

“Minding Animals”: Paul Shepard’s “Selfish” Argument for His Own Question “What Good Are Animals?”

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Overview

In this series, paying homage to Paul Shepard’s life and work, I explore perhaps his most radically consistent claim and far-reaching exposition, an extension of his studies of the totemic mind. In the illusory, futile contest between humanity and the natural world (between the pastoral and industrialized mind and tribal, totemic MIND), there is a persistent image on the face mirror of this struggle, an enemy; humanity faces its own animal nature and cannot or refuses to integrate it as part of a healthy and complete psyche. Thus the degenerating standoff that Paul Shepard describes so eloquently and passionately in many of his books. In *Thinking Animals: Animals and the Development of Human Intelligence*,¹ Paul Shepard honestly examines human-animal–non-human-animal relations in ways that shame and inform today’s easy and emotional debates on animals rights and relations. His cognitively

relevant and empirically supportable argument of why humans should *mind the animals*, is answered, in short: *because the human mind is animal then and today, and it evolved with (because of) other intelligences that supported it*. With further estrangement and alienation from *related-otherness*, in Paul Shepard's words, "Our thoughts will fly like pollen grains, spinning into the perfect freedom of thin, hot air."²

Introduction

In answering the question that heads this essay, "What good are animals?", Shepard presented a robust *cognitive necessity* explanation for the aforementioned relations exemplified in the virtues of totemic cultures. However, there is a risk that his sophisticated answer and arguments could be superficially or easily assimilated as a reiteration of anthropological totemism or that their cognitive and evolutionary underpinnings could be missed. Or worse, a risk that even when half-way understood, they could be dismissed as a romantic stance.

After examining the various economical, ecological, and ethical arguments for why non-human animals deserve a central place and role in our developing cultures, he settles on what he readily admits is a "selfish" reason or argument for their preservation: *mindng animals*. This is not a selfish, self-interested argument in a biosemiotic sense, if we admit that all animals borrow from one another or biosemiotically, service each other and that their ensemble survival depends on the accurate decoding, further interpretation, and elaboration of contextually natural signals. It is a cognitive bridge moving in both directions rather than a tap source from where we can drink without giving back.

In Shepard's own words, this argument includes the following premises:

1. Human intelligence is bound to the presence of animals.
2. They [Animals] are the means by which cognition takes its first shape and they are the instruments for imagining abstract ideas and qualities, therefore giving us consciousness.
3. They [Animals] are the code images by which language retrieves ideas from memory at will.

4. They [Animals] are the means to self-identity and self-consciousness as our most human possession, for they enable us to objectify qualities and traits. By presenting us with related-otherness—that diversity of non-self with which we have various things in common—they further, throughout our lives, a refining and maturing knowledge of personal and human being.³

While re-addressing the above points, I will not try to argue the obvious while seeking logical or empirical support from diverse social, cognitive, natural, and behavioural scientific disciplines. For example, there is ample cross-cultural comparative psychological, archeological, artistic, and anthropological evidence that the first two points are historically correct.⁴ As a biosemiotician and cognitive ecopsychologist, I am particularly interested in his connection between our relations to *related-otherness* and how these relations impact language, memory, and ultimately, MIND,⁵ the third point. In other books⁶ Shepard brilliantly argued that ontogeny, being predicated in our relations to *related-otherness*, leads to a truly mature human nature. This is the essence of point four, which alludes to the mechanism (objectification of non-human animal *qualities* and *traits*) as the ABCs of self-identification and the emergence of self-consciousness. The last sentence of point four, and in resonance with Deep Ecology principles,⁷ argues that the diversity of non-human animal forms (habits, cognitive states, behaviours, and added significations) provides a plethora of developmentally useful marks and totemic “masks” that aid human maturation processes⁸ and contribute, ultimately, to a rational definition of humanity.

