

*Animal Passions and Bestly Virtues: Reflections on Redecorating Nature*

By Marc Bekoff

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*Animal Passions*, by Marc Bekoff, contains a series of articles that provide an informative introduction to cognitive ethology, the study of animal emotions and intelligence. Bekoff includes a survey of the roots and parameters of ethology, and detailed examples of Bekoff's field studies revealing exactly what cognitive ethologists do, and why this work is important. *Animal Passions* draws interesting conclusions about animal behavior and animal minds, especially regarding social play and morality. This series of articles ponders difficult moral questions, and willingly accepts—even insist on—limits to what scientists may do to nonhuman animals, limits that Bekoff hopes will be drawn by ethicists and protected by law.

Bekoff begins his book by explaining how he came to write *Animal Passions*. A “curiosity brought me to cognitive ethology,” he remembers (2). Bekoff is a scientist, but he is unlike most researchers of his generation—willing to question the sciences, to consider the importance of emotions and anthropomorphism, and willing to forgo studies for the sake of the animals themselves. His sense of affinity with other animals prevented him from working in other fields of science, where animals were routinely and callously killed. In *Animal Passions*, Bekoff explains that he dropped out of two different science programs because of the way animals were used and abused. Bekoff does not leave his heart at the lab door; he does not pretend that animals have no feelings; he does not try to disregard or ignore the many moral questions and moral obligations entailed in ethology. Bekoff brings an interesting angle to the scientific study of animals: “In many ways, much of my work was always leading, sometimes directly, and sometimes obliquely, to my interests in ethics—how we treat other animals, how they treat one another, that is, wild justice—and the asymmetric nature of human-animal interactions in which arrogant anthropocentrism almost always trumps the animal's view and place in the world” (20).

Wisely, Bekoff begins his book with a discussion of ethology. Ethology has permitted Bekoff to study animals in their natural environments, minimizing harm, yet still study nonhuman animals “rigorously using methods of natural science” (41). He offers a short history of ethology, including main players such as Charles Darwin, Jacques Loeb, Konrad Lorenz, Niko Tinbergen, and David Griffin. Bekoff describes cognitive ethology as “the comparative, evolutionary, and ecological study of animal minds, including thought processes, beliefs, rationality, information processing and consciousness” (23). Where fears of “anthropomorphism” prevail, he notes that cognitive ethology “explicitly licenses hypotheses about the internal states of animals” (40). This fascinating aspect of Bekoff's work, exploring animal minds, is readily apparent in *Animal Passions*.

Bekoff works with “geneticists, anatomists, theologians, and philosophers” (4). His thoughts on compassion have been influenced by the Dalai Lama; he collaborates with well known contemporary philosophers in the field of animals and ethics. As a scientist, Bekoff stands ahead of his time, outside the tight confines of “hard” science. But some articles in *Animal Passions* retain

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lingering vestiges of science's more conventional ways. These pieces anticipate a hesitant readership, humans unwilling to grant other animals such fundamental characteristics as emotions or morality. He now and again reassures these readers that other animals cannot be assumed to have happiness in the sense that we know it, but they have their own joy, "dog-joy" and "chimpanzee-joy" (151). "To some people, the idea that animals can be moral beings is preposterous, bordering on blasphemy. Surely, they say, it is human morality that defines 'human nature,' and morality sets us apart from, and above, other animals... Our place in the grand scheme of beings is not at risk, and we do not have to worry that we're not special or unique. All animals are special and unique" (129). This more conventional voice of science is balanced with writing that shows great strength and courage, and seems to reveal Bekoff's deeper commitments: "I'm convinced that many animals can distinguish right from wrong. Decades spent watching wild and captive animals have persuaded me that species living in groups often have a sense of fair play built on moral codes of conduct that help cement their social relationships" (140). At other times he takes an even stronger view, noting that humans sometimes seem the least moral among the many animals, revealing frustration with our "anthropocentric view of other animals, in which humans are so taken with themselves" (151). Bekoff notes that "people fail to realize that the food they're savoring, the clothing they're wearing, and the circus act they're enjoying involves sentient beings who have suffered enormously for the person's pleasure" (27).

*Animal Passions* offers detailed examples of Bekoff's ethological field work. He writes about moving yellow snow from one scented location to another in order to explore his own dog's reaction, studies where he compared the pack behavior of urban dogs with their rural counterparts, and studies where he recorded and examined the minute details of social communication in dogs at play. He includes an article about a seven-year coyote study in Grand Teton National Park, in which he explored the correlation between food source availability and social organization. Coyotes were captured and marked with colorful tags and radio transmitters, allowing researchers to identify specific individuals, and to be able to tell which individuals were spending time together. Bekoff noted what coyotes ate, and whether or not they formed packs or moved as individuals, concluding that variations in food availability, and the size of the food source, determined whether coyotes were more apt to live in groups, pairs, or as individuals. Bekoff's study indicated that coyotes are "not as devastating to livestock as were, for example, other predators and disease" (78). But the evidence presented was suppressed. Bekoff's paper, which explained what researchers actually observed coyotes hunting, was at first accepted for publication in a scientific journal, only to be later rejected on political grounds. Bekoff's study demonstrated as much about our communities as about coyote communities: some people in our nation do not want scientific studies to get in the way of ongoing extermination programs put into place for ranchers.

