

Ticks, bees, and scallops were subjects of great interest to Jakob von Uexküll, a nineteenth century biologist from Estonia. He was convinced that these forms of life have their own capacities for perception and he tried to imagine what life would be like from their points of view.

Jakob von Uexküll, in turn, is a subject of great interest to Dorion Sagan, a theorist and science writer from Massachusetts. Sagan considers Uexküll to be a forerunner to biosemiotics, the study of “signs” and meaning produced by the biological world. Continuing in this lineage, Sagan is a biosemiotician who thinks that the natural world crafts complex life systems from common and readily available materials.

Sagan isn't interested in nature's transcendent beauty but in the self-awareness and interior lives of its basic bacteria. Nonhuman forms of life, in other words, have their own inner perceptual worlds and their own sense of purpose and intentionality.

This brings us back to thinking about what life would be like from the perspective of a tick, a bee, or a scallop.

When the philosopher Thomas Nagel asked *what it is like to be a bat*, he concluded that while we will never have access to the answer to that question, the fact remains that there is such a thing as what it is like to be a bat.

While that life is shut off and inaccessible to us humans, Sagan points to the shared and hybrid nature of any life form. For example, our moods and desires—things we think of as inherently our own—are shaped by the many nonhuman lives that inhabit our own bodies.

Beyond the cells in our body that are deemed “animal,” there are nonhuman, nonanimal organisms that materially make up not just *what* we are, but *who* we are. But what is it like to be *them*, one wonders? A shared and public life is always entangled with an inner world—with one never fully disclosing itself to the other.

This complicates the mind-body problem quite a bit, and, in a sense, even discredits the entire notion of there being distinct or separate “species.”

Sagan’s lecture was titled *Art and Life: Carving the Atmosphere*. It took place on June 9th, 2012, organized and hosted by Alicia Ritson.