

Multimindedness

by Tom La Farge

1.

At Wiscon 2007 a panel entertained the question “Just how smart are animals, anyway?” This was one of those panels, the kinds I like best, where the panelists very quickly lost control of the situation. We did more listening than talking. Voice after voice—it became hard to tell them apart, there was so little dialectics—joined to create a sort of choral conversation, adding tones and layers to a developing harmony. Its theme was love of animals. Animals, we asserted, are not dumb, in either sense of the word, but very smart, though differently from humans.

But what is the difference? Just how are animals smart? How smart are humans in those ways? What kind of fabulation might consider those modes of intelligence?

2.

I have a particular interest in the kind of intelligence I call “multimindedness.” By multimindedness I mean a mode of thinking that proceeds simultaneously on several planes, in several voices, with different affects and inflections; a kind of choral refrain but still composed around a self. I am imagining having many minds without losing my mind. The multiminded thinker functions in the world by entering into composition with the world and inviting its different minds in, not as thoughts but as thinkings, running together in a common direction, sometimes trading places like a hunting pack.

When animals hunt in packs they hunt as a collective. They cooperate, they communicate, but the interpenetration goes much deeper than that. The nature writer and film-maker Hugo van Lawick, when he was in Kenya with his wife Jane Goodall, observed African wild dogs (*lycaon pictus*) before a hunt, performing a “wreathing” dance in which every dog rubs against every other dog,

nosing and licking each other's lips,... their squeaks gradually changing to frenzied twittering.... And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the pack started to trot away from the den on its evening hunt.... [T]here seems to be little or

no difference between the behaviour of a high-ranking and a low-ranking individual. (58)

I lately stood on a dock and watched a school of minnows “wreathing.” They were fascinating to watch. The school, following no particular leader, constantly changed direction all at once so that the mass of them made a shifting shape. I looked to see if there was a predator whom they sought to fool, but there was none; but I suppose you don’t wait for the dogfish to show up before taking protective action. Bees and locusts similarly swarm, but in none of these cases is it possible to guess the intentions of the individual. It seems far more credible that intentions in these cases are completely collective.

Unlike social insects or schooling fish, wild dogs have distinct personalities. I mean, beyond what we project upon them, they have individually characteristic modes of response, address, and other behaviors; they can be seen to display different affects from each other even when humans have no exact name for these. For instance, van Lawick observed one older male, whom he named “Yellow Peril,” to empty his bladder whenever he became excited. The name is flippant, but the behavior is not a projection of a human trait. Such marked differences, as well as the behaviors that can be traced to rank and role in a strict dominance hierarchy, are lost in the “wreathing” ceremony, a submersion of “identity” and rank in the wreathing “ceremony” suggests a merging that cuts deeper than cooperation.

3.

Perhaps it is, not mind, but identity and personality that animals lack. In his book *Animal Minds* Donald R. Griffin, who discovered bats’ use of echolocation, shows evidence for self-awareness to the extent of a set of interests. In other words, animals can feel and reckon, but the structure of that experience is situational. It proceeds from a dealing with the world, not from an “identity.”

Human identity is something we make for ourselves with great labor. Society instructs us in ways we accept and resist; we need only think of the complex issue of gender. Identities so hardly earned do not easily allow for multimindedness. The kind of mind that conforms to identity is hard to recognize in individual animals. Then what should we call the way that animals are in the world?

4.

Let's try out the term "gesture" as a substitute for identity in animals and see if it stays available to the human animal as well.

A gesture traces the outline of a reality. By "reality" I mean a singularity in a heterogeneous world, not a transcendent Idea. It defines a "character" like a letter traced out by a pen or an ideogram by a brush, a flow of ink or paint. It is what Bertold Brecht wanted his actors to detach in "epic theater." "The task of the epic theater ... is not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions... to discover the conditions of life.... Epic theater is by definition a gestic theater" (Benjamin, 150, 151). The lives of animals grow out of and follow the conditions of the world, conditions that they share.

Here's another way to think about this difference. We engage with one another intersubjectively. I can "stand in your shoes," position myself within your structure of experience, to identify with a your point of view. What animals use might better be called "interobjectivity," in seeing another animal possibly as an object (of hunger, of sexual need) but more importantly as *objective*: a gesture in which a reality is to be read. Interobjectivity presupposes a sharing of the conditions of the world and erases point of view. We use perspective to recompose the world around ourselves at every step we take through it. Animals use it to alter their body-form, turning sideways or puffing up to grow larger and look scarier, or making themselves small to show submission. The world they perform these gestures in is mapped in smells, echoes, volumes, colors, traces, tracks, trails—gestures. Some gestures can be shared, taught, learned, and then the animal participates in the multimind.

Anthropomorphism treats animals as human by assigning them feelings and experiences specific to identified subjects. But that doesn't mean that we cannot share feelings and experiences with animals. We are not shut out from their world or they from ours—or we from each other's. For instance, we know that birds sing, but are they musicians.

We can say then that the musician bird goes from sadness to joy or that it greets the rising sun or endangers itself in order to sing or sings better than another, etc. None of these formulations carries the slightest risk of anthropomorphism, or implies the slightest interpretation. It is instead a kind of geomorphism. (Deleuze and Guattari 318-19)

Birds, by this account, are doing something that human musicians also do. “Geomorphism” traces in a gesture the experience that the human and animal share because it is particular to neither but implicit in “the world.”

