Life in translation
*Commentary on **Broom** on Animal Welfare*

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Abstract: This commentary emphasizes Broom's (2014) attack on "the widely stated human prejudices" that prevent modern humans from understanding and communicating with animals of other species. As a student and scholar of what is now referred to as literary animal studies, I find one of these biases — anthropocentrism (human exceptionalism) — of particular concern because much of the literature I study is valued only for its concern with animals presented as so remarkably similar to human beings that they are read as symbols or allegorical representations of the human rather than real animals: when some of these animal characters speak what seems to be human language, they are commonly belittled as anthropomorphic! Broom mentions that humans tend to find the ability to use language as humans do "particularly impressive" but not if it is used by a being who happens to be nonhuman. I suggest that such use in literature is often a device used to translate animals' real methods of communication into language that human readers can understand. The hope is that this will lead to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the animals in question: what animals are really like, how they see and respond to their Umwelt or surround, and what would really be involved in meeting the needs they have. In other words, what would constitute welfare from that animal's perspective?

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Reading *Sentience and Animal Welfare*, I found myself particularly drawn to two points Broom (2014) emphasizes in his Preface: first, that he intends his book "to account for the widely stated human prejudices" he believes prevent us from actually understanding and communicating with animals of other species and, second, that among these often anthropocentric biases, the most harmful is the assumption that some animals -- humans and mammals specifically -- "have brains that function at a completely different level from those of birds, fish, or invertebrate animals such as octopus, squid, lobsters or spiders" (Broom, 2014) . This is music to the ears of the author of *Cockroach* (Copeland, 2003).

In the body of the book, Broom notes that humans tend to find the ability to use words as we humans do "particularly impressive." This fact that led to the ape language experiments (explored in Copeland, 2012) and other studies of human-like language in non-human species. I suggested that such studies often began as efforts to understand the languages these animals actually use to communicate with others of their kind and, since humans are not their only neighbors, with other nonhumans. The emphasis of the experiments, however, soon shifted to

testing the animals' ability to understand and use human language, to answering questions about how human language developed, and to explaining what these beings could tell us about what it means to be human. Ironically, this is exactly the focus Broom suggests will prevent us from "hearing" the other[-than-human] "words" that they actually produce and from appreciating the sophisticated modes of communication that have evolved in other sentient beings (Bloom, 2014, 45).

Perhaps these points struck me so powerfully because, as a scholar of literary animal studies, I have been forced for years to defend what many denounce as anthropomorphic devices in animal literature — talking animals, for instance — as means of translating the nonhuman protagonist's actual mode of communication into words that humans can or will "hear." Whereas Broom, convinced that science and scientific language can transform human biases, makes this the basis of the animal welfare education he proposes in his conclusion, I am convinced that only story-telling can effect such a change. Throughout my reading of *Sentience and Animal Welfare*, I found myself wishing for the stories behind all the studies and statistics — the animals rather than the facts about them. Other nonfiction writers on animal sentience and feeling — Sally Carigher (1944), Rachel Carson (1956), Marc Bekoff (2008), Jonathan Balcombe (2011), Sy Montgomery (2015), Carl Safina (2015), and Elizabeth Thomas (2009) come to mind. They support science with anecdote, coming close to the power of fiction in a way that Broom does not.

Such writers use not only human intelligence but also intelligence stimulated by imagination. They know that stories carry the reader into the worlds of the nonhuman or human other, metamorphosing us into the animal itself, embedding us in its niche in the Umwelt. I suspect that this is possible because of the deep well of our shared evolutionary metamorphosis from the spark of life into the tangle of species we are still in the process of learning to comprehend. Story-telling allows us to experience life as the other experiences it, using the senses that animals rely on, however like or unlike our own they may be. In the process we not only learn to envy the dog's nose and the bat's echolocation, but also to understand what such beings really need in order to be well and healthy and happy. We come to understand what welfare really means for that individual being, an understanding which must, in the final analysis, be the basis of animal welfare.

Perhaps imagination is as much a sense as sight or smell, and humans may glean through it as much insight about the world around them as dogs do from their avid reading of the doggie newspaper on their daily walks or runs through what Sy Montgomery calls the Smell Lane (Montgomery, 2015). Her Border Collie, Sally, and all our domestic companions "*straddle two worlds: those of their human families, and those of their animal neighbors. Sometimes they can tell us about the larger, wilder world outside our walls and windows….And this is one of the many miracles of living with even the most common of pets. Once in a while, they can give us a glimpse of the unseen lives of our unseen neighbors — wild animals who are near at hand but, at least by humans, are little understood.*" Once in a while human artists, like Sy or like Barbara Gowdy in her novel *The White Bone* (2000), can give us a glimpse of the unseen lives of the neighbors as well.

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