

# INDIFFERENCE: DISORDER OR NORM?

On indifference in the world of animals and on whether, with great effort, humans can manage to detach themselves from their biological nature.



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**I**t all depends on who indifference pertains to. There is a certain rule of animal behavior, that social species, including humans, are less indifferent to the harm or injustice done to representatives of their own kind than are species that spend their adulthood alone. This is perfectly understandable, because no community would survive without empathy, or the ability to share the feelings of others.

## Social rapport

In social animals, the ability to share the feelings of others leads to compassion and eagerness to help. This fosters bonds between members of the community, without which no family or herd could survive. However, a "herd" that is too big, for example the entire *homo sapiens* population, starts suffering from what could be referred to as the critical number syndrome. The idea here is that there is a certain population limit for each species – once the population exceeds a specific number, behaviors start to emerge that contradict the care that had previously been shown towards members of the group. Such behaviors involve indifference or even aggression towards others. One example can be found in lemmings. If their population grows too large, they leap into the sea in masses and swim to certain death. Mothers do not try to save their children, bonds cease to exist. In turn, the excep-

tionally sociable and family-oriented badgers can turn fratricidal when the density in their burrows (referred to as setts) exceeds some critical number.

Our species, too, is subject to the same laws as those governing the lives of other social mammals, so we can expect that excessive population density does not have any good influence over us, either. The fact that we are growing increasingly indifferent to the world around us may be explained in terms of changes in perception. We largely live our lives on the Internet, where we are extremely sensitive to "likes" and "hates." Back in the real world, there is not enough empathy left in us. Aside from that, the reality is often dirty, smelly, and it may indeed "bite." Sharing the feelings of others is much easier when things smell nice. In my opinion, this is the gist of human indifference – it is much easier than getting ourselves involved in something than might get us dirty. We live in times when convenience is king. If something is difficult, it needs to be made easier. Easy has become synonymous with good, healthy, and valuable. Want to lose some weight? Take a pill. Want to be a good person? Donate a small amount of money to charity. After all, it is so easy. Empathy must be easy, too. Empathy is the antithesis of indifference and should be a prelude to offering real help.

Until recently, empathy was believed to be found only in our species. Today, we know that other species practiced it in its full glory long before we ever found out about our own humanity. Unfortunately, scientific evidence of its existence outside the human world comes at the cost of the suffering of thousands of animals. Let us imagine the following situation: two rats were locked in two different cages, but they could see and hear each other. When one of them pulled at



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a small chain, it got a treat, but the other one got an electric shock. The first rat quickly realized what was happening and did not even try to touch the chain despite feeling hunger. The rat was hungry, but not indifferent to the suffering of another rat.

Let us move to a different lab: two mice were locked in one cage, but one of them was trapped in a small transparent box where it could not move. Both were hungry, and there was a selection of delicious treats in the food dispenser. The mouse that was free to move did not bother to look at the food. Instead, she attempted very stubbornly to free the trapped mouse. Someone might say that the mouse was stupid, because she could first eat and then try to rescue her friend. Such a someone would be a great example of a person affected by indifference. Such a person cannot empathize with someone who is suffering or share in that suffering, which immediately instills an imperative to help.

Today, we know of various human psychological disorders can be linked to indifference, perhaps even pathologically so. But not everyone who hits an animal while driving and fails to stop, not every hunter, and not every person breeding animals for fur is a psychopath. Certainly, a psychiatrist would not diagnose

most such people as having any such disorder or being abnormal in this respect. In my opinion, however, anyone who causes people or animals to suffer and does so for other reasons than self-defense lacks the ability to share the feelings of others. Otherwise, they would not act like this.

## Naturally empathetic

How does empathy arise? In a sense, we learn it starting from the early weeks of our lives. The brain of every newborn mammal, and this also means the human brain, is as immature as its body. Through contact with its surroundings, it learns to be a human, a mouse, or an elephant. This process largely involves mirror neurons. Their name itself shows perfectly well what they are responsible for. Just as mirror reflections copy our activity in a faithful way, so mirror neurons teach babies how to emulate family behaviors. Of course, this is a considerable simplification, because what we will be like as adults is determined by a lot more processes and circumstances in life, as well as elements of our genetic heritage, but there is nonetheless a good chance that a child raised by empathetic parents will be empathetic as well.

A chimpanzee family



I am talking here about “children” in different species. For instance, chimpanzees and bonobos in fact quite often have children born with Down’s syndrome. In fact, the symptoms of this disease in people and in apes are not very different. Intellectual and physical incapacity depends on the severity of the disease. Even apes severely affected, however, have been observed to live quite long lives by the standards of the condition. All members of the family take care of not only children, but also adults affected by the syndrome. Young apes thereby gain experience in what it means to be a chimpanzee or a bonobo. In the future, they look after the weak in the same way as their parents or older siblings. Apes without such role models, in turn, are a lot more likely to be indifferent to the needs of other representatives of their own species.

However, empathy among animals may go much further, beyond the framework of the family or even species. Many years ago, a certain researcher of African faunas (I do not remember his name) observed a strange couple in a savanna: a male zebra and a male wildebeest that were practically inseparable. They grazed next to each other, and when a signal was raised

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to flee, the zebra would lay its head on the wildebeest’s rump and they would run together. After longer observations, the researcher realized that the zebra was blind. No one ever proved why the wildebeest risked its life for the sake of a blind zebra – but I nevertheless know why: because they had been friends for a long time, and true friendship, not only among people, expresses itself as “us, rather than me.” We could suspect that if the wildebeest had lost its friend for some reason, it would have helped another animal.

