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Do Animals Have Emotions?

1 Somewhere in the savannas of Africa a mother elephant is dying in the company of many other pachyderms. Some of them are part of her family; some are fellow members of her herd. The dying elephant tips from side to side and seems to be balancing on a thin thread in order to sustain her life. Many of the other elephants surround her as she struggles to regain her balance. They also try to help by feeding and caressing her. After many attempts by the herd to save her life, they seem to realize that there is simply nothing more that can be done. She finally collapses to the ground in the presence of her companions. Most of the other elephants move away from the scene. There are, however, two elephants who remain behind with the dead elephant—another mother and her calf. The mother turns her back to the body and taps it with one foot. Soon, the other elephants call for them to follow and eventually they do (Masson and McCarthy, Elephants 95). These movements, which are slow and ritualistic, suggest that elephants may be capable of interpreting and responding to the notion of death.

2 The topic of animal emotions is one that, until recently, has rarely been discussed or studied by scientists. However, since the now famous comprehensive field studies of chimpanzees by the internationally renowned primatologist Jane Goodall, those who study animal behavior have begun to look more closely at the notion that animals feel emotions. As a result of their observations of various species of animals, a number of these researchers have come to the conclusion that animals do exhibit a wide range of emotions, such as grief, sympathy, and joy.

3 One of the major reasons research into animal emotions has been avoided is that scientists fear being accused of anthropomorphism—the act of attributing human qualities to animals. To do so is perceived as unscientific (Masson and McCarthy, "Hope and Joy" xviii). Frans de Waal, of the Yerkes Regional Primate Research Center in Atlanta, believes that if people are not open to the possibility of animals having emotions, they may be overlooking important information about both animals and humans. He explains his position in his article "Are We in Anthropodenial?" The term anthropodenial, which he coined, refers to "a blindness to the humanlike characteristics of other animals, or the animal-like characteristics of ourselves" (52). He proposes that because humans and animals are so closely related, it would be impossible for one not to have some characteristics of the other. He contends, "If two closely

related species act in the same manner, their underlying mental processes are probably the same, too" (53). If de Waal is correct, then humans can presume that animals do have emotions because of the many similarities between human and animal behavior.

4 Grief has been observed in many different species. In many instances, their behaviors (and presumably, therefore, their emotions) are uncannily similar to the behaviors of humans. Birds, which mate for life, have been observed showing obvious signs of grief when their mates die. In The Human Nature of Birds, Theodore Barber includes a report from one Dr. Franklin, who witnessed a male parrot caring for his mate by feeding her and trying to help her raise herself when she was dying. Franklin observed the following scene:

> Her unhappy spouse moved around her incessantly, his attention and tender cares redoubled. He even tried to open her beak to give her some nourishment. [. . .] At intervals, he uttered the most plaintive cries, then with his eyes fixed on her, kept a mournful silence. At length his companion breathed her last; from that moment he pined away, and died in the course of a few weeks. (qtd. in Barber 116)

5 Veterinarian Susan Wynn, discussing the physiological symptoms brought on by emotional trauma in animals, notes that

"[a]nimals definitely exhibit grief when they lose an owner or another companion animal. [. . .] Signs of grief vary widely, including lethargy, loss of appetite, hiding [. . .]" (5). This observation reinforces de Waal's position that animals experience some of the same emotions as humans.

6 Perhaps the most extreme case of grief experienced by an animal is exemplified by the true story of Flint, a chimp, when Flo, his mother, died. In her book, Through a Window, which elaborates on her thirty years of experience studying and living among the chimps in Gombe, Tanzania, Jane Goodall gives the following account of Flint's experience with grief.

> Flint became increasingly lethargic, refused most food and, with his immune system thus weakened, fell sick. The last time I saw him alive, he was hollow-eyed, gaunt and utterly depressed, huddled in the vegetation close to where Flo had died. [. . .] The last short journey he made, pausing to rest every few feet, was to the very place where Flo's body had lain. There he stayed for several hours, sometimes staring and staring into the water. He struggled on a little further, then curled up—and never moved again. (196-97)

7 Of course, animal emotions are not limited to despair, sadness, and grief. Indeed, substantial evidence indicates that

animals experience other, more uplifting emotions, such as sympathy, altruism, and joy.

