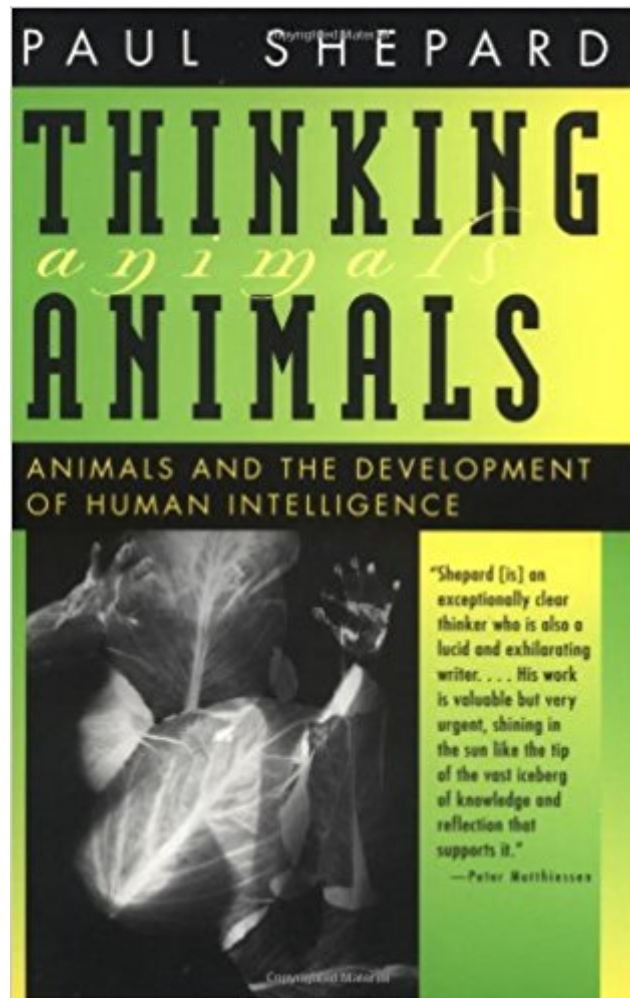




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Thinking Animals: Animals And The Development Of Human Intelligence



Synopsis

In a world increasingly dominated by human beings, the survival of other species becomes more and more questionable. In this brilliant book, Paul Shepard offers a provocative alternative to an "us or them" mentality, proposing that other species are integral to humanity's evolution and exist at the core of our imagination. This trait, he argues, compels us to think of animals in order to be human. Without other living species by which to measure ourselves, Shepard warns, we would be less mature, care less for and be more careless of all life, including our own kind.

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Customer Reviews

What can animals teach humans? Everything, writes the environmental philosopher Paul Shepard, and he's not being hyperbolic. In Shepard's view, it was through the observation and emulation of animals that humans developed their abilities to communicate. The development of the brain and larynx depended on accidents of biology, on bipedalism and upright posture. But more, their development both hinged on and reinforced the desire of humans to communicate with each other, and to members of other species, about their existence in the world; as Shepard writes of one particular human mental skill, "grouping and categorizing is not something done by children simply because their biology requires it, but because the real animal world of each child is to be his concrete model of reality." The natural world, in other words, teaches us to think. All human culture, in Shepard's view, rests on our natural history, and the separation that has occurred over the generations between humans and the natural environment is to our detriment. Shepard imagines a

future in which animals no longer have a place, their role in the world having been assumed by human inventions. Scholarly without ever being pedantic, Shepard offers a powerful argument for conservation and preservation. *Thinking Animals*, like many of Shepard's books, has come to be a key text in the literature of the animal rights movement and of environmentalism generally, and it is endlessly stimulating. --Gregory McNamee

Published in 1982, 1973, and 1978, respectively, Shepard's titles employ animals in order to further the study of humans. His theories incorporate elements from nature as well as from mythology, literature, sociology, and numerous other concentrations. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

...in forty years of relentless reading. We have all seen the evidence of subjects driven mad by sensory deprivation. We know that the health of an individual is tied up with the health of the community. Shepard gives us a glimpse of the myriad ways in which the mental health of our species is tied up with the interspecies conversations that produced our consciousness. To vastly oversimplify his synthesis of anthropological, biological, and cultural sources, Shepard's thesis is that the only argument that can possibly save wild animals and the environments upon which they survive is this: that without them we will destroy that heritage of which we are most proud: our human consciousness. The arguments are expanded in his other work, and I keep meaning to read them-as soon as I have absorbed this one. I've been rereading it for 20 years.

Paul Shepard (1925-1996) grew up in rural Missouri, during a primitive era that lacked television, internet, and cell phones. He was lucky to live in a community where progress had not yet erased the wildlife. Young Paul was fascinated by wild animals. He collected butterflies and bird eggs. He hunted and fished. He adored the great outdoors. It was a happy time. World War II hurled him into the mass hysteria of modernity. He survived D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge. He spent 20 years at Pitzer College, close to the monstrous megalopolis of Los Angeles. During his lifetime, population tripled, and nuclear bombs turned cities into ashtrays. It was easy to see that old-fashioned rural society was starkly different from the industrial nightmare. Modern society was insane. Why? Shepard explored this question in *Thinking Animals* (and in all his other books). Over the passage of millions of years, evolution gradually increased the intelligence of many species. As predators got better at tracking, stalking, teamwork, and killing, the herbivores got better at being escape artists. For this balancing act to work, predators had to be slightly more clever than prey. If predators got

