

## Healing Society's Relationship with Animals:

# A PHYSICIAN'S VIEW

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N THE MEDICAL PROFESSION, ONE IS continuously mindful of the value and sacredness of human life and of the virtue in promoting and enhancing it. This applies not only to the most intelligent and articulate human beings, but also to the least fortunate among us, including those with severe acquired illnesses 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 communicate 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 thoughts, 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 electrophysiological standpoint, cerebral electrical activity ("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 many years. Even without such careful observation, logic would dictate that the life-conferring energy allowing consciousness, thoughts, decisions, pain perception, etc., must 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 system structures and circuitry, down to the cellular level, are analogous in humans and other animals, particularly primates, where again they may be almost indistinguishable. These structures include centers for motor function; associated motor movements; 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 humans—and a specific inclination 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 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 humans than have some humans. Almost all animals have some form of easily recognizable communication, and it is now clear that at least some primates can be taught sign language and other, verbal language, though none yet 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 survive with a life-force energy activating his or her central nervous system, limitations of the brain restrict the capacity of this energy to express itself.

Theologians have historically drawn the line between humans and other animals with the underlying premise that animals cannot possess souls or spirits. Yet it is precisely this life-force energy in humans constituting the soul or spirit that must also inhabit and activate the

central nervous systems of other living animals. All of the world's major religions and a growing collection of scientific data on near-death experiences and related phenomena suggest the capacity for this energy, soul, or spirit to transcend (exist separately from) the human body. The primary definition of soul in *Webster's New World Dictionary* is: "an entity which is regarded as being the immortal or spiritual part of the person, and though having no physical or material reality, is credited with the functions of thinking and willing, and, hence, determining all behavior." If, in the preceding sentence the word "person" were changed to "individual," the resulting definition would fit clearly with what we know about other animals as well as humans.

Few would deny that the mentally retarded child, or even the child born without cerebral hemispheres, has 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 other animals as they do to the bodies and brains themselves, which specifically define and limit the expression of this 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 somehow eternally destroyed or damaged. On the contrary, that part of all of us which is immortal or capable of transcending the body should not be damaged by illness or any other structural change to the human body, but rather its expression temporarily limited.

Clearly, there are distinct and major differences between humans and other animals. 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 minds of humans and other animals. The eminent British neurologist Lord Walter Russell Brain (1895-1966) observed, "I personally can see no reason for conceding mind to 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 my own." Nearly a century earlier, in his book *The 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 mind 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 sense of great obligation, not only to other human life but to nonhuman life as well. Humankind'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 humans would react if an intellectually superior 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 humankind'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 widening our circle of compassion to embrace

all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the liberation 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." Schweitzer was a rare and gifted individual whose immense creativity was complemented by an ability to distinguish the truly important from the less important, even when many of his ideas went against the mainstream of public opinion. Over a half century ago, Schweitzer wrote, "To the man who is truly ethical, all life is sacred, including that which from the human point of view seems lower on the scale." In a separate book on human ethics, he further observed, "Today it is considered an exaggeration to proclaim constant respect for every form of life as being a serious demand of a rational ethic. But the time is coming when people will be amazed that the human race was so long before it recognized that thoughtless injury to life is incompatible with real ethics."

As more humans awaken to the deeper identity of other sentient beings, the seeds of evolution are created—seeds that will ultimately foster not only harmony between humans and other animals, but also between humans and other humans. ■

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