We owe to Shepard the developmental insight that objectification of non-human animal *qualities* and *traits* that, during Jean Piaget’s stage of concrete operations, if not earlier, formed (and can still today) the basis for an authentic abstractification of the fully mature and integrated self. We owe to Paul Shepard the explanations of how a rational and mature evolution of humanity, of authentic being, can follow a totemic route that has been (and continues to be) dismissed as childlike animism. We owe it to Paul that his arguments can translate easily into empirically testable evolutionary cognitive science and biosemiotics.⁹

This essay will explore, critique, and re-assess his entire *minding animals* argument and, in particular, his last two points. Furthermore, I examine the consequences of not minding animals from an ecopsychological perspective. All arguments can be distilled to the

claim that humans should *mind the animals because the human mind is animal then and today, and it evolved with (because of) other intelligences that supported it*. The logical consequence of the preceding distillation is Paul Shepard's prediction that the future of a decontextualized mind, a mind that does not *mind animals*, will: "... fly like pollen grains, spinning into the perfect freedom of thin, hot air."¹⁰

When thoughts are not grounded in or do not express these basic animal-natural relations, then we only have other over-civilized human minds to mind, many of them ill, self-deluded, banal, capricious, or artificial. When mass media further propagandizes banal and capricious text, this leads, semiotically speaking, to *mind*ing corrupted language-as-thought and finally derailing the psyche into the wrong fixations: consumerism, materialism, and the manufactured, disposable culture.

The dysfunctional Machiavellian ape and mind are the products of a perverse vacuum: closed cultural systems bred in the insecurities and the inadequacies of naturally decontextualized court intrigue. Without a pipeline out of the Forbidden City, without a link to LIFE outdoors, the necessity for eunuchs and concubines, priests and scribes, plots and assassinations, and god-like monarchs is merely replaced by similar forms of social decadence, control, and bizarre protocol.

But even within the decadence of contemporary industrialized societies, individual non-human animals do emerge to salvage, to save, and to heal us. That this animal emergence, without and within, can be so thorough in its effects signifies that deep down our animal minds are still able to connect to *otherness* despite its over-civilized patina.

The Case of Seabiscuit, the Horse Millions of Americans *Identified With*

Laura Hillenbrand's book¹¹ and subsequent movie by the same title, *Seabiscuit*, weaves a complex story of at least three human destinies interlinked to the rise to prominence, to the athletic redemption of an "underdog horse," to use a bestial descriptor, Seabiscuit. The remarkable, well-written and filmed story does explore the question of why millions of Americans in 1938 were so drawn to and finally *identified with* the small and unlikely race horse. However, both book and movie take for granted the need of the downtrodden populace, exacerbated by the depression era, to identify with an underdog horse as a sociological phenomenon. That is, none of the sociological and

cultural explanations clarify why the identification was with a non-human animal, a horse. Even when we admit that this identification was also wish fulfillment and that millions of Americans saw in the toughness of this unlikely winner the possibility for themselves to come up out of the rot, the object of identification and wish fulfillment was still a horse.

Paul Shepard argues that the origin of desired qualities and traits are intrinsically in the beast.¹² Additionally, Seabiscuit's story suggests human characteristics, hopes, and desires projected onto an animal, a type of centaur psychology. To the extent that the animal performs as desired then the selected components of this projection are satisfied.

Still, why a horse and not a comic book character, or a soldier, or a sports hero? Whether projection or assimilation of desired characteristics, a trans-species and truly ancient event must have taken place at Santa Anita and the other races that Seabiscuit won in the late 1930s. The distinction between the horse, the rider, and the spectator was certainly blurred. In the midst of our civilization, fed by an agrarian culture that ploughed with horses and defended or conquered by horsemen, it was perhaps easier to relate to the notion that horse and rider are one, or must be one, if they are to accomplish these feats. It is no secret to the jockey that rider and horse must become a centaur when they work together as a seamless creature.

Paul Shepard attributes the centaur with the following, "As one, the grafted man and horse combine in the orgiastic passion of the cavalry charge, the dream of flight, ravishment, intoxication, destruction."¹³ Perhaps all of these attributes match, with greater or lesser intensity, the feelings of an era coming out of intoxication followed by prohibition and the desperate need to be freed from poverty and the economic situation that bound their possibilities. In such desperate and depressed times, the image of a fragile and small jockey riding atop a smaller-than-usual race horse in "flight" becomes "the orgiastic passion" of everyone.

