



PETER GODFREY-SMITH

MAGDALENA KOZHEVNIKOVA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7484-9638>

University of Warsaw

Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology

“What It’s Like to Be an Octopus”: An Interview with Peter Godfrey-Smith

«Каково это – быть осьминогом»:
Интервью с Питером Годфри-Смитом

Абстракт

Философ Питер Годфри-Смит рассказывает об осьминогах как о центральных фигурах в размышлениях о нечеловеческом сознании и интеллекте. Он затрагивает вопрос социального поведения в колониях осьминогов, а также их способности испытывать эмоции и коммуницировать. Также обсуждаются вызовы, связанные с защитой животных и пределы этической ответственности. Годфри-Смит подчеркивает необходимость развития новых форм осмыслиения ценности и жизни живых существ, не принадлежащих к человеческому роду.

Ключевые слова: беспозвоночные, осьминоги, философия сознания, этика животных, интеллект, сознание, интервью

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Abstract

Philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith discusses octopuses as key figures in his reflections on non-human consciousness and intelligence. He addresses the social behaviors observed in octopus colonies as well as their capacity for emotion and communication. He also speaks about the challenges of animal protection and the limits of ethical responsibility. Godfrey-Smith emphasizes the need to develop new ways of thinking about value and the lives of non-human beings.

Keywords: invertebrates, octopuses, philosophy of mind, animal ethics, cognition, consciousness, interview

Magdalena Kozhevnikova: In your renowned book *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness*, you wrote that octopuses served as your guides to the philosophical problems of the mind, particularly because of their significant differences from humans. Among other things, you noted that octopuses are “embodied differently” and function outside the usual division between body and brain. Do you think that humans will ever be able to imagine what it’s like to be an octopus (to paraphrase the title of Thomas Nagel’s seminal paper)?

Peter Godfrey-Smith: Yes, I think we’ll probably learn enough to do a pretty good job of imagining what it’s like to be an octopus. This might involve a combination of scientific knowledge, our imaginative abilities, and perhaps some technology that helps. We can’t ever know *exactly* what it’s like to be them, because we can’t ever *be* them. The same is true with other humans. I am not pessimistic about the limits of knowledge in this area.

M. K.: You described Octopolis, an octopus colony. A few years after that, another colony, dubbed Octlantis, was discovered. It is said that these colonies were created due to access to a large amount of food combined with a small number of hiding places. In other words, octopuses were forced by natural conditions to live close to each other, rather than by preference. But can these forced changes in behavior and more frequent interactions between individuals affect the development of the species, or at least certain populations?

P. G.-S.: Assuming these sites are unusual for the species, it would be hard for them to have much evolutionary effect. This is because when octopuses of this kind reproduce, the new larvae drift away and the young adults probably do not end up settling back where they were born. The population is probably always being “mixed” in this way, and the sites are too small to have a big effect on the species as a whole. If octopuses, like salmon, were able to come back to where they were born, that would change things. The sites are still very small, though.

M. K.: You stated in your book that octopuses have evolved a “non-social form of intelligence.” What can we say about the emotions of solitary octopuses? The complex emotions and colorful communication of octopuses may indicate – as you suggested in the book – that their lifestyle is not as solitary as we previously thought.

P. G.-S.: I think that emotions could go with a solitary lifestyle. They can be associated with individual learning, for example, and that does not require a social setting. The colors they produce are made to be seen by others, but a lot of the time, this could involve other species – predators, especially. Octopuses at our sites have produced behaviors that we interpret as signals between octopuses, though. We [David Scheel, myself, and Matthew Lawrence] have a paper about this in *Current Biology*, 2016 (“Signal Use by Octopuses in Agonistic Interactions”¹). Because

¹ David Scheel et al., “Signal Use by Octopuses in Agonistic Interactions,” *Curr Biol.* 26, no. 3 (2016): 377–382, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.12.033>.

octopuses reproduce sexually, and do mate, they have to have some social interactions, even if they are limited. At Octopolis, these simple forms of social interaction seem to have become more elaborate.

I should add that Octopolis has been very quiet over the last few years, with very few animals present when we have visited. I hope the site recovers.

M. K.: Your book, *Other Minds*, was a success and has been translated into many languages. Where do you think this “fashion” for octopuses and the interest in them outside scientific and ecological circles come from? Do other invertebrates have a chance to arouse similar interest?

P. G.-S.: I don’t know why octopuses suddenly became so interesting to people at this time. But because these animals *are* so interesting, this was likely to happen at some stage.

The way that octopuses and cuttlefish make contact with humans is unusual among invertebrates. They can be curious about us. I don’t know if this is completely unique among invertebrates, but it’s certainly very rare.

M. K.: What are your ethical assumptions? Which trend of ethics is closest to you? What is more important to you from an animal ethics perspective: intelligence or sentience?

P. G.-S.: I don’t accept any of the main theoretical options in moral philosophy – utilitarianism, Kantianism, virtue ethics, and so on. In the third book in this series, *Living on Earth* [2024; the other two being *Other Minds* (2016) and *Metazoa: Animal Minds and the Birth of Consciousness* (2020) – M. K.], I do try to sketch a general position on ethical matters. It draws on those standard views, and also on Martha Nussbaum’s “capabilities” approach as applied to animals, and John Dewey’s work from the early 20th century.

