaspora.

As early as the ninth century, with a present from Caliph Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne, elephants were offered as special gifts to European royalty and marched from court to court until they died of cold and loneliness. A few such stories have been fictionalized—Nobel laureate José Saramago's *The Elephant's Journey* (2008, translated 2010); young-adult fantasy author Judith Tarr's *His Majesty's Elephant* (1993); and BBC World Service producer Christopher Nicholson's bleakly enchanting first novel *The Elephant Keeper* (2009). Set in eighteenth-century England, it begins with the purchase by a respected gentleman of two half-dead baby elephants from a merchant ship just returned from the East Indies. A stable boy, Tom, takes a shine to them, is made responsible for their care, and becomes inseparable from one of them forever. (The other is resold and eventually killed.)

Tom's attachment to this elephant, Jenny, opens his eyes to the quagmire of human motivation that gives rise to the unjust world they live in. Like many other stories, the presence of an animal as a key character offers a compelling stand-in for those members of society who don't have power and metaphorically can't speak for themselves.* Sometimes, they become tales of a sympathetic human finding his own voice to represent those who literally cannot.

Tom, however, is not simply a hero or a victim. His devotion to Jenny also leads him to betray his sweetheart, abandon his family, ignore grave evil, and descend into a sordid London underworld whose misery he actively contributes to. In every choice that arises for Tom between Jenny and another person, he knows he can't leave Jenny because there is literally no one else on earth who will protect her. She is "only an Elephant," after all, and not entitled to the same basic social claims as people. But since she

* In addition to those mentioned above, Coco Hall's 2009 graphic novel *Elephant Girl* makes this point with parallel stories of human trafficking and animal captivity. Based on real events, it follows the abduction from a remote Indian forest and transfer to Los Angeles of a young girl and an elephant, whose various appealing qualities are exploited in the ways they often are.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

exists not as a subject in her own animal society but as an object in the human one, she *is* susceptible to any violations someone may impose (as was her brother, whose untimely demise was the result of profound degradation and misunderstanding). Tom's unusual connection to her puts him in limbo between two realms which are perhaps impossible to integrate—not because animals are too different from us, but because they are too alike.

Involving any animals in our society—for entertainment, companionship, labor, or other purposes—places them in an awkward category. They don't belong and cannot in any meaningful way participate in human systems of political representation, but they have interests to be represented all the same, many of which are close enough to ours that to exploit or ignore them is an obvious injustice. (The more dissimilar needs may expose them to injustice too, of course, but in ways that are less readily apparent.) But as long as there is human life there will be some use being made of animals—and the animals on whom we depend will depend even more on us.

The history of elephants in the United States might have proceeded in all kinds of peculiar directions had Abraham Lincoln accepted the King of Siam's 1861 offer of a breeding pair, to be released into the forest to found an American dynasty. Lincoln, having a few other matters to attend to and reckoning that this was the last thing he needed, gracefully declined. (Later, one of his final acts as president, on the afternoon of the day he was shot, was to instruct his staff to let go a Confederate spy who was trying to flee to England: "When you have got an elephant by the hind leg, and he's trying to run away, it's best to let him run.")

There being no native dynasty, the ones that came arrived as curiosities. Where in European courts they stood for majesty and might, and in Hindu and Buddhist settings for the wisdom and sacredness of animal life, in America they morphed to fit the national tendencies to uprootedness, exhibitionism, and making a buck—a theme suggested in a movie idea the author James Agee outlined in the last letter he wrote before his death in 1955:

> At the beginning, elephants converge from all over Africa, towards a disembodied voice, the voice of God, which addresses them roughly as follows: "My children: you know that you are my chosen people. You know that—to you alone—I have given my secret: I do not regard myself as omnipotent. I gave that up when I gave to Man the Will to love me or to hate me, or merely to disregard me. So I can promise you nothing. What little I can tell you is neither encouraging nor discouraging. Your kind is used already for work, and the men who use you

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> are neither markedly improved nor disimproved by contact with you. Nor have you ever been improved nor disimproved in that process. But now, a new age begins. Soon, now, you will be taken to be looked upon, to be regarded as strange and as wonderful and—forgive me, my dear ones—as funny. As I said, I am not omnipotent; I can't even prophesy: I ask only this: be your own good selves, always faithfully, always in knowledge of my love and regard, and through so being, you may convert those heathen, those barbarians, where all else has failed."
>
> During this admonition, and blessing, the oldest elephant sadly leaves the assembly, and walks away to the great, secret, elephant cemetery, and dies there.
>
> Soon after, men come among the elephants, and capture them for circuses.

Agee imagined subsequent scenes based on real events in American elephantine history, beginning with Old Bet, the centerpiece of an exotic traveling menagerie, who was reportedly shot by a Maine farmer in 1816, believing her to be the unholy behemoth of old. A later scene concerns another circus elephant, Mary, who was lynched in Tennessee in 1916 following an altercation with a brutal keeper—an event that, although Agee never made his movie of it, has been dramatized for the stage three times: Mark Medoff's *Big Mary* (1989), George Brant's *Elephant's Graveyard* (2007), and Caleb Lewis's *Clinchfield* (2009). As a proxy for more traditional, less newsworthy lynchings, this ill-starred elephant seems to be the nonpareil. All these accounts, in their way, are trying to say something of the clash between what turn out to be two inverse evils: the bigoted, airtight provincialism of the town proper, and the gaudy, sordid disassociation of traveling circus life—that is, being someone entirely because you are from somewhere, or being from nowhere at all. Mary happened to be so unfortunate as to drop into this unneighborly maw.

