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EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

Alex the Parrot

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Thinking about animals — and especially thinking about whether animals can think — is like looking at the world through a two-way mirror. There, for example, on the other side of the mirror, is Alex, the famous African Grey parrot who died unexpectedly last week at the age of 31. But looking at Alex, who mastered a surprising vocabulary of words and concepts, the question is always how much of our own reflection we see. What you make of Dr. Irene Pepperberg's work with Alex depends on whether you think Alex's cognitive presence was real or merely imitative.

A truly dispassionate observer might argue that most Grey parrots could probably learn what Alex had learned, but only a microscopic minority of humans could have learned what Alex had to teach. Most humans are not truly dispassionate observers. We're too invested in the idea of our superiority to understand what an inferior quality it really is. I always wonder how the experiments would go if they were reversed — if, instead of us trying to teach Alex how to use the English language, Alex were to try teaching us to understand the world as it appears to parrots.

These are bottomless questions, of course. For us, language is everything because we know ourselves in it. Alex's final words were: "I love you."

There is no doubt that Alex had a keen awareness of the situations in which that sentence is appropriate — that is, at the end of a message at the end of the day. But to say whether Alex loved the human who taught him, we'd have to know if he had a separate conceptual grasp of what love is, which is different from understanding the context in which the word occurs. By any performative standard — knowing how to use the word properly — Alex loved Dr. Pepperberg.

Beyond that, only our intuitions, our sense of who that bird might really be, are useful. And in some ways this is also a judgment we make about loving each other.

To wonder what Alex recognized when he recognized words is also to wonder what humans recognize when we recognize words. It was indeed surprising to realize how quickly Alex could take in words and concepts.

Scientifically speaking, the value of this research lies in its specific details about patterns of learning and cognition. Ethically speaking, the value lies in our surprise, our renewed awareness of how little we allow ourselves to expect from the animals around us. VERLYN KLINKENBORG

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