8 Many scientists who study animal behavior have found that several species demonstrate sympathy to one another. In other words, they act as if they care about one another in much the same way as humans do. It is probably safe to assume that no animal is more sympathetic, or at least displays more behaviors associated with the emotion of sympathy, than chimpanzees. Those who have studied apes in the wild, including de Waal, have observed that animals who had been fighting making up with one another by kissing and hugging. Although other primates also engage in similar behaviors, chimps even go so far as to embrace, and attempt to console, the defeated animal ("Going Ape"). Another striking example of one animal showing sympathy for another is the account cited by Barber of a parrot comforting its sick mate. It is not, however, the only example of this type of behavior, especially among birds. Barber cites several other instances as well. According to Barber, documented records show that responsible observers have seen robins trying to keep each other alive. Also, terns have been known to lift another handicapped tern by its wing and transport it to safety. Likewise, a jay has been known to successfully seek human help when a newborn bird of a different species falls out of its nest. What makes this latter example particularly noteworthy is

that the newborn wasn't a jay but an altogether different type of bird.

9 Had the jay been helping another jay, it would be easy to assume that the act of caring was the result of what scientists call genetic altruism—the sociobiological theory that animals help each other in order to keep their own genes alive so they can reproduce and not become extinct. Simply put, scientists who believe in genetic altruism assume that when animals of the same species help each other out, they do so because there is something in it for them—namely the assurance that their species will continue. This theory certainly provides an adequate, unbiased scientific explanation for why animals such as birds might behave in a caring manner. However, if animals really help each other out only when doing so will perpetuate their species, then the jay would have had no genetic reason to help the newborn bird.

10 There is another popular explanation for why a bird of one species might help a bird of another species, however. Scientists who favor a related scientific theory called mutual altruism believe that animals will help each other because some day they themselves may need help, and then they will be able to count on reciprocal help (Hemelrijk 479-81). This theory is a plausible, nonanthropomorphic explanation for why animals show sympathy, regardless of whether they actually feel sympathy.

This point is crucial because after all, humans can't actually observe how an animal feels we can only observe how it behaves. It is then up to the observer to draw some logical conclusion about why animals behave in the ways they do. The mutual altruism theory, however, also can be disputed. In many cases, animals have helped others even when the receiver of the help would probably never be in a position to return the favor. For example, there are many accounts of dolphins helping drowning or otherwise impaired humans to safety. Janine Benyus, in her book Beastly Behaviors, describes how dolphins find a struggling victim in a matter of seconds and lift him or her out of the water to breathe. According to swimmers whose lives have been saved by dolphins, their rescuers are "careful, efficient, and persistent" (235).

11 Not only do animals show sympathy, but they are also clearly able to express joy. For example, on many occasions primate experts have heard apes laugh while in the presence of other apes. These experts are sure that the noise they heard was laughter because of the clarity and tone of the sound. In their book, Visions of Caliban, Dale Peterson and Jane Goodall describe this laughter in detail.

> I'm not referring to a sort of pinched vocalization that might be roughly compared with human laughter, as in the "laughter" of a hyena. I'm referring to real

> laughter, fully recognizable laughter, the kind where you lie down on the ground and shake in a paroxysm of clear amusement and simple pleasure. According to Peterson and Goodall, only four species, in addition to humans, have the capacity to be amused and to show their amusement by laughing: chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos, and orangutans. (181)

12 Even the actions of animals who are not able to laugh uproariously indicate that they feel joy. Many animals engage in playful behavior that can only emanate from a sense of joy. In "Hope and Joy among the Animals," Masson and McCarthy tell an amusing, yet true, story about an elephant named Norma.

> A traveling circus once pitched its tents next to a schoolyard with a set of swings. The older elephants were chained, but Norma, a young elephant, was left loose. When Norma saw children swinging, she was greatly intrigued. Before long, she went over, waved the children away with her trunk, backed up to a swing, and attempted to sit on it. She was notably unsuccessful, even using her tail to hold the swing in place. (45)

13 Geese, according to experts, have an "emotional body language which can be read: goose posture, gestures, and sounds can indicate feelings such as uncertain, tense, glad,

victorious, sad, alert, relaxed or threatening." Additionally, birds sometimes can be seen moving their wings back and forth while listening to sounds they find pleasant (McHugh).

14 In short, animals exhibit a large number of behaviors that indicate that they possess not only the capacity to feel but the capacity to express those feeling in some overt way, often through body language. If these are not proof enough that animals have emotions, people need look no further than their own beloved cat or dog. Pets are so frequently the cause of joy, humor, love, sympathy, empathy, and even grief that it is difficult to imagine animals could elicit such emotions in humans without actually having these emotions themselves. The question, then, is not "Do animals have emotions?" but rather, "Which emotions do animals have and to what degree do they feel them?"

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