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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Our Love for Animals

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Abstract Love does not necessarily benefit its object, and cost-free love may damage both object and subject. Our love of animals mobilises several distinct human concerns and should not be considered always as a virtue or always as a benefit to the animals themselves. We need to place this love in its full psychological, cultural, and moral context in order to assess what form it ought to take if animals are to benefit from it.

Keywords Animals · Love · Sentimentality · Morality · Animal ethics

I live on a pasture farm, in a part of England where a thin topsoil covers a subsoil of clay. You can grow grass on this topsoil, but you cannot plough it without turning up the clay, in which nothing grows. The only human use for the land, therefore, is to support things that live on grass or its by-products. That means: cows, sheep, pigs, and chickens by way of domestic animals; game birds by way of wildlife; and horses for riding. By far the most profitable of these animals, from the point of view of our local farming economy, are the horses, which bring people who earn *real* money into the countryside and encourage them to turn that money into grass. Those who are trying to turn grass into money have a much harder time of it. Still, all in all, I see our little patch of farmland as an example of good-natured animal husbandry. All our animals live in an environment to which they are adapted, enjoy basic freedoms, and are saved by our intervention from the lingering misery of old age and disease or from a long, drawn-out death from physical injury. This is true, for the most part, of the wildlife, too. The game birds are either shot or eaten by the foxes; the rats, field-mice, voles, and other rodents are taken by the buzzards and hawks; and the fish are quickly swallowed by the visiting heron. Death from old age, disease, or injury is rare, and we do what we can to help our wild animals through the winter, with scraps from the kitchen for the carnivores and corn and nuts for the birds.

Of course, there is much room for improvement, and there are aspects of our management that disturb me. In particular, it worries me that our natural affections favour some animals over others. Thus, we go out of our way to ensure that the predators get through the hard days of winter, but do little or nothing for the mice and voles and do what we can to exterminate the rats. Of course, we don't poison the rats, since that would be to poison the owls, buzzards, and foxes that eat their remains. But we interfere in the natural order and could not envisage life on the farm if we did not do so. Hares are welcome, rabbits less so; stoats and weasels enjoy our protection, crows and magpies don't dare to come within range. So far, I have not met any country person who does not make choices of the kind that we make, and when I read of "wildlife sanctuaries" I wonder how far their wardens are prepared to go, by way of managing those species that, if left to themselves, will turn a viable habitat into a desert—grey squirrels, for instance, Canada geese, cormorants.

Although I worry about our meddling in the order that surrounds us, I take comfort from the fact that species that were never seen on the farm when I bought it 15 years ago are now reestablishing their presence there: bullfinches, wagtails, kestrels, kitty hawks, fallow deer, stoats, and grass-snakes. We have many

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kinds of bee, and the ponds abound in frogs, toads, and dragonflies. But we also have neighbours, and by far the greatest threat to the animals that live on our land comes from that source. I don't refer to the farming neighbours, who maintain the ecological balance in much the way that we do. I refer to the incomers, those who have moved to the country in order to enjoy the tranquillity that is the by-product of other peoples' farming and who come with their own menagerie of animals—much loved animals, who have enjoyed all the creature comforts that the town can provide. It is the dogs and cats of these people that do most to upset the fragile order we have tried to maintain, and I cannot help draw some conclusions about the distinction between the right and the wrong ways of loving them.

One neighbour has a dog that she walks along the public bridle way, leaving it free to run in the hedgerows and out into the fields. This dog does what dogs do: It sniffs for quarry and, when it finds something, gives chase. In the winter, when birds are hidden under leaves, conserving their energy as best they can, they cannot easily survive being chased every day. The same is true of hares, rabbits, and voles. Of course, our neighbour is adamant that her dog would not dream of killing the things he chases—he is only doing what his nature requires. The same is true, of course, of the pheasant, the stoat, or the rabbit he is chasing. The difference is that the dog goes home to a warm house and a supper consisting largely of other animals that have been tortured into a tin, while its quarry goes hungry, trying to recover from the shock and weakened for its next encounter.