For her and Agee's other sacrificial innocents sent on their great commission to reform the wicked human heart, it is uncertain whether the effort is thus proved a failure, even bringing out the worst in those they came to save, or if there is a greater meaning in their suffering that points toward redemption. Agee's non-omniscient, non-omnipotent God leaves that to our own conclusions, as the finale, also based on a historical event, takes the elephants from dignified abasement to oblique transcendence:

> The greatest choreographer of his time, George Balanchine, instructs the greatest elephant corps of any time, in ballet. The elephants are embarrassed, but dutiful. The big night comes. They dance to music by

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> Stravinsky, in pink tutus. They do very nicely; hardly a mistake. But all through the performance, people roar with joy at their clumsiness, and their dutifulness. The elephants are deeply shamed. Later that night, the wisest of them, extending his trunk, licks up a dying cigar-butt, and drops it in fresh straw. All 36 elephants die in the fire. Their huge souls, light as clouds, settle like doves, in the great cemetery back in Africa.
>
> And perhaps God speaks, tenderly, again; perhaps saying, "The Peace of God, which passeth all understanding…" etc.

The true story of this bizarre collaboration came about as follows: "I wonder if you'd like to do a little ballet with me," the choreographer suggested to the composer, "a polka, perhaps." "For whom?" Stravinsky asked. "For some elephants," Balanchine replied. "How old?" "Very young." There was a long pause. "All right," said Stravinsky, "if they are very young elephants, I will do it." (Stravinsky later remarked that his music was best understood by children and animals.) In contrast to Agee's rendering, historical reports suggest that the dancers may in fact have enjoyed their routine, appearing to take pride in mastering and performing it together.

However, in other circumstances, distressed elephants have been known to kill themselves in ways that certainly seem intentional—not only by refusing food and water, but by stepping on their trunks to suffocate, or deliberately tightening chains hung around their throats. Under the circumstances, these actions seem much closer to despair than to fatal stupidity. Other perverse behaviors, such as the way cows giving birth sometimes turn on their newborns, are never seen anywhere but in captivity.

Catching an elephant from the wild is a tumultuous process that often involves the deaths of several more in the melee. Less brutally, but rather creepily, it may also entail the complicity of other elephants, who are trained to entice their wild kin into a compromising situation where they can be caught. (Another way of catching elephants, employed less now than it used to be, is to save the babies from a cull and market them. Because of the psychological problems caused by having their entire families slaughtered around them, culling experts now recommend just killing the babies with everybody else.) In transit, captive elephants are subject to extreme discomfort and often die from overheating, freezing, stifling, dehydration, or infection.

To avoid these problems, many zoos and other institutions seeking elephants have attempted captive breeding programs, which they bill as a

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

conservation effort to increase the numbers of an endangered species. The 2008 anthology *Elephants and Ethics*, an outgrowth of a Disney Animal Kingdom-funded conference, is a detailed guidebook to this and the many other ins and outs of elephant captivity. (A few chapters deal with global issues such as poaching and culling, but overall it is a very Western-oriented handbook, as the vast bulk is concerned with the small minority of elephants held in zoos and circuses.) The book gets deep in the weeds of this stuff with some weird dilemmas. The managers of captive-breeding programs, for example, would by and large like to avoid birthing male elephants because they are hard to house as they grow older—they can't be kept with the female groups that live together, they can't be kept in close quarters with other males, and they are especially dangerous to handle when they start going into musth. Breeders correctly sense that sex-selective abortion would be a nonstarter with the public; would in vitro fertilization with screened embryos be any better? Would it be possible?

A step or two back from this thicket, the primary question becomes whether it is morally defensible to keep elephants captive at all. Although they are the "keystone species" of zoos—by far the number one attraction demanded by the public—some zoo officials, in Philadelphia, Detroit, the Bronx, and elsewhere, have in the past few years bravely closed their elephant exhibits and sent the residents to a sanctuary, wildlife park, or other more suitable home, having reached the conclusion that they were unequipped to provide an ethically acceptable standard of living.

Most zoos are having a harder time letting go, a struggle exemplified by the 2004 attempt of Alaska Zoo officials to hang on to Maggie, the sole elephant in the state. Because of Alaska's climate, Maggie had to spend up to ten months of the year standing around indoors in her concrete pen, isolated, cold, unhealthy, and bored silly. Amid calls for her removal to a warmer area and more appropriate living situation, zoo leaders instead decided to raise money to build her a $100,000 treadmill—which, after much fanfare at its installation, she could not be prevailed upon to use. Eventually they gave in, and in 2007 she was relocated to a sanctuary in California.

The point is not that elephants are treated cruelly by their handlers. While there is no shortage of examples of harsh or negligent treatment, many—probably most—zookeepers and circus trainers have close relationships with their elephants and may even love them intensely. But the contexts that bring them together are fundamentally inhumane. Carol Buckley, the founder of the Elephant Sanctuary who started out in the circus industry, writes that "I've known people in this business for thirty

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

"Mes elephants" by Fiseha Hailemichael, flickr/hailemichaelfiseha (CC BY 2.0).

Elephants remain a major attraction of the circus industry in the United States and around the world. Here, an audience watches elephants perform in a French circus in 2011.

years. I know they love elephants. What I have had to learn to understand is you can love someone in a very dysfunctional way."

