

DO CRITTERS GO TO HEAVEN?

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December 17, 2017

“A Man and His Dog” An Apocryphal Tale

(Based on a “Twilight Zone” episode that aired 55 years ago, written by Earl Hamner, Jr.)

A man and his dog were walking along a road. The man was enjoying the scenery, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was dead. He remembered dying, and that his faithful dog had been dead for many years. He wondered where the road was leading them.

After a while, they came to a high, white stone wall along one side of the road. It looked like fine marble. As he reached the wall, he saw a magnificent gate in the arch, and the street that led to the gate made from pure gold. He and the dog walked toward the gate, and as he got closer, he saw a man at a desk to one side.

When he was close enough, he called out, "Excuse me, where are we?"

"This is heaven, sir," the man answered.

"Wow! Would you happen to have some water? We have traveled far," the man said.

"Of course, sir. Come right in, and I'll have some ice water brought right up."

The man gestured, and the gate began to open.

"Can my friend," gesturing toward his dog, "come in, too?" the traveler asked.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't accept pets."

The man thought a moment, remembering all the years this dog remained loyal to him and then turned back toward the road and continued the way he had been going. After another long walk he came to a plain dirt road, which led through a farm gate that looked as if it had never been closed. As he approached the gate, he saw a man inside, leaning against a tree and reading a book.

"Excuse me!" he called to the reader. "Do you have any water? We have traveled far."

"Yes, sure, there's a faucet over there."

The man pointed to a place that couldn't be seen from outside the gate. "Come on in and help yourself."

"How about my friend here?" the traveler gestured to his dog.

"There should be a bowl by the faucet; he is welcome to share."

They went through the gate, and sure enough, there was an old-fashioned faucet with a bowl beside it. The traveler filled the bowl and took a long drink himself, then he gave some to the dog. When they were full, he and the dog walked back toward the man who was standing by the tree waiting for them.

"What do you call this place?" the traveler asked.

"This is heaven," was the answer.

"Well, that's confusing," the traveler said. "The man down the road said that was heaven, too."

"Oh, you mean the place with the gold street and pearly gates? Nope. That's hell."

"Doesn't it make you mad for them to use your name like that?"

"No. I can see how you might think so. But, truth be told, it saves us a lot of time. They screen out people who are willing to leave their best friends behind."

REFLECTIONS

As I suspect is true for some of you, many of my earliest and most vivid memories are of times I became aware of other creatures: silvery minnows flashing in the stream that bisected our farm; wriggling snakes and scurrying field mice exposed when I moved a bale of hay; cats mewing for milk at the doorstep; hens scratching in the barnyard.

“To children,” the psychologist **Mary Anne Randour** points out, “animals are not lower, they are fellow beings of equal standing,” and so it seemed to me at the time.

Growing up a century and a half ago near Portage, **John Muir** and his siblings felt much the same. Witnessing the wholesale killing of Passenger pigeons they exclaimed, “Oh, what colors; look at their breasts, bonnie as roses, and heir necks aglow with every hue.... It’s awful like a sin to kill them.”

Responded with absolute certitude to his children’s regret, the elder **Muir** agreed that the birds were quite bonnie. But, he assured them, “they were made to be killed and sent for us, God’s chosen people, to eat.”

John Muir would not, however, follow in his father’s footsteps, and as a young man recording what he experienced and witnessed on his “Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf” he wrote:

It never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers of religion that Nature’s object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of one great unit of creation...? They are all part of God’s family, unfallen, undepraved, and are cared for with the same species of tenderness and love as is bestowed on the angels in heaven and the saints on earth.

In the modern world many still accept uncritically the “soulless” state of animals, and presume that we are authorized by God, or accorded the right by our own superior status, to subdue them. **Tetsuro Matsuzawa**, an internationally celebrated scientist at the University of Kyoto’s Primate Research Institute finds this troubling. “I really do not understand this need for us always to be superior in all domains. Or to be so separate, so unique,

from every other animal,” he told **Virginia Morell**.

Matsuzawa has ample reasons for reaching that conclusion. Not only apes, but creatures as dissimilar as parrots, porpoises, elephants, dogs and rats have demonstrated a capacity for communication, learning, problem solving and even empathy that few would have dreamed of even fifty years ago. As in so many other ways, **Charles Darwin** was ahead of his time, insisting that dogs have the power to reason, and know what it feels like to love, envy, mourn and even experience the prick of conscience. The evidence **Darwin** offered for this was anecdotal, based on observation of his own dogs and reports from other 19th century dog owners, but modern research has proven much of what he recorded correct.

