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Introduction: The Silence of the Chimps

In November 2009, *National Geographic* published a picture that would capture the imagination of readers and scientists alike. In it one could see Dorothy, a forty-something-year-old chimpanzee, lying on a wheelbarrow that was being pushed by two humans. In the background a group of sixteen chimpanzees huddled behind a fence, each and every one of them staring intently at their fellow (see figure 1). The reason this picture fascinated so many people was that Dorothy was dead, and the rest of her conspecifics, with whom she had cohabitated for her last eight years at the Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue Centre in Cameroon, appeared to have gathered to bid her farewell.

Monica Szczupider, the photographer who captured this moment, described it as follows: “Chimps are not silent. They are gregarious, loud, vocal creatures, usually with relatively short attention spans. But they could not take their eyes off Dorothy, and their silence, more than anything, spoke volumes.”¹ But what exactly was this silence saying? Is it possible



FIGURE 1. “The grieving chimps,” photo by Monica Szczupider.

that the chimps were experiencing something similar to our grief over the loss of a loved one? Could they understand what had happened to Dorothy? Did they perhaps know that that very thing would happen to them sooner or later?

This picture sparked such interest that it led various scientists to publish similar cases that they had witnessed throughout the years but had not yet documented, and many others began to pay closer attention to the behaviors surrounding death of the animals they were studying. With this, a new discipline was born: *comparative thanatology*, which aims to study how animals react to individuals who are dead or close to dying, the physiological processes that underlie their reactions, and what these behaviors tell us about the minds of animals. Although the focus was originally on primates, the last few years have seen an explosion of publications on the topic. As a result, there is an increasing number of articles on the thanatology of

species that are far removed from monkeys and apes, such as elephants, whales, horses, crows, and even insects.

This interest in how animals relate to death is part of a growing scientific trend that addresses the extent to which animals possess capacities traditionally believed to be solely human. A mounting number of studies suggest that many animal species are endowed with at least rudimentary forms of old guarantors of human uniqueness, such as numerical cognition, rationality, morality, language, or culture.² The idea of human beings as an entirely separate, more-than-animal species is becoming less and less tenable by the day. Naturally, the question of whether animals possess a notion of mortality becomes relevant in this context, for throughout the ages humans have thought of themselves as the only species blessed—or cursed—with an understanding of death.

Comparative thanatology—the study of animals’ relation to death—is a discipline located at the intersection of *ethology* and *comparative psychology*. Ethology is the branch of biology that focuses on the study of animal behavior, and it shares with comparative thanatology a predilection for field studies carried out in more or less natural settings. Comparative psychology, in turn, aims to study animal minds experimentally and compares how different species deal with similar problems and what cognitive mechanisms they use to resolve them. Comparative thanatology shares with this discipline an interest in animal psychology, and also makes use of many of its studies to inform the debate on how animals experience and understand mortality.

This book is not written by an ethologist nor by a psychologist, but by a philosopher. This may surprise you, if your image of the philosopher corresponds to a bearded old man who smokes a pipe and sits in his armchair reflecting upon the

meaning of life. I won't deny that this description fits some of us, but the truth is that philosophy is a very heterogeneous discipline, and not only are there philosophers from a wide variety of age groups, genders, and ethnicities, but many of us also spend our time studying topics—such as climate change, terrorism, video games, medicine, or porn—that don't fit the popular image of what philosophers like to ponder.

The variety of topics that philosophers study reflects certain peculiarities that this discipline has and that distinguish it from others. In contrast to other branches of science and the humanities, philosophy lacks a predetermined object of study. There can be philosophy of anything because philosophy is a method, a way of looking at the world and reflecting on it, rather than the study of a particular, concrete phenomenon. This allows philosophers to be in a constant dialog with other areas of knowledge, to move with ease from one discipline to another, to take nothing for granted, to question every assumption, and to offer refreshing and innovative points of view that can serve as catalysts for any debate.

This book is framed within a relatively young branch of philosophy known as *philosophy of animal minds*. Although philosophy of mind goes back, at the very least, to ancient Greece, throughout history it has focused almost exclusively on the human mind. Philosophy of animal minds vindicates the study of the minds of animals, not just to understand ourselves better, but also as an end in itself, given the assumption that the psychology of other species is interesting independently of what it can teach us about our own. In turn, this discipline works in dialog with science, reflecting on the methodologies with which we study the behavior and cognition of other species, identifying potential biases, and aiming to provide conceptual clarity.

Comparative thanatology, as a discipline that has existed for barely a decade, is very much in need of a philosophical outlook that can help to identify the hidden assumptions that may be biasing its research, as well as to clarify the meaning of its key concepts. This book centers specifically on identifying and removing the anthropocentric biases that underlie the investigation of how animals relate to mortality. Moreover, the key concept on which I focus, and which makes up the backbone of the overarching argument, is the concept of death. What exactly does it mean to *understand* death? Is the concept of death something binary, an all-or-nothing matter, or can we conceive it as a spectrum, as something that admits higher or lower degrees of complexity? Would it make sense to talk about different concepts of death that capture the perspectives of different species?

An important part of the work that I carry out in this book is, therefore, one of conceptual analysis. However, this does not merely consist of clarifying the language being used, for through such an analysis one can arrive at conclusions about the world. For example, in order to determine whether the experiments that demonstrate altruistic behaviors in animals are evidence that animals are moral, we need to start from a clear characterization of what it means to be moral. The same applies in this case. Through an analysis of what it means to have a concept of death, we can look at existing evidence from a different perspective. What's more, this analysis will allow us to clearly delineate the *cognitive requirements* for understanding death; the psychological architecture that an animal must be endowed with in order to have an awareness of mortality. Knowing this, we can then look beyond comparative thanatology and consider what other fields, such as evolutionary biology, can tell us about the extent to which this capacity is likely to be found in nature.

Do animals understand death? In this book I use the conceptual and argumentative tools that philosophy makes available to us in order to analyze the empirical evidence that has been accumulating in the field of comparative thanatology during the past decade, and thus provide an answer to this question. As we shall see, since its birth this discipline has been characterized by certain anthropocentric biases that have led thanatologists to intellectualize the concept of death and place an excessive emphasis on grief as an emotional response to others' demise. Locating and eliminating these biases will allow us to see that the concept of death requires little cognitive complexity and that there are multiple ways in which animals can emotionally react to death and learn about it. If my arguments in this book are correct, the concept of death is much easier to acquire than has usually been presupposed and is likely to be widespread in the animal kingdom.

Perhaps all of this sounds outlandish to you, if you are not used to hearing about the concepts or emotions of animals. If this is so, I would ask you to put some trust in me, for this book is written for readers with no previous knowledge of the matter and does not require you to master any notion regarding animal psychology. On the other hand, perhaps you belong to the group of people who doubt that animals even have minds. If that is the case, today's your lucky day, for here I will not only discuss animals' relation to death, but I will also tackle both philosophical arguments and empirical evidence that support the notion that humans are far from the only animals with a mental life. Therefore, if you are a skeptical reader, you should find in this book, at a minimum, some food for thought.

In what follows, we will begin with philosophy and delve deeper and deeper into comparative thanatology and its related empirical sciences. I have aimed to keep technical distinctions

to a minimum and, when they were absolutely necessary, I have attempted to explain them with care, along with a touch of humor wherever possible (though hilarity is regrettably not always guaranteed). To those readers who struggle a bit with philosophy, I ask for patience. For those who came looking for stories about animals, I promise they will arrive. And without further ado, dear reader, I would like to thank you for choosing this book. I sincerely hope that you will enjoy it and learn something about how animals understand death—and maybe a bit about how we do as well.

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