

Animal Companions and Human Well-Being: An Historical Exploration of the Value of Human–Animal Relationships

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I. INTRODUCTION

Historical accounts of people's relationships with animals are, for the most part, sketchy, and the little documentary evidence we have refers primarily to the lives of the rich and famous. Our knowledge of how ordinary people in the past related to animals, or benefited from their company, therefore remains indistinct and largely speculative. Even where the historical evidence is relatively complete, there is a danger of overinterpreting it—of attributing values, attitudes, and sentiments that make sense to us from a modern perspective, but which would not necessarily have had any meaning for our historical predecessors. All of this demands that we treat historical evidence with an appropriate degree of caution. In addition, “well-being” is clearly a multifactorial concept and it would be impossible, within the scope of this brief review, to explore the past impact of animals on all of its different constituents.

With these provisos in mind, the present chapter will confine itself to the theme of human health and the ways in which animals in general, and companion animals in particular, have been perceived as contributing to its maintenance and improvement. While attempting to set this work in historical con-

text, the chapter will not attempt a detailed review of recent studies of animal-human therapeutic interactions, because this material has already been adequately covered elsewhere (see Serpell, 1996; Wilson & Turner, 1998).

II. ANIMAL SOULS AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

In the history of human ideas concerning the origins and treatment of illness and disease, nonhuman animals play a variety of important roles. The precise characteristics of these roles depend, however, not only on the prevailing view of animals, but also on the particular supernatural or "scientific" belief systems in which they are imbedded.

Probably the most archaic of these belief systems, usually referred to as *animism*, involves the concept that all living creatures, as well as other natural objects and phenomena, are imbued with an invisible soul, spirit or "essence" that animates the conscious body, but that is able to move about and act independently of the body when the bearer is either dreaming or otherwise unconscious. According to the typical animist worldview, all manifestations of sickness or misfortune are the direct result of assaults against a person's soul or "essence" by other angry or malevolent spirits encountered during these periods of unconsciousness. In some cases, these spiritual assaults are thought to be retaliatory; the result of some deliberate or inadvertent moral transgression on the part of the person. Alternatively, the person may be the innocent victim of an attack by spirits acting on behalf of a malevolent shaman or witch. Clues to the origins of spiritual assaults are often provided by the content of the dreams or visions that immediately preceded a particular bout of illness, injury, or misfortune (Benedict, 1929; Campbell, 1984; Eliade, 1964; Hallowell, 1926; Martin, 1978; Nelson, 1986; Speck, 1977; Wenzel, 1991).

Animist belief systems are characteristic of all hunting and gathering societies, and among these societies, offended animal spirits are often viewed as the most common source of malign spiritual influences. Many Inuit peoples believe, for example, that the spirits of hunted animals, like the ghosts of murdered humans, are capable of seeking vengeance. To avoid this happening, all animals, whether dead or alive, are treated with great respect. Otherwise, the hunter or his family can expect to suffer some misfortune: The animals will no longer allow themselves to be killed, or they may take their revenge by afflicting someone with disease, physical handicap, or even death (Wenzel, 1991). As an Inuit informant once eloquently expressed it:

The greatest peril in life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls. All the creatures that we have to kill and eat, all those that we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls, like we have, souls that do not perish with the body, and which must therefore be propitiated lest they

should avenge themselves on us for taking away their bodies. (Rasmussen, 1929, p. 56)

In other hunting and gathering cultures, more specialized sets of moral relations existed between people and the animals they hunted for food. For instance, many Native American and Eurasian peoples believed in the concept of personal "guardian spirits" (Benedict, 1929; Hultzkrantz, 1987). Among the Ojibwa (Chippewa) and their Algonkian neighbors, these spirits were known as *manito* and they were commonly represented as the spiritual prototypes or ancestor figures of wild animals. All of these *manito* were thought of in highly anthropomorphic terms. They were easily offended, capricious, and often bad tempered, but they could also be appeased and, to some extent, cajoled by ritual means. Living animals were regarded as "honored servants" of their respective *manito*, and one such spirit apparently presided over and represented all of the earthly members of its species. At the same time, animals were also viewed as temporary incarnations of each *manito* who sent them out periodically to be killed by favored hunters or fishermen. For this reason, hunters invariably performed deferential rituals upon killing an animal, so that its essence would return to the *manito* with a favorable account of how it was treated.

According to the Ojibwa worldview, the activities of *manito* explained nearly all the circumstances of everyday life. Every natural object, whether animate or inanimate, was charged with spiritual power, and no misfortune, whether illness, injury, death, or failure in hunting or fishing, was considered accidental or free from the personalized intent of one *manito* or another (Landes, 1968). Animal guardian spirits were also believed to vary in terms of power. Some species, especially small and relatively insignificant ones, such as the majority of insects and such things as mice, rats, or squirrels, were believed to possess correspondingly limited spiritual influence, and rarely furnished people with useful guardian spirits. In contrast, more physically impressive species, such as bears, bison, wolves, or eagles, were deemed to possess extraordinary spiritual power and were therefore eagerly sought as patrons (Benedict, 1929; Landes, 1968).

