

False Equivalencies Between Humans and Other Animals

By [Karen Davis, PhD, President, United Poultry Concerns](#)

March 2023



“Procrustean” Art by Sue Coe

“Congenitally Crippled Villains” – Ann Rule

In February this year I reread a book by the American true-crime writer, Ann Rule (d. 2015). *If You Really Loved Me* (1991) is the story of a sociopath named David Arnold Brown who went from rags to riches to life without parole for brainwashing a 14-year-old girl named Cinnamon to shoot to death his then wife Linda as she lay sleeping in bed. He wanted Linda dead so that he could enjoy an unfettered sexual liaison with Linda’s 16-year-old sister Patti and collect the million-dollar insurance he had on Linda. David Arnold Brown manipulated everyone he could, above all the girls and women who lived together with him in his house, with the refrain, “If you really loved me, you would do this” – “this” being felonious behavior and other bad things under his constant threat that he would abandon them if they refused. He charmed, cajoled and terrified his household into executing his will.

In the Afterword to this story I discovered some angry comments I had made in the margins back in 2016 when I first read the book.

Seeking to explain David Brown, Rule wrote:

We share with animals the limbic system in the brain. The limbic system tells us what we *want*. Animals take what they want and have no control system. Human beings have the prefrontal lobe that gives us feelings and reasoning power. That, in essence, gives us brakes. One school of thought suggests that some infants *are* born with a breakdown in the pathways between the prefrontal lobes and the limbic system and lack the ability to control their desires. Like animals, they simply take what they want – congenitally crippled villains.

Shocking to read this not only because it misrepresents other animal species and the complexity of neurophysiology in all of us, but because Ann Rule is an otherwise careful investigative reporter with a large following. In a later book of hers, *In the Still of the Night* (2011), she does show sensitivity toward horses, dogs, and a bird intentionally burned to death by a teenage sadist.

“A Swirling Mass of Tiny Details” – Temple Grandin

Temple Grandin is an animal science professor at Colorado State University and a consultant to the meat industry. Catherine Johnson specializes in neuropsychiatry and the brain. In *Animals in Translation*, they team up to argue that autism is “a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans—putting autistic people in the perfect position to translate ‘animal talk.’”

Since people with autism are said to have impaired social and communication skills and limited emotional responses, it is fair to ask how autistic people actually compare neurologically and experientially with competent adult animals equipped with complex social and communication skills and emotions. Are autistic “translators” of animal life common and credible enough to support the contention that they’re perfectly positioned to do this work? How do autistic perceptions of nonhuman animals compare with those of non-autistic animal empathizers? Bypassing these questions, the authors contend that animals and autistic people are alike in having mostly simple, unambivalent emotions. According to Grandin, animals “never have psychodrama” (apparently she never spent time in a lively chicken yard). “Children don’t either,” she says (oh, really?). “Emotionally,” says Grandin, “children are more like animals and autistic people, because children’s frontal lobes are still growing.”

This is a familiar contemporary grouping: normal human children, cognitively-challenged human adults, and nonhuman animals are pitted together as having the same basic level of (in)competence and a simple pictorial view of the world as “a swirling mass of tiny details.” Grandin writes that even though autistic people have normal-sized brains, they have “trouble making connections.” Their brains “function more like a child’s brain or an animal’s brain, but for different reasons.” (Imagine that this rubbish gets 5-star reviews on Amazon.)

“Intellectually Disabled Human Beings” – Peter Singer

Even in the process of promoting animal liberation and criticizing the traditional hierarchy of nature set forth by Aristotle and others, the “father” of the modern animal advocacy movement maintains a presumption of human superiority over all other forms of life. The hierarchical point of view starts at the top, with mentally competent adult humans characterized as “capable of abstract thought, planning for the future and complex acts of communication,” down to the “lowest” life forms. The chief point of contact between humans and other animals is “suffering”; otherwise, little that we share with other animals is recognized. Over time, starting with the publication of *Animal Liberation* in 1975, even the suffering of animals could not compete with the “superior” suffering of humans in Singer’s utilitarian worldview. Animal liberation shrank in his output to a patronizing contempt for animals.

An example is Singer’s concept of personhood. In *Rethinking Life and Death*, published in 1994, “personhood” is a privileged identity to which only mentally competent adult human beings and the great apes are definitively entitled, with the great apes far below humans. As for the rest of earth’s animal residents – “whales, dolphins, elephants, monkeys, dogs, pigs and other animals”—some, maybe all might eventually be shown to be “aware of their own existence over time and capable of reasoning.” Then they too could qualify as “persons,” he says.

Loftily he asserts that the ability to suffer and enjoy life, though worthy of “concern,” does not of itself confer personhood or admit a nonhuman animal to the “community of equals.”

