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The object of grief

Commentary on [King](#) on Animal Grief

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Abstract: King's new book is a wonderful collection of diverse anecdotes illustrating the variety of animal practices that are convincing illustrations of grief. Those who want scientific arguments for that conclusion should, however, read elsewhere.

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It would be hard not to like this book (King, 2013). As a dutiful reviewer should, I will do my best, although the only thing I actually dislike is the serious consideration King briefly gives to the views of C. S. Lewis.

King's book is chiefly a diverse collection of anecdotes about animal behavior when confronted with death or separation from others, followed by a meditation on human grief and some of its literature. Some of the stories are from her experience or from acquaintances, some of them are from field studies, and a few are from experiments on animals. The range of examples is enormous: cats, dogs, elephants, goats, bears, chickens, monkeys, crows, chimpanzees, and turtles. Even a pair of pigs is mentioned, but briefly, I suppose in recognition of the general disposition of pigs.

While some of the parallels are surprising (who would have thought that crows have death rituals so much like those of elephants), the general themes — a lot of animals show behavior analogous to human grief, and we should believe they are grieving — will not be surprising to anyone who has paid attention to animals at home or on the farm. King omits cattle, so I will say a word for them. Years ago on Yukatec farm in Virginia, Rangus the cow genius would regularly spring the corral gate to release captured members of his herd. Rosehips, a Golden Guernsey, fell in love with Yukatec's owner, Don McCaig, a Scot (author of some wonderful novels about dogs and other things, and a skilled sheep-dog man) who shared some of her coloring. For his safety, I had to do the milking. When one of a devoted pair of steers was corralled, his companion left the herd to be beside him, and waited there for days until his pal was hauled away.

The value of King's book, aside from the pleasure of reading it, is that lay readers sympathetic to improvements in the treatment of animals will come away with a wealth of persuasive examples of animal emotion and caring, and that is quite enough for a book to do. King's topic nonetheless raises a tangle of scientific and philosophical issues her book does not reach. She is not strong on biological science beneath the organism level. Occasional attempts at scientific language go awry — she thinks a “null hypothesis” must be a negative claim. King says that she does not think that animals have “concepts,” but she does not say what those are. Grief requires an object; if an animal grieves at the loss of another, then that emotion has an object. What more is required to have a “concept”?

There is almost nothing in the book on the preservation of analogous brain structures and brain chemistry across species, and the established roles of those tissues and processes in producing human emotions. (Readers who want a brief introduction to the relevant brain science could read Antonio Damasio's (2011) “Neural Basis of Emotions,” which includes references for those who want more.) The science matters for the philosophical questions King avoids, which is of course how each of us should know, or should reasonably believe, that others have minds, and which others do, and minds of what kinds, and how we are obliged to treat them. While the preservation of neural structure and processes may not make a bright line between creatures with complex emotions such as grief and those without (Where are robins and turtles?), they make the case awfully strong for mammals. But for most people, King's stories will be more compelling than any science could be. They're good stories.

References

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