

## 'The simpler explanation is that the animals are intentionally deceiving'

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*Elephants Weep.* Among many similar anecdotes, Masson quotes this, from the *Natural History of Elephants* (Cassell, 1960): "Sadie, a circus elephant, was punished for trying to run out of the ring. The two men who were training her 'stood dumbfounded' when she began to weep, the tears streaming down her face and sobs racking her huge body."

He also quotes Charles Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, which reports: "The Indian elephant is known sometimes to weep. Sir E. Tennent, in describing those which he saw captured and bound in Ceylon, says some 'lay motionless on the ground, with no other indication of suffering than the tears which suffused their eyes and flowed incessantly'. Speaking of another elephant, he says, 'When overpowered and made fast, his grief was most affecting: his violence sank to utter prostration, and he lay on the ground, uttering choking cries, with tears trickling down his cheeks.'"

Such tales provide strong circumstantial backing for Allman's belief that, when he comes to examine the brains of elephants and dolphins, those crucial self-awareness neurones "will also be present". As Masson says, however, "anecdotal evidence is only anecdotal evidence", and there is still substantial dissent among scientists from the Wise view, particularly those who fear that the rosy glow of anthropomorphism is obscuring sloppy scientific method.

Such dissent is not always expressed loudly — such is the fear of letter-bombs that animal rights zealots have instilled in their opponents. But one renowned proponent of the sceptical perspective says (on condition of anonymity): "I like animals, and when you're dealing with pets the only way to treat them is like little people with fur and feathers on, but I'm concerned that we don't jump the gun and start accepting weak science." He then sifts through the evidence with a merciless eye for what is verifiable and what is not.

"The Durban dolphin results have not been published, let alone replicated, so the design of the experiment has not been exhaustively explored, and those elephant anecdotes, I'm afraid, are just that. As for Allman's work, we know that the frontal lobe is important in self-awareness, but the anterior cingulate cortex in particular is one of the most frequently activated areas of the brain ... I don't doubt the quality of the research but the interpretation that these neurones are specific to self-awareness may be stretching it a bit."

However, there are those who feel that scientific scepticism can sometimes decay into a wilful negativity that philosopher and psychologist Daniel Dennet has christened the "killjoy perspective". For example, even apparently hard evidence of counter-deception involving fourth-order mental states — "he thinks that I don't know that he knows that I'm suspicious" — has possible alternative explanations.

In *Rattling the Cage*, Wise cites some observed behaviour from primatologists Dr Andrew Whiten and Dr Richard Byrne. Outside the Tai National Park in the Ivory Coast, a wild chimpanzee found a box full of bananas and was just opening the lid when another chimp arrived. Immediately the first chimp closed the lid and moved about 3m away, striking a nonchalant attitude.

The second chimp eventually wandered off, at which point the first one returned to the box and opened it — but

when the second chimp left the clearing he had doubled back and hidden behind a tree, and now he sprang and took the bananas. According to the anonymous sceptic: "This could have been a coincidence. He could have left the clearing and then decided to turn back, or seen the other chimp move out of the corner of his eye at the last minute and hidden. It may look to an observer that the second chimp was aware that the first chimp was suspicious and engaged in a counter-deception strategy, but there are alternative explanations [that] don't involve attributing mental states. As scientists we must accept the most parsimonious explanation."

However, Dr Debbie Custance from Goldsmiths College in London says: "Sometimes the most parsimonious explanation may be that the animals have mental states. The learning histories used to explain away repeated observations of apparent deception are sometimes so convoluted that the simpler explanation is that the animals are intentionally deceiving."

Adds Wise: "I could offer a stimulus-response model of almost any human behaviour [that] would be impossible to disprove. But it doesn't mean that it's right."

Nonetheless, the killjoys so far have the upper hand. Received scientific opinion is still that man is the only animal with a theory of mind and the legal position remains that all animals are classed as goods — almost.

The exception is New Zealand, where last November the Government passed the Animal Welfare Act, granting great apes "basic rights to freedom from imprisonment and torture ... recognising their advanced cognitive and emotional capacity".

This is the first time anything approaching personhood has been granted to any non-human and Wise is pleased. But he also believes that the legislation does not go far enough. "They have stricter protection on the statute, but they're not yet legal persons."

The trouble with full personhood for certain animals is that it raises hard questions about cut-off points — in humans and non-humans. "If reason or self-awareness is the indicator, then do Alzheimer's patients or small children have rights?" asks Wise. "Of course they do, under US law — by virtue of being human they are said to be autonomous, though this is a legal fiction."