That this particular horse was not a wild animal, and thus not properly the subject of what is considered the totemic, is an insufficient reason to minimize the effect it had on so many human minds, for there is an even more ancient antecedent to the horse-as-transport construct in the human mind. Ancient humans painted, symbolized, and fed on horses long before they rode them. Recognizing and describing this ancient connection between the Pleistocene human mind and horses, Shepard wrote:

Everything we know about such hunting leads us to suspect that our ancestors had “horse” in their stomachs and in their heads in every sense: nutritional, metaphysical, esthetic, and metaphorical. Truth of the invisible and eternal were to be found in the natural world. And of all the animals the horse may well have been the most elusive and intelligent, the one deepest in human dreams and imagination, most challenging to our imagination, and therefore evoking the most eloquent responses.¹⁴

Seabiscuit was “good for many” humans, if albeit momentarily, when it counted the most. It would be hard, if not impossible, to quantify the positive or long-term effects associated with its identification by the masses. However, Seabiscuit is a public and grand example of the power of animals to get under our own animal skin and affect equally obvious and palpable changes, from collective euphoria to the personal symbolic association that if this unlikely winner, a horse, can beat the odds, “so can I.”

That a personal and communal identification with Seabiscuit and with his story unfolds in the twentieth century, when machines already rule the world, is a testament to the primitiveness of this connection and to Shepard’s insight.

Equally “under our skin” and deep in our psyches are the symbolic linguistic connections that fix the human mind to *Animalia* and finally to MIND at large. The next section sketches the mnemonic uses of fauna in reinterpreting aspects of human nature.

Pigs, Bitches, Snakes, and Worms

The exploration, enjoyment, and inhabitation of natural and wild spaces occur in the background of vegetation or bare landscapes where animals are mobile, salient forms. This figure-ground relationship wherein human animals and non-human animals are animated from within, displace ourselves about, and play out our respective species’ dramas, is always a whole until we shatter its connections. Although the human wanderer of wild spaces is potentially, equally, aesthetically, and spiritually impacted by plants, rocks, atmosphere-earth exchanges, water, and vistas, animals become the ambassadors, by virtue of their closer and mindful relationship, to the totality of the landscape. They embody and express MIND in the landscape. Thus, other animals stand for the power of signification of MIND, translating an abstract natural totality into categories and dichotomies of thought.¹⁵

Paul Shepard is keenly aware of, frequently writes about, and zones in on the ease of taxonomical classification inherent in the human child. Call them sensitive periods for language acquisition, or devoted developmental stages, the link between cognitive development and the association of words and then concepts in animal behaviour and phenotype, for Paul, stands out as the foundation for later identification and full maturity when the child employs the natural lexicon.

It is not surprising that the average frequency of animal metaphors, proverbs, surnames, insults, and songs across languages and ethnic groups outnumbers botanical or geological references five to one.¹⁶ Even when animal husbandry is itself an ancient labour, it is surprising that the focal industry of civilization, agriculture, has not replaced these ancient animal figures of speech. Again, the human animal and mind finds kinship in other animated forms and finds ways to express this kinship. Not only that, but there might be an even more ancient memory specific to our species. The animal *protein sacrament* as Shepard calls it, its procurement and consumption, may have enriched and boosted the development of our primate brain. The fixation with animal protein, its procurement and consumption as a sacred gift, and the accompanying and necessary learning of animal habits and traits leads naturally to their dichotomizing and as examples of kinship societies.

A central aspect of matching and classifying personality traits while observing all behaviour is their stereotyping. Stereotyping is the isolation or singularization of a specific trait, habit, or phenotype supposing or hoping that this isolated or singular characteristic subsumes the whole, the entity. Equally, isolation or singularization of trait characteristics is the simplification that could turn the stereotype into an insult. Judging by their historical and universal prevalence, insults and derogation are necessary cognitive and linguistic constructs as useful for self-criticism and self-evaluation as for projective verbal attacks.

The animal kingdom behaves aggressively, submissively, sexually (bitch-like, stud-like), gluttonously, mysteriously, humorously, witchlike, stealthily, passively, nosily, heavenly, lightly, cautiously, or prudently. Coyote is humorous, cunning, wise, stupid, arrogant, and always a powerful spiritual source. He dances, runs, stalks, appears and disappears, surprising himself and baffling human observers. Raven is wise, enigmatic, cautious, sombre, noisy, and always a spirit messenger.