Certainly zoo standards have been evolving for the better, and most institutions strive to create the best possible habitat for their animals within the limits of their resources. And the key point they emphasize in their defense is the educational value and the resulting benefits to all elephants everywhere. As Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey veterinarian Dennis Schmitt writes in *Elephants and Ethics*, "The connection between a live elephant and the public is undeniable. People remember the first time they visited a circus and saw a live elephant. How many people remember and talk about the first time they read about an elephant in a book or saw an elephant on TV?" Circuses can offer elephants as "ambassadors," he continues, and "build awareness of all the other elephants in the world." (Presumably zoos are even better equipped to do this.) By falling in love with the one elephant they have seen, the argument goes, people will be inspired and informed to go out and help elephants generally.

Whatever may be the instrumental value of these involuntary ambassadors, it is a diminished kind of love that keeps its object confined and unhappy. Freedom is the hardest, greatest gift, returning nothing to the

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

giver but the selfless fact of having given it. From a strictly human point of view, it *would* be a more impoverished world that did not offer these opportunities to connect with our most intriguing fellow creatures—but it would perhaps be a better one.

If You Prick Us, Do We Not Bleed?

In that instant, in too short a time, one would have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old.... in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further.

–George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant"

While elephants' exhibition value has brought serious harm to them through the centuries, worse than that is the appeal of an elephant worth more dead than alive. Avocational safari hunters such as Teddy Roosevelt and his friend Henry Fairfield Osborn, major figures in the

Wikimedia Commons

"I felt proud indeed as I stood by the immense bulk of the slain monster": On his famous post-presidency safari in 1909, Teddy Roosevelt and his party killed thousands of animals, including several elephants.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

early conservation movement, loved the elephant in all its wildness and compiled a great deal of information on its behavior and natural history. The very awe of its magnificence and power was what made the elephant such desirable game. The hunter, in tracking and conquering his prey, seeks in some way to seize for himself that glorious force of life the animal displays. The catch is that, as soon as you have shot the animal, that force of life is gone—the instant it is at your touch it has already eluded you, belonging to no one anymore. Famous photographs of Roosevelt towering athwart felled giants exude an eerie combination of tremendous manly pride (generally, the sex that brings life into the world seems content with that primal connection to it, and is less interested in taking it back out) and utter negation; the deanimated lump no longer conveys anything but the material presence of piercing loss. Or, as Poole says of the poached corpses that she finds: "There is something so grand about the life of an elephant, its great size, strength, and age, that in death its loss is equally monumental. To have taken so many years and eaten so many trees, to have become so big; to have roamed the earth as King of Beasts and then to have collapsed in a piece of rotting flesh is tragic and so seemingly wasteful of life."

Adult elephants have no predator other than man. (Babies may sometimes be preyed upon by lions and the like; to protect them, the moms and aunts circle around the small ones, facing outwards to give any interested comers the evil eye. This proves sufficiently intimidating.) They are occasionally hunted by some African tribes for meat or as a rite of passage, but not (to these ends) in great numbers.

Meanwhile, opportunities now exist at certain game reserves for those aspiring to the masculinity of Teddy Roosevelt to pay great sums of money to chase the animals around a large pen in a jeep, that is, a confined hunting zone where there is no real test of strength or match of wits and they are ultimately guaranteed a kill. These are often couched as conservation efforts—attaching a high price to elephants makes each one "valuable" from the perspective of the local community, and the money can ostensibly be spent on some worthy elephant-related cause.*

* There is a new, gentler alternative in "green hunting," where elephants and other large game are stalked and shot with tranquilizing darts. Hunters get the thrill of the chase, biologists get the chance to approach the doped-out animal for any needed testing or tracking purposes, contributions to the animals' upkeep may be made for the privilege, and no one gets hurt. This is, however, a very minor phenomenon, and even so has problems of its own.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

Be that as it may, the snuffing out of any such life is a tragedy—even a *necessary* death, such as that of Tarquin Hall's killer elephant. When with a heavy heart, Mr. Choudhury finally corners him in the forest and shoots,

> His trunk whipped back in the air. His mouth opened wide, revealing his writhing black tongue. He reared up on his hind legs, kicking out defiantly.
>
> Then the fight went out of him. His ears fell to his sides. His trunk flagged. His head slumped as if he was overcome with fatigue. Like a disgraced child who only now understood that he had misbehaved, the rogue tried to turn and walk away, almost apologetically.
>
> Then, in one violent movement, he reared up once again, his trunk reaching for the sky as if he was trying to clutch at his departing soul. He let out a tortured, rasping noise. Then his legs buckled. His body slumped forward. And he dropped to the ground with a thud, his tusks driving into the soft earth.

Within hours, hundreds of people have materialized to mourn the passing of a *hathi*, so upset that the hunting party, reluctant as they were, even fear for their own safety. Iain Douglas-Hamilton, who also had to dispatch a menace once, reports a similar emotional experience: "It was the only time I ever shot an elephant, and when I saw the sudden collapse of this marvelous organism which tumbled down a steep bank like a deflated paper bag, I found it incomprehensible that people should do this for pleasure."

Now picture scaling this up—to a hundred elephants, a hundred thousand, a million. That is the upshot of the poaching explosion of recent history. And while safari hunting at least represents, however perversely, an appreciation for the total majesty of the animal, this massacre implies a different valuation of elephants altogether, one where their whole worth is in the ivory they grow.