The methods used to obtain the patronage of these kinds of guardian spirits varied from culture to culture, but they almost invariably involved some form of physical ordeal (Benedict, 1929). Among the Ojibwa, young men at puberty were expected to isolate themselves in the forest and endure long periods of fasting, sleeplessness, and eventual delirium in an effort to obtain visions. Those who were successful experienced vivid hallucinations in which their "souls" entered the spirit world and encountered one or more *manito* who offered their future help and protection in return for a variety of ritual obligations. *Manito* advice or assistance could sometimes be discerned through natural portents and coincidences but, more often, guidance came indirectly

through the medium of subsequent dreams and visions. At such times the person's soul was believed to reenter the supernatural dimension and confer with its spiritual guardian. The content of dreams was therefore considered of primary importance as a guide to action in daily life (Landes, 1968).

In some societies, it was regarded as virtual suicide to injure, kill, or eat any member of the same species as one's guardian spirit. Like the Ancient Mariner's albatross, it could result in the withdrawal of spiritual patronage, and cause general misfortune, illness, and death. On the other hand, and in an equally large number of cultures, the guardian spirit specifically awarded its protégé the authority to kill members of its own species (Benedict, 1929; Hallowell, 1926).

As in most fields of individual achievement, not all men and women were equally good at obtaining the support of animal guardian spirits. Some never obtained visions and were regarded as "empty, fearful and cowardly" for the rest of their lives. A small minority, on the contrary, displayed extraordinary visionary talents and were henceforth regarded as medicine men, sorcerers, or shamans (Landes, 1968).

III. ANIMAL POWERS AND SHAMANISM

Mircea Eliade refers to shamanism as an "archaic technique of ecstasy" derived from guardian spirit belief. Both represent quests for magico-religious powers, and shamans differ from everyone else only in "their capacity for ecstatic experience, which, for the most part, is equivalent to a vocation" (Eliade, 1964, p. 107). Although shamanic power was derived from the assistance of one or more guardian spirits, the relationship between the shaman and his spiritual "helpers" or "familiar" was both more intimate and more intense than that attained by ordinary persons. In most cases, the shaman not only earned the patronage of guardian spirits but also developed the capacity to control them.

Shamans, typically, could achieve this power at will by entering a state of trance or ecstasy, usually induced by monotonous chanting, drumming, and dancing, and commonly assisted by the consumption of psychoactive drugs. Such states were considered to be analogous to death—the only other time when a person's essence becomes truly detached from the body and capable of independent actions in time and space. According to Eliade (1964), this ecstatic out-of-body experience enables the shaman to divest himself of human form and recover the situation that existed at the beginning of time when no clear distinctions separated humans from animals. As a result, he is able to reestablish friendship with animals, acquire knowledge of their language, and also acquire the ability to transform himself into an animal as and when occasion demands. The result is a kind of symbiosis in which the person

and the guardian spirit fuse to become two aspects of the same individual (Eliade, 1964).

Although they occasionally take human form, the vast majority of shamanic "familiar" are animals of one kind or another. Once he has adopted this disguise, the shaman is able to move about freely, gather information, and perform magical acts at a distance from his body. It is unclear from the various anthropological accounts, however, whether the animal spirit had its own independent existence when not in the shaman's service, or whether it was simply a material form assumed by the shaman when engaging in the practice of magic. Stories and legends concerning shamans provide conflicting evidence in this respect. In some, shamans are said to be able to disappear when attacked or pursued, whereupon all that will be seen is some swift-footed animal or bird departing from the scene. If this animal is injured or killed, the shaman will experience an identical mishap wherever his or her body happens to be. On the other hand, shamans never killed or consumed the flesh of animals belonging to their familiar's species, implying that these spirits existed separately and could easily be mistaken for ordinary animals (Speck, 1918).

Depending on their particular talents, shamans are believed to be able to foretell the future, advise on the whereabouts of game animals, or predict impending catastrophes. Their ability to control the forces of nature can also be employed to manipulate the weather, subdue animals, or bring them close to the hunter. Above all, since all manifestations of ill-health are thought to be caused by angry or malignant spirits, shamans possess a virtual monopoly on the treatment of sickness. Because the shaman is generally the only individual capable of visiting the spirit world at will through the agency of his animal familiar, he provides the only reliable method of discovering and counteracting the spiritual origins of physical and mental illness (Eliade, 1964; Speck, 1918).

IV. ANIMISM IN CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL TIMES

Although animist belief systems are particularly characteristic of hunting and gathering peoples, they have also persisted in a variety of forms in many pastoral nomadic and agricultural societies where they often coexist, through a process of syncretic fusion, with more recently imposed religious creeds and practices. An interesting contemporary example still flourishes among Central American indigenous peoples such as the Maya. Although Christianized and agricultural, the Mayan inhabitants of Chamula in the Mexican province of Chiapas believe in the existence of individual "soul animals" or *chanul* that are assigned to each person at birth by the celestial powers, and which share reciprocally every stroke of fortune that their human counterparts experi-

ence. All *chanul* are nondomesticated mammals with five digits, and they are physically indistinguishable from actual wild animals. Indeed, a person may only discover the identity of his soul animal through its recurrent appearance in dreams or with the help of a shaman (Gossen, 1996).

