

## Today I Talked to My Cat

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*Thoughts on the science, self-evidence, and spirituality of animal consciousness*

I was at a party last night, and of all the attendees, the host's cat, Sparrow, was among my favorites. She's a deeply sweet, greatly emaciated tuxedo cat my good friend Christine rescued from the streets a couple months ago. Though tiny Sparrow is now fed regularly, given a warm place to sleep, the advanced kidney disease she developed living in the hard city prevents her from putting on weight. When Sparrow jumps into your lap, you barely feel the pressure of her on your body. Such an adequate name, Sparrow, for such a nearly weightless being.

Throughout the party, I was kept in dialogue with Sparrow. Her meow is stupefying in its volume, considering that her mass should best be measured in ounces. She would meow—her paradoxically gentle caterwaul—and I would be compelled to respond: “What now, Cat, more lap time?” “No, Cat, I have no authorization to feed you.”

Such was the continuity of our conversation that when the party had dwindled to just a few people, Christine remarked on it. “You have a lot to say to Sparrow, don't you? I've heard you talking with her all night.”

As it turns out, among Christine and the two or so last guests, I converse with pets to quite a large degree. Though all admitted to saying the occasional couple words to their resident cat or dog, when it comes to *my* cat, Annabelle, I tend to speak in paragraphs, long back-and-forths of human/cat utterances. I'm sure I'm not alone in this, among you readers, but whatever your level of communication with your pets, most of us do verbally interact with the

animals we share our homes with. Many of us believe, or at least like to believe, that a conversation with a cat is to some degree possible. *You, Cat, understand me at some level and I, Joseph, understand you.*

A subject that has fascinated me for some time is that of animal consciousness, and in particular, the growing body of scientific evidence that confirms that animals are indeed conscious. In fact, in 2012, a group of neuroscientists signed the Cambridge Declaration of Consciousness, which states:

“The weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.”

This Declaration was widely hailed as important and necessary among those who work in the field of animal consciousness, giving, as it was, a stamp of official credence to the science that had been done in the years preceding it. For the signatories, the evidence was unequivocal: nonhuman animals possess the requisite brain power for consciousness. However, as welcome as the statement was, some of the researchers who had for decades been investigating the possibility, and in their minds high probability, of non-human consciousness felt that it was a bit of a *no-duh, that's what we've been telling you for years* moment.

Among those who wondered what took the Declaration signers so long to state something so evidently obvious was Dr. Marc Bekoff, professor emeritus of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder and a scientist who has worked extensively in animal consciousness research. As he has flatly stated, “It’s high time to stop pretending we don’t know if other

animals are conscious and sentient beings.” What’s more, Bekoff and some of his colleagues say that many more kinds of animals are capable of consciousness than the Declaration was willing to give them credit for, including fish and even insects.

But just what do these scientists mean by consciousness, whether among human or non-human animals? A quote that circulates widely among animal consciousness enthusiasts comes from philosopher Thomas Nagel, who has said that “an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to *be* that organism—something it is like *for* the organism.” In other words, consciousness for a bat, or a wasp, or a human being, requires an aware state of its own subjective experience. The bat, or dog, or porpoise, knows what it’s like to be itself.

For some readers of this essay, it may require quite the leap of faith to entertain the idea that bats and bees know what it’s like to be themselves. And no wonder. For hundreds of years, Western science and philosophy has been telling us that we humans are special in this capacity. Only the *human* animal knows what it is to be itself, our scientists have said, and all the other creatures we live next to are more or less instinctual machines, sliding through their multi-various lives without a single thought on the subject of self.

But, as we all should know by now, science never stands still. An ever-growing number of studies concludes that, yes, birds do have an awareness of what it’s like to be a bird and honeybees know themselves just as well. As chief science officer at the Allen Institute for Brain Science, Christof Koch, says, “it feels like something to be a honeybee. And it probably feels very good to be dancing in the sunlight. It feels very good to have access to some nectar and to be able to drink that and carry that back to the hive.”

Some of you are probably skeptical of such floofy, New Age-y sounding statements, even when spoken by important scientists with lavish positions. But even if you can't get with the idea that bees enjoy the feel of the wind in their antennae and the sun on their stripy backs, I think a lot of you will agree that your cat or dog has feelings—of love, embarrassment, and even grief—that they are capable of learning, that they know who *you* are and so are capable of knowing who they are, to some degree.

We spend our lives with these creatures, these animal others, and we like to believe our pets are more than just instinctual automatons. We agree with Bekoff that we don't require a panel of neuroscientists signing a Declaration to tell us what we witness everyday—that our cat is an individual, that our dog thinks, that these companions are capable of love, of making decisions, of choice and self-awareness.

