

# EDITORIALS

## Empathy or Anthropomorphism?

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The recently published report of a British working party chaired by the very Reverend Dr. Edward Carpenter (*ANIMALS AND ETHICS*, Watkins Press, London, UK, 1980, £2.00) contains a revealing and possibly mistaken use of the word anthropomorphism. I believe that Carpenter *et al.* mistook empathy for anthropomorphism when they stated, "anthropomorphism—that is judgements made by man arising from his own subjective experience." I would prefer to assign the word empathy to this meaning. According to Webster's dictionary, to anthropomorphize means "to attribute a human form or personality" to some other being or entity, while empathy is "the imaginative projection of one's own consciousness into another being," or "the capacity for participating in or a vicarious experiencing of another's feelings, volitions or ideas," which is closer to Carpenter *et al.*'s assumed meaning of anthropomorphism.

One would hope that Carpenter *et al.* have not lost the understanding of or ability to empathize, or do they intend to demean the activity as being mere anthropomorphizing? No, I believe not, otherwise they would not have created their excellent report. Perhaps they are simply reflecting our culture's increasing lack of contact with feeling and therefore with the true meaning of empathy.

Yet how can a person actually project his or her consciousness into another being? Preposterous, impossible, smacks of ESP and mysticism — until it is *experienced*. Then it need no longer be the subject of debate, for it is not like a belief or an idea. It simply *is*. When I empathize with an animal or person, that individual's suffering becomes mine, for I experience, through imagining, that suffering. But when I anthropomorphize an animal, the reverse occurs: my suffering becomes its suffering because I judge it on the basis of my own subjective experience, as if the animal were a person.

Perhaps we should do both when we witness the suffering of animals. The dissonance or discrepancy between empathy and anthropomorphism will decrease as we develop greater understanding of animals, their needs and behavior as well as the role of our own psychology (values, wants, projections, fears, etc.). Then we have compassion and wisdom, this wisdom being the objective knowledge of the animal as distinct from instrumental knowledge acquired to satisfy human utilitarian goals, or mechanistic and reductionist knowledge generated by human curiosity. Perhaps "fellow-feeling" is a more appropriate term for sympathetic resonance with another being, a balanced state of understanding, anthropomorphism and empathy.