An elephant's tusk, useful to its owner for everything from digging to defense, is blessed and cursed with a strength, texture, and beauty unique among natural (and even artificial) substances; it has, as Cynthia Moss writes, "an incandescence and warmth unlike any other material used for ornaments or sculpture." The first ivory crisis occurred in the nineteenth century, with colonial forays into Africa and Southeast Asia yielding exotic exports such as carvings and piano keys newly affordable to people of an industrialized Europe and United States. In 1800, there were 26 million elephants roaming Africa alone; in less than two centuries, the population

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

dropped by 98 percent. Steve Bloom, photographer of a gorgeous 2006 elephant image collection, notes the irony that "so many elephants were sacrificed to make those very instruments through which the human soul is expressed. Pianists would unleash their feelings and reach out to others through the physical medium of an elephant's tusk. These animals died for our music."

A modern variation on the theme is illustrated in a recent *National Geographic* magazine feature on the religious icons and other carvings being produced in an increasingly wealthy Asia, now the world's major ivory market. Spectacular photos of these pieces sit in contrast to gruesome ones of slaughtered elephants and sordid heaps of dirty tusks—but also to some of live elephants, unperturbed and minding their own business, dirty tusks still on them, just as nature intended. Few other accounts show all these things together, and the combination is startling: here is raw nature, here is the exquisite potential in it that only civilization—human artists—can fulfill, and here is the bloody price of that fulfillment.

And, strictly speaking, it is not civilization but its breakdown that is responsible for these artifacts, since killing elephants for ivory has been illegal for decades.

Commercial trafficking in Asian elephant parts was outlawed by ratification of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1975. The 1980s saw the population of African elephants drop by more than half, from 1.3 million to 600,000, which though initially attributed to habitat loss turned out to be the result of the skyrocketing ivory trade. Leading up to the 1990 CITES conference, rumors abounded that the African elephant was going to be placed on the protected list, as indeed it was, making all international trade in new ivory illegal. In the interim, however, poaching increased even more and countries with ivory were encouraged to sell it off while they still could. Kenya chose instead to make a statement, hauling out its entire stockpile of tusks—about 12 to 13 tons, worth $3 million—and torching it in a media-baiting bonfire.

Meanwhile, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe argued that their elephant populations were plentiful enough to hunt from and an important natural resource for their economies, which they should not be penalized for making use of just because other countries mismanaged their own. In 1999 and again in 2008, these countries were permitted to sell their stockpiles, purportedly accrued from natural deaths and confiscations from poachers.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

The trouble with legalizing ivory within certain limits is that once it enters the market, it is virtually impossible to tell where it came from, and poached tusks can easily be laundered through countries where selling them is legal. Also, now that the global market has come to expect that there will periodically be sell-off opportunities in exception to CITES, ivory can just be hoarded until the next one is announced.

Today, upwards of 25,000 elephants are poached every year, and even countries such as Kenya, which has been politically out front in promoting conservation and anti-poaching efforts, are experiencing steep drops in their elephant populations. Ivory of any provenance is now mostly taboo in Western society, thanks to the hard work of advocates who have been lobbying on elephants' behalf for decades. But it is hard to say what chance this message has of getting through to China, by far the biggest market for the material—a country whose attitude toward human life leaves much to be desired, not to mention animals. And at the source in Africa, a region of the world that faces every possible kind of difficult reality, the financial potential of a pair of tusks is a far more potent factor than global opprobrium or sentiment for elephants. In the big picture, this is what it looks like when an unstoppable force meets an all too moveable object.

At the 2013 CITES conference, held in Bangkok in March 2013, trade sanctions were threatened for several countries involved in ivory

Ivory in a store at the London Docks (sepia photo), English Photographer, (20th century) / Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library

Then…: This warehouse on the London docks was filled with tusks in the early twentieth century.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

poaching, smuggling, and sale, but none were actually imposed. The conference of the parties did, however, vote to implement DNA testing in tracing seizures of contraband ivory and other protected materials.

Even as poaching is reducing some elephant populations to perilous levels, others are being killed en masse supposedly for their own good. Elephant feeding exacts a heavy burden from their habitat—fifty pounds of vegetation munched by each elephant every day adds up to a lot. When elephants moved freely across the African continent, this denuding fit naturally into regrowth patterns and the impact was dispersed. Confined to parks, even very large ones, they can't migrate in the same way and the trees and ground cover get stripped down dramatically. Thus, to protect biodiversity and avoid the sad spectacle of elephant starvation, many park managers cull populations to what they deem sustainable levels.

As Moss, Poole, and many others have eloquently argued, these grisly interventions take a very short view of ecological cycles and elephant populations' ability to self-regulate and adapt to their environment. Births go down in the years following a major drought, for instance; since elephants' reproduction cycles are so long, manually adjusting the population year to year means intervening in a process that has not played itself out yet. In *Elephants on the Edge* (2009), G. A. Bradshaw attributes the mentality

ElephantVoices, Joyce Poole.

…and Now: A huge bonfire of tusks, as Kenya burns its stockpile in 1989 to help combat the ivory trade.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

to *do something*, *get control of the situation*, and *fix the problem right away* to the martial roots of park management in Africa, quoting South African journalist Mike Cadman:

> Throughout colonial Africa former soldiers dominated conservation and became "wardens" and senior "officers" in nearly all large colonial game parks and game departments, starting in the late 1890s and persisting for almost one hundred years.... The fact that their thinking drove much of modern conservation policy up until about the 1980s is critical.... Soldiers and armies are expected to be aggressive. "If it doesn't look like what we think it should, we'll make it so."