too good at hunting, or prey got too good at escaping, the ecosystem would plunge into chaos. For both teams, intelligence and awareness were essential. Our two-legged ancestors were not natural born carnivorous predators like lions, tigers, and wolves. The two-legs had to play two roles, hunter and prey. This required them to have the aggressive mindset of stalkers and killers, as well as the hyper-awareness of delicious walking meatballs. Living in a healthy ecosystem was vastly more stimulating than staring at glowing screens. Everything was alive, intelligent, alert. The sky, land, and water were filled with living things. The air was rich with music and fragrances. Paying complete attention was a full time job. A jaguar might be hiding behind any rock. Just over the hill, a group of deer might be taking a nap. Forests were not an ideal habitat for hunters, because large herbivores did not eat wood or leaves. Savannahs, on the other hand, were a yummy all-you-can-eat buffet of nutritious grasses and forbs. Grasslands attracted mobs of herbivores, as well as their sacred partners, the carnivores that kept them in balance. Without weapons, two-legs could not kill animals that were ferocious or speedy. The spear was invented by Homo erectus, maybe two million years ago. Maybe they were tired of eating frogs, grubs, bird eggs, and assorted carcasses. Maybe they were tired of losing their kin to big cats. Armed with spears, they could kill big game and survive on the savannah. Spears also enabled them to kill the man-eaters that kept them in balance — a devilish whirl into dark juju. In so doing, they stepped outside the boundaries of evolution, and the balance it provided. And so, to avoid overhunting and overbreeding, the spear-chucking two-legs had to become self-regulating. They had to live with utmost mindfulness, year after year, without fail. Today, it's obvious that two-legs are far better at overbreeding than self-regulating. There are still a few wild tribes skilled at self-regulation, but they are not doing well in their struggle to resist obnoxious outsiders. Shepard sidestepped this discussion of our fateful experiment with weapon technology. Instead, he focused on the growth of big brains and human intelligence. He believed that complex language played a major role in activating our developmental turbo-thrusters. We kept getting smarter and smarter and smarter. Wow! It was amazing for a while — until it got stuck in the muck. By and by, too smart two-legs began goofing around with a fateful experiment in plant and animal domestication. The core of Shepard's message was that we evolved in a world where we were surrounded by a variety of wild animals, and this played a central role in the development of human intelligence. A healthy wild ecosystem was a fantastic place to live. We learned about everything. We named everything, and complex language made it easy to transfer large amounts of vital information from one generation to the next. Humans were odd in that their throbbing brains spent more than 20 years in their immature phase. Year after year, they got bigger and smarter. A quirky aspect of extended childhood was that the immature phase did not

automatically graduate into the mature phase. This required a kick. Wild cultures used initiation ceremonies to guide youths through this transition. Modern societies tend to flub this up. Endless youth often leads to infantile behaviors, or to neurotic hardening, ãwhere rigidity and protective shells make a grotesque parody of true maturity.ã•For Shepard, everything was cool until the dawn of domestication, the rebellion against evolution. The wild ecosystem was replaced by a manmade landscape inhabited by enslaved and castrated animals. Folks began hallucinating that two-legs were the masters of the world. Of course, the theory of evolution, made famous by Darwin, blew this foolish homocentric nonsense completely out of the water. Two-legs, indeed, are animals, but most continue to strongly deny this most embarrassing fact. Wild animals were fascinating to observe, and they taught our ancestors many skills for living on the land ãconcealment, stealth, stalking, tracking, ambush, and so on. Critters lived perfectly well by their wits and abilities. They had no desire to be our friends, nor any need for humans whatsoever. They were wild, free, intelligent, and alert. Domesticated animals were the opposite. Wild traits were undesirable, so they were erased via selective breeding. This resulted in pathetic, pudgy, dim-witted, docile mutants. Unlike barnyard fauna, wild animals were only submissive in their immature phase. Similarly, modern folks, deprived of growing up in a healthy wild ecosystem, fail to develop in a healthy way. We have a strong tendency to retain infantile or adolescent tendencies long past childhood. Many spend their entire lives in an immature state. Today, our bodies and minds are the end product of millions of years of hunting, foraging, and studying nature. Our genes are at home in the wild, and every newborn is a wild animal, eager to enjoy a life of wild freedom. We cannot develop normally when we are raised in abnormal circumstances. This damages us. We become frustrated, alienated adults, lacking a confident sense of self. In an effort to compensate, we buy pets. ãThe very concept is unknown among most of the worldãs pre-industrial peoples, exceptã by an affluent minority. ãOnly in this perspective of the rarity of the pet does the pet explosion in modern cities take on its full strangeness.ã• Pets may dull the pain of modern life, but ãkeeping pets is a hopeless attempt to resurrect crucial episodes of early growth that are lost forever.ã• Healthy childhood development requires successfully accumulating a sequence of time-critical experiences. Adult attempts to reconnect with their missing childhood wildness might be partially successful, at best. ãThe mind, like the body, is an organ with multiple ripenings, and going back is a pathetic, exceedingly difficult undertaking.ã• To bypass this mess, kids should be raised very close to nature. ãThe point of this book is to assert that animals have a very large claim on the maturing of the individual and his capacity to think and feel.ã• Thinking Animals was published in 1978. Eighteen years later, Shepard

published *The Others*, which took a fresh look at the subject. It's a better book, and easier to understand.

The original edition of this book was published by The Viking Press in 1978 (I know, because I was its editor), and a very important book it is. I'm delighted to see it back in print, because it got little attention when it first appeared. Few scientists then believed in the importance of animals to the development of human intelligence; now the subject of animal intelligence itself is taken far more seriously, and I'm certain that Paul Shepard's work made a significant contribution to this change.

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