

Are We Really That Special?

by Lisa Towell



“Humans are the only animals capable of ...” I’ve seen countless variations on this statement in magazines, in books, and on television. Complete the sentence with anything you like: language, using tools, love, planning for the future, empathy, self-awareness, humor.

These generalizations are often wrong. Sure, it’s pretty hard to argue with “Humans are the only animals who produce reality TV shows.” But let’s take a look at the common assertion that the ability to use language is unique to humans. Koko the gorilla had a vocabulary of more than 1,000 signs in American Sign Language, and she invented new phrases to describe things for which she hadn’t been taught a name, like “finger-bracelet” for “ring.” And it’s not just primates who are capable of using language meaningfully. Alex, an African gray parrot, learned to use more than 100 different words and exhibited the intelligence of a 5-year-old human. For example, when shown two objects of different sizes, he could answer the question “What color bigger?” by stating the color of the larger object. Alex also knew how to count. Looking at a tray of objects of different shapes and colors, he could correctly answer the question “How many green blocks?” even if he had never seen that particular collection of objects before. And that’s just human language—of course, animals have their own languages, too.

Self-awareness is another often-cited distinction between human and nonhuman animals. But elephants have shown that they have self-awareness by passing the mirror test. In this test, a mark is made on an elephant’s face in a location where she can’t see it without a mirror. When confronted with her reflection in a mirror, she repeatedly touches the mark with her trunk, indicating that she recognizes the reflection as an image of herself.

Those of us who have lived with animals recognize the absurdity of the assertion that “Humans are the only animals who can feel empathy and love.” The attachment between mated animals, or between mother animals and their babies, is often written off as “just instinct.” Whenever I hear that dismissive statement, I think of Scarlett, the brave mother cat in New York City who rescued her kittens one by one from a fire, almost at the expense of her own life. It’s hard for me to see any difference between Scarlett’s love for her kittens and the attachment between human mothers and their infants.

The “It’s just instinct” argument also doesn’t hold up when animals show emotional connections that cross species boundaries. Stories of dogs and cats who have saved animals of other species abound, and pigs have demonstrated courage and compassion when their human companions were in trouble. I love the story of the pig Lulu, who summoned help when her human companion suffered a major heart attack. She ran out to the road and lay down, blocking traffic, until she was able to lead a motorist to her guardian’s side.

I have a theory about people’s tendency to say, “Humans are the only animals ...” It’s a way of setting us apart, of making our species special, of showing a little “species pride.” But sadly, this distinction is often used to justify inhumane treatment of animals. Some people believe that it’s OK for animals to suffer because they’re “less than” human. Of course, there are many differences between human and nonhuman animal species, but not all of them are flattering to us: For example, humans develop weapons of mass destruction and use them. Or consider the many talents that humans *don’t* possess, like a whale’s echolocation, a dog’s exquisite sense of smell, or a bird’s ability to navigate using the Earth’s magnetic field. And here’s one thing that all animals, both human and nonhuman, have in common: We all want to avoid suffering and be happy.