*Animal Passions* includes other interesting and highly relevant ethological field studies that Bekoff conducted in parks, where he focused on interactions between domestic dogs, human beings, and black-tailed prairie dogs. One of these studies explored the impact of dogs and people on parks, while another looked at the effect of domestic dogs on prairie dogs. The former includes observations and a questionnaire exploring what people perceived to be problematic in parks where urban people and their dogs crowd together to enjoy remaining open spaces. Bekoff observed dog behavior (off-trail wanders, chasing of birds or wildlife, encounters between dogs and people, and obedience) and also handed out a questionnaire asking park users what they perceived to be the largest problems among several options (such as dog feces, unruly dogs, unruly people, or too many people in a small space). Interestingly, responses were consistent with information collected by observation: unruly people were the largest problem. This study offers insights into local attitudes

about dogs, parks, and open spaces, and he notes that people in other cities could easily use this format to document problems and attitudes in their own local parks.

The ethological study of domestic dogs and prairie dogs was similar in many ways, but focused on dog/prairie dog interaction. Researchers noted what sizes and types of dogs were most apt to disrupt prairie dogs, how soon prairie dogs responded to different types of dogs, and how disruptive various dogs actually were—some pursued the prairie dogs right to their burrows and proceeded to dig. In a fascinating show of indifference to other creatures, those questioned in the study felt that prairie dogs should not be protected even if domestic dogs were a hazard. Apparently the happiness of our companion animals is more important than the lives of prairie dogs. Indeed, Bekoff's study proved right: unruly people are the largest problem to be faced, and too many unruly people at that.

Some of the scientific studies in *Animal Passions* can be dry reading, filled with numbers, lists, graphs, and detailed descriptions, but this collection of field studies also offers a vivid picture of the world of ethologists. These studies demonstrate the relevance of ethology, how such studies can influence our personal lives (dog walking), and how they can expose ongoing and pervasive political, economic, environmental, and social problems, such as the government backed extermination programs maintained on behalf of meat industries.

Many of Bekoff's ethological studies, especially those done with canines, focus on play behaviors, and on links between play and morality. Bekoff has found that social play provides a window into "fascinating topics such as cooperation, fairness, and morality" (123). Here Bekoff directly addresses the question, "Can animals be moral beings?" (144). He refers back to Darwin's observation of continuity, where animals and humans do not differ in nature but in degree, and argues that such traits as cooperation and fairness have an evolutionary value. Bekoff notes that groups of individuals who can cooperate, who can work together, have a much greater chance of survival. Social play is a way of learning to work together, of learning behaviors that will be necessary for survival later in life.

Bekoff provides interesting examples of animals exhibiting a sense of morality, such as an experiment where hungry rhesus monkeys refused to eat if attempts to acquire food brought a shock to another monkey. (One wishes those conducting these experiments had such a heightened sense of morality!) What could be better than social play, Bekoff asks, for learning "the rights and wrongs of social interaction—the moral norms that can then be extended to other situations such as sharing food, defending resources, grooming and giving care?" (142). Bekoff asserts that a sense of fairness is "common to many animals, because there could be no social play without it, and without social play individual animals and entire groups would be at a disadvantage" (142). Bekoff concludes: "morality evolved because it is adaptive" (142).

What does this tell us about human morality? First, we didn't invent virtue—its origins are much more ancient than our own. Secondly, we should stop seeing ourselves as morally superior to other animals. True, our big brains endow us with a highly sophisticated sense of what's right and wrong, but they also give us much greater scope for manipulating others to cheat and deceive and try to benefit from immoral behaviour. In that sense, animal morality might be "purer" than our own.

We should accept our moral responsibility towards other animals, and that means developing and enforcing more restrictive regulations governing animal use. There is growing evidence that while animal minds vary from one species to another, they are not so different from our own, and only when we accept this can we be truly moral in our relations with other creatures and with nature as a whole. (143)

Bekoff walks a fine line in *Animal Passions*. He acknowledges that he studies animals because he is curious, and interested, and he feels that this is the *best* reason for scientists to interfere in the

lives of other animals. Yet he admits that this may not be a *valid* reason to intrude in the lives of these other individuals and their communities. He offers evidence that ethological studies are often harmful to other species. He even includes a chapter on ethology and ethics with a lists of twelve questions that need to be more closely examined by both scientists and ethicists. “Are we ever justified, and if so under what conditions, in bringing wild animals into captivity?” (244). “What is the relationship between good science and animal welfare?” (245) “What principles should we use as ethical guides?” (250) “Are scientists responsible for how their results are used?” (251).

Bekoff faces topics many scientists quickly dismiss, and though he does not offer conclusive answers, he pushes the pendulum.

The fact that there may be little consensus about the answers to these questions at this time does not mean that there are not better and worse answers. As a general principle we should err on the side of the animals, and never forget that respect for the animals is of utmost importance. But real progress in the future will involve developing ever more precise guidelines about what is permissible (243).

Bekoff admits he has done experiments that he regrets. He reflects on research he has done with captive animals where coyotes consumed mice and chicks, and confesses: “I am deeply sorry and haunted by the knowledge that I did this sort of research and would never do it again. I cannot give back life to these mice and chickens, but I have anguished over their deaths at my hands” (7). *Animal Passions* includes more recent research, about which Bekoff writes that it was necessary to the project to “capture and mark individual coyotes, and for this purpose we generally rely on foot traps, the jaws of which are wrapped with thick cotton padding to reduce the likelihood of injury to the trapped animal. To keep the coyote from thrashing around in the trap we frequently attach a tranquilizer pellet, which the animal usually swallows” (88). Readers are likely to suspect that Bekoff questions the morality of endangering coyotes in this manner, but in this instance Bekoff offers no comment, only the blunt facts of what he has done and why.

Foggy moral boundaries surrounding scientists and their use of other animals are something about which Bekoff seems clearly aware, but not resigned. To Bekoff’s credit, *Animal Passions* is likely to leave some readers pondering the morality of any science that studies nonhuman animals—even ethology practiced by those few scientists who are sensitive to the lives and suffering of nonhuman animals.