Humans Aren't the Smartest Among Earth's Diverse Intelligences
Interviewed by Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions
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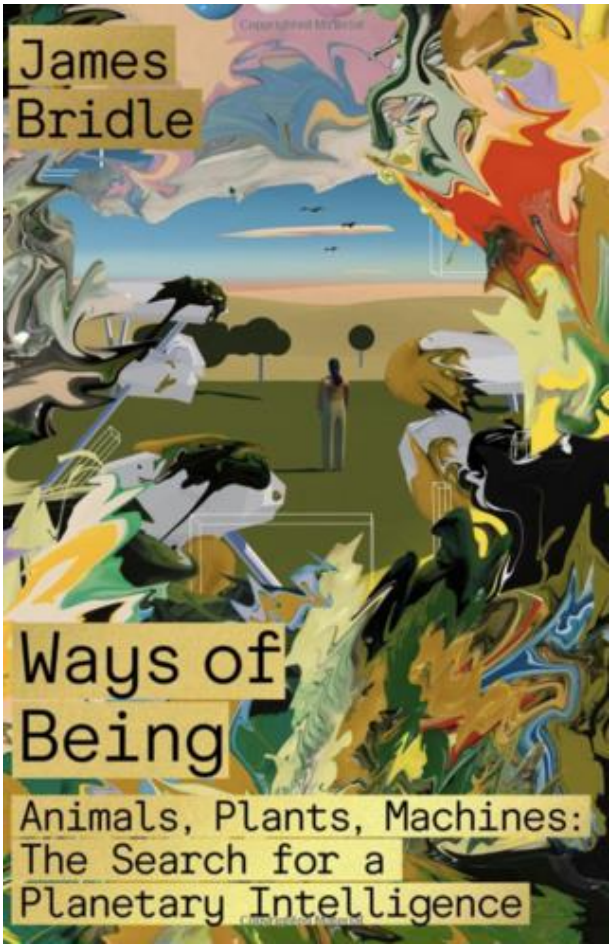
James Bridle explains how the world is full of all sorts of other intelligences.

I recently read one of the most original, wide-ranging, and thought-provoking books I've seen in a while called Ways of Being: Animals, Plants, Machines: The Search for a Planetary Intelligence *by writer, artist, and technologist James Bridle, and I'm thrilled he could answer a few questions about his landmark book.*[1,2]



Source: James Bridle, used with permission.

Why did you write *Ways of Being: Animals, Plants, Machines*?

I'm an artist and writer. In the last few years, I've focused my practice around ecology and the environment, creating artworks on the theme of renewable energy and redistributing power, learning how to build physical, sustainable things, and trying to practice a more aware and regenerative life. At the same time as moving out of the city to a small island, I've tried to figure out what is useful in what I know about already—technology, the internet, AI—to bring to discussions of the planetary crisis.

Ways of Being is one outcome of this: an attempt to understand where we have gone wrong, how we misunderstand the world, the other beings in it, and how we relate to them. It is part of my own process of moving from a place of uncertainty and fear to one of agency and even hope, accompanied, I now find, by a whole host of new friends and collaborators.

The definition of intelligence we have used for so long—that is, "what humans do"—is woefully insufficient and largely incorrect, particularly when conceptualized and deployed by powerful and rapacious corporations, whose profit motives and lack of care for humanity and the rest of the planet are woven into the code they write. However, in revealing to us that other, non-human kinds of intelligence are possible, AI opens the door to a re-evaluation and re-imagining of what intelligence is—something more-than-human, and something that doesn't just happen in our heads, but is a quality of our relations with one another, perhaps even an emergent quality of life itself.

Who is your intended audience?

The book is really intended for everyone.

What are some of the topics you weave into your book, and what are some of your major messages?

I realized quite early on in researching and writing the book that "intelligence" as we usually think of it is not always a useful way of framing how we should relate to one another and the world, but it's important to understand how we've always done that. The history of how we evaluate the abilities of others is key here, so I look at the ways we judge other creatures' abilities, from putting apes and elephants in front of mirrors to see if they recognize themselves to giving them tools to open doors or find food. It turns out that most of these methods are deeply flawed—indeed, the abilities they supposedly test for vary widely across human cultures too—but they are revealing.

