

OK, What's Really Going On With Bunny the Talking Dog?

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Last weekend in the “honourable mentions” I included a fascinating article about Bunny, the talking dog. Bunny is a dog that uses a special apparatus that consists of buttons on the floor that she can press with her paws. Pressing a particular button will produce a particular word. The disconcerting thing is that Bunny has a tendency to push buttons that make coherent sentences or questions that she’s never heard before, and that she has done so so many times in contexts that make eminent sense, that it is clear she is trying to communicate. It would appear even that she is asking some pretty “metaphysical” questions, not only about herself, but why she’s “here.” We’ll get back to this whole subject, because it’s the center of today’s high octane speculation.

I suppose that talking about a dog pressing buttons might seem a bit “indulgent”, but in a world where the leadership class of the West appears to have *lost* all self-awareness and to have become incapable of coherent speech (q.v. Bai Den Dzhao, any recent public statement), a dog apparently forming sentences and asking “Platonic” questions I think is pretty newsworthy, and worth some high octane speculation time. And besides, most regular readers of this website are well aware of my fascination with animals and the apparent intelligence and emotional life in higher beasts: dogs, cats, horses, dolphins, birds (corvids, parrots, &c), and of course, one of my favorites, octopuses. I’ve recounted, for example, the

incident with my friend Dr. Scott D. DeHart's African Gray parrot, Murray. During a period when we were sharing an apartment, I would drive his youngest son to school (Scott left early as he was teaching school). Murray's cage was right next to the front door, and on the way out, I used to always say, "Ok Murray, I'll be right back; you be a good bird," or something similar.

One day, as we were leaving, I turned to Murray as Scott's son was looking on, but before either of us could say anything, Murray said (I kid you not), "I'll be a good bird."

Our jaws were on the floor, and for very good reason. This was a sentence Murray had never heard before. He simply composed it on the spot for the occasion, and used it in the proper context. I tried to put the whole unnerving incident out of my mind, until another incident with Murray brought me up short. Being a smoker, I would also step outside to smoke a cigarette. Shortly after this incident, something began to happen: I'd get outside, light my cigarette, and take that first wonderful drag, and... the phone would ring. Angrily, I'd snuff out the cigarette, run back into the apartment as fast as my overweight frame could waddle, and answer the phone, only to have the line go dead. This went on for a couple of days, and then something else: As soon as I'd enter the bathroom to relieve myself, again, as regular as clockwork, the phone would ring. And it would continue to ring until I came tearing out of the bathroom trying not to severely injure myself as I zipped myself up and waddled to the phone... only to find the line dead once again.

I would probably have gone on like this, until the telltale laughter from Murray after one such incident gave his whole sinister game away:

Parrot: 2 Supposedly Intelligent Human Being: 0

Since then I've really had my eyes peeled for similar stories

of animal intelligence and, in this case, of an animal playing a game. There are endless videos on YouTube of such things, of crows solving intricate puzzles (using tools no less); of gorillas speaking sign language, of octopuses learning by simply watching other octopuses solving problems, and, yes, of African Gray Parrots forming their own sentences and talking.

And now along comes Bunny the dog, who is asking the sorts of metaphysical questions one does not normally associate with canines (or even, as we've come to learn to our chagrin in the past couple of centuries, some humans... this article courtesy of MANY of you who read last week's honourable mentions):

[Bunny "The Talking Dog": Self-Aware Canine Asks About the Meaning of Life](#)

Here is the "problem", and see if you can spot what caught my eye:

Bunny the Dog is famous on social media because of her ability to talk by using buttons, as reported by [Insider](#). But recently, the talking dog blurted out a surprising question about her existence. [Salon](#) reports that Bunny looked into the mirror and asked who herself is.

People were astonished as the [Sheepadoodle](#) breed asked about the meaning of life through her augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device.

Through the development of her communication, Bunny seemed to be interested in her sense of self. Since then, the AAC helped her and other dogs exchange words with humans, but this time, she asked a different one from her usual conversation.

Pressing the AAC button consecutively, Bunny constructed a sentence: "Dog what dog is?" Amazed, Bunny's human parent Alexis Devine said that the question pushed her to add more buttons for the words "same", "different", and "animal."

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A combination of over 3,000 dogs and cats are enrolled in this project, including Bunny. Most of the results from the observation suggest that cats and dogs, in fragments, can talk.

OK, I suppose that in itself is not really big news to anyone who has owned a cat or a dog, and seen first hand their ability to understand words. Why should we be surprised that – given appropriate tools – they would use them to communicate to us? But there's more:

According to Rossano, self-awareness is not the initial target of the study. But considering the development from various subjects, language and self-awareness have added curiosity to research. With that said, Rossano shared that the new concern of the study is whether dogs can recognize a sense of time, such as the past, present, and future.

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For example, even though dogs have difficulty identifying themselves in the popular mirror test, a recent study published on [Scientific Reports](#) entitled "*Dogs (Canis familiaris) recognize their own body as a physical obstacle*" suggests that dogs have the capability to identify self-awareness through considering their own bodies as an obstacle.

As one might have guessed, it is *this* which caught my attention, plus the fact that Bunny at least appears to be asking "the Platonic questions": what am I, why am I here, who am I?" and perhaps the most important question, "What is an 'I'?" In some past blogs and in some vidchats I've remarked often on the need to break out of this post-Cartesian binary world of the equations we've all absorbed from the wider (and mostly western) culture of "human=intelligent & self-aware, everything else=not intelligent nor self-aware". I've remarked that St. John of Damascus once used the term "hypostasis" not only to denote individual human persons, but also particular animals (this horse and that horse), and so on. The story of Noah's ark is not simply the story about the

survival of humanity, but of animals.

All this brings me to my two off-the-end-of-the-twig high octane speculations of the day: firstly, what if our tests of “self-awareness” in dogs, cats...whatever... are simply the wrong test? What if our obsession with mirrors and so on is more of a comment on the human predisposition toward narcissism rather than self-recognition and awareness? What if it is a pathology as much as it is an indicator of self-awareness? What if animals do not respond to the “mirror test” because they think it’s rather silly and uninteresting?

Don’t laugh, because in my Shiloh’s case, I noticed exactly this behaviour. The big mirror in my master bathroom is visible from my bed. The first few nights I had her, she would bark at her reflection in the mirror. On one occasion, as she sat on the bed barking at her reflection, something amazing happened: she cocked her head in that wonderful way that dogs do, and then, cocked it in the opposite direction. And immediately the barking at her reflection stopped, and has not resumed. It’s as if, in that moment, she understood that the dog in the mirror was her. At that moment, she lost interest, and has not barked at herself since.

This leads me to my second high octane speculation of the day, one with much more profound implications, one sparked by Bunny’s metaphysical questions, and by all those videos of octopuses watching each other solve problems, of crows solving intricate multiple-step puzzles (and using tools to do it), of African Gray Parrots forming sentences and asking questions, of gorillas using sign language, and add to this all those stories of saints with their bears, or befriending lions, or surrounded by wild birds who seem to flock to them: or of those videos of pigeons attacking 5G towers and removing the wires: *something is going on* in the animal world, but what? And my speculative answer is, what if something is causing them to “wake up” for whatever reason, to take the next big “cosmic leap” in intelligence? What if, in response to

humanity's insanity in trying to develop artificial intelligence, this is nature's way of balancing things out? What if, indeed, armies are being raised right under our noses, and we're too stupid to see it?

See you on the flip side...

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