

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

THE ELEPHANT WITHIN

THE SOURCE: “Do Elephants Have Souls?” by Caitrin Nicol, in *The New Atlantis*, Winter/Spring 2013.

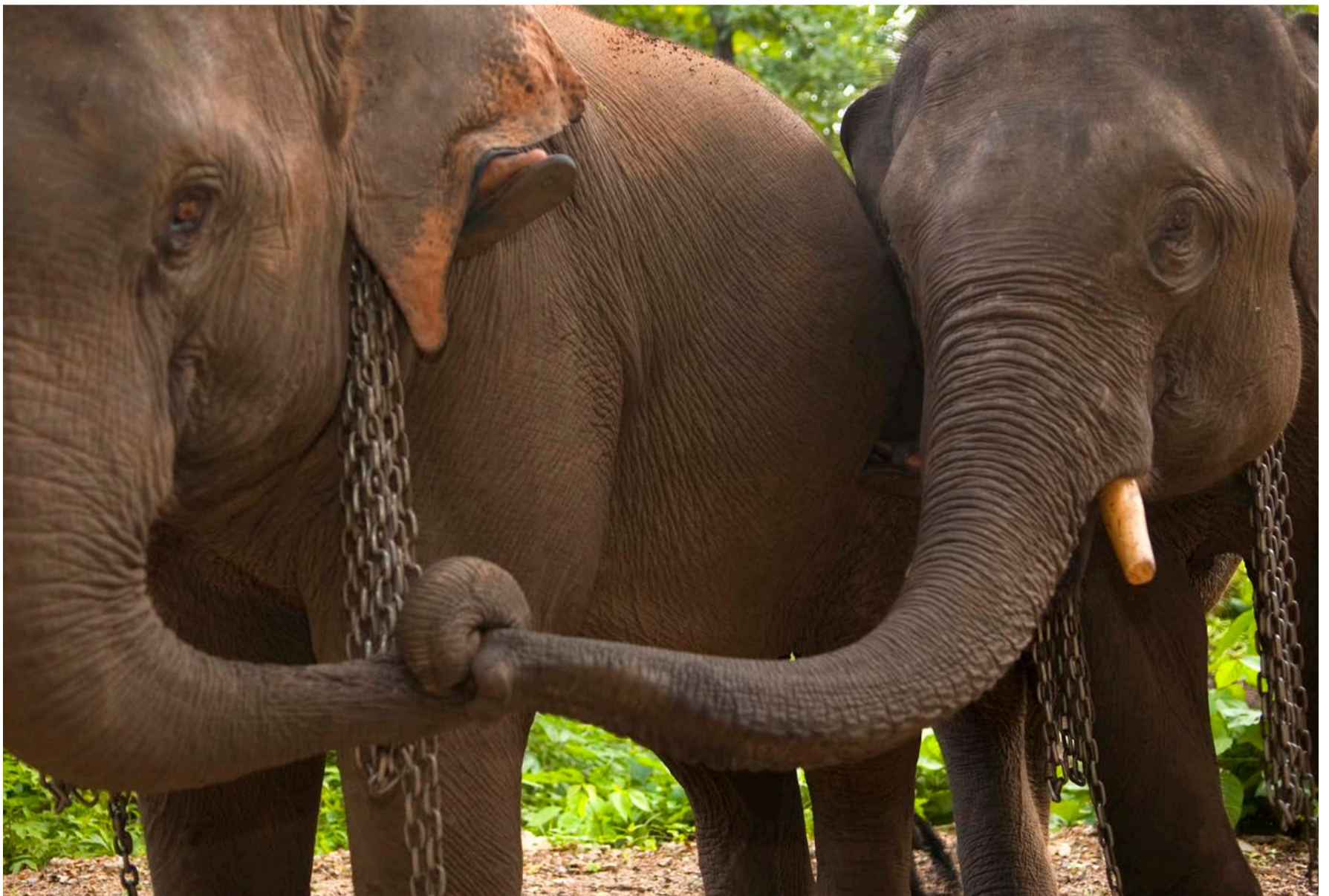
A WILD ELEPHANT ACCIDENTALLY BREAKS the leg of a passing camel driver, then scoots him under a tree and stands guard for a day until the man is discovered by a search party.

Upon being captured, a bull elephant audibly weeps, tears streaming from

his eyes. Around him other captive elephants lie prostrate, silently crying.

Placed in a sanctuary for elephants retired from zoos and circuses, two elephants who’d once worked in the same circus are reunited. It’s been 22 years. Put in adjacent stalls, they explore each other with their trunks and then try to climb in together. They both begin to roar loudly. Allowed in the same pen, they become inseparable from that day forward.

