

In Few Words: “The Animal Intelligence”

After:

Humans have been trying to identify intelligence in other animals and measure it. We have been doing this, maybe, because we want to understand ourselves. In this episode of In Few Words, they make an incredible job trying to explain these topics to a broad public.

It starts talking about the mirror self-recognition test, a test scientist used to make when they wanted to see if an animal had self-awareness. Some animals, besides us, pass it, for example chimps, dolphins and elephants. A psychologist says in this episode, “It’s so human to think what is going on inside other animals’ brains” and I agree strongly with her words.

After that, it talks about some experiments made in the last century where researchers tried to make a chimpanzee learn a human language; they failed, though. What they could do is teach a chimpanzee 150 words of a sign language. In spite of the failure of the first experiment, I think what they did is remarkable. A few years later, another kind of experiments started to be done when behaviorism appeared. Skinner showed that many animals can learn to do things if we teach them using the “rewards and punishments” method. This idea changed how humans see animals.

Obviously, they can’t end the episode without mentioning our biases when we try to measure intelligence. For example, they talk about how we thought that observing animals is enough to know if the animals are self-aware. Although it seems good at first, we are lacking a lot of information because there are plenty of things that animals feel that we cannot feel. As an example, dogs use their nose more than their eyes. Maybe it is more accurate to study them with their strongest tool than with ours.

Something that really called my attention was the Happy’s trial. Happy is a captured elephant and the US court is deciding whether she has to be free. The strongest reason being is that he passed the mirror test.