Another neighbour has a pair of cats—attractive animals, which know how to simulate affection toward their human owners, while policing all around them with the invincible insolence of a dominant species. Both dogs and cats are predators; but dogs can be trained not to kill. They can be trained to focus their hunting instincts on a particular species, or they can be bred to focus the very same instincts on some other and more humanly useful pursuit, such as herding sheep or retrieving game birds. Not so cats. Everything in their nature tends toward the single goal of killing, and although they can be pampered into relinquishing this goal, they are by that same process pampered into relinquishing their nature. A true cat wants out, and when out he wants death. The distinctions between fair and unfair game, between vermin and protected species, between friend and foe—all such distinctions have no significance for a cat, which sets off from the house in search of songbirds, field mice, shrews, and other harmless and necessary creatures with no thought for anything save the taste in his mouth of their blood. One estimate puts at 180 million the number of wild birds and mammals lost to cats each year in Britain (Woods, McDonald, and Harries 2003). The domestic cat is, without exception, the most devastating of all the alien species that have been brought onto our island, and the worst of it is that, thanks to the sentimentality of the British animal lover, it is a crime to shoot them.

Love has many forms, and there is no reason to suppose that my love of farm animals and wildlife is in any way superior, as an emotion, to the love of our neighbours for their dogs and cats. But two questions should be asked of every love: Does it benefit the object and does it benefit the subject? Whether or not we agree with Oscar Wilde's bathetic line from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* that "each man kills the thing he loves," it is certainly true that there are loves that destroy their object, for the reasons given by William Blake (in "The Clod and the Pebble" in his *Songs of Experience*):

> Love seeketh only self to please
> To bind another to its delight,
> Joys in another's loss of ease
> And builds a Hell in Heav'n's despite.

There are loves that enslave, stifle, exploit, and abuse. And, then again, there are loves that corrupt the subject, giving him a false and flattering view of himself and a comforting picture of his own cost-free lovableness. Love is not good in itself; it is good when part of virtue, bad when part of vice. In which case we should follow Aristotle and say that it is not as such good to love, but good to love the right object, on the right occasion, and to the right degree.[1] Learning how and what to love is part of growing up, and love, like other emotions, must be disciplined if it is not to collapse into sentimentality, on the one hand, or domination, on the other.

There is much literature that takes the love between humans and animals as its subject, and we are none of us short of examples with which to explore what might be good, and what bad, in such a cross-species affection. I am as susceptible to the love of pets as anyone

[1] Adapting the celebrated remarks on anger in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Chapter 5.

and still remember my childhood dog, a repulsive creature entirely deficient in canine virtues, as an object of deep and need-filled emotion. When my horse, Barney, whom I loved, died beneath me while hunting, I was quite stricken for a while, until setting eyes on Barney's successor. Cats have always taken a shine to me, purring and kneading in my lap with no knowledge of the contempt in which I hold their species. Still, none of this should impede me from asking the question when, and how, it is right to love an animal.

The first point to make is that love for animals is only exceptionally love for an individual animal. I love the animals on our farm, but few of them are objects of an individual love: It is the presence of bullfinches, not of any particular bullfinch, that delights me and for which I work as best I can. Of course, I am concerned when I come cross a bird or a mammal in distress and will go out of my way to help it: But this is not love, only ordinary kindness. With the horses it is different, since I stand to them in another relation, knowing their individual traits and foibles and riding them, often in hair-raising circumstances in which we depend on each other for safety and maybe even survival. A special bond grows from such circumstances—the bond that caused Alexander the Great to mourn Bucephalus and to build a city in his honour. However, it is unclear that horses respond to their riders as *individuals* or that they are capable of feeling the kind of affection, either for us or for each other, that we feel for them. They distinguish a good place from a bad one; they recognise and relate to their stable mates; they know what kind of treatment to expect from which of the two-legged creatures who come to care for them. But their affections are weak, unfocused, and easily transferred. Barney, for me, had some of the qualities of Bucephalus: bold, eager to be first in the field, and obedient in the face of danger. And that was the ground of my affection: not that he regarded me with any favour or made a place for me in his life as I made a place for him in mine.

Now, it seems to me that there are bad ways of loving a horse—ways that are bad for the horse and also bad for the one who loves him. A love that regards the horse as a plaything, whose purpose is to satisfy the whims of a rider, to be an object of cuddling and caressing of a kind that the horse himself can neither reciprocate nor understand, such a love is a way of disregarding the horse. It is also in its own way corrupt. A person who lavishes this kind of affection on a horse is either deceiving himself or else taking pleasure in a fantasy affection, treating the horse as a means to his own emotion, which has become the real focus of his concern. The horse has become the object of a self-regarding love, a love without true care for the thing that occasions it. Such a love takes no true note of the horse and is quite compatible with a ruthless neglect of the animal, when it loses (as it will) its superficial attractions. Horses treated in this way are frequently discarded, like the dolls of children. And it is indeed the case of the doll that provides, for the philosophy of love, the most poignant instance of error. Children practise affection with their dolls: It is their way of developing in themselves the expressions, habits, and gestures that will elicit protection and love from those around them. But we expect them, for this reason, to grow out of dolls and into proper love—love which bears a cost for the one who feels it, which puts the self in the hands of another and which forms the foundation of a reciprocal bond of care.