Mind, then, does not presuppose identity. The form of mind that belongs to gesture, to geomorphism, is multimindedness, in which we and birds can join in a chorus.

5.

What happens then? A singer, woman or tropical boubou (*lanarius aethiopicus*), has a voice that she trains and perfects, but what sort of mind does she use, surrounded by other voices, or, like the boubou, singing antiphonally with her mate, inserting one note of hers between two of his at microintervals? Let’s call what she does “listening-singing,” meaning that she does both at once. Doubtless the singer is guided by the music and the conductor, the bird by genetic imperative and learning, but she does not attend only to these. She listens to others as she sings, and these do not feel like different actions. More largely, she uses her shape-of-voice to help construct a satisfying shape-of-song. In the concert hall the audience too has been listening-singing, even if the second action is inaudible. The composer must have done this first. My friend Michael Kowalski, a composer of operas, speaks of locating and adding in “the missing voice” in an orchestration. The whole composition as “heard” in his head proposes that voice and makes it audible to him. Then he fills it in as best he can. The composer, the singers, and the audience share in what birds or dogs come by more easily, the multimindedness of polyphonic music.

What happens when a mockingbird or a starling, singing alone, imitates the songs of other birds? The ordinary functions of birdsong are held by behavioral scientists to be the attraction of a mate and the claiming of a territory or food-source. What selective advantage does the Australian lyrebird gain from its imitation not just of other birds’ songs but of barking dogs and chainsaws? The marsh warbler (*acrocephalus palustris*) migrates every year from northwestern Europe to southeastern Africa and picks up the songs of birds it hears at

every stage of its voyage, repeating them (one would think uselessly) in habitats where the birds who first uttered them will never come. It may not be possible to say why it does this; but all these birds are listening-singing a voice they miss and contributing to a polyphony present in the mind and only there.

6.

Identity restricts us in ways we sometimes want to shake free from. In the last chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes a man and a woman converging on a taxi:

The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction. The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off. Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. (97-8)

Then “unity of the mind” cannot be “identity.” Rhythmical order” expresses it more exactly and allows for multimindedness, to achieve which we have to reduce effort, relax. Walter Benjamin echoes Woolf’s stress on relaxation as the prerequisite for the sharing of experience. “The concept of the epic theater... indicates above all that this theater desires an audience that is relaxed and follows the action without strain. This audience, to be sure, always appears as a collective...” (147). And in his essay “The Storyteller”:

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story’s claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience.... This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. (91)

“Psychological shading” asks us to be interested in identity, in intersubjective experience, while the sort of story Benjamin imagines (and recognizes in the tales of Nikolai Leskov) asks us to enter a world of experience that erases such differences by relaxing the strain they impose.

7.

Why shouldn't the fabulations of science fiction and fantasy work like this? To write a fable, animal or human, in which the audience is a collective, in which the strictures of identity are relaxed, in which what is then transmitted through gesture is geomorphic experience, in which a character's voice is listening-singing with all the chorus of missing voices, seems a worthy goal for the literature that calls itself speculative.

The author must not make himself into the ethnologist of his people, nor invent a fiction which would be one more private story: for every personal story, like every impersonal myth, is on the side of the 'masters.' There remains for the author the possibility of finding 'intercessors,' that is of taking real and not fictional characters, but putting them in the position of 'making fiction,' 'making legends,' 'fabulating.' The author takes a step towards his characters, but the characters take a step toward the author: double becoming. Story-telling [*la fabulation*] is not an impersonal myth, but neither is it a personal fiction: it is a *parole en acte*, a speech-act through which the character keeps crossing the boundary which would separate his private business from politics, and himself produces collective utterances. (Deleuze, 222)

8.

After WisCon I read the copy of Carol Emshwiller's *Carmen Dog* I had bought at the Small Beer table. Carol was on the "Just How Smart Are Animals Anyway?" panel, so I emailed her to tell her how much I enjoyed her *Carmen*. In her reply she apologized for the book as a piece of anthropomorphizing, but I can't agree. The way that Pooch, the dog-into-woman protagonist, sings and can't keep herself from singing along in the opera house, tracing in her still dog-inflected voice the same gesture as the diva, seems to me to bring out exactly what Deleuze and Guattari meant by "geomorphism" and establishes Pooch as an "intercessor character." In this passage she has been taken to the pound:

Pooch wants to cry, scream and roar, or better yet, sing. Yes, sing. Perhaps she could help them all with a song or two. She had been listened to at the opera. Only for a moment, but actually taken seriously, the whole audience, held fast by her voice. *Her* voice alone! She could feel it. She would try that now. It might help them all. She begins rather tentatively with "*Elle a fui, la tourterelle!*" gaining confidence with every note, for the others become silent almost instantly. ...

It's hard to say if it is her voice or her sensibility that holds them spellbound, the rise and fall from almost whisper, to wail, to deep-throated growls of sadness and pain. Whatever it is, it reminds them of home. Home, in its many and various forms—burrows, beaches, tops of trees, all kinds of homes—and they forget for a while the dirty bowls, the smell of urine, and their fate. (20)

“Home” is not a force only in the lives of humans, nor do humans alone communicate emotion through music. The creatures in the pound, caught in the uncomfortable middle between the two states, perhaps no less uncomfortable, called “human” and “animal,” share an emotion and join in a music that one has to call objective. If we, writers who want to build worlds more satisfying than the one our masters make for us, need a model for these new fabulations, we could start with *Carmen Dog*.

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