

What Makes Us So Great?

Wonder is what sets us apart from other life forms. No other species wonders about the meaning of existence or the complexity of the universe or themselves.

- Herbert W. Boyer, co-founder of Genentech, Inc.

Are we really the only species that "wonders about the meaning of existence or the complexity of the universe" or ourselves?

In truth, we don't know that. What we know for certain is that we can talk and think and wonder. And we know that we have no ability to communicate with most animals and only a minimal ability to communicate with a very few.

It has been written and told in times past that no animal except humans has a sense of humour and that is what sets us apart from other living creatures more than any other. The person who originated that observation was not familiar with recent studies of chimpanzees and dolphins, which both seem to have senses of humour.

Chimps like what we would call the slapstick style, while dolphins like a playful form of humour. We don't know what either animal calls their own sense of humour, or even if they know that we have our own. We play with them and consider ourselves superior, even though we don't understand them.

While we have the ability to put animals into cages and they do not, we don't know for certain if the reason is that they appreciate the freedom of not living in cages whereas humans encage themselves in houses and apartments, cubicles and offices at work. Other animals apparently value freedom more than we do.

But then, they're dumb, aren't they? Or we think they're dumb. In fact we know that they communicate with each other freely and easily, whether through the air or through water. Whales communicate over huge distances through water (hundreds of kilometres in some cases), but we humans have trouble making ourselves understood under water unless we have special technology or we can lip read each other's faces.

No doubt Boyer and his company have done some marvellous things in the biotechnology industry. He doesn't consider the possibility that other animals don't care about technology because they have more interesting (and frightening) matters to occupy them. Other animals live on the edge of danger every day, whereas we humans seek out such adventures for excitement.

Almost every animal that kills does so for food. Only a few kill for sport or for select parts of their prey, but their kills provide food for many other animals that do not have the ability to find enough protein for themselves. We won't call that altruism since surely only we humans have that quality. Not many of us at that.

We kill by intention, often for the sole purpose of destroying another person. Especially if that person happens to represent someone farther up in the hierarchy who leads a country in war. But sometimes because the other person has annoyed us or we want the shoes or jacket he is wearing. Or because we feel hurt because we were dismissed from our job.

No one would deny that humans are different from other animals. But which is more powerful, our wonder or our ability to destroy willingly and needlessly?

Every other animal adapts to its environment or it dies. As large parts of Africa desertify and the middle of the USA heads in that direction, are we adapting by altering our immigration rules, by providing living accommodation elsewhere for the displaced and starving people, by changing our habits so that we can help to keep them on their native land or by changing our political boundaries so that these people can move to more comfortable places to live?

No, it's up to them to adapt, not us.

The number of television programs and promotions for charities that feed starving people suggest that we are not adapting to changes unless we are the ones affected. Even our United Nations requires that acts of genocide must

be proven by tens or hundreds of thousands of deaths before it will vote to send in troops to help make peace. That is slow adaptation to tragedy.

With technology we tie people into offices and factories and kill others in massive numbers in other countries. Other animals don't do that.

But other animals can't wonder either. At least if you believe Herbert Boyer.

Bill Allin

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Author: builder

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