Each species is different, and when it comes to dogs there is no doubt not only that dogs reciprocate the affection of their masters but also that they become attached to their masters as *individuals*, in a way that renders the master irreplaceable in their affections—so much so that the grief of a dog may strike us as desolate beyond anything that we, who have access even in extremity to consolation, could really feel. The focused devotion of a dog is—when it occurs (and not all dogs are capable of it)—one of the most moving of all the gifts that we receive from animals, all the more moving for not being truly a gift but rather a need.[2] It seems to me that the recipient of such a love is under a duty to the creature that offers it, and that this creates a quite special ground for love that we must take into account. The owner of a loving dog has a duty of care beyond that of the owner of a horse. To neglect or abandon such a dog is to betray a trust that creates an objective obligation and an obligation toward an individual. Hence, my neighbour is right to think that her obligation to her dog takes precedence over my duty to care for the wildlife whose welfare her dog is compromising. She occupies one pole of a relation of trust, and it would be a moral deficiency in her to assume the right to enjoy her dog's unswerving affection while denying

[2] Among the many affecting accounts of this relationship in the literature, I single out George Pitcher, *The Dogs Who Came to Stay* (1995), since I knew the dogs and the author.

him what she can easily provide by way of a reward for it. Thus, I don't judge her adversely for her irritating dog or her equally irritating love for it: The fault is mine, like the fault of being upset by the selfishness of families as they strive to secure the best seats on a train. Each of us has a sphere of love, and he is bound to the others who inhabit it.

That said, however, we should still make a distinction between the right way and the wrong way to love a dog. Dogs are individuals, in the way that all animals are individuals. But they have, if it can be so expressed, a higher degree of individuality than birds, certainly a higher degree of individuality than insects. By this I mean that their well-being is more bound up with their specific nature and circumstances, with their affections and their character, than is the well-being of members of other species. A bird relates to its surroundings as a member of its species, but not as one who has created for itself an individual network of expectations and fears. The loving dog is dependent on individual people and knows that he is so dependent. He responds to his surroundings in ways that distinguish individuals within it and recognises demands that are addressed specifically to him and to which he must respond. His emotions, simple though they are, are *learned* responses, which bear the imprint of a history of mutual dealings.

In this way, it is possible to read into the behaviour of a dog something of the interpersonal responses we know from human affection. The dog is not a person, but he is like a person in incorporating into himself the distinguishing features of his experience, coming to be the particular dog that he is through being related to the particular others in his surroundings. But why do I say he is not a person? The reason, briefly, is this. Persons are individuals, too; but their individuality is situated on another metaphysical plane from that of the animals, even that of the animals who love them and love them as individuals. Persons identify themselves in the first person, know themselves as "I," and make free choices based on these acts of identification. They are sovereign over their world, and the distinction between self and other, mine and not-mine, deciding and not deciding penetrates all their thinking and acting. The dog that looks into the eyes of his master is not judging, not reminding the master of his responsibilities or putting himself on display as another individual with rights and freedoms of his own. He is simply appealing as he might to a mate or a fellow member of the pack, in the hope that his need will be answered. There is not, in any of this, the "I"-to-"I" encounter that distinguishes persons among all other things in nature and which, indeed, for Kant, is a sign that they are not really part of nature at all. Although I relate to my dog as an individual, it is from a plane of individuality to which he can never ascend. Ideas of responsibility, duty, right, and freedom, which govern my intentions, have no place in his thinking. For him, I am another animal—a very special animal, certainly, but nevertheless one that exists on the same plane as himself and whose motives he will never comprehend, except in terms of the kind of unquestioning unity of being that is the sum of canine affection.

Now, it seems to me that the right way to love a dog is to love him not as a person, but as a creature that has been raised to the edge of personhood, so as to look into a place that is opaque to him but from which emerges signals that he understands in another way than we who send them. If we base our love for our dog on the premise that he, like us, is a person, then we damage both him and ourselves. We damage him by making demands that no animal can fully understand—holding him to account in ways that make no sense to him. We will feel bound to keep him alive, as we keep each other alive, for the sake of a relation that, being personal, is also eternal. It seems to me that a person loves his dog wrongly when he does not have him put down when decay is irreversible. But it is not so much the damage done to the dog that matters: It is the damage done to the person. The love of a dog is in an important sense cost-free. The greatest criminal can enjoy it. No dog demands virtue or honour of his master, and all dogs will leap to their master's defence, even when it is the forces of good that are coming to arrest him. Dogs do not judge, and their love is unconditional only because it has no conception of conditions. From a dog, therefore, we can enjoy the kind of endorsement that requires no moral labour to earn it. And this is what we see all around us: the dwindling of human affection, which is always conditional and always dependent on moral work, and its replacement by the cost-free love of pets.