These and other stories collected from people who’ve worked or lived among elephants, and recounted in a long



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC STOCK

An elephant pair clasps trunks at the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

essay by Caitrin Nicol in *The New Atlantis*, raise a two-part question: Do elephants have consciousness? In other words, do they feel intensely, are they self-aware, do they think? And if they do, how should that change how we treat them?

Nicol considers these questions throughout her giant digest of popular writing about elephants, deciding, along the way, that a central obstacle to finding an answer is our taboo against anthropomorphism. One reason the taboo exists, she writes, is that “in modern Western science, the whole concept of life is so mechanical that, if you look closely, not even people are supposed to be anthropomorphized . . . terms such as *love*, *sorrow*, and *concern* have no place in an impoverished language of chemical transactions at the micro level.” Another reason for the taboo? It’s hard enough to interpret other humans’ thoughts and motives—let alone an animal’s.

Nicol starts her investigation with the basics. In his 1985 essay “Tool, Image, and Grave,” philosopher of biology Hans Jonas considered the activities regarded as unique to humans. As it turns out, Nicol notices, all three of these “indicators of important mental and spiritual qualities” are also associated with elephants.

While elephants do not fashion tools

in the form of reusable objects, they do use sticks to scratch themselves and twists of grass to clean their ears. They dig ponds, and cover the water with bark and grass to hide it. Asian work elephants have been found plugging their collar bells with mud, the better to sneak out at night and steal bananas.

Elephants have also been observed making images, an activity that requires transferring an idea into a concrete form. Zoo elephants have occupied themselves with doodling in the sand, and, given art supplies, have used them to draw. One matched paint colors to visitors’ clothing. Whatever meanings the drawings may have are anyone’s guess—they are either random scribbles or abstract art, depending on your aesthetic sensibility.

Elephants have been proven to pass a different “image test”: Positioned in front of mirrors, they—like very few other creatures, including dolphins, great apes, and

Positioned in front of mirrors, elephants—like dolphins, great apes, and the average 18-month-old human baby—can recognize themselves.

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Finally, and perhaps most hauntingly, elephants are the only animals known to commemorate their dead. They sometimes bury a fallen friend, and they stand vigil, even when coming across skeletons of strangers, or of the long departed. They react to ivory—in one case, to a bracelet worn on the wrist of a safari-going tourist.

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An elephant is born with a brain one-third its adult size, compared to one-quarter for humans, one-half for chimps, and 90 percent for most other mammals. The “greater span of growth outside the womb ... accompanies a more important role that nurture and learned skills play in the animal’s maturation,” Nicol notes. The literally civilized animals have developed sophisticated communication systems to impart learning. One system uses low-pitched rumbles

that travel through the air. In the 1990s, an insect biologist, Caitlin O’Connell-Rodwell, discovered that elephants tap into these rumbles seismically, through their front feet or by laying their trunks on the ground; they can also detect distant footfalls in this manner.

“Ironically, it has been the elephant’s misfortune that people find it wonderful,” Nicol writes. Hunters prize them as game. Their ivory is coveted for its beauty. They captivate audiences in circuses and zoos. But if elephants are intelligent and sociable enough to be capable of great psychological distress, they require special protection. Just how much and of what sort, however, is a thorny question.

Abolishing trophy hunting might seem a no-brainer to urbanites, but locals scratching out a living on the same ground as elephants sometimes regard them as intrusive pests. Animal welfare advocates will have to take people’s needs into account, too. On the other hand, conservationists must take a harder line with the ivory trade, which is responsible for the poaching of 25,000 elephants a year. (Africa alone was home to 26 million elephants two centuries ago; that population has dropped 98 percent.) African countries maintaining healthy elephant populations argue that they should

be allowed to sell their ivory, but poachers who work elsewhere can easily launder their wares through these countries.

Elephants eat a lot—50 pounds of roughage per animal per day—and those confined to parks are routinely culled to prevent overpopulation. This solution is troubling for a few reasons. First, elephant populations self-regulate according to the environment (“births go down in the years following a major drought”), and second, because of the animals’ social nature, decimating herds has contributed to the “collapse of elephant society” and “disrupted the transmission of elephant culture from one generation to the next.”

What of keeping these enormous animals captive for our entertainment? The best facilities cannot support the herd environment elephants are adapted to, and some animals live without a single pachyderm companion. Living in pens, the animals are bored, even when they are not in physical discomfort—and they often are. The structure of

elephants’ feet, made to absorb seismic waves, makes them “especially susceptible to distress . . . severe elephant foot problems are depressingly common in zoos and other captive situations, where the animals must stand on concrete.” Some American zoos, deciding that the elephant cannot ethically be kept captive, have sent their star attractions to sanctuaries.

The elephant is due these kindnesses, even if, Nicol concedes, its inner life remains opaque to us. She quotes the naturalist Henry Beston, who, in *The Outermost House* (1928), wrote, “We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. . . . In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time.” ■