On the meta-ethical side, I do not believe in a special class of “moral facts.” I understand this whole area in terms of the idea of *valuation*, which is a different activity from stating facts. Valuations can be more or less rational, though, and good arguments can sometimes be made for ethical valuations. So in this area I am a “non-factualist” but not, I think, much of a relativist (this term is problematic).

My opposition to cruel forms of farming and cruel experimental practices is based on this view about the primacy of valuation. In *Living on Earth*, I use the idea of a “life worth living” when addressing many of these questions. We should not give the animals under our control lives that are not worth living.

M. K.: You are one of the signatories of the New York Declaration on Animal Consciousness from April 2024. Could you share how this declaration was created and what discoveries and ethical challenges lie behind it?

P. G.-S.: I was not much involved in the drafting of the document, but I was happy to sign it. It is quite cautious in its wording, which is good. On the ethical side, some people in the discussions wanted a stronger statement at the end about

how we should treat other sentient animals. But I think there's a problem in the case of insects. Human interests and the interests of insects are often very much opposed, and we can't just "make peace" with them, in the way we can with many other animals. On the other hand, we might try to develop insecticide chemicals in a way that is mindful of the likely experiences for the insects. We will have to learn a lot more, perhaps, before that becomes really feasible.

M. K.: In your opinion, what conditions must be met for us to have moral obligations towards a specific animal or species? Which invertebrates, in particular, deserve more protection and care from us?

P. G.-S.: I think that the ability to feel pleasure and pain, or something like those states, is certainly important. I am sympathetic to "sentientism" in this sense. (I discuss this in the second of my Whitehead Lectures at Harvard in 2023; the first lecture is also there on my website.²)

I suspect that quite a few invertebrates are in a "gray area" when it comes to sentience – they are so different from us that they are neither clearly *in* nor clearly *out* of this category. I expect our concepts to evolve in this area, and our future patterns of evaluation and concern will evolve alongside our new views of experience and sentience.

The insect case is the most important (as they are so numerous and are also reasonably good candidates for sentience). As I said above, this case is affected by the frequently antagonistic nature of our relationships with them. Some crustaceans are also good candidates for sentience, as Robert Elwood and his collaborators have shown. This is a case where it certainly makes sense to reform a number of practices surrounding food preparation. We should not boil these animals alive, in particular.

M. K.: Thank you very much for the interview.

Peter Godfrey-Smith is the author of several popular books, a university lecturer, and an enthusiast of the ocean depths. He was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, where he completed his studies before earning a PhD in philosophy at the University of California, San Diego. He has worked at Stanford University, Harvard University, and the CUNY Graduate Center, and since 2017 he has been based at the University of Sydney. His research focuses primarily on the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of mind. Godfrey-Smith has written six books, including *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (2016) and *Metazoa: Animal Life and the Birth of the Mind* (2020).

² See: <https://petergodfreysmith.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Whitehead-1-Limits-of-Sentience-PGS-2023-G5.pdf>; <https://petergodfreysmith.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Whitehead-2-Boundaries-of-Consideration-PGS-2023-K7.pdf>.

Peter Godfrey-Smith jest autorem poczytnych książek, wykładowcą uniwersyteckim i miłośnikiem morskich głębin. Urodził się i wychował w Sydney w Australii, gdzie ukończył studia, a następnie zdobył doktorat z filozofii na Uniwersytecie Kalifornijskim w San Diego. Pracował na Uniwersytecie Stanforda, Uniwersytecie Harvarda i w CUNY Graduate Center, a od 2017 roku na Uniwersytecie w Sydney. Jego badania koncentrują się głównie na filozofii biologii i filozofii umysłu. Godfrey-Smith napisał sześć książek, m.in. *Other Minds: The Octopus, The Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (2016; polskie wyd.: *Inne umysły. Ośmiornice i prapoczątki świadomości*, 2018) oraz *Metazoa: Animal Life and the Both of the Mind* (2020; polskie wyd.: *Metazoa. Od szklanych gąbek i morskich smoków do ukrytej krainy umysłu*, 2023).

Magdalena Kozhevnikova is an ethnologist and bioethicist. Her work focuses on non-human subjects, animal ethics, transspecies studies, and biotechnologies. She holds a degree in ethnology and cultural anthropology from the University of Warsaw, as well as a German-Russian master’s degree in “Intercultural Communication” from the Moscow University for the Humanities (Russia) and the Alice Salomon Hochschule (Germany). She defended her doctoral dissertation, titled *Проблема природы человека в контексте развития биотехнологий* (The Problem of Human Nature in the Context of the Development of Biotechnologies), at the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. She has worked at the Russian Academy of Sciences and the University of Warsaw. She is currently affiliated with the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Magdalena Kozhevnikova jest etnolożką i bioetyczką. Interesuje się podmiotami nie-ludzkimi, etyką zwierząt, studiami transgatunkowymi i biotechnologiami. Ukończyła etnologię i antropologię kulturową na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim oraz niemiecko-rosyjski program magisterski „Komunikacja międzykulturowa” na Moskiewskim Uniwersytecie Humanistycznym (Rosja) i Alice Salomon Hochschule (Niemcy). Obroniła pracę doktororską pt. *Проблема природы человека в контексте развития биотехнологий* (Problem natury ludzkiej w kontekście rozwoju biotechnologii) w Instytucie Filozofii Rosyjskiej Akademii Nauk. Pracowała w RAN oraz na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim. Obecnie jest związana z Instytutem Archeologii i Etnologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk.