

EAGLES AND AMBIGUITY

By Robert Marcuson

DNA research increasingly points to the similarities between human beings and all the other creatures on Earth. Yet the differences remain so profound and so many that it is easy to forget we are animals. A particularly striking difference for me is how the other animals live such comparatively straightforward lives, so much less complicated and confusing, so much less ambiguous. I learned this by watching eagles through an internet camera 95 feet above the ground.

Two bald eagles returned each spring to this same nest high in a loblolly pine. Their six-foot platform was both living area and nursery, and much in need of repair after long winter months of disuse. So much as any human would do, the birds set to work. Both birds worked steadily at their site, cleaning and refurbishing. They tossed out the old litter and flew in new twigs and sticks. Sometimes one eagle would bring in a fresh stick and carefully arrange it in place only to have its mate quickly remove and reset the stick in a new location. This kind of thing would likely cause conflict between me and my wife, but the eagles showed no animosity.

When finally the nest was ready, and over the course of another week or so, the slightly larger female produced three eggs for the center bowl of the nest. Then she set on them for another month. Both birds were hunters, so she occasionally left the nest for short periods, but only after meticulously embedding her eggs in a ball of down and feathers. While they set on the eggs, the nest continued to receive regular maintenance. Dead food, feces and fish bones were tossed, areas here and there tidied up. And of course the birds needed to eat. Sharp talons might produce a duck or seagull, but generally the eagles caught and flayed fresh fish. Both birds set on the eggs for warmth, but more often the male was the bird loitering at the edge of the nest, standing on an adjacent branch or flying about somewhere nearby. It rained and snowed and the nest rocked in the wind. After a month of such activity, and over another long week or so, the tiny eaglets hatched.

We watched all this from the Norfolk Botanical Garden's eaglecam, and sometimes it was astonishing to see. The first-to-hatch little eaglet flopped about among its siblings still in the egg. Struggling to hold head high, the agitated blurry fluff fell, flopped, staggered back up again. Mother eagle stood by, her head dwarfing the little bird, patiently holding in her beak a fleck of fish. She waited for the new eaglet to still its exertion long enough to insert the fleck into the tiny beak, mother's head and shoulder filling most of our 17-inch computer screen.

Strapped to the tree next door, the camera recorded also the sound of wind and creaking branches, even an occasional human voice drifting up from the path below. When the breeze blew from the right direction and not too strongly, we might hear eagle screeches and squawks. But they were not noisy birds. There was not a lot of idle chatter. Though not eagles ourselves, we easily intuit meaning for these bird sounds. But the

eagle's expression of alarm or delight on the arrival of more fish are nothing like language. I doubt you can even say, "Pass me the stick. No, the other one," in Eagle.

It's this language, I believe, that is a human being's primary source of confusion and ambiguity.

I must have become conscious of ambiguity when I was very young. The connection with language and words suggests it goes way back. One of my early confrontations with language was in 7th grade. Not arithmetic, something afterwards, before algebra and geometry, an educational experiment called New Math. Seldom a child to draw attention to myself, I found myself in a classroom argument with the teacher. She was saying something that made no sense and I was not getting it.

Finally I blurted. "You cannot have less than nothing!"

Now had Teacher been using words I already understood, like "minus" or "subtract", there never would have been a problem. But language clarity was not part of the New Math. I am not alone in this opinion. Kindergartner Sally from George Schulz's comic strip "Peanuts" suffered similarly. Sally mulled over sets, equivalent sets, one to one matching sets, non-equivalent and sets of one, sets of two, until she burst into tears. "All I want to know is how much is two and two?"

There was a span a few years later when I actively studied words. I often sat in my grandmother's wing chair--she kept turning on the table lamp for me--and sifted her stack of Readers Digest, circa 1960 and earlier. "Towards More Picturesque Speech" was a favorite column, also the vocabulary list. At the library, I often referenced the massive pedestaled dictionary, paying special attention to lists of synonyms and words meaning the same, but not quite. I spent an intensive few months later in high school with vocabulary builders with titles like "Word Power" and maybe "More Word Power". Learning so many new words meaning the same, but not quite, maybe infused me with my sense of ambiguity. And these books demonstrated the power of words to shape thought. I can nearly see the page where at once I discovered the words jingoism and chauvinism and felt the new words fragment my singular view of patriotism.

Learned quickly, many of these new words never made it out of short-term memory. I did feel their loss, and this, too, was part of learning. George Orwell's 1984 theme of limiting ideas by destroying their words was demonstrated to me as I began to forget some of my newly learned words. His book was on the optional reading list at Camden High, but I received my first Orwell from the Science Fiction Book Club.

