

The Reflection We Resist

By Julia Weissman

After Jane Goodall's passing, I have found myself reflecting on how her life's work, breaking the boundaries between humans and animals, resonates through the words of Frans de Waal and G.A. Bradshaw. Both *Mama's Last Hug* and *Elephants on the Edge* challenge readers to confront the moral and emotional connections that link humans and animals. De Waal's account of Mama the Chimpanzee's recognition of Jan van Hooff reveals the empathy and social awareness that shape chimpanzee life, while Bradshaw's portrayal of Happy the Elephant tracing the white "X" on her forehead expands this understanding into questions of consciousness and identity. I agree with both authors' rejection of the outdated notion that emotion and morality are uniquely human. Together, their work reveals that denying animal emotions is not an act of scientific neutrality, but rather a defense mechanism that extends into other forms of exclusion, from the way we treat immigrants to the way we confine animals. In unison, de Waal and Bradshaw call for a reimagining of personhood that transcends species boundaries, asking us to see empathy not as something that separates us from other creatures, but as a shared inheritance that binds all sentient life.

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Frans de Waal's *Mama's Last Hug* opens with the image of an elderly chimpanzee named Mama, frail and nearing death, recognizing her longtime friend, Jan van Hooff, after years apart. When Jan enters the dying chimpanzee's night cage, de Waal describes how "Mama has an ecstatic grin, a much more expansive one than is typical of our species" (13). Mama then "reaches for Jan's head while he bends down. She gently strokes his hair, then drapes one of her long arms around his neck to pull him closer" (13). For de Waal, this act of recognition "was typically Mama: she must have sensed Jan's trepidation about invading her domain, and she was letting him know not to worry" (14). In this moment, de Waal reveals the emotional intelligence and empathy that define chimpanzee life, showing that Mama's tenderness is not an imitation of human feeling but an expression of her own. By beginning his book with this intimate scene, de Waal invites us to see animals not as lesser beings, but as emotional counterparts capable of the same love, reassurance, and recognition humans feel.

De Waal uses this encounter to challenge the notion that emotion distinguishes humans from other animals. By showing this emotional connection through real actions instead of abstract theory, he dismantles the illusion of human exceptionalism. He argues that the astonishment people express over such encounters says more about us than about the animals themselves: "That we are impressed by Mama remembering me is a sign of humanity's low opinion of animal emotional and mental capacities" (16). For de Waal, it is not that chimpanzees act human, but that humans persist in denying their emotional reality. "Anyone who knows chimpanzees realizes that they have excellent face recognition and long memories," he writes, emphasizing that traits like empathy and memory are not uniquely human but part of a

shared evolutionary inheritance (18). By framing the human surprise as a kind of ignorance, de Waal suggests that what we call scientific objectivity often hides a reluctance to confront our kinship with other species.

At the core of this denial, de Waal proposes, is the fear of losing humans' sense of superiority. He writes, "Disgust at the sight of apes was in fact widespread, but how could this be, unless the apes were telling us something about ourselves that we didn't want to hear?" (17). He brings examples from Queen Victoria's revulsion at chimpanzees to modern audiences laughing at videos of apes, tracing a long history of discomfort with our evolutionary closeness to them. Humans, he suggests, protect their sense of status by distancing themselves from animals that too clearly mirror human emotion and behavior. He furthers this by explaining that the problem is not that apes resemble us, but that they reveal parts of ourselves we would rather ignore. By turning feelings of disgust and denial into subjects of analysis, de Waal reframes the question about whether animals can feel into an ethical and psychological reflection on human insecurity and our need to feel superior.

Ultimately, de Waal shows that this fear-driven denial of animal emotion reflects the same hierarchies that divide humans from one another. He observes that when people laugh at apes' expressions or frustrations, their reaction is "a sign of recognition but also of unease with the uncomfortable closeness" (18). This reaction reveals how easily empathy can be withheld from those labeled as different or "other." Whether directed toward animals or marginalized human groups, this distancing allows systems of superiority to persist by denying shared experiences or shared emotions. Going back to Mama's embrace of Jan, de Waal challenges the mindset that sustains speciesism and inequality. This moment invites readers to

reconsider what it means to be human, suggesting that our ability to empathize is a mark not of separation from other species, but of what binds us to them.