As in so many other ways, however, stepping in to control a specific aspect of a complex situation has yielded enormous unintended consequences. Although culling experts once believed that they could take out precisely the desired number of elephant families while leaving the rest of the population alone, more recent data show that survivors are definitely affected, even if they were far away at the time of the cull. Elephants have relationships within their herds that extend well beyond the small group of immediate family they travel and spend each day with, and their long-distance communication capabilities make them aware of events happening miles away. As Bradshaw and others have documented, disturbed behavior has often been observed among these survivors, and autopsies of those who die later for other reasons show signs of sustained high stress consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder.

In the past several years, there have been increasing reports of elephants rampaging around out of control—destroying property, attacking people, raping and killing rhinos, and other chaotic behavior. Traditional explanations for rogue elephants such as musth or competition for habitat do not fit with the sudden change, as some behaviors (such as lethal fights between bulls) are surging out of proportion to their normal incidence and some (such as assaulting rhinos) are otherwise nearly unheard of. Instead, Bradshaw points to the collapse of elephant society brought on by culling and poaching, the licit and illicit forms of mass annihilation. In addition to the psychological trauma these engender in survivors, they have also disrupted the transmission of elephant culture from one generation to the next.

Though elephants may naturally live to seventy, it is now rare to find a male over forty anywhere in Africa, and even those are rare enough. With their matriarchal society, it's easy to overlook the influence of the seemingly independent bulls. But Mother Nature needs her father

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

elephants—an epiphany that only comes as a surprise thanks to the stigma of anthropomorphization.

"No Matter What It Takes"

> *And, above all others, we should protect and hold sacred those types, Nature's masterpieces, which are first singled out for destruction on account of their size, or splendor, or rarity, and that false detestable glory which is accorded to their most successful slayers. In ancient times the spirit of life shone brightest in these; and when others that shared the earth with them were taken by death they were left, being more worthy of perpetuation. Like immortal flowers they have drifted down to us on the ocean of time, and their strangeness and beauty bring to our imaginations a dream and a picture of that unknown world, immeasurably far removed, where man was not: and when they perish, something of gladness goes out from nature, and the sunshine loses something of its brightness.*
>
> –W. H. Hudson, *The Naturalist in La Plata*

The good news for elephants is that, as the most charismatic (and most mega) of the so-called charismatic megafauna, they have many friends. Countless organizations exist to save them from all kinds of harms—hunting, habitat loss, circuses, any number of other things that until even very recently we've found acceptable. These groups and their messages have not been ineffective, either, with the audiences that they reach. But even a basic aim such as *an animal this magnificent should not be slaughtered to make carvings out of its teeth* turns out to be dazzlingly hard to effect. It is one thing to boycott ivory and even pass international laws against it; it is another to confront the situation on the ground, entangled in a web of other issues.

One particular story highlights many of them, recounted in a strange and disturbing 2010 *New Yorker* essay by Jeffrey Goldberg. The bare facts are these: in 1994, the dedicated conservationists Mark and Delia Owens hosted a film crew from ABC to document their anti-poaching efforts in Zambia. In 1996, the show aired, preceded by a warning of violence "which might be upsetting to viewers." The warning was referring to a scene that showed a suspected (but unarmed) poacher being shot to death on camera. Under threat of legal action, the couple left the country immediately and have never been back.

Neither Mark nor Delia was present on the scouting expedition where the shooting took place, and in fact, not all of the ABC crew members were even aware that they had a "snuff film" on their hands, though they noted bizarre occurrences around camp—a break-in supposedly attributed to a hyena, the sudden dis- and re-appearance of a roll of film, a visitor

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

vanishing without explanation. Those who did know chose not to notify authorities but just took the footage home and packaged it for broadcast.

When the events of that day were ultimately televised and an investigation launched, if anything the details descended further into obscurity. In the ABC program, the off-camera shooter is unidentified—and for that matter, so is the victim. Mysteriously, no actual body was ever found, or anyone reported missing within a large radius. A former U.S. ambassador to Zambia (who was not in office at the time of these events) suggested that ABC staged the whole shooting with actors and no one was actually harmed. Mark's version of the story also centered on the network's eagerness to get dramatic footage, insinuating that one of the local scouts was bullied or excited by the camera crew into firing at someone recklessly.

The surprise revelation of the real culprit makes for a troubling dénouement—but in a way, the bigger story is not in the resolution (or lack thereof) of this one terrible occurrence but in the milieu where it all took place.

To many Westerners, Africa is Eden or the Heart of Darkness, maybe both. To Africans, Africa is where they live. Many see the tremendous foreign interest in and power brought to bear on protecting their wildlife as just the latest version of imperialism. It is all very well, it seems, for people whose countries have never dealt with native elephants to have the luxury of tooling around in the barren strip malls that support a comfortable lifestyle and counting on far-off places to hold the soul of the natural world in trust, occasionally piped into our living rooms via nature documentaries—but there are people living there as well, with their own needs and aims and points of view.

Elephants have long been a nuisance in many populated areas, marauding through crops and becoming dangerous when challenged. More importantly, when sources of income are nearly nonexistent, and there is a voracious if illegal market for elephant products, the incentives to ignore the law are far stronger than most local governments' power or resolve to enforce it.

Enter the Owenses, with the ability to drop in as if from on high and devote their considerable energies and resources to no other purpose than the salvation of the elephants. The partnerships they tried to forge with park authorities and the neighboring community only went so far; over the years, their program became characterized by a kind of ad hoc martial law—armed night patrols in planes and helicopters, an unofficial understanding with the scouts (whose training and support the Owenses provided) that they should shoot to kill.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

“elephants #1” by Chris Preen; flickr/framesofmind (CC BY 2.0).