I suppose I ought to define ambiguity. You may even catch me switching the word for another without telling you. But I hesitate to define. My idea of ambiguity shares space in my head with too many others, like Perspective, Perception, even Ambivalence, just naming a few. Such ideas and words abut and overlap and help me fine-tune my notions of what is. For me to impose a definition with synonyms and other words feels like poking a bag of water, pushing here, poking there, fiddling with the shape and still

not satisfied. My pre-internet thesaurus finds the word ambiguity falling squarely in the realm of Uncertainty. So I'll forgo definition for a few more examples.

Like the day soon after I received my beginner's driver's license. Missing my turn, I swung my father's Rambler around in the middle of Leigh Avenue. This initiated conversation with San Jose Police. I watched in the mirror as the uniformed patrolman approached my open window, ticket book already in hand.

"Where are you going?" he said.

I had no thought whatsoever of being the smartass, but nevertheless snapped back, "The other way."

Perhaps there was nothing strictly ambiguous in his question or my answer. At least he did not give me a ticket.

But clearly his stiffened stance and the tone of his, "What did you say?" indicated some misunderstanding had been committed.

Clearly ambiguous was a conversation involving another uniform a few years later. I met General Westmoreland at The Presidio in San Francisco. After a morning of preparation and cleaning up, and now clad in my blue pajamas, I stood at attention at the foot of my army hospital bed. General Westmoreland was conducting inspection as generals often do. He walked the line of beds, speaking a few words to each soldier in turn.

On reaching my bed he asked, "Where were you hit?"

I answered, "In my side."

The General threw me a peculiar and hard-to-forget look and spoke a few less memorable words before continuing down the line of beds. But his angled eyebrows stayed with me. Perhaps I should have said, "In my side, Sir!" Certainly I should have. But there must be ambiguity even in eyebrows. Years later the realization came out of nowhere--I must have still been thinking about it--that General Westmoreland was not asking about my health. He was inquiring about the location in Vietnam where I had been shot. Later, I would discover the General did have a special interest in my Army unit.

Ours was a simple ambiguity over the meaning of the word where. Some ambiguity is, well, even more ambiguous.

The television raged one day in 1975 when communist tanks rolled into Saigon. I spent much of that afternoon and evening hanging around with my friend Jay in The Hub. We were part of a small squadron of Colorado College vets spending our GI bills at the foot of Pikes Peak. In the student union's Hub they sold a cup of coffee for a quarter and a cheese omelet for another dollar and quarter, cash flow not yet the primary purpose of higher education. The new Pong machine resided downstairs in the basement with 3.2 beer and television with Walter Cronkite. All the vets were upset to some degree over this unexpected end to the Vietnam War, but Jay and I were the two with nothing better to do. So we commiserated and lamented over coffee and beer, pong and pizza, spending more

hours together than ever before in melancholy personal communion. Only at day's end did he make a remark about how the war turned out that clued me. Our heads were not sharing the same place after all. For Jay was mourning having lost the war. I was regretting there had been any war at all. These are not the same.

Ambiguity found me again a year later, far from both Colorado and my native California. I'd driven to Vermont to attend an intensive summer Russian language program. My least spoken answer to "Why learn Russian?" was my curiosity: how is it that people so much alike behave so violently towards each other. Later, I even studied the language in Moscow.

Among this particular Vermont group of sometimes-teenager language students, I was second oldest, middle between the kids and the retired sea captain. On an exam, I translated into Russian a sentence describing what I had eaten for "dinner." Teacher liked to discuss our mistakes in class and as I was the only of 20+ students seemingly ignorant of the word "dinner", it was my turn. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner is pretty easy for a Russian. 3 events, 3 words. But not so easy for me translating from English. Because the English "dinner" might mean lunch, it might mean dinner, that is to say, supper. Imagine me, the embarrassed older kid, trying to defend himself before the native-Russian Babushka who had used the test for several years and never seen an answer like mine. It was the red-dressed girl sitting one row up who rescued me. She agreed that the English "dinner" can be used for both midday (obed) and evening (uzhin) meal, though of course she never used it my way. Likely the problem was caused by my being from the far west. A few other students nodded their heads. Even the sea captain confirmed.

Many of my examples occurred at school. Perhaps it's the collaboration between learning and words. For an especially uncomfortable experience with ambiguity, we have to return to the college at the base of Pike's Peak.