The other difficulty is that if proof of a theory of mind entitles higher animals to legal rights, doesn't that suggest that animals without such a theory — cats, say — must not be entitled to them? Wise wants to confine the debate for now to chimpanzees and bonobos, although he is writing a follow-up book that will discuss elephants, dolphins, orang-outangs, baboons and possibly pigs. "I'm not sure yet about the pigs," says Wise.

Others are less restrained. There are arguments for levels of consciousness and emotion in species ranging from sheep and cows to cockroaches, slugs and snails. "Perhaps people should think twice before reaching for the fly spray," says Dr Stephen Wickens.

These are murky waters and in the foreseeable future they are likely to get murkier. But Wise is not in a hurry. "Even [sympathetic] judges might feel bound by law," he says. "Like they were with slaves. It was never argued that they didn't have minds but they were still classed as property. It will be a long haul to change the law at that level." But, he adds, "I can wait." □

# Ring of confidence

What makes a woman take up boxing? For Mischa Merz, it goes beyond fitness and sport to the core of her being, writes Richard Yallop

**M**ISCHA Merz is 12 lines into her autobiographical tale of her addiction to boxing when she throws her first punch at feminism. Her starting point is that in broad daylight she was mugged by two women, and that attack seemed to challenge all the "popular myths and misconceptions about women and aggression, women as victims, women as moral gatekeepers".

Merz had already challenged most of the popular stereotypes of womanhood by taking up boxing six months earlier. Having seen off her muggers, who fled once they realised they had unwittingly encountered Xena in inner-suburban Melbourne, Merz picked her next target: what she saw as the dishonest stereotype of a femininity that suppresses aggression and the display of muscles.

It prompted her new book, *Bruising: A Journey Through Gender*. It is part theoretical discussion of feminism and femininity and part personal description of her obsession with the subculture of boxing, that raw and elemental contest which over the ages has attracted most of the world's leading sportswriters.

Her book is doubly counter-cultural: besides rebuffing much prevailing feminist thought, it also seeks to defend boxing at a time when the sport's appeal and number of participants is shrinking, because of concerns over brain damage, and because of the unsavoury model provided by former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson.

We have arranged to meet at the end of Merz's morning training session at The Underworld, a Melbourne gym whose name perfectly expresses the murky milieu of the boxing world. Fresh from a sparring session, the blonde, tousle-haired Merz looks pink-faced from the morning's exertions.

She is 36, short and stocky (in the book she describes herself as having the legs of a Shetland pony), and speaks in a slightly nasal tone that you might think originated from the day she had her nose bashed in by a male sparring partner. She says, in fact, her nose is blocked because she has a cold.

She regarded having her nose broken that day (see accompanying extract) as her rite of passage in the sport that had mesmerised her long before she decided

to venture into the ring. She had always watched boxing, but she was encouraged to take up the sport by her lawyer husband, Peter Holding (son of former Victorian Labor MP Clyde Holding), who also boxed.

A year after the Victorian Amateur Boxing League staged its first female fight in 1996, she took up the pursuit. Female fights are still banned by the NSW Government, but they are permitted in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. When Merz started there were few women boxers, but she says the number of teenage girls coming into the sport is rising.

Most people thought she was crazy to box: "It's such a sacred masculine ritual; rather like the men's equivalent of childbirth in the way it excludes women."

But in the face of other people's consternation, Merz became more addicted, not less. From nervous beginnings and an ecstatic win in her first amateur fight, she progressed to losing an Australian title fight on the Gold Coast. She has no intention of giving up the sport now, after three years in its thrall.

She says that being married did, at least, deflect questions that may have arisen about her sexuality.

In the flesh Merz is friendly and feisty, rather than intimidating. She says she was always a tomboy. That wasn't a problem in childhood (though her mother always wanted to put her in dresses, while she wanted to wear jeans and jumpers) because she could still climb trees and ride bikes with the boys. But once she left childhood behind it was harder to maintain the tomboy persona because society didn't really accept it in mature women.

Instead she was confronted by stereotypes that men were aggressive and women were gentle, instinctive and caring — stereotypes that begin when mothers give birth to "pretty girls" or "big, strong boys". "I'd never been persuaded by feminist arguments, and I realised it was the duplicitous quality of it, that women can't be aggressive, that annoyed me."

The book quotes American psychologist Beverly Fagot, who says that a girl's sense of being female is defined by a suppression of aggression. That echoed with Merz: "Women are supposed to be above aggression — that's what men do, resolve things through violent