Healing Society's Relationship with Animals:

IN THE MEDICAL PROFESSION, ONE IS CONTINUALLY MINDFUL OF THE WALTERS AND SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE AND OF THE VIRTUE IN PROMOTING AND ENHANCING IT. THIS APPLIES NOT ONLY TO THE IMMEDIATE AND ARTICULATE HUMAN BEINGS, BUT ALSO TO THE LEAST FORTUNATE AMONG US, INCLUDING THOSE WITH SEVERE ACQUIRED AND DEVELOPMENTAL DEFECTS, SOME OF WHICH MAY BE SO PROFOUND AS TO PRECLUDE ANY MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS.

Each individual has a unique value, not by virtue of his or her level of intelligence or ability to compete in a certain way, but by virtue of the energy inhabiting that body which instills recognizable "life" into its protoplasm. This energy, which activates the human brain, allows the physical structures of the brain to achieve consciousness, make decisions, think, and feel pain and pleasure. Without such energy, the human body (including the brain) is merely a carcass devoid of these capabilities.

Although scientists are attempting to develop the technology to measure this energy directly, there is currently no consistent way to do so. We can, however, measure many of its consequences. For example, from an electro-anatomical standpoint to the electrical ("brainwaves") can be measured via the electroencephalogram (EEG).

The analogy of this energy in the human with that in other animals is, upon reflection, self-evident, particularly for those humans who have closely associated with animals and observed their personalities carefully over years. Even without such careful observation, logic would dictate that the life-conferring energy allowing consciousness, thoughts, decisions, pain perception, etc., would reside in other living animals as it resides in living humans in order to activate their central nervous systems.

If more evidence is needed, the EEGs of animals are analogous to those of humans; in fact, the EEGs of gorillas and other primates are nearly indistinguishable from those of humans. This is not surprising given that the brain structure and other central and peripheral nervous systems structure and circuitry, down to the cellular level, are analogous in humans and other animals, and therefore, their ability to maintain this capacity for energy, soul, or spirit to transcend (exit separately from) the human body may be almost indistinguishable. These structures include centers for motor function, including motor and sensory systems for pain and touch perception, vision, hearing, taste, and smell, and, in many cases, centers which mediate mood and personality.

There has been a general tendency among anthropologists to oversimplify the struggle among scientists and theologians—to draw a very sharp line between humans and other animals while disregarding significant analogies and areas of overlap. As a result, ethical standards that have been developed with little or no consideration for sentient beings other than human beings, based on certain features possessed by humans but not other animals.

Scientists have usually focused upon the superiority of human intelligence or language function. Yet gorillas and other primates have scored higher on intelligence tests designed by and for nonhuman beings; they have a soul or spirit, yet there has been a reluctance on the part of many to accept that this possibility exists in animals. We humans should be open to the further possibility that the differences we observe between humans and animals may not relate as much to the energy/soul/spirit that inhabits the bodies and brains of humans and animals as they do to the bodies and brains themselves, which specifically define and limit the expression of the energy. A similar phenomenon can be observed in humans with various impairments. It hardly seems possible that the energy or soul residing within a human who has a stroke or contracts Alzheimer's disease is the same energy that can master our exact vocabulary. Clearly, these animals possess more language function than a child who is less than three months old and considerably more function than a human born without cerebral hemispheres, who cannot meaningfully interact with the environment or other beings. Although the latter may suffer from a severe handicap, their behavior does not mean less, they should not be disregarded for this reason.

Scientists and theologians have historically drawn the line between humans and other animals. The eminent British neurologist Lord Walter Russell Brain (1895-1966) observed, "I personally can see no reason for conceding my fellow man and denying it to animals. . . . I at least cannot doubt that the interests and activities of animals are correlated with awareness and feeling in the same way as in us humans." Nearly a century earlier, in his book "Descent of Man," Charles Darwin (1809-1882) observed, "There is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties. The difference in being between man and higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind."

As I reflect upon these observations, I cannot help but feel a genuine obligation, not only to other human life but to nonhuman life as well. Human-kind's superior intelligence and capacity for making moral judgments do not confer upon us the right to exploit other species (or for that matter other humans with lesser intellectual capacity), but rather a responsibility to show compassion for them and assist them.

I cannot help but wonder how we would react if an intellectually inferior race of beings with advanced telepathic communication capabilities we could not comprehend were to land on Earth. Would they be morally justified on the basis of these additional capabilities to utilize humans in the ways we presently utilize other animals for the benefit of their "superior" race? I am convinced that much of human-kind's present cruelty to animals is the result of a failure to recognize who the animals really are. Dr. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) alluded to this when he commented, "A human being... experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by wideness of our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature with tenderness and reverence in order to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the human ideal and a foundation for inner security."

In order for humankind to evolve spiritually, there is a need for us as a species to learn to think of other beings as ends rather than means. Perhaps no other physician has epitomized this concept more than Dr. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) through his philosophy of "reverence for life." The son of an organist and a mother who was so long before it recognized that at least some primates (or for that matter other humans and other animals) cannot possess souls or spirits. However, we should not be too quick to judge the significance of these differences since there is a considerable amount of evidence to suggest, even by human definitions, that the most important and enduring elements in humans and animals may be those elements which differ the least.

Other physicians and scientists have made similar observations about the mental capacities of higher animals. The eminent British neurologist Lord Walter Russell Brain (1895-1966) observed, "I personally can see no reason for conceding my fellow man and denying it to animals..."

As more humans awaken to the deeper, karmic, and spiritual teachings of the world, we can no longer ignore our relationship to all forms of life, including to all living creatures and the whole of nature with tenderness and reverence in order to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the human ideal and a foundation for inner security."

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