In any case, whatever your thoughts, I believe these things very much. For me, the science only reinforces a philosophical given, a spiritual fundamental, that I've kept with me since I was a kid. When I walked through my childhood neighborhood, I felt that the squirrels and I shared a mutual respect and appreciation. When I went hiking with my dad in the woods, I knew, albeit in a mostly unarticulated way, that the frogs in the pond that I liked to catch were as creatively able as I, that they participated as much in creating their world as they swam and ate and croaked as I did when I drew a picture or imagined lands of hobbits and elves.

The jolt of wonder I feel when I read a study that shows that crows perform a strange corvid version of funeral services for their dead is not because I've never imagined such a potential. Rather, my excitement rises out of the satisfaction that my childhood daydreams about animal-human likeness are being born out in scientific field studies and in the laboratory.

I talk to my cat, Annabelle. I greet her when I get up in the morning and ask if she wants some food. When I walk upstairs to where she's sitting in her chair, I ask her what she's been up to. In the middle of the night when she wakes me with her too loud and too plaintive meow, asking for a bleary eyed petting, I tell her to leave me the hell alone.

Much of this conversation is, of course, for my own amusement. It strikes me as agreeably ridiculous to ask Annabelle about her day, considering the stasis of her routine. On occasion though I'm struck with wonder at her existence, when thinking about how she perceives and measures her life, about what she thinks of me and the things I say to her. On the most fundamental level, isn't it awfully odd that these creatures have agreed to spend their lives with us? Two radically disparate species sharing a home with one another?

Annabelle is *conscious*, for goodness sakes. Sparrow, my party host Christine's cat, is conscious. Within these animals' brains is an incredibly sophisticated, complicated network of communications. A cat's ears, nose, mouth, eyes are sending millions of signals to its brain, and its brain is sharing that information with itself in a coordinated way so that the cat may form a coherent picture of the world in which it lives. That brain then has to place the cat—Annabelle and Sparrow—within that world so that it knows how to navigate about, to get the food, water, mousy toys, and human attention that it needs and wants.

That picture of the cat within its world, requiring the interaction of several hundred million neurons, is consciousness. As is her insistence when you haven't given her the food she wants when she wants it. As is her love for you when you've been gone all day and finally you're home. Annabelle knows what it's like to be a cat, to be herself, and behaves, feels, thinks accordingly. Given all that, today I talked with my cat. Not the usual silly banter but with an effort to understand what it is like to be her. To understand what it is like to

be her being her. And that's a pretty rigorous thing to do. I don't believe I did a good job of it. It's hard enough to try to understand what makes another human a human, and that's our own species. We might share the gift of consciousness with cats and octopi and bluebirds, but that doesn't mean we experience ourselves and our places in the world in the same way.

One of the things human animals do is to privilege language as a way to make sense of things. If we can say something to ourselves, or to other humans, if we can write it down or think it through with words, we feel as if we have a grasp, a better understanding of it. But though that is a good way to go about understanding, it's not the only way. Ask a Buddhist monk or a nun contemplating the mystery of god and they might say that to fully understand reality, you have to move past language, past the duality, the either/or, that language requires. A principal function of language is to divide things into groups, into categories of this and *not* this. Of course, that helps with making order out of our day-to-day lives, but it can stand in the way of a rounded, whole picture of things.

To be fair, this language/extra-language problem might not be unique to humans. Nonhuman animals use language—the body gestures of dogs, the songs of whales, the waggle dance of bees. Perhaps more poetically inclined humpbacks say to their friends, “You talk too much. Let your mind be still.” But whatever forms of language other animals use, it certainly isn't the same as the language of human animals. The howl of a wolf isn't readily translatable into a song that a little girl might sing. And so, after asking Annabelle in spoken English what she thought about being a cat, how she felt about her morning, I thought I might move on to something else, something less verbally centered, a way of “talking” that might be more freely transferable.

I looked into Annabelle's beautiful and depthful eyes, saw how she lay on the pillow and switched her tail. I watched how she moves her body, fixes her gaze. I tried to sense what her body tells her, how her brain awakens, moment by moment, to that information. Trying not to let words encroach too much, I measured the strangeness of her existence, the near impossible reality that she came into being, material and living, in this place in this time. I considered the evolutionary miracle that allows her, and every animal, to wake up to the knowledge of herself.

Annabelle's mystery of existence and consciousness is different in detail but the same in kind as my own. We share a need to participate in that mystery, to use our senses, our brains, and our bodies to be alive to the tangible and intangible universe, to act amid the often ineffable patterns of this conscious world, to do our singular part to bring the world into being. And in the struggling, mute apprehension of our shared need, I might have gotten somewhere close to knowing her and understanding why she is alive, and desires to be. Not too close, mind you—this could only be a starting place—but a bit closer, or so I'd like to think.

Tomorrow, or next week, I'll give it another try. I'll consider the things that Annabelle and I share—the need to eat, to breathe, a love of sitting in the sun, the pleasure of our friendship. I'll ask her about her day.