Reiterating point three of Shepard's minding animals "because" argument, animals remain the *code images by which language retrieves ideas from memory at will*. American idioms reflect this animal mnemonic function when we easily use expressions such as jack of all trades, social butterfly, bear hug, donkey-Democrats, elephant-Republicans, busy beaver, he is a sloth, eager beaver, eats like a pig, porking out, as the crow flies, beeline, bird's-eye view, eagle eye, a fly on the wall, stubborn as a mule, scarce as hens' teeth, something smells fishy, snake in the grass, speaking with a forked tongue, and many others, to explain complex thoughts or denote classification.¹⁷ She is a foxy lady, he works like a dog, or she looks like a dog, are all phrases that play up the ambiguity we feel even toward our faithful canine companions.

When the source of the mnemonics is weakened, diluted, or trivialized then the aphorisms, metaphors, or idioms are no longer *necessary cognitive and linguistic constructs for the specific purpose of self-criticism and self-evaluation*, even though they remain trivially useful for projective verbal attacks. When the source of these associations is finally lost, meaning is also negated.

When the Totem Poles Rot, So Do Our Stories, So Do Our Selves

Atmospheric or astronomical gods are removed and abstract. Yahweh, Destiny, Orpheus, and Thor are dangerous, controlling gods not to be emulated. Second order gods, virtue or talent gods and goddesses, although pointing to a desired ideal human emotion or mental faculty, are also removed, inhabiting realms of their own. Usually, the cognitive state, gift, or virtue, that they represent, bestow, or encourage are ideals not easily attained or are meant to clarify the obscure origins of meme knowledge lost to human memory.

For example, as the legend goes, Zeus created the brothers Prometheus (foresight) and Epimetheus (hindsight). Prometheus created humans and Epimetheus the other animals, the latter giving the rest of the animal kingdom the best gifts. As consolation and compensation perhaps, and while defying Zeus, Prometheus stole the sacred fire and gave it to humanity. Ever since, puny humans have used holocaustic warfare on themselves and on the rest of the planet. Atmospheric or astronomical pantheistic or monotheistic mythologies alike remove humanity from the consequences of its own miscalculated deeds

blaming the projected insanity and arrogance of sky-deities for its own mischief.

But totemic animal spirits lend themselves to the immediate *objectification of qualities and traits*. Totemism includes personal responsibility not only for the animal spirit inherited or married into but also for a specific set of tribal responsibilities, rituals, ceremonies, and protocols, complementary to those of the other clans. Only when all the clans are represented and each carry on their traditional responsibilities is the circle of tribal life complete, is tribal life in harmony with natural LIFE.

Lacking the daily behavioural reminders of real animals and their mythical totemic representations, while forgetting the rituals associated with our affiliation, leads to arrogance and an impoverished psychology, prevented as it is from animal identification early on and continuing throughout our lives. Irrevocably, identification proceeds, as Paul Shepard¹⁸ clearly traces, as a built-in developmental necessity but in a civilized and urban vacuum and, more and more it seems, at the mercy of immature adults and banal media. The *self*, looking for fertile and sensible soil to embark upon individuation, only encounters simplistic either-or dichotomies and a myriad of persona choices, each one more removed from LIFE processes than the next. Although abundant, and abundant to the point of confusion,¹⁹ the opportunities for identification are no natural diversity grounded on real natural processes. Like Pinocchio in the land of sweets and diversion, the abundance of persona masks and empty behavioural repertoires themselves prevent seeing our *related-others*: Pinocchio remains a naïve wooden automaton object rather than a flesh and bones child. Worse, the magnificent water and landscapes where our companion *related-others*, all animals, play out their own mythical stories are being eroded and robbed, making their own behaviours less natural and more desperate.

A measure of this dissociation is the degree to which we infantilize, caricaturize, and generally de-humanize even the animals we profess to love. Our pampered egos are so full of self-deluding fantasies that they project their own tinsel selves onto domesticated animals making them appear as ridiculous as we are. These projections, emanating as they do from infantilized selves that never truly bonded with nature early on, reach bizarre and desperate situations when we then go on to save the wild world with off-centre egos. Such was the case of Timothy Treadwell, the man-child who lived with grizzly bears and was finally mauled and devoured by one of them. It is now known that Mr.