While de Waal challenges the idea that empathy is uniquely human, G.A. Bradshaw pushes this idea further in *Elephants on the Edge*. She argues that animals not only feel emotion but also experience grief in similar ways that reveal our shared vulnerability. Her argument operates through language itself when she reframes identity with the question “Who is an elephant?” and the insistence that it is a “who,” not a “what” (1). This small shift in pronouns transforms elephants from objects to subjects. Her description of Happy, the Bronx Zoo elephant, takes this idea further as it reads almost like a human biography: “She is middle-aged, amiable, but known to keep to herself... As an infant, she was forcibly taken from her family in the Asian wild and shipped to the United States” (1). The words “forcibly taken” and “shipped” challenge what people often call “zoo transfer” or “relocation.” Instead, they resemble what we would use to describe human kidnapping. Later, when Bradshaw writes that Happy “has never experienced the traditional family life of her native culture,” she humanizes elephant society by calling it a culture, a word usually reserved for humans, and reminds us how captivity also erases the social belonging and togetherness that is important for personal well-being (1). In this way, Bradshaw’s language makes it impossible to dismiss elephants as emotionless.

Further, Bradshaw’s depiction of elephants living with grief and trauma challenges readers to confront the psychological and moral consequences of human exploitation. When she writes that elephants “show wrenching grief when a loved one dies or somehow departs forever,” the phrase

“wrenching grief” evokes a sense of grief so intense it seems to consume the body itself, showing that elephants can feel loss with the same physical and emotional intensity humans do (13). This portrayal affirms the reality of animal emotion and rejects the idea that their responses are unfeeling. She reinforces this by narrating that a mother may “grieve over her dead child for days . . . alternatively trying to revive the baby and caressing and touching the corpse” (11). Her repeated attempts to “revive” the calf show a refusal to accept loss, which mirrors human denial in the face of death. Together, these images reveal that elephants, much like humans, struggle with death and the pain of letting go. Grief blurs the line between our world and theirs.

If grief reveals an elephant’s emotional awareness, captivity shows the cost of denying it. Like de Waal, Bradshaw argues that the way humans treat animals is part of a broader human pattern of controlling what we might fear resembling us too closely. Within the Bronx Zoo, Bradshaw writes, elephants live by “a schedule shaped to human schedules and customs,” their days reduced to feeding times and medical check-ups instead of the “cycles and drama of birth and death” that define life in the wild (4). Bradshaw describes Happy’s “spare” quarters and the promises that the exhibit will close only “when one or two of the trio dies” (2). Captivity turns living beings into temporary displays. The mirror test, meant to prove elephants’ self-awareness, only makes this horror clearer: Happy “touched the white cross on her forehead while standing in front of the mirror” (5), recognizing herself for the first time. Yet, she was forced to return to a life of isolation. In fact, I believe this is further proof of suffering. Self-awareness without freedom is cruel, as Happy’s ability to recognize herself means she can also recognize her own confinement.

Here, evidence of intelligence becomes proof of human hypocrisy. It is the celebration of animal awareness without any willingness to honor it. Through this, Bradshaw reveals how captivity is not just physical restraint, but also psychological restraint. Elephants are aware enough to know what they have lost, but are powerless to change it.

Some scientists may argue that interpreting animal behavior as emotional or moral is misleading. From their perspective, gestures like Mama's embrace or Happy's reaction to the mirror are one-off experiences, or rather than showing empathy or grief, they reflect learned or instinctive responses. While animals may respond to pain or social cues, scientists suggest it doesn't mean they feel in the complex ways humans do. In fact, they believe that by describing animal actions in emotional terms, we risk misunderstanding what is actually happening and turning science into sentiment.

While these critics raise an important concern about the limits of interpretation, they fail to recognize that the authors' observations are not acts of sentimentality, but an acknowledgement of what connects rather than divides living beings. Both de Waal and Bradshaw reveal that the refusal to recognize emotion in animals mirrors the way humans deny empathy to one another. Our insistence on hierarchy and societal divides extends beyond species boundaries. The same mindset that allows us to confine elephants or dismiss chimpanzee grief also fuels the systems that justify racism, sexism, and the dehumanization of immigrants and marginalized groups. In each case, power depends on creating distance and on pretending others do not deserve the same emotional understanding as we do. De Waal and Bradshaw challenge that illusion by framing empathy as shared between all living beings. To accept this shared capacity is to accept the

responsibility that compassion cannot stop at the borders of our species, our nations, or our identities. In a world defined by division, their work asks us to imagine something radically simple: a way of living built on connection, where recognizing the emotions of another, human or not, is the first step toward justice.

WORKS CITED

- Bradshaw, G. A. *Elephants on the Edge: What Animals Teach Us about Humanity*. Yale University Press, 2009.
- De Waal, Frans. *Mama's Last Hug: Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.