UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
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Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?
And Beyond Intersectionality to *Animality*

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3 October 2021
frederickuu.org

Last year, I preached a sermon titled "Thoreau, Animal Emotions, and Us" that was inspired by Francis de Waal's fascinating book on *Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us about Ourselves*. At that time, I promised that I would preach a sequel to that sermon about animal *intelligence* based on another of de Waal's books which has the wonderfully provocative title *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are*?

This is that promised sermon with one important twist: there's another related book that I read in the meantime that was too interesting not to share with you, so I'm going to add that at the end.

For now, let me begin by briefly reintroducing Dr. Francis de Waal. He is a Professor of Primate Behavior in the Department of Psychology at Emory University in Atlanta. In 2007, *Time* voted him one of the "World's 100 Most Influential People Today." And he has published many paradigm-shifting books, including *Chimpanzee Politics*, *Peacemaking among Primates*, and *The Bonobo and the Atheist.*

The worldview that de Waal is inviting us to explore is deeply Darwinian. One of Charles Darwin's essential insights was that all life on this planet is descended from a common ancestor through a few billion of years of evolution. We humans were not spoken into existence in a one-time special act of creation, and we are not "a little lower than the angels." We are merely a "little higher than the apes."

Sometimes this discovery has been received as devastatingly bad news or even as heretical. But this evolutionary worldview can also be understood as inspirational good news: we humans are not separate and alone. We are part of the Animal Kingdom, deeply interconnected to the environment, ecosystems, and other beings on this planet. It's what our UU Seventh Principle is all about: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

Here's one way Darwin put it in his 1871 book *The Descent of Man*: "The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind" (de Waal 1). And a growing body of scientific evidence supports this claim that there is a spectrum of consciousness, thinking, and feeling, that extends throughout the Animal Kingdom and likely well beyond.

In previous years we have also explored the more rudimentary sentience of plants, trees, and mushrooms. I can't revisit all that today, but suffice it to say that if you haven't read Peter Wohlleben's The Hidden Life of Trees, I highly recommend it as a great place to start. (And for any Ted Lasso fans, the most recent episode featured Coach Beard reading The Entangled Life, which was the inspiration for my sermon a while back on mushrooms and mycelial networks. While I'm making recommendations, I'll also mention the excellent documentary film, *My Octopus Teacher*, available for streaming on Netflix.

As we proceed, it is helpful to keep in mind that, although Darwin was a proponent of animal intelligence way back in the nineteenth century, among most scientists, the idea of animal intelligence remained an oxymoron until well into the 1980s (10). One of the reasons for that omission was the dominance of B. F. Skinner's novel and influential behaviorism, which dominated animal science for half a century.. This fruitful but limited approach to studying animals' conditioned responses to specific stimuli produced very interesting and useful—but ultimately narrow—findings. was (50). Over the past few decades, the academic tide turned toward observing animals in more natural surroundings.

Along these lines, I love de Waal's confession that often enough, discoveries about animal intelligence have less often resulted from "eureka moments"—sudden bursts of insight—and more often from closely observing animals over time—

periodically finding yourself saying something like, “That’s funny” when an animal does something unexpected. Such observations can lead to pathbreaking new ways to study animals on their own terms (2).

How many of you are or have been pet owners? Can you think of times your pet has done something surprising? And did you perhaps find yourself saying something like, “That’s so interesting!” As the owner of two dogs and two cats, I can definitely see how scientists periodically stumble upon animals doing the darnedest things.

De Waal’s book is filled with so many more examples than I can even begin to mention, but I will give you some representative cases. One of the earliest impressive examples of intelligence in apes was a chimpanzee who, with no previous training, stacked four boxes on top of each other to get high enough to reach a banana (64). This is one of many instances of animals coming up with “unwaveringly purposeful” actions resulting in creative solutions to problems—until their goal is accomplished (65).

Another example which happened at a zoo in the Netherlands has become infamous as The Great Escape at Burgers’ Zoo. One night, a group of apes—again with no previous training—picked up a tree trunk that was far too heavy for any one of them to carry alone. They propped that fallen tree against a wall, climbed up it like a ladder, then twenty-five of the apes feasted on everything they could find at the nearby zoo restaurant (67). If those chimpanzees had been brought into a court of law, I suspect there would have been sufficient evidence to prove premeditation. That crime was planned beforehand.

If we turn our attention from the land to the sea, we regularly witness similarly cooperative dynamics between orcas, sometimes called killer whales. At times, when a group of orcas spot a seal floating on a piece of ice, they swim at high speed toward the ice in perfect unison, creating a massive wave that capsizes the seal right into one of their mouths. Although scientists do not yet know exactly how they coordinate these attacks, their precise synchronization seems like strong evidence of intelligence, communication, and planning (190-191).

It also used to be commonly believed that animals don’t use tools, but evidence has now been amassed of many different instances of animal species regularly using

tools in a variety of ways. According to recent estimates, “Chimpanzees use between fifteen and twenty-five different tools per community, and the precise tools vary with cultural and ecological circumstances” (80). Beyond primates, there are also fascinating studies of *crows* using tools. For instance, “New Caledonian crows spontaneously modify branches until they have a little wooden hook to fish grubs out of crevices” (90).

Also noteworthy: just as different human individuals are good at different things, different individuals of other species also have a range of aptitudes in different areas. These variations in capabilities are due to a variety of causes and conditions, including both nature and nurture. For instance, like humans, some chimpanzees might have greater *emotional* intelligence, other chimpanzees greater *kinesthetic* intelligence, and still other chimpanzees greater *cognitive* intelligence.