Treadwell was mentally unstable when he entered wild spaces and thus lacked a realistic understanding of life-and-death processes. Even when he entered these wild Alaskan spaces, capable of curing just about any urban ill, Mr. Treadwell remained an angry actor-persona subject to manic-depressive personality swings that must have been troubling for the bears. That he survived thirteen summers in their midst suggests that insanity may protect even a foolhardy human from wild grizzlies most of the time, but a time comes when a grizzly is hungry enough to overlook human eccentricities.

The virtual world of games, being amused by fauna-television and never being directly intimidated or taught by it, the preoccupation with the mall culture, and the necessity of maintaining entertainment 24/7 are all blinders to seeing the commonality between ourselves and *non-self*. Without the discovery of that commonality of being, the chasm between the natural world and us widens. And that is the crux of Shepard's fourth point: the very abundance and diversity of *related-otherness* is comprehensible and has permanency, unlike the overabundance of material society, but in order to establish a psychological commonality of being with the *others*, with *non-self*, in order to achieve its full adult cognitive effects, the entire taxonomy of *qualities* and *traits* that could lead to a mature and integrated being must be acquired early on.

Totem poles are controversial when carved by pseudo-aboriginal artists. Just like Australian aboriginal fake paintings, they adorn without informing. Before most of the genuine totem poles rotted away and their clan representatives forgot all about their masks, before dreamtime was a Western happy song, or before Mayan calendrical motifs were incinerated in a Promethean bonfire by insecure priests, the information contained in masks, dots, and bars was very similar: *a continuum exists between the beginning of time and today, between myself and the jaguar, between my tribe and the natural world*. Lacking these fundamentals means not minding history, natural or human, not minding the animals, not minding the entire natural world.

Conclusion

It takes a writer of Shepard's calibre, in conviction and knowledge, to make a reader feel instantly depressed and optimistic at the same time. At the same moment, the reader realizes the ecopsychological drift, the loss of kinship with wild animals and of a material savage world, Shepard aptly formulates and draws the blueprint for redemption,

regeneration, and hope. The blueprint presented in the form of an argument that explains why humans should mind other animals is, as I named it early on, a *cognitive necessity* argument. This qualification needs to be reiterated for I believe it is central to Shepard's thinking and argument. A professor of Human Ecology and a sophisticated student of human development, he zones in on cognitive development as key to understanding nature estrangement or alienation.

By emphasizing that cognitive development is qualitatively different when sufficiently naturally enriched, when cognitive development is fed by an increasingly large taxonomy of animals and animal parts, he brings psychology to a new focus, perhaps even dragging the entire field to a necessary paradigm. Notwithstanding empirical studies and field observations reporting that natural peoples exhibit formidable classificatory, mnemonic, and taxonomical capacities surpassing those of the urban child and adult, Shepard's argument and insight fleshes out these more cognitive aspects of human development, while at the same time saying something more profound about their effects on a mature psychology. While doing this, his psychology is not only normative but becomes *ecopsychology*. His final message, one reiterated by others, is that without an ecopsychology we won't survive. Worse, in our own self-enacted demise we are ripping apart larger and larger chunks of the natural world in acts of holocaustic, irreparable destruction.

And yet there is room for redemption if we intellectually accept, take to heart, and enact his "selfish" argument. That *human intelligence is bound to the presence of animals* includes our humane responsibilities to animals in bondage and respect for those in wild freedom. That *animals are the means by which cognition takes its first shape and that they are the instruments for imagining abstract ideas and qualities, therefore giving us consciousness* is corroborated by even a cursory look at the frequency of animal images, characters, and themes in children's books and movies, youth's entertainment, and adult fantasies.