Such a love wants to have it both ways: to preserve the pre-lapsarian innocence of its object, while believing the object capable nevertheless of moral judgement. The dog is a dumb animal and therefore incapable of wrongdoing; but for that very reason, he is seen as right in all his judgements, bestowing his affection

on worthy objects and endorsing his master through his love. This is the root cause of the sentimentalisation of animal life that makes a film such as *Bambi* so poisonous—leading people to "dollify" animals, while believing the animals to be "in the right" and always endowed with the moral advantage. But you cannot have it both ways: Either animals are outside the sphere of moral judgement or they are not. If they are outside it, then their behaviour cannot be taken as proof of their "innocence." If they are inside it, then they may sometimes be guilty and deserving of blame.

Human love is of many kinds. In its highest form, it comes as a gift, freely bestowed on another person along with the offer of support. But such love does not come without cost. There is a cost to the subject, and a cost to the object. Love can be betrayed by its object, when he shows himself to be unworthy to receive it and incapable of returning it. And to undergo this experience is one of the greatest of human griefs. But love for that very reason imposes a cost on its object, who must live up to the trust bestowed on him and do his best to deserve the gift. Love is a moral challenge that we do not always meet, and in the effort to meet it we study to improve ourselves and to live as we should. It is for this reason that we are suspicious of loveless people—people who do not offer love and who, therefore, in the normal run of things, do not receive it. It is not simply that they are outside the fold of human affection. It is that they are cut off from the principal spur to human goodness, which is the desire to live up to the demands of a person who matters to them more than they matter themselves.

Clearly, if we conceive human love in that way, we can see that we all have a strong motive to avoid it: We do not benefit by avoiding it, and it is always a mistake to try, as we know from the tragedy of *King Lear* (see the important essay "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" by Stanley Cavell 2002). Nevertheless, life is simpler without interpersonal love, since it can be lived at a lower level, beneath the glare of moral judgement. And that is the *bad* reason for lavishing too much feeling on a pet. Devoted animals provide an escape route from human affection and so make that affection superfluous. Of course, people can find themselves so beaten down by life, so deprived of human love that, through no fault of their own, they devote themselves to the care of an animal, by way of keeping the lamp of affection alive. Such is Flaubert's (1877) *Coeur simple*, whose devotion to her parrot was in no way a moral failing. But that kind of devotion, which is the residue of genuine moral feeling, is a virtue in the one who displays it and has little in common with the Bambi-ism that is now growing all around us and which seeks to rewrite our relations with other animals in the language of rights.

I have argued against the idea of animal rights elsewhere (see Scruton 2002). My argument stems not from a disrespect for animals, but from a respect for moral reasoning and for the concepts—right, duty, obligation, virtue—which it employs and which depend at every point on the distinctive features of self-consciousness. But perhaps the greatest damage done by the idea of animal rights is the damage to animals themselves. Elevated in this way to the plane of moral consciousness, they find themselves unable to respond to the distinctions that morality requires. They do not distinguish right from wrong; they cannot recognise the call of duty or the binding obligations of the moral law. And because of this, we judge them purely in terms of their ability to share our domestic ambience, to profit from our affection, and from time to time to reciprocate it in their own mute and dependent way. And it is precisely this which engenders our unscrupulous favouritism—the favouritism that has made it a crime in my country to shoot a cat, however destructive its behaviour, but a praiseworthy action to poison a mouse and thereby to infect the food-chain on which so many animals depend.

It is not that we should withdraw our love from our favourite animals: To the extent that they depend on that love, we should continue to provide it. But we must recognise that, by loving them as *individuals*, we threaten the animals who cannot easily be loved in any such way. Loving our dogs and cats, we put a strain upon the natural order that is felt most grievously by the birds and beasts of the field. And even if those creatures have no rights, this does not cancel the fact that we have duties toward them—duties that become every day more serious and demanding, as we humans expand to take over the habitats that we confiscate without scruple and enjoy without remorse. And our lack of scruple is only amplified by the sentimental attitudes that are nurtured by the love of pets and which inculcate in us the desire for easy-going, cost-free, and self-congratulatory affections, and which thereby undermine the human virtue on which the rest of nature most depends.

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