Even to be a nonhuman “person” on the highest level is to be a poor contender within this universe of thought: the vaunted chimpanzees rank with “intellectually disabled human beings.” Such categorizing scarcely differs from the prejudicial attitudes Singer originally castigated. It relegates the entire animal kingdom, apart from humans, to a condition of mental disability that is totally incompatible with the

cognitive demands exacted upon real animals in the real world. It illogically and unjustly implies a cerebral and experiential equivalence between the mentally challenged members of one species and the mentally competent, fully functional members of other species.

I've been told that these particular falsehoods and their authors are hardly if at all known by the general public, so we needn't worry that characterizations of other animals as congenital villains and "lesser-abled" individuals will affect common attitudes. Unfortunately, mischaracterizations of other animals as evil and stupid are historical. They are built into religious, educational and scientific edifices, reflecting and reinforcing ignorant attitudes and the abusive behaviors these attitudes legitimize.

"I Want To, But I Can't!"

In their comments, Ann Rule and Temple Grandin reduce the entire nonhuman animal population on earth to a monolith called Animal. Turkeys and turtles, chickens and chimpanzees, dogs and frogs: all nonhuman creatures, they imply, uniformly perceive the world and behave in the same disconnected, dizzy, irrational or villainous manner. How *do* these creatures survive?

In reality, most nonhuman animal species, far from exhibiting "uncontrolled" sexual conduct, have specific mating seasons aligned with the seasons of the year. It is humans who, unlike "animals," are sexually active year round and are often preoccupied to the point of pathology with sex, including sexually assaulting animals for food production – a practice of which Grandin approves. Most other animals have built-in brakes on wanton sexual behavior. Male and female turkeys, for example, come together to mate in the spring, then separate once the mating season is over, whereupon the mother turkey broods her eggs in the nest she has made for this purpose. After her chicks (poults) hatch, the maternal family spends the next several months foraging together while the male birds flock elsewhere.

An example of controlled desire in roosters can be seen in our sanctuary. Each time I scatter biscuit crumbs, pieces of bread or grapes, our roosters run up to grab their share only to stand back and drop what is in, or was almost in, their beaks as the hens swarm in, often grabbing the morsel right out of the rooster's mouth. His self-sacrificing behavior reflects the fact that in Nature, roosters find food for their families of hens and chicks, often picking up a morsel and dropping it for them to go first. He wants to eat, but a genetic check instructs him to feed his family first.

In *King Solomon's Ring*, ethologist Konrad Lorenz describes what happens when two male turkeys have been fighting and one of them wants to quit. According to Lorenz, the one who has had enough makes a "specific submissive gesture which serves to forestall the intent of the attack." He lies down with his neck stretched out on the ground.

At this signal, says Lorenz, "the victor behaves exactly as a wolf or dog in the same situation, that is to say, he evidently wants to peck and kick at the prostrated enemy, but simply cannot: he would if he could but he can't! So, still in threatening attitude, he walks round and round his prostrated rival, making tentative passes at him, but leaving him untouched."

People often ask me "what is the hardest part of being an animal rights advocate for chickens and turkeys?" One of the hardest is seeing how certain individuals who betray animals and are basically ignorant about them are viewed from within the animal advocacy movement, as well as outside of it, as experts on animals. The crumbs they throw, often laced with poison, are treated like jewels, understandable considering the plight of animals under the steel heel of humans.

Animal advocacy ethologist Dr. Marc Bekoff interviewed me when my book of essays *For the Birds: From Exploitation to Liberation* was published in 2019. He asked about key themes, to which I replied in part:

There is the theme of who chickens and turkeys are in and of themselves within their own worlds of experience and expression as revealed in circumstances that are as free as possible from the preconceptions that distort our perception of them. The figure of Procrustes came to mind one day as I was reading the summary of a talk by an agribusiness professor that distinguishes between the “science-based” view of animals and the “sentimentalized,” a.k.a. anthropomorphic, view. Procrustes is a tyrant in Greek mythology who keeps an iron bed on which he places his victims after stretching or shrinking the bed in advance to reshape them to reflect his will. If they are too short, he stretches them to size. If too tall, he amputates their excess length. Rhetorically and literally, exploiters do this to animals all the time. What I call the “procrustean solution” is the false kind of [anthropomorphism](#) that consists of “re-forming” individuals and groups destructively in order to have your way with them, and attributing your way to their will.

Though pessimistic about the fate of other animals with humans, I am an Activist for animals and animal rights regardless. By “rights” I mean the claims of other animals upon us as fellow beings with feelings—claims that must be codified into fully enforced laws for effective protection against *our* wanton behavior.

Meanwhile we must work at ground level to change people’s attitudes toward nonhuman animals to fit the facts about who they are and what they need, desire and deserve to have such as their own families, homes and self-governance, and to be characterized justly by us. What is needed starting now is not “more information” but more implementation.