No one wanted it that way, and no one ever dreamed that it would come to that when they were starting out, but carried deep into a desperate situation, with other avenues exhausted and the massacre unchecked, it all came down to that stark choice. In Mark’s words, “I love life in general so much that to be brought to the point of having to extinguish human life

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

to protect wildlife is a tremendous conflict and contradiction. But give me another solution. It's why we still have elephants here."

But with their neocolonial innuendo and condescending racial tone (exiled in Idaho, the Owenses reportedly became frustrated that they couldn't just order the neighbors around anymore) as well as an unseemly eagerness for population control (going so far as to warn that "despite the ravages of AIDS" there are still way too many Africans), the antihumanist subtext to the Owenses' conservation effort becomes clear. "[Mark Owens] scared my people," a local chief told Goldberg. "The man has an illness. He loves animals more than he loves people."

In fact, though the relative value of elephants (alive or dead) is just the question, the whole dark vortex is altogether human; actual animals almost do not appear in the *New Yorker* account at all, not even during the raid on the supposed poacher, who was not only unarmed but does not seem to have had an elephant to hunt. In fact, the star appearance of real elephants in the essay is in a flashback to the Owenses' arrival at the valley in 1986, when they noticed the animals' skittishness in approaching water, a prime location for poachers to lie in ambush. "At this moment," Mark declared, "we pledge to each other: no matter what it takes, or how long, we will stay in North Luangwa until the elephants come to drink at the river in peace." This evidence of human violence was a jarring contrast to the unpopulated paradise they had become accustomed to in their first twelve years in Africa, alone among the animals and the beating pulse of raw nature and the expanse of open sky, as if they were, Mark wrote, "the only two people in the universe."

Thus the romance of a world without us became a tragedy that's *all* about us. The complexities of life on earth with other people are just as much a part of conservation in the bush as they are of mucking around in society; and even the most righteous purpose in the world may come at a damning cost.

Elephantasies

The torn boughs trailing o'er the tusks aslant,
The saplings reeling in the path he trod,
Declare his might,—our lord the Elephant,
Chief of the ways of God.

–Rudyard Kipling, *Beast and Man in India*

If the elephants' dire predicament invariably warps into a drama about other fallen souls, they are at least recast into a more assertive role than

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

casualty or victim when they become the guide for a crawl back to the light. Donne, Agee, Kipling, and many others share a sense that elephants inhabit a kind of special state of grace, and so they serve as inspiration for thinking on the deepest things.

Elephants figure in some way in a number of religions, more centrally in areas of the world where they are native. The elephant is considered a totem (sacred ancestor) in many African cultures. The Koran contains a Chapter of the Elephant, concerning how even the mightiest elephant-laced army was felled by a flock of birds and the will of Allah. Various Christian writings take the elephant's graceful and majestic nature as symbolic of the virtues or a testament to divine glory. One of the Sanskrit Jataka Tales tells of the Buddha's previous life as an elephant king, and Buddhists believe that white elephants are bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), or at least their mounts. Ganesh, the elephant-headed Lord of Beginnings and Obstacles, is among the most celebrated deities in the teeming Hindu universe. According to legend, Ganesh is the son of Shiva the Destroyer and his consort Parvati, who one day appointed her son to stand guard outside the door while she bathed. Due to a misunderstanding at the threshold, Shiva sliced off his own son's head, and in order to appease the horrified Parvati, replaced it with the head of a passing

"Ganesh in Stone" by Orin Zebest, flickr/orinrobertjohn (CC BY 2.0).

A statue of Ganesh, the Hindu deity with the head of an elephant.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

elephant. A sweeter variant has it that the famously amorous Shiva and Parvati, observing a tender elephant couple in the forest and wishing to partake in this new mystery of love, turned themselves into elephants for a night, and from this union Ganesh was born.

All religions metaphorically come together in the old fable of the blind men and the elephant, where each feels just one part of it and believes he has the superior perception of the whole. Edward Topsell, who in his 1607 bestiary proclaimed that "there is no creature among all the Beasts of the world which hath so great and ample demonstration of the power and wisedom of almighty God as the Elephant," reported that elephants worship the sun and moon—a suggestion Lyall Watson also flirts with in *Elephantoms*, but that probably belongs in the same category as Topsell's other fun fact that elephants conceive by eating mandrake.

However, given their mental and emotional chops and awareness of mortality especially, who is to say that they don't have some sense of the metaphysical? The central facts and mysteries of their existence, about which they clearly have deep feelings, are the same as ours: death and love, life and new life, the chasm between the way things ought to be and how they really are. Alas, we can't begin to know what elephants make of such matters, but there is something weird and refreshing about considering these basic existential questions from an intelligent animal's imagined point of view. No revelation, no tradition. Just attention to the way the world goes by and simple wonder at it, with all of the same questions that force themselves on us raw and fresh and perpetually unsolved in moments of crisis or clarity. An elephant may only have dim intimations of them, but after all, so do we; envisioning a more limited but still searching perspective can renew our appreciation that we too see through a glass darkly.