## Learning to be indifferent

Just as we learn to be empathetic, however, we can also learn to be indifferent. A friend of mine who is vegan and very sensitive to the suffering of animals told me a story from her childhood. She was on vacation, visiting a relative who lived in the countryside. The backyard was ruled by a fat young piglet. Bought by the owner several months earlier, the piglet had become friends with the whole family. It would accompany the mistress of the house to a bus stop and the kids to school. When he reached the weight of around 220 pounds, a butcher was called and killed the unfortu-

nate animal behind the barn. The kids cried and asked why. They were told in reply, “Because a pig exists to be eaten.” My friend returned to her city, whereas her cousins stayed in their village and continued to learn not to react when they heard cries for help, when another pig, calf, or chicken was slaughtered. After that, it gets easier to walk indifferently past a door behind which a dog, a kid, or a wife is being beaten severely.

In some sense, such “urban” indifference to suffering is even worse. City residents wash their hands of accountability. They refuse to think about where meat, milk, and eggs actually come from, because they are too “sensitive” to see the truth and take responsibility for factory farms and slaughterhouses. They all “love” animals and nature, but in a convenient way, with no sacrifices, in front of their computers and TV screens.

Several years ago, both in the press and on Radio TOK FM, I talked about an experience that I can only describe as the pinnacle of indifference from members of my own species. My readers and listeners were outraged, though maybe my texts are read and my shows listened to only by people who are not indifferent. Still, I do not believe that, among the at least 100 people who failed to react in the situation I will now describe, there was not a single one who would describe himself or herself as a “sensitive person”...

I live out in the country, and the road leading to my home has a several-mile section that runs through a forest, with many turns. On that November evening, it was already quite dark. After one of the turns, the headlights of my car lit up a large animal tossing about in my lane, probably the victim of an accident. I stopped my car a few yards away, because otherwise I would have ended up in a ditch, but turned the headlights so they would light up what seemed to be a dog. But as I was running to the animal, I realized it was not a dog. Rather, it was a young male wild boar that weighed around 175 pounds and was desperately trying to flee, but he could only move his front legs. He kept pounding them on the asphalt, but he could not lift his paralyzed hindquarters. He looked at me with mortal fear in his eyes, but he let me help him.

I do not know where I got the strength from, but I managed to get him to the side of the road. Every car that drove by could see us. I waved my hands and ran out onto the road. No one even slowed down. I only wanted someone to help me carry the boar to the car. After half an hour and several dozen cars that drove by, I decided to deal with the problem myself. I took a blanket out of the car trunk and managed to roll the boar onto it. After that, I slowly dragged him to the car. “But now what? I’m not strong enough to put him inside,” I thought, so I tried again to stop the cars that were driving by. I did not look like a thug, I was crying, because I felt helpless and tired, and the poor animal, wrapped up in the blanket, lay at my feet. No one stopped. No one even asked what had happened.

They were probably in a hurry to eat dinner and watch their favorite show. It was cold and dark. It was raining, and they were tired after work.

But then a true “miracle” happened. The wild animal itself, though scared, allowed me to put him on the floor on the passenger’s side. I slid the passenger seat as far back as I could, and the boar dragged itself inside using its front legs. I only helped him lift his rump. When I started the car, the boar jumped nervously, but a moment later he calmed down. There was less terror in his eyes. As I was driving, I was already planning the construction of a special cart that would take the place of the boar’s hind legs. Unfortunately, there was ultimately no need for that, because in addition to the trauma to his spine, the boar had multiple internal injuries. He died. The only good thing was that he died in peace, not harassed by village dogs or finished off by an enthusiast of wild boar meat. I think that before he died he even regained his hope that he would pull through. Unfortunately, I myself lost my hope in human empathy.

It cannot be ruled out that such behavior often results from fear. Of course, that was not the case in the situation I described, because for someone to realize the victim was a wild animal, they would have had to stop and get out of the car. But indifference to the suffering of animals may indeed result from fear, when the only thing we know about animals are biased myths – about boars being big and scary, about rabies flying through the air, and about bats getting tangled in our hair and such stereotypical depictions as those in the Hound of the Baskervilles or Jaws. I blame this situation first of all on the system of education and secondly on the media. School curricula, moreover, do not facilitate better understanding of the animals closest to us, namely the higher vertebrates, but instead focus more on *Paramecium caudatum* and *Euglena viridis*. There is no school subject that offers hope of fostering empathy, no teaching of ethics in the broad, ecological sense. Instead, the media delight in headlines like “child bitten by dog,” and nature channels broadcast shows with the words “natural born killers” in their titles.

Finally, we must not omit to mention the flawed laws regulating the subject and the broad approval of society for the treatment of animals like objects. Both are consequences of the appetite for meat. It is very difficult to explain why we should show different treatment to pigs vs dogs, to cows vs cats, to chickens vs canaries, to horses bred for meat vs those used for riding purposes, to carp vs goldfish. The same holds true for the animals bred for fur and the equally “furry” pets that lounge around on our sofas. So long as indifference towards the needs of various species of animals, their suffering, and death may be rewarded with wallets full of money, we will close our eyes and cover our ears, because it is simply more convenient and easier. ■

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