Since we’re focusing on animal intelligence today, I’ll give you one last particularly intriguing example. A little more than a decade ago, a young male chimp named Ayumu at the Kyoto University in Japan repeatedly displayed a trait that in humans is sometimes called photographic memory: “Trained on a touchscreen, he can recall a series of numbers from 1 through 9 and tap them in the right order, even though the numbers appear randomly on the screen and are replaced by white squares as soon as he starts tapping.” Dr. de Waal—and most humans who have tried—are unable to get more than five numbers correctly” (199-120).

Scientists are also getting more skilled at testing animals in ways that are more species-specific. For example, experiments by previous generations of scientists have been found to have “set up” non-human animals to perform poorly on tests which, as it turned out, had human built in. This dynamic is behind that clever title “Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?” We humans haven’t always been, but we’re getting better.

And here’s the trajectory that a growing consensus of scientists agree on. Regarding this gigantic tree of life that has branched out and evolved over billions of years into the wild variety of species on this planet, **“every cognitive capacity we discover is going to be older and more widespread than initially thought”** (93). So, in general, regarding sentience and consciousness, intelligence and emotions—and

how far these traits ascend up the tree of life—"science is increasingly favoring continuity over discontinuity" (234).

Now, having explored some of the latest discoveries about animal intelligence, I want to pivot to the related book I mentioned earlier that I stumbled upon recently and found too interesting not to share with you. I heard about it on a podcast called Witch, Please, hosted by two feminist academics who are rereading the Harry Potter series through the lens of various academic ideologies: Orientalism, classism, queer theory, disability studies, structuralism, and so much more. It's accessible, hilarious, and really well done. And their episode on animal studies recommended a book titled *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft* by Aph Ko (2020)—the founder of an organization called Black Vegans Rock.

Ko's book is an interesting way of reflecting on the implications of taking seriously the proposition that animals have significant intelligence and emotional range; it also reflects our UU commitment in our 8th Principle to "actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions."

As a Black woman vegan, Ko has spent significant time in a variety of struggles for justice and liberation, making her unusually qualified to directly observe the many ways these core movements operate in mostly separate silos.

And here's where Ko's perspectives get really interesting. She is skeptical of typical advice insisting that we need to be more *intersectional*—that is, we need to act even more at the *intersection* of race, gender, class, ability, and other points of oppression and division, such as among species.

Ko thinks that, although the emphasis on intersectionality is often well intended, the results are too often what Ko calls "social layerism," in which oppressions are merely stacked one on top of another: "activists mention more and more oppressions in the same sentence, [when] the oppressions don't really have a [clear] relationship with one another" (76). And she is really interested in those underlying relationships.

Far beyond merely working in coalition across differences, for Ko, it's so clear that there is a deeper connection because it's literally her embodied existence—as a person who is simultaneously Black, a woman, and a vegan. And she is doing really

fascinating work of articulating the deeper underlying sources out of which her social justice concerns arise.

Her book is short and accessible, so you'll have to check it out for fuller details; but I'll give you two examples that were particularly striking to me. First, Ko challenges her fellow activists in the Animal Rights Movement (the vast majority of whom are white) that they will never really get the widespread, system-transforming results they are seeking as long as they primarily focus their activism on non-human animals. Instead, she challenges Animal Rights Activists to learn about **"white supremacy's appetite for flesh and power" from how enslaved Black people were treated like animals** (114).

That's really worth thinking about: the work for animal rights can potentially be much deeper, broader, and more effective in the long term if it is engaging with the larger project of dismantling White Supremacy Culture. As Darwin taught us, *we human beings are also animals*, and the way we human animals have often treated *non*-human animals falls under the larger umbrella of the ways we human animals have treated our fellow human animals. In the larger struggle for collective liberation, the work for animal liberation (and why non-human animal lives have and haven't mattered historically) is deeply interconnected to the work of Black liberation (and why Black lives have and haven't mattered historically).

Ko also shares an important caution: too often, white Animal Rights activists have approached Anti-Racist activists in a way that makes people of color feel like they are being asked to add the struggle for animal rights as one more burden to the systemic oppression they already have to face every day. Instead Ko says that, "*The goal should center on getting anti-racist movements to talk about animality rather than trying to create strategies to get people of color to join the dominant animal rights movement*" (27).

To say more about how we might begin to pull all this together, Ko quotes a fellow scholar, Claire Jean Kim, a professor at the University of California at Irvine: **"For animal studies, and feminist studies too, the path forward goes through, not around, black studies"** (124). That insight is strongly related to our UU 8th Principle: that as we get serious about dismantling White Supremacy Culture, we'll find that, in

the process, we will have made a lot of progress on many other interlocking oppressions—because we will have begun to get at the root of a toxic culture of supremacy and domination.

The second example I wanted to share from Ko flips the perspective. Here, she challenges her fellow Anti-Racism activists to see that veganism is about a lot more than one's diet, eating lower on the food chain, and decreasing harm to animals, as important as all those things are. At a deeper level, **veganism is about rejecting a "politics that characterizes animals and nonwhite people as disposable and consumable"** (119). That's also really worth thinking about. And then asking ourselves how next to move, both individually and collectively, toward ways of being in the world that are more ethical, sustainable, and in right relationship with ourselves, the planet, and all living beings?

Now, there's a lot more to say about all of that—and I'm not saying that Ko's is the only way to work for collective liberation. But I do invite you to consider that her perspective and approach are compelling, especially her search for the deep underlying dynamics of justice movements.

In that spirit, may we each do all that we can within our spheres of influence to decrease suffering, greed, and cruelty and to increase freedom and compassion for all sentient beings. In the words of a Buddhist "loving kindness" meditation:

> May all sentient beings be filled with loving-kindness.
> May all sentient beings be peaceful and at ease.
> May all sentient beings be free.