Empathy or Anthropomorphism?

Michael W. Fox, Editor-in-Chief

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.

Predation—The Way of Life

James R. Rooney, Editorial Advisory Board

Considerations of the rights of animals have become fashionable and, one hopes, long-term concerns for people of a wide variety of interests and persuasions. In addition to the expected ecologists, zoologists, humanitarians, veterinarians and so on, philosophers and theologians are coming to grips with the existence of life other than man. In this editorial I should like to emphasize a basic theory of human-animal interaction which will, I trust, be recognized immediately to be true although generally overlooked in the human-animal “rights” colloquy.

The first element of the theory is the simple fact that the universe and this world, as part of that universe, is an ordered system. While our understanding of all of the facets of that order is far from complete, it seems irrefutable that such order does exist. The philosophical term ‘cosmology’ defines an ordered universe. What we loosely call “Nature” is, in fact, that portion of cosmology which applies to this earth. Nature, then, is the earth as an ordered system. Within that context there appear to be three major laws:

1) Survival of an individual life takes precedence over the survival of another individual.
2) Survival of the species takes precedence over the survival of the individual.
3) Survival of life takes precedence over the survival of the species.

It appears that there is a single operator, a single theory, which subsumes all three of these laws: predation, the basic interaction among all forms of life from the least to the most complex.

The food chain is hard theory, indeed. It is unnecessary to belabor the obvious role of predation in the first two laws. The third law has not, perhaps, been clearly stated previously. The extinction of species over the earth’s history shows the law at work. An excellent and provocative exhibit in the Museum of Science in Boston also makes the point. One aquarium contains unpolluted water and the variety of marine life as it may have been in the Boston harbor years ago. The second aquarium is appropriately polluted for the harbor today. While there are fewer numbers and varieties of species, there is still life. Indeed, it would be difficult to find anyplace on this planet, a nook or crevice so foul, so noxious, that something alive was not in residence.

So far two elements of the theory I am developing have been identified: life on earth as part of an ordered system and predation as the operator within that ordered system. However, the theory remains incomplete. What is the ordered system, merely big fish eating small fish and being eaten by yet bigger fish? We yearn for some purpose, some goal, some ends for these means.

The best, perhaps, we can do to satisfy that yearning, omitting metaphysics, romanticism and theological speculation, is to appeal to another time-honored...