



## The Nature Institute

Dear Friends,

One problem we constantly come up against in our work here at the Institute has to do with the differences between our own human experience and the meaningful activities we try to describe in other organisms. Those activities include purpose-like behavior and the cognitive aspects of perception. How can we characterize such activities in a paramecium or elephant without reading, or seeming to read, features of our own behavior and perception into organisms very unlike us?

In her article on the restoration of bald eagles in this issue, Henrike indirectly alludes to the problem when she remarks: “It is not so easy to be aware of and concerned about the disappearance of creatures less conspicuous than the emblematic bird, such as many amphibians, reptiles, fish, insects, spiders, song birds, and more.” What are the reasons that we come to value and rally behind certain creatures, while we attend to others—regardless of their ecological significance—much less?

Craig faces the problem of anthropomorphism in one of its more extreme forms when he asks, “Do Flowers Hear Bees?”—except that in this case we are not speaking of anthropomorphism proper:

I’ve noticed in the literature a tendency to animalize plants as a means of giving them more credence as “substantial” beings on earth that we should be more aware of and care for. But this is not at all necessary. Plants are remarkable creatures in their own ways. We don’t need to analogize them with animals, which scientists do when they refer to “neurobiology” in plants.

And Steve comes up against this problem in a yet different way when he discusses the “purposive” character of life. In his feature article, he writes that the activity of proteins in the human body is “graceful, artistic, purposive, and meaningful.” This is not language typically used when describing molecules, and yet—given all the research findings—it seems much more suitable than all the talk of “molecular mechanisms” that are supposed to make life happen. The mechanistic language distorts our picture of living processes.

At the Institute our struggle to find the right descriptive language for the living qualities of life is ongoing. The wrestling with ideas and language sometimes leads to heated (if also friendly!) debates among ourselves. We don’t expect the issues to go away any time soon.

To perceive phenomena carefully and then to work to articulate experience in adequate ways is something we focus on during our year-long foundation course, which you can read about in this issue. It is heartening to experience the willingness of participants to challenge accepted paradigms and to strive to bring phenomena to expression in fresh and context-sensitive ways. This too is ongoing work, and we are glad that through the course, participants and teachers alike have the opportunity to stretch their abilities in the effort to let life manifest itself more fully.

Craig Holdrege

Steve Talbott

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### *In Context*

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Copies of *In Context* are free while the supply lasts. All issues are posted on the Institute website.

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