I had earned college credits even before meeting General Westmoreland, so needed only two more years to graduate. This technicality released me from the Senior Seminar requirement for graduation, but not the Orals. I chose my oral exam inquisitors from the two professors I knew best. I even knew they were divorcing each other. What I didn't know was that attacking my exam answer was as good as attacking any spouse inclined to defend me. This fact is just local color. No ambiguity here, just me being dumb and not knowing certain human behaviors. I also did not know that a major purpose of Senior Seminar was to prepare for this Oral Exam. So while I was skipping the seemingly optional seminar for something more to my liking, maybe a course in Russian, all the other seniors were studying together, unitedly preparing for Orals. I cannot reproduce the question that got me into trouble as the blue book was long ago suppressed and destroyed. But there are multiple ways to interpret a question like: Describe the Spread of Homo Sapiens in the Americas. You might answer with a discussion of routes and land bridges, as did I. You might choose to depict cultures and their evolutions, as did everybody else. Clearly our starting point was the same, but our journeys did not

follow the same path or reach the same destination. I'm happy to say, I did pass my Orals and graduate. It may have been a split decision.

Too often we forget that words are slippery. (So too are the minds that use them, but we won't get into that.) Not only might a word have multiple meanings and mean something different to different people in the same conversation, words like to change with time. They won't stand still even for me. The same Woman's Movement that turned girls into women spoiled that early favorite of mine, Chauvinism. Women needed a word, of course, so I won't begrudge them one of mine. But the kidnapping of M. Chauvin was so complete the sorely-needed original meaning now seems regretfully lost.

Fortunately, most of our confusions caused by slippery words are too small to notice and don't really matter. When they do matter, well, life is not so much rocket science. We bumble along. Every day we bumble. A friend suddenly decides not to see you anymore and you don't know why. Or maybe it is you who is saying, "That is, too, what you said!" Misunderstanding occurs so frequently we hardly expect life to be any other way.

My wife Deale was leaving food out for a stray cat. I mildly disapproved. We already had two cats and there seemed little evidence this sleek one really needed a new home. When it snowed one day, she looked out the window and said she saw prints on the sidewalk. We might never have known of our miscommunication had I not sarcastically remarked on how she had already found a name for the stray cat. Prince, of course.

So I have reason to wonder if we ever really communicate. The eagles suggest Nature doesn't demand deep understanding and communication, only that we procreate. And God discourages communication, mixing up language as he did after the Tower of Babel Incident. Past that level of "Please pass the stick", maybe we are all of us spending life in our separate flesh and bone containers imagining that we communicate. The reality we think we all share together might be simply illusion. Delusion.

So I postulate Bob's Law. Bob's Law states simply: Miscommunication is the Norm. And the Corollary to Bob's Law: What can be understood in more than one way, will be.

About now you may be thinking, "Ok, Bob, the cat is cute, but this is a little nutty. Just too obviously you are wrong and are skidding off the cliff here. Humankind has thousands of years of arts, literature, philosophy and science, technology, massive construction, we drive rovers on Mars while sitting in Texas for crying out loud. How can all this be possible if our communication is so poor?"

Well, okay, you have a point. But give me a chance to topple you, Strawman. And so long as I am out on this limb, I might as well climb all the way up--and out--and sit on the limb of the tree next door to my eagles at 95 feet.

My three eaglets are all out of the egg now and approaching adult size, early adolescence say. The fluffy yellowish baby-bird stuff has given way to darker grayish

down, and now even that is poked through with small but real feathers. If they were human babies, you might coo and say they look just like their parents. Never true, of course, but we say it anyway. Both Mom and Dad eagle are away from the nest right now, out hunting as the mouths they feed are so much larger. Little fish flecks will no longer do. We once worried the last to hatch eaglet might starve. The two older siblings seemed to grab up all the food. Now the little one is as large as the rest of them.

One at a time the eaglets hop about and stretch their wings, showing off to each other. Soon they will be developed enough to jump from the nest to nearby branches, like crawling before learning to walk. Humans call this early development stage "branching", but the eaglets have no word for it.

I hear faint wing turbulence as an adult alights at the edge of the nest. No fish this time. The eagle stretches its wings to full extension, folds them, stands and stares at me.

I feel I must speak. It must be my DNA.

"Nice job," I say. "Building this nest, feeding these young and guarding them from crows and raccoons, cooperatively the two of you. For all these days and months. For all these thousands of years." The eagle blinks. I think it may be Dad. "And you managed all this without words, without language."

A multitude of nearby birds and insects produce an aural cloud of tweets, chirps and buzzes. All their songs mean pretty much the same, some variant of "Here I am." Sitting here on my creaky limb with the wind and sun, I am truly impressed by the efficiency of it all.

How strange that people in our age are so divorced from Nature. For many, Nature exists only on weekends or holidays, if then. It is something other. We even have a special word for it. We call it "Nature." Meaning what? Well, usually it is not "Here", it's not the "City", it is not "What I am doing today." At that school in Vermont, a nineteen-year-old New York City girl walked out of her dorm one summer night. She laid her head back and stared into the black sky and exclaimed, "What is that!"

