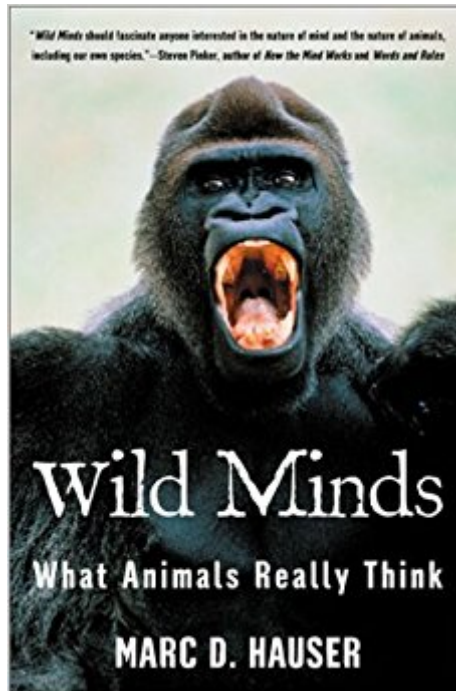




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Wild Minds: What Animals Really Think



Synopsis

Do animals think? Can they count? Do they have emotions? Do they feel anger, frustration, hurt, or sorrow? At last, here is a book that provides authoritative answers to these long-standing questions. Most popular science books tend to misrepresent animals, presenting them either as furry little humans or as creatures that cannot feel at all. Marc D. Hauser, an acclaimed scientist in the field of animal cognition, uses insights from evolutionary theory and cognitive science to examine animal thought without such biases or preconceptions. Hauser treats animals neither as machines devoid of feeling nor as extensions of humans, but as independent beings driven by their own complex impulses. In prose that is both elegant and edifying, Hauser describes his groundbreaking research in the field, leading his readers on what David Premack, author of *The Mind of an Ape*, calls "a masterful tour of the animal mind."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A penetrating, entertaining, and up-to-the-minute book on the minds of animals."
—Steven Pinker, author of *The Language Instinct*
"A welcome addition to the growing body of work on animal thought."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

Marc D. Hauser is a professor at Harvard University, where as a Fellow of the Mind, Brain, and Behavior Program he performs laboratory research, supplemented by fieldwork around the world. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife and their menagerie of animals.

This is a report of ongoing studies, by many in different fields, of whether animals experience "moral emotions, feelings such as guilt, shame and embarrassment", if they're capable of inhibiting their own desires, if they "understand the impact of their" decisions, etc. I'm not sure how objective Mr. Hauser is however as, to me, he seems determined to have his opinion prevail as I can't recall one study he's accepted as valid. I'm sorry too that the studies are not definitive.

Vervet monkeys make one cry when a cheetah approaches; a different cry when an eagle flies overhead, and yet another cry when a human is near. It's a pity Marc Hauser makes no attempt, Edgar-Rice-Burroughs-style, to transliterate that last cry: I'd like to know the vervet word for "human". But though Hauser acknowledges the many species that exchange sounds that are very close to being "words", he argues convincingly that they do not have language. That's disappointing, of course, for those of us with that Dr Doolittle urge for closer communication with animals, but clearly how things are. And despite the subtitle "What animals really hink" Hauser concludes that we are too different ever to truly know that: not only will we never settle down with a lion or dog and exchange views about politics and sex and art; but much of their behaviour will remain enigmatic to us. We simply can't imagine or empathise our way into knowing what they are thinking. Many people, anthropomorphising wildly, like to imagine that they can. But there are always alternative explanations for animal behaviour, and no way of checking which is the correct one. Nor do animals have a "moral sense", as is argued in the final section of the book. Though animals do cooperate, and will sacrifice themselves or their interests for the benefit of others. On that question I'm not so sure that the animal form of "ethics" is really qualitatively different from the human, despite the cultural ideas we heap up around concepts of "morality". But that's an argument about human thought, and therefore outside the scope of the book. In some ways the earliest parts of the book are the most interest. Animals don't have language, but they do have tools for understanding the world: dividing reality into classes of objects, engaging in rudimentary mathematics, and creating mental maps of the physical world. This section of the book could be usefully read by anyone still believing, along with the previous generation of French philosophers, that a chair, for example, is a linguistic construct rather than an object of a certain kind. Animals deal with reality in ways that strongly suggest that their perception of the world, and their organisation of the world into different classes of things, by edibility, animate or inert, sharp or soft, green or blue, and so on, is at the fundamental building-block level similar to ours. Clearly there is a world without language, let alone text. The book doesn't show us, as its sub-title claims, "What

animals really think", but it does contain a great deal of fascinating information on how animals organise their information about the world, the kind of guesses they make about the behaviour of others, the cries and signals that became the building-blocks of our languages, and much else besides. And it's not the most misleading title in this genre: consider the "Penguin English Dictionary". A splendid resource, certainly, but penguins don't seem to respond to any of it ... Anyway, you can't use Hauser's book to "talk to the animals either", but at least you will know more about why you can't. Recommended. Cheers! Laon

I was surprised with the negative comments on this book, so I thought I would share my opinions. This book will give you ample talking points to consider with your friends/family: Does this combination of experiments show that animals have self-awareness? Did this animal begin using a tool because they were taught or because they planned a course of action? What other systems do animals use to navigate and explore the world? The book begins by describing how research, both generally and specific to animal models, should be carried out. It also encourages you to think about what types of experiments would need to be implemented in order to tackle questions concerning animal behavior. It then dives into a myriad of animal experiments that demonstrate what we know about what animals think, how they learn, and other interesting questions. If large amounts of experimental data bores you, I would not recommend this book. However, if you are looking for an exhaustive, scientific exploration of animal minds and behavior, this is the one.

People often think that science should be conclusive, like a good mystery novel. This book illustrates, in an entertaining, layman-accessible style, what most topics of scientific study really give us. Through a satisfyingly large selection of anecdotal and experimental citations, Hauser explores the process of determining animals' motivations using only behavioral evidence. From this limited angle it's difficult to get very far, but he puts forth a number of viable hypotheses. His conclusions are presented gracefully, acknowledging that other people might interpret the evidence differently. I haven't known of many scientists (or even professors) who could do that! I really like the "tools" analogy and the explorations and comparisons with the human infant, as well as his captivating writing style. Maybe we will never find out exactly what goes through our pets' minds as they interact with us, but this book is the best, most realistic discussion I've come across. It is honest and doesn't take any questionable authority. And it makes a great read for people who are somewhat intellectual but are bored stiff by the likes of "Nature". I was also happy to learn that Marc D. Hauser is a homeboy of mine... I wasn't exactly a Pit Punk, but in my college days I spent a lot of time in

that area - in the Film Archives in particular. I wonder how close we came to crossing paths.

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