



## Excerpts from the Introduction to *Why Animals Talk*

Ancient humans, living in a time much closer to nature, were surrounded by the sounds of creatures, some insignificant, some deadly. Before traffic noise became a constant hum, drowning out not just the gentle buzzing of insects, but masking even the dawn chorus of hundreds of birds, the world was filled with animal sounds. Could it be that all of the screeching, howling, and singing meant nothing at all? Even in prehistoric times, it was inevitable that we attempted to make sense of what we were hearing. And when the only yardstick we had for interpreting communication was our own language, then it was natural to assume that these animals were talking too. The singing of coyotes at night was not so different from our own songs around the campfire. The calling of birds to each other every morning no different from greeting our own family and neighbors upon waking. Certainly, the warning roar of a lion when you approach too close to her cub is a message that is hard to misinterpret. Of course animals spoke! And therefore, our distant ancestors felt that animals had spirits like us, desires and ambitions like ours, and, no doubt, stories and tales to tell us. What culture does not have tales of talking animals? In the Bible, Balaam had a donkey that berated him for mistreating her. Icelandic mythology tells of Ratatoskr, a squirrel who is a messenger of the gods, scampering up and down the tree of life. And in Indian legend, Kindama the deer cursed a hunter for shooting him while he was mating.

Times have changed since that age full of legends of talking animals. We now cast a skeptical eye on the possibility that a grasshopper and an ant could have an argument about storing food for winter, as in Aesop's fable.

But who doesn't believe that their pet dog or cat can tell them when it's time to be fed, or time to go outside? And our appetite for stories about talking animals hasn't diminished—from Disney movies like *The Lion King* to quasi-realistic novels like *Watership Down* and *Wild Animals I Have Known*. Our fascination with the possibility that animals might speak is partly because of them—we want to understand what is going through their minds—but also partly because of us. Do we have a deep need to believe that animals are not just mindless robots, but reflect our own existence in a simpler, perhaps more appealing life?

[...]

Following the lead of Renaissance philosopher René Descartes almost 400 years ago, science preferred to consider animals as lacking any internal mental experience, without cognitive states of cognitive needs. And so, I suppose the logic would go, with nothing in their minds, they have nothing to talk about. Descartes, in fact, described non-human animals as “automata,” i.e. robots.

[...]



Maruyama Ōkyo, *Puppies* (detail), 1781, two-panel folding screen, ink and color on paper, 9 5/8 × 24 7/8 in (24.45 × 63.18 cm). Minneapolis Institute of Art, Mary Griggs Burk Collection, Gift of the Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation (2015.79.158).



## A World of Edo Art Creatures of the Land

Where was the error in this approach? Precisely in the preconception that animals must be fundamentally different from and simpler than humans—that animals must be robots. Whereas ancient cultures were happy to believe in cursing donkeys and messenger squirrels, the modern European philosophers of the last 400 years wanted to show that the entire universe—with the exception of humans, created as they were, in God's image—could be reduced to a set of clockwork mechanical instructions. Thus was the idea that animals cannot talk ensconced in Western culture.

Twentieth-century science began to challenge these old ideas of human exceptionalism. Why must animals be so different from humans? We can't simply assume that, because we appear to behave so differently from other animals, and seem to be capable of far more complex technological achievements, our fundamental makeup is therefore different. Humans, just like every other animal alive today, have been evolving for exactly the same length of time—3,800 million years—and evolved from the same common ancestor as the rest of the animal kingdom.

[...]

[This] evolutionary perspective helped to remove science from the shackles of the philosophical trap that for centuries held that science must always show humans to be superior.

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