Dale Estey's gentle 1989 novella *The Elephant Talks to God* takes a whimsical jab at such a thought experiment. Immanent in nature, God appears as a cloud or rock to converse with the inquisitive elephant. The elephant wants to know: How is it that nature, which is so giving, can also be so rude? What does it mean to *be* an elephant, and not an ant, for instance, or a tree? Is there one truth about the world, which presents itself to all of them so differently, and how would someone find it out? Why is there fear, and what's the deal with love? What happens in death? Why is there such a thing as "if"—that is, choices and possibilities? How tragic is it that a butterfly, so beautiful, lives only through the summer?

"Butterflies don't live a season," answers God. "They live a life." The elephant protests. "They're gone when it's their time," replies the cloud.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

"To a butterfly the season is their life, they expect nothing more and fulfill their existence. To the trees, your life is brief....Seconds or hours, long shadows or short, it's all the same kind of time. The butterfly feels he has as long a life as you." Then pondering how such limits could be more gift than theft, "God spoke to the elephant, and called him by his name, and filled his heart full of his beloved butterflies, and they soared through his blood, wingtip to wingtip, until he understood the power of their life."

Barbara Gowdy carries the exercise into a whole new dimension with her brilliant 1998 novel *The White Bone*—which, though fictional, is as impressively conceptualized an answer as anybody has produced to the question, What is it like to be an elephant? Based on meticulous research into elephant behavior and other forms of savanna life, Gowdy lays out the terrain of perceptions, circumstances, and relationships that inform what an elephant might understand to be the meaning of existence. From that, she constructs a fanciful but compelling edifice of myths and mores in an elephant-centric cosmos. The subtext to this feat is a sly commentary on the origin and purpose of human tradition and belief, beginning with the following: in this world, the divine is known simply as the "She." It is obvious to the matriarchal society of "she-ones," the name for both sexes of her highest creatures, that this is so, and that everything that happens is in some way ordained or at least foreseen by her, inscrutable as she may be.

Calves are named for some feature of the circumstances of their birth—Bolt during a storm, Swamp beside a bog—and the bulls retain these names for their whole lives. Cows, however, having come of age, are renamed for some attribute of the She (as all attributes are): She-Measures, She-Brags, She-Sees. The bulls are not "changed" by their amorous rendezvous, whereas the cows profoundly are, ultimately yielding new life, and must mark the passage.

Being thus privileged, burdened, and empowered in a way others are not, grown cows are the only ones to join the She in the sky after death—but only if they still have their tusks a full day after they die; a star is the shine of a sky cow's tusk. Sometimes these stars are felled, presumably by a "hindlegger" who in death as well as life covets the ivory, and has snuck out to get it from his own place of eternal perdition underneath the earth.

Hindleggers descended from the she-ones long ago, when during a famine a few she-ones broke the sacred law against eating another creature, and were thereafter deprived of grace and cursed to walk upright in rage and envy ever since. They seem to want the tusks so desperately in order to recover some of their lost power (perhaps by grinding them up

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

to eat them). They are often accompanied by "sliders," a kind of being that is peaceable by default, mainly preferring to sleep, unless a hindlegger burrows inside one, which so disturbs it that it races around emitting foul smells and noises. Some say that in recent years a new strain of hindleggers has appeared, ones which are remarkably non-aggressive and appear to simply want to sit and watch. This seems implausible, but if it is true it may be that they are remembering the time when they were she-ones, and perhaps hoping that if they concentrate hard enough they will be returned to that more favored form.

As the story begins, a mass slaughter has nearly wiped out a whole family of she-ones; and as members of a different family learn the news and try to care for the survivors, a renewed attack occurs. In the ensuing mayhem, a young cow is stranded from the rest, and so when they have mourned their many dead, they must set off to find her. Meanwhile, there is a rumor swirling around of a Safe Place protected from such atrocities and from the drought that is overtaking them as well. Somewhere out there is a talisman that would show the way, if they could only find it; but they must be careful in their search to refer to it only as "the that-way bone" or "the white prize," for its power is drained away whenever it is spoken of directly as the white bone.

Being independent, bulls come and go from the proceedings, but they are still intensely sentimental and involved in the she-one society, helping to spread gossip between the dispersed families, which they may be variously connected to by birth or by fond memories of mating. One bull in particular, Tall Time, is especially interested in the plight of the separated family and the possibility of the white bone. He is a master of signs, omens, and superstitions—the "links" in the known world that explain why things happen the way they do. It stands to reason that by mastering every piece of this lore, he can gain control over—or at least find his bearings in—what may seem like hard chance.

His investigative spirit is shared by Date Bed, the missing cow calf. She is a budding scientist for whom "thus spake the She" is not an acceptable explanation for anything—but her inquiry into whys and hows has not led her to suspect that there might be no basis for any of the mythology; rather, she sees it as a breach of faith to *not* believe that the She would want to make her secrets knowable. Whereas Tall Time becomes crashingly disillusioned when confronted by too many tragedies and too many unknowns, Date Bed's trust in ultimate order and benevolence keeps her from losing heart while lost on the savanna. She is no more than dimly aware that she owes the credit to *herself,* to her own insight, pluck, and

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

ingenuity, rather than to a higher power, for making it far enough to have any prospect of being saved.

The third major character is Mud, who is less philosophically curious than Date Bed and Tall Time, but her life began under terrible circumstances, and since then she's had both the alienated perspective of an outsider and an unshakeable inner recognition of the dark side of reality.