One of the reasons dogs in particular manifest so many of the traits **Darwin** attributed to them is that they’ve been around humans for tens of thousands of years. This has resulted in “convergent evolution” – two completely separate species acquiring new capabilities in tandem due to their close proximity and shared agendas. Because of their intimate relationship with humans, a dog’s brain is now quite different from that of its wolf ancestors, and its emotional life varies accordingly.

For instance, like small children, dogs experience separation anxiety when their owners are absent. Moreover, a dog’s vocalizations – the range and tone of their barking – have developed in ways that enable them to communicate certain feeling-states to their human companions. Because they are eager to please, dogs pay attention to and readily pick up on signals from their owners; one exceptional Border collie responds appropriately to over 300 words.

For those of us who’ve had long-standing relationships with dogs – Trina and I have had two over the span of 35 years - this may sound familiar. But what about some other

animals who aren't routinely a part of our lives?

Alex was a famous African Gray parrot who could carry on an unscripted conversation with his keepers and count objects accurately. Controlled experiments showed that **Alex** could distinguish between "same" and "different," and understood the concept of "zero" or "none" – tasks considered to be cognitively demanding. Some parrots are able to grasp the purpose and function of words, using terms like "hello" and "good-night" not just randomly or imitatively, but in the proper context.

Other birds, like scrub jays, seem to possess what researchers call "theory of mind," which means that they are attuned to what another bird may be thinking. When a scrub jay becomes aware that another is watching them hiding a nut, they will return a few moments later, retrieve it, and secret it in another location.

Another species, the Australian bowerbird, is an artist. Male bowerbirds build elaborate nests and decorate them with an assortment of colorful objects in an effort to attract females who, for their part, are quite discriminating about which male they choose to cohabitate with. They are the first animal, other than humans, recognized as having an artistic sensibility.

Dolphins have the highest ratio of brain size to body mass in the animal kingdom and possess numerous remarkable traits. They are highly social and have their own way of doing things - things that are not genetically inherited but learned. Like humans, elephants and the great apes they are "culture creators."

Along with apes, elephants and some species of birds, dolphins know how to use tools. In captivity, they quickly learn sign language. One particularly responsive dolphin, **Akeakamai**, became so proficient that she would respond to new commands the first time her trainer issued them. "These were not trained behaviors;" he reported, "She had a deep understanding of

the grammar of language." Other dolphins appear to possess *mirror neuron cells* because of their ability to mimic the behaviors of their trainers. For instance, if a human bent backward and lifted a leg, the dolphin would turn on its back and lift its tail in the air, creating an analogy between the two appendages – leg and tail.

Among the great apes, orangutans are recognized as master escape artists, able to outwit zoo-keepers' best attempts to contain them. Chimpanzees not only use tools, but have been known to modify an object so that it better serves its intended purpose. In an earlier era, tool making was believed to be a property belonging exclusively to hominids; it was our special mark of superiority. That claim is now questionable.

Moreover, in certain respects chimpanzees exhibit mental skills superior to our own. When exposed to a random sequence of numbers displayed momentarily on a screen, chimps are able to duplicate the sequence with far greater accuracy than human subjects. Scientists attribute this to what they call the chimps' superior "flash memory."

So chimps remember, but can they really think? **Jane Goodall**, who became widely known for her decades long observations of chimpanzees in their natural habitat, witnessed several instances when her subjects acted deceitfully, and tried to pull the wool over the eyes of others in their troop. This requires a certain amount of calculation, but because her evidence was, like **Charles Darwin's**, anecdotal, most primatologists didn't take it seriously. "To say that the chimp was actually thinking about his actions isn't scientifically permissible," **Goodall** remarked. The most one can say is that "If she were human, we would say that she is acting deceitfully." To claim anything more for the chimp made one guilty of anthropomorphizing.

Like humans, chimpanzees can be murderous; in the wild troops wage war against each other. But they also exhibit

empathy, caring for and sharing with each other – evidence, perhaps, of a rudimentary moral sense. The same is true for elephants. Matriarchs, the acknowledged leaders of elephant bands, have been observed rescuing a calf from drowning. On another occasion a wild elephant was observed bringing water to a dying companion.