What she had never seen before was the Milky Way.

Nature is the part of our world we share with eagles. Sticks, nests, eagles and eagle families are all built of the same stuff as skyscrapers and human beings. It's the here and now, the real world, the world of matter and energy. Gravity, too, I should say, sitting up here on my limb. And this world we share with the eagles really is rocket science. We drive rovers on Mars by using Engineerspeak and Mathematics, the least ambiguous of all languages. In this real world, two and two unambiguously equals four.

The world we don't share with eagles is everything else. We create this unshared world in our imaginations, building it and sharing what we can with words and the ideas we make from words. Two and two might be just about anything we want. All our ideas and concepts, values and moralities, courage and cowardice, religions and nations with all their various patriotisms... these are all in our heads. Our country exists by the same

kind of mutual agreement that gives green paper printed in Boston exchange value back in that other mental construct, Texas. Sure, the paper is real. But the value is in our heads. A Texas eagle sees dirt, not borders.

Human beings are different from eagles because the important things, those things more important than home and family and all our possessions, those things are all in our heads. That our imaginings are most important must be true, else why do we periodically risk and destroy people, homes and families and all the possessions for the sake of our valued abstractions?

It seems all those childhood hours spent with imaginary friends were not wasted after all.

Hoping for conversation, I say to the eagle, "I see by the scimitar curves of your beaks and talons how you are also an efficient fighting beast. Our human imaginations depict you eagles representing power, leadership, vision. Your talons carry olive branches and arrows."

Dad blinks at me and pecks at his feet. I am stunned. Dad's meaning is clear. His talons are for fish and the occasional duck. I want to say to him that we humans do not kill only for food and territory and mating rights. But I say nothing as then I might have to answer the eagle's question, "What else is there?"

"Our imagination," I might answer, but it would be too hard to explain.

Up here where the air is thin, I begin to sense how people so alike are so ready to do violence to each other. We fear and cannot trust each other, and we fight over imaginary things. Even if we could put aside lying, ego, power and greed, we still must struggle with our imaginations. And as every imagination is at least a bit different from every other imagination, how can there be anything but ambiguity? How should I trust what you mean, my fellow Man, when you say Two? Ambiguity is the enemy of trust. Uncertainty is the friend of fear. Miscommunication is the norm.

Something is up. Dad and his eaglets are beginning to fidget. I've spent so much time examining their lives. I feel I ought to give something back, maybe a glimpse into human lives. I wonder how to explain anything Jay and I might have been thinking when the tanks rolled into Saigon. In terms an eagle might understand. There were these huge... flocks of people... clawing and squawking at each other. "This is my Fish!" squawks one flock. "No, it is not your fish. It is my Duck!" squawks the other.

But it is impossible. Despite the rapport I feel here on my limb with the eagles staring at me, wondering what I am up to, I know it is impossible. Eagles have no language. They are not equipped to understand beings of fantasy such as us, and all that confusion and misunderstanding. If eagles did have language, I think it must still be easier to explain that rover on Mars than the countless imaginary worlds people carry in their heads.

Without words, could an eagle form a thought such as, "You have so much trouble. Why not just change and be more like us?" I imagine Dad might ask this.

Then I would tell him that likely we can't change anyway. We humans imprint our ideas and worlds just as the little eaglets imprint on Mom and Dad. Once a notion is established in our brain, far stronger evidence is needed to replace it than was ever required to implant it the first time. Orphaned eaglets are trained to follow gliders and ultralights. To the eaglet this must seem perfectly natural, as it should and must be. And there is likely some person somewhere to believe and follow every imaginable notion, all the while seeing what is expected and expecting what has already been seen.

To expect any different destination, I think we humans should have started on a different path.

I'm coming down from my limb now. The eaglets and Dad are scrutinizing the sky. Mother is bringing back a fresh fish and they will have no attention left for me. Surely, I will miss them more than they will miss me. So back down the tree I climb, looking for solid ground again beneath my feet.

I was sitting in a library composing my thoughts and thinking about eagles when I overheard a conversation between two college girls. I can call them girls instead of women as they lagged me by two generations. The gist from one was that people are crazy. Amazing, I realized. This young person uses the same coping mechanism I use: all those people from other planets and realities whom I simply cannot comprehend, well, that's because they are crazy.

Can eagles be crazy? The thing about eagles is they don't have language. They cannot travel from "Pass me the stick" to "Oh, for please god would you pass me that stick!" all in a squawky tone or raised eyebrow. The eagle world is not sliced and diced by contradiction and nuance.

There was a time when humans, you and me, were like eagles. And then we invented language and things got complicated. So I will leave you with a favorite quote that has nothing at all to do with eagles:

Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like an apple.