There is a diffuse, tragic, exhilarant eroticism in their nearly hopeless tripartite search, for each other, for a white bone and a Safe Place which may or may not exist, for whatever meaning or direction underlies it all. These yearnings are cast against the ordinary conditions of hardship aggravated by systemic assault on their kind like hot winds howling over baked terrain. Their various approaches to their situation—we can *know* it, we can *fix* it, we can *escape* it—yield innovative strategies and raise the emotional stakes for success but have little purchase on their fundamental circumstances, just as, in the human sphere, science and technology may better our lives immensely in the short term while ultimately they change nothing. At bottom, "thus spake the She" turns out to be the cardinal explanation after all.

But if anything does change, it is Mud's awakening to her place in the society she always felt was bogus—which, true, was not dreamed up in perfection *de novo* but came to be collaboratively conceived and passed down over time, by other elephants who found in it a way to protect each other both from danger and from despair. Though the essence of the she-ones is memory, the force of life flows forward; and by devotion, fear, necessity, or whatever it takes, that is the direction they must go. If there is a meaning to the whole ordeal, it is that they love each other. For one sure thing about the elephants is that they are deeply capable of love.

The Pale Blue Dot

> *I had seen a herd of Elephant travelling through dense Native forest, where the sunlight is strewn down between the thick creepers in small spots and patches, pacing along as if they had an appointment at the end of the world.*
>
> –Isak Dinesen, *Out of Africa*

The outlook for elephants today is grim. Naturally, as one would hope, the common refrain of all the literature about them is a rousing alarm on behalf of these friends, totems, property, and sometime foes with whom we share an earth, who even with their great strength have patiently endured all kinds of violations from us and now depend on our goodwill to save them.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

But in the long run, that message is no match for the economic and environmental forces arrayed against them—if not their survival, then at least their freedom. All the other land giants have already met their appointments at the end of the world. The elephants will not have the space to just be who they are forever.

For Lyall Watson, a march to the edge of the world by one park's sole surviving elephant prefigures this eventuality. Wandering along the cape one day, Watson witnessed a remarkable meeting worth recounting at length:

> It is a sound that sneaks up on you, something you feel rather than hear, a rumble which is more visceral than cerebral, threatening to addle your mind.... I knew that blue whales can make high-energy, low-frequency moans that last for thirty seconds or more, but I had never heard one before when watching blue whales off Baja California or Peru. I supposed that the sound of ship engines and generators might have masked it, but I hadn't imagined that the calls would fall within our range of hearing anyway....
>
> The sensation I was feeling on the clifftop was some sort of reverberation in the air itself. Perhaps an interference pattern set up

iStockphoto

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

> between the whale call and its echo from the rocks below? That too seemed unlikely, and I was still puzzling over it when I realized that the whale had submerged and I was still feeling something. The strange rhythm seemed now to be coming from behind me, from the land, so I turned to look across the gorge, sweeping my gaze across the cliffs, over the great milkwood tree—and then swiftly back to the tree again, where my heart stopped....
>
> Standing there in the shade of the tree was an elephant. A fully grown African elephant, facing left, staring out to sea!...A female with a left tusk broken off near the base, looking for all the world like the stub of a large cigar. I had never seen this elephant before, but I knew who she was, who she had to be. I recognized her from a color photograph put out by the Department of Water Affairs and Forestry under the title "The Last Remaining Knysna Elephant." This was the Matriarch herself. But what was she doing here?...
>
> She was here because she no longer had anyone to talk to in the forest. She was standing here on the edge of the ocean because it was the next, nearest, and most powerful source of infrasound. The under-rumble of the surf would have been well within her range, a soothing balm for an animal used to being surrounded, submerged, by low and comforting frequencies, by the lifesounds of a herd, and now this was the next-best thing!
>
> My heart went out to her. The whole idea of this grandmother of many being alone for the first time in her life was tragic, conjuring up the vision of countless other old and lonely souls. But just as I was about to be consumed by helpless sorrow, something even more extraordinary took place....
>
> The throbbing was back in the air. I could feel it, and I began to understand why. The blue whale was on the surface again, pointed inshore, resting, her blowhole clearly visible. The Matriarch was here for the whale! The largest animal in the ocean and the largest living land animal were no more than a hundred yards apart, and I was convinced that they were communicating! In infrasound, in concert, sharing big brains and long lives, understanding the pain of high investment in a few precious offspring, aware of the importance and the pleasure of complex sociality, these rare and lovely great ladies were commiserating over the back fence of this rocky Cape shore, woman to woman, matriarch to matriarch, almost the last of their kind.
>
> I turned, blinking away the tears, and left them to it. This was no place for a mere man....

This tableau is oddly reminiscent of the search for extraterrestrial intelligence: the signals piped out over the border, from one domain into

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.

another as alien as it is infinite, with such poignant hopefulness that they may be heard at all, much less understood. Out of great loneliness, the elephant went to the edge of her world and poured her soul into the void—and out of great providence, someone was there to answer.

From some combination of existential loneliness and intrepid curiosity, we also have for decades now been calling out for someone past the borders of our known experience. Meanwhile, although we've been working on it for millennia, the real depths of terrestrial intelligence are almost as unplumbed. Whether there are millions or just one, what does it mean that there is such a thing as Elephant?

The scientific enterprise, that special activity of human beings, brings us proof of their abilities and tools to unriddle them, but scientific language simply breaks down in describing who they are—as it does with beauty or with love—leaving us at the edge of a vast field of signals out of ordinary range. Listen with your ears, your eyes, your heart, your mind, your soul for the message from these kin as improbable as life itself, different and yet the same. We are not alone.

Copyright 2013. All rights reserved. See www.TheNewAtlantis.com for more information.