Elephants also recognize their own dead, and will stop and become suddenly quiet when they encounter another elephant's corpse or skeleton. When in pain, captive elephants have been known to shed tears. Neuroscientists have recently detected *economocells* in the brains of elephants, whales and the great apes. These spindle-shaped neurons were once touted as the cells that "made us human" because they're connected to feelings of love, emotional suffering and sociability.

Although elephants and whales diverged from our branch of the evolutionary tree tens of millions of years ago, the developmental outcomes are remarkably similar to our own. If this is a cause for puzzlement it's because we have misconstrued evolution as a straightforward, progressive movement from "lower" to "higher" levels of sophistication. But, **Virginia Morell** argues,

Evolution is not linear, it is divergent – which means that we all sit on the limbs of a bushy tree, each species as evolved as the next, the anatomical differences largely the result of ecology and behavior. (Thus), we are not the culmination of all these "lesser beings;" they are not lesser and we are not the pinnacle of evolution.

So far so good, but what about other creatures that we routinely dismiss as inconsequential, lacking in those special qualities we've identified in the so-called "higher" members of the animal kingdom. Well, some have considerably more mental

and emotional intelligence than we give them credit for.

Take rats. When Trina and I were undergraduates in college, she "adopted" two handsome hooded rats that my sister had to give up due to asthma. These cuddly creatures lived in Trina's apartment for two years, free and un-caged. The mattress was on the floor, and in the morning the rats would awaken us by nuzzling in our ears. At the sound of the refrigerator opening, they would scamper out of their hiding place, climb up our legs and sit on our shoulder waiting for a treat. In terms of personal hygiene, they were as fastidious as any cat we'd ever owned, cleaning themselves thoroughly after being handled by a curious stranger.

Although they are routinely used and disposed of as research subjects, behavioral studies are now showing that rats have distinct personalities, exhibit altruism, are self-aware and even make decisions based on what they know and don't know – a faculty called "meta-cognition." But hey, I could have told you that.

Controlled research has revealed some remarkable findings about other life forms as well. Among ants, older "scouts" teach younger ones how to navigate unfamiliar terrain. East Asian archerfish are excellent marksmen, and can knock insects and small birds off branches or out of the air by releasing a powerful, precisely aimed stream of Water. This is not a natural talent; young fish increase their accuracy by watching their more accomplished elders. In order to do this, researcher **Thomas Shlegel** notes, "they have to take the viewpoint of the other fish."

It wasn't that long ago that one invited laughter for showing even the least regard for creatures that the philosopher **Rene Descartes** once dismissed as "meat machines." Despite his tarnished reputation for conducting deprivation experiments with baby monkeys, **Harry Harlow**, the late

University of Wisconsin primatologist, made startling discoveries about the capabilities of his primate subjects. But fearing ridicule from his peers, he withheld his findings for several decades. **Harlow** also worked extensively with a Vilas Zoo orangutan named **Jiggs**, who made him a believer in animal intelligence. Upon his passing, **Harlow** offered this complement: “**Jiggs** died demonstrating a level of curiosity greater than that of many of our University’s undergraduates.”

Every time we come up with a quality or an attribute that makes *homo sapiens* distinctly different, or innately superior, a similar trait crops up in one animal or another. Attempts to establish a clear demarcation between the human and the non-human are ongoing because most people still find it difficult to surrender our primacy. Nevertheless, in many respects animal emotions, animal thought, animal perceptions do resemble our own while still being fitted to their own unique circumstances. For this reason, the philosopher **Peter Singer** has offered an ethical dictum for our consideration:

It is wrong to sacrifice important interests of the animal in order to satisfy less important interests of our own.

Given the manner in which we’ve been gobbling up their real estate, disrupting their lives through climate change, raising them in “confined animal feeding operations,” such a dictum may strike us as inconvenient and hard to live up to, but it’s certainly worth further pondering.

What about the soul, then? Whatever the scientific evidence might suggest, many will still turn to criteria established by religion for a definitive answer to that question. No dog is going to heaven, they will insist. Personally, I’m agnostic with respect to the “soul” because there is so much disagreement over what it signifies. But I

do appreciate **Mary Oliver’s** take on the matter. “I keep looking around me,” the poet remarks, “And one question leads to another.”

The face of the moose is as sad
As the face of Jesus....
Why should I have (a soul), and not
the anteater
Who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the
camel?
Come to think about it, what about
the maple trees...?

In this season when the theme of Incarnation leaps to the forefront, may we deepen and broaden our understanding of what that might mean. Were we to recognize animals as children of God, as human beings we might feel a lot less lonely.