For example, gibbons were long considered to be less intelligent than other apes because, in experiments, they refused to use sticks to pick up food or lift cups under which snacks were hidden. But it was eventually realized that gibbons simply see and experience the world differently because they mostly live in the trees: Their long fingers are not adapted to picking things up off the ground, and they pick their tools from above their heads. Gibbons are intelligent in all kinds of ways, but their intelligence differs because it is embodied: It reflects the pattern of their life, and the pattern of their bodies, just as ours does and that of all other beings.

Other intelligences differ in much greater ways. Slime molds, for example—strange, unicellular critters somewhere between fungi and amoebae—can solve complex mathematical problems far quicker and more efficiently than either humans or our most advanced supercomputers. And we don't really know how they do it, and perhaps we can learn, but we can also recognize this as intelligence and learn from it how to better relate to other beings when we see them as having their own agency, intelligence, and ways of being in the world.

It turns out that most of our categories and processes for recognizing agency and intelligence in other creatures, as well as the hierarchies of species and capabilities we've constructed, are fundamentally flawed and damaging to our mutual understanding and ability to flourish. If we recognize this, we can start to do things differently. In the book, I explore ways of constructing technology that might be more generative, such as non-binary and biological computing, delving into the history of cybernetics, crab computers, and random number generation—taking lessons from music, mathematics, and cephalopods along the way.

And I also suggest that a meaningful realization of this awareness involves constructing a new kind of politics, one which recognizes and trusts the intelligence of other beings, learns from them, and goes forward together.

How does your book differ from others concerned with some of the same general topics?

There's a huge cultural interest in AI at present, and this is fascinating in itself. Why are we so obsessed with a technology which is intended to put us out of work, take over the things we enjoy, and ultimately supplant us? Most of the writing about it is either tech boosterism or doom-laden eschatology.

I take a different path: firstly, by arguing that there is nothing "artificial" about AI; secondly, by treating this novel form of intelligence as a colleague and compatriot rather than as a slave or potential master; and thirdly, by bringing it into dialogue with all the other intelligences which surround us, which reveals something new about both our own conception of it and the wider world in which it is inevitably enmeshed.[3]

Is there anything else you'd like to tell readers?

Everything is alive, and everything is intelligent. The fear and pain that many of us are experiencing in the present moment—whether due to political and social turmoil or the collapse of our ecological relationships, which are at the heart of the climate crisis—are the outcome of deep-rooted Western ideas of power, domination, human superiority, racism, and speciesism. But the world knows differently, and by looking outside ourselves, by listening and relating to the billions of other lives we share the planet with, we can discover new ways of being and doing that can shift our perspective, and thus our ability to change and go forward together.

References - In conversation with James Bridle.

1) James Bridle is a writer, artist, and technologist. Their artworks have been commissioned by galleries and institutions and exhibited worldwide and on the internet. Their writing on literature, culture, and networks has appeared in magazines and newspapers, including Wired, the Atlantic, the New Statesman, the Guardian, and the Financial Times. They are the author of *New Dark Age* and *Ways of Being*, and they wrote and presented "New Ways of Seeing" for BBC Radio 4 in 2019.
2) I thoroughly agree with Jane Goodall when she wrote, "James Bridle encourages you to widen the boundaries of your understanding, to contemplate the innate intelligence that animates the life force of octopuses and honeybees as well as apes and elephants. We humans are not alone in having a sense of community, a sense of fun, a sense of wonder and awe at the beauty of nature. Be prepared to re-evaluate your relationship with the amazing life forms with whom we share the planet. Fascinating, innovative, and thought-provoking, I thoroughly recommend *Ways of Being*."
3) James also notes, "At the same time, books about the environment and ecology still tend to separate us from the world, by insisting on our unique responsibility for it, and thus our own exceptionalism. They may also decry technology wholesale, but we cannot go back to the caves. Rather, we need to recognize ourselves as unique but not special: one among many emanations of evolution and the world in which we are inextricably entangled, and to see how the things we know and create can support and assist in the regeneration of the world."

Are Plants Intelligent?