

Creative Deception

I am very much heartened by the Research News from Roger Lewin ("Do animals read minds, tell lies?", 4 Dec., p. 1350) that Richard Byrne and Andrew Whiten are continuing to build their imaginative "catalogue of low cunning" in primates, undaunted by their inability to answer "fundamental questions" about the usefulness of anecdotal materials posed by the unreconstructed experimentalists who are forever slashing at our soft, empathic throats with Ockham's razor. I think, however, that Byrne and Whiten should be on their guard against what I see as a certain primatocentrism. The existing anecdotal literature is not a rich store of information on "creative deception," owing perhaps to an understandable preference on the part of early writers for indications of decency rather than of devilry in animals. "For my own part," Darwin asserted (1, p. 619), referring to an incident he had described previously,

I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey, who braved his dreaded enemy in order to save the life of his keeper . . . as from a savage who delights to torture his enemies, offers up bloody sacrifices, practises infanticide without remorse, treats his wives like slaves, knows no decency, and is haunted by the grossest superstitions.

Nevertheless, we already have at least some fragmentary evidence on the basis of which Byrne and Whiten might be encouraged to broaden the taxonomic scope of their inquiry.

What surely must be regarded as an instance of low cunning in a cat was reported (2) by Darwin's protégé, George J. Romanes, who, although he "fished the seas of popular literature as well as the rivers of scientific writing," was careful to retail only observations "corroborated by . . . independent observers" that were made under circumstances in which there could not be "any considerable opportunity for mal-observation" (2, pp. vii-ix). Romanes attributes the following account to a Dr. Frost (2, p. 418).

Our servants have been accustomed during the late frost to throw the crumbs remaining from the break-fast table to the birds, and I have several times noted that our cat used to wait there in ambush in the expectation of obtaining a hearty meal from one or two of the assembled birds. . . . For the last few days this practice of feeding the birds has been left off. The cat, however, with almost an incredible amount of forethought, was observed by myself, together with two other

members of the household, to scatter crumbs on the grass with the obvious intention of enticing the birds.

According to Romanes, the cat reasoned, first, that "crumbs attract birds, therefore I will wait for birds when crumbs are scattered" and, later, "therefore I will scatter crumbs to attract birds" (2, p. 419). It would be difficult to argue for less "self-consciousness" in this cat than in the young baboon "that set Byrne and Whiten off on their survey." Compare the interpretation of the baboon's behavior proposed to Lewin: "a scream will bring mother to the rescue, who will chase off the female, leaving the food for me."

Romanes indexed only one instance of "deceitfulness" in a monkey, but several in dogs, and one in an elephant. His own terrier, inept at catching flies, once "positively pretended" to catch one, "going through all the appropriate actions with his lips and tongue," and then looked up at Romanes (who had ridiculed previous failures) "with a triumphant air of success."

When Romanes, pointing to the fly still on the window, made it clear that he had not been taken in, the poor animal was "very much ashamed of himself" (2, p. 414). Another telling account, by W. H. Bodley, is of two dogs, once chastised for fighting, that "used to swim over a river of some breadth . . . and fight out their quarrel on the other side . . . like two duellists crossing the Channel to fight in France" (2, pp. 451-452). The elephant was observed by a Rev. Mr. Townsend and his family. After slipping a chain and stealing the keeper's lunch, the animal carefully covered all traces of the crime and then, unable to "fasten the chain again round his own foot . . . twisted it round and round it, in order to look the same" (2, pp. 409-410).

In retrospect, there should be nothing surprising here. Cats, dogs, and elephants are "clearly intelligent," and they are known to have "the capacity to communicate," with which, as "Philosophers have long acknowledged," comes also "the ability to deceive." It may be that creative deception will be found even in certain invertebrates, such as honeybees, which, in the view of an authority untainted by "pride of parsimony" (3, p. 53), "intentionally and consciously communicate information" by dancing (3, p. 99). Although Byrne and Whiten do not expect deception in members of "highly cohesive" groups, it has reached me that efforts are now being made to determine whether a honeybee that has found food in one place will, on occasion, deliberately send its nest-mates elsewhere. Who can yet say in how simple a creature the "concept of self" and the ability "to read the mind of another

individual," which are inferred from deception, appeared for the first time?

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REFERENCES

1. C. Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (D. Appleton and Century, New York, ed. 2, 1874).
2. G. J. Romanes, *Animal Intelligence* (Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, London, ed. 9, 1910).
3. D. R. Griffin, *The Question of Animal Awareness* (Rockefeller Univ. Press, New York, 1976).

Response: As I am more acquainted with the minds of primates than of felines, I thought it best to consult my cat, Barbeque, on the matter of Bitterman's interesting letter.

Barbeque tells me that, charming though George Romanes' tales are about the cognitive abilities of cats, and other beasts for that matter, they are in fact not to be believed: they are the product of minds anxious to see in others what they know to be so in themselves.

In preparing this reply, Barbeque conferred with some of his friends, and they decided that, for the good of science and *Science*, they should come clean. "Humans believe that we understand everything they say, but, sad to relate, we don't," he said. "We are thought to be reflective, just because we look as if we are. It's a good trick, isn't it?"—ROGER LEWIN

The IPPNW: A Single-Issue Organization

Constance Holden, in her generally illuminating essay on "Politics and Soviet psychiatry" (News & Comment, 5 Feb., p. 551), states, "The IPPNW [International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War] has tended to adopt the position that to press for human rights concerns may unnecessarily alienate the Soviets." This neglects both the purposes and the history of the IPPNW.

The IPPNW is quite literally a single-issue organization. With physician chapters in 55 countries (with governments that are capitalist, socialist, democratic, and military and political dictatorships), we chose at the outset to focus our energies on preserving nuclear peace and preventing the annihilation of the Northern Hemisphere. The focus on the medical, scientific, and professional aspects was designed to make certain that neither the Soviets nor anyone else used the IPPNW as a vehicle for national propaganda. We deliberately removed from the agenda—as an organization—Afghanistan, East-