The degree to which the last two groups are not transferring these earlier real or imagined lesson-faunas into healthy reinterpretations and models for self construction could determine immature human-human, human-nature affiliations, terminating in anthropocentric and clinical psychology, never reaching a grounded ecopsychology. Our mental lexicons, in slips-of-the-tongue, metaphors, dreams, or in our insults, are proof enough that *animals are the code images by which language retrieves ideas from memory at will*. More importantly, these biosemiotic connections have the power to affect personality development, beneficially, when they are employed for the specific

therapeutic purpose of *self-criticism* and *self-evaluation*. If I have been *eating like a pig* for too long, perhaps it is time I begin *eating like a bird*. “Eating too much,” “eating excessively” or “eating too little” or “eating less” do not quite convey my situation so bluntly.

Finally, because of all of the above points, animals become *the means to self-identity and give us self-consciousness as our most human possession, for they enable us to objectify qualities and traits*. Replacing animals with other humans—limited, prescribed, idiosyncratic, and uniform as they exist in the urban landscape—means to perpetuate infantile fixations or to reduce the diversity of MIND and behaviours. Uniquely human positive role models exist for children and adults to emulate. But even these are being replaced by the new archetypes of rape, horror, mutilation, and crude wealth. To mitigate and correct the human monoculture of “success,” “abundance,” “divertimentos,” and never-ending mass-sized, superficial human connections, animals present *us with the related-otherness—that diversity of non-self with which we have various things in common*.

Their diversity of forms, minds, habits, colours, and habitats all converge on the same existential theme whose denial makes life and death processes meaningless and morbid at the same time. Whereas anthropocentric, *affluent*, and entertainment themes explode away in multiple and contradictory messages or fizzle out into nonsense, the convergence of natural diversity seldom confuses when its ecological fundamentals are understood. It is its self-correcting capacity for being understood that makes it a trusted encyclopedia. It is its self-correcting capacity for being understood that makes it developmentally and cognitively important. Paul Shepard understood and communicated this insight more profoundly than most writers and scholars.

By our lifelong proximity to them, animals *further a refining and maturing knowledge of personal and human being*. If human development is lifelong, it profits from the re-interpretative possibility of previous animal associations at subsequent stages of identification and individuation. *Raven* in my fifties means other strategies of my own mind and personality, more subtle perhaps than cunning *raven* at thirty. *Raven*, as a *related-other* mirror for middle age, might mean patience, fortitude, and conservation of energy for when the right opportunity comes around. *Raven* teaches me that scavenging is an art. Proximity does not mean keeping animals in cages and zoos for amusement or distraction. Animals in cages and zoos are seldom qualified ambassadors of their wild brethren. Zoo animals, like over-civilized

humans, are limited, prescribed, idiosyncratic and do not exemplify true diversity of MIND and behaviours.

Minding animals is, as Paul Shepard suggests, a fundamental reason to include them in our lives on their own intrinsic terms. Not minding animals admits to anthropocentrism and to the strange and fetish desire of “going at it alone.” If the rise of human intelligence and self-consciousness was indeed predicated and founded on our understanding of other animal minds, what happens when the book of *Animalia* is burnt in Prometheus’ fire?

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Notes

¹ Shepard 1998.

² Ibid., 262.

³ Ibid., 253–61.

⁴ Paul grounds his thinking and writing in all these disciplines.

⁵ I write *mind* in upper case when I mean the complete psychical space that is subserved by language and memory processes, and not these ancillary processes themselves in an evolutionary vacuum. I believe this is consistent with Shepard's inclusive stance of cognition in the service of *ecopsychological being*.

⁶ Shepard 1982.

⁷ Naess 2005.

⁸ Cognitive, affective, and social

⁹ For these arguments see Conesa-Sevilla 2006a; 2006b.

¹⁰ Shepard 1989, 262.

¹¹ Hillenbrand 2002.

¹² Although if we accept totemic mentality we must be prepared to accept the notion that cognitive reciprocity allows equally for easy human animal to non-human animal projections.

¹³ Shepard 1989, 257.

¹⁴ See Shepard 1996, 250.

¹⁵ A rare and significant exception to this rule is the use of hallucinogenic plants and plant products. But even under their effect, animal forms and messengers predominate and assist with translating MIND into useful knowledge.

¹⁶ Foley 2005.

¹⁷ Idioms obtained from Chang and Shepherd 2005.

¹⁸ Shepard 1982.

¹⁹ Erikson 1968.