The Maya believe that most illness is the result of an injury inflicted on a person's *chanul*. These injuries may be inflicted deliberately via witchcraft, by another person mistaking one's *chanul* for an ordinary animal and hurting or killing it, or it may be "self-inflicted" in the sense that the person may allow him- or herself to experience overly intense emotions, such as intense fear, rage, excitement, or sexual pleasure, that can frighten or upset the *chanul*. The people of Chamula are also extremely reluctant to kill any wild mammal with five digits, since by doing so they believe they might inadvertently kill themselves or a friend or relative.

As far as curative measures are concerned, the only traditional remedy for an illness resulting from damage to one's soul animal is to employ the services of a shaman who will use various rituals, and the influence of his own, more powerful soul animals, to discover the source of the affliction and counteract it. According to Mayan folklore, shamans and witches also possess the ability to adopt the material form of their *chanul* in order to gain access to the supernatural realm (Gossen, 1996).

The purpose of dwelling on this particular example of contemporary Amerindian belief in soul animals is that it illustrates, according to Gossen (1996), the remarkable tenacity of animistic-shamanistic ideas and practices in Central America, despite the coercive influence of nearly five centuries of imported Roman Catholicism. Similarly, in Europe and around the Mediterranean basin, it appears that vestiges of comparable belief systems survived in a number of local and regional healing cults, at least until the early modern period.

In the pre-classical period the connection with animism was particularly obvious. In ancient Egypt, for example, the entire pantheon was dominated by distinctly shamanic images of animal-headed gods and goddesses, including the dog-headed Anubis who guided the souls of the dead on their journey through the underworld, and whose other roles included physician and apothecary to the gods, and guardian of the mysteries of mummification and reincarnation. Dogs and snakes were also the sacred emblems of the Sumerian goddess, Gula the "Great Physician," and of the Babylonian and Chaldean deity, Marduk, another god of healing and reincarnation (Dale-Green, 1966; Schwabe, 1994).

In the classical period the animist associations are somewhat less prominent but still readily discernible. Within the Greek pantheon, the gods were less often represented as animals, but they retained the shamanic ability to transform themselves into animals in order to disguise their true identities. Dogs and serpents also played a central role in the cult of Asklepios (Aesculapius), the son of Apollo, who was known as the God of Medicine and the Divine

Physician. Asklepios's shrine in the sacred grove at Epidaurus functioned as a kind of ancient health resort. Like modern-day Lourdes, it attracted crowds of suppliants seeking relief from a great variety of maladies. As part of the "cure," it provided an early instance of institutional, animal-assisted therapy. Treatment involved various rites of purification and sacrifice followed by periods of (drug-induced?) sleep within the main body of the shrine. During their slumbers the God visited each of his "patients," sometimes in human form but more often in the guise of a snake or a dog that licked them on the relevant injured or ailing portions of their anatomy. It appears that the dogs that lived around the shrine may have been specially trained to lick people. It was believed that these animals actually represented the god and had the power to cure illness with their tongues (Dale-Green, 1966; Toynbee, 1973). Inscribed tablets found within the precincts of the temple at Epidaurus testify to the miraculous powers of the local dogs:

Thuson of Hermione, a blind boy, had his eyes licked in the daytime by one of the dogs about the temple, and departed cured.

A dog cured a boy from Aigina. He had a growth on his neck. When he had come to the god, one of the sacred dogs healed him while he was awake with his tongue and made him well.

Although evidently material in form, the healing dogs and snakes at Epidaurus clearly fulfilled much the same function as shamanic spirit helpers. Through their ability to renew themselves periodically by shedding their skins, not to mention their potentially venomous qualities, snakes have always possessed strong associations with healing, death, and reincarnation (Morris & Morris, 1968). Likewise, in mythology, the dog is commonly represented as an intermediary between this world and the next. Some authors have attributed this to the dog's carrion-eating propensities, while others ascribe it to the dog's proverbial watchfulness and alertness to unseen "spiritual" threats, as well as its liminal, ambiguous status as a voluntary occupant of the boundary zone separating human and animal, culture and nature (White, 1991; Serpell, 1995).

During the early centuries of Christianity, traces of ancient shamanic ideas and practices were still prevalent throughout much of Europe. In addition to being healers, most of the early Celtic saints and holy men of Britain and Ireland were distinguished by their special rapport with animals, and many, according to legend, experienced bodily transformations into animal form (Armstrong, 1973; Melia, 1983). St. Francis of Assisi, who appears to have been influenced by Irish monastic traditions, has also been described as a nature mystic. Among other feats, he preached sermons to rapt audiences of birds, and was able to pacify rabid wolves (Armstrong, 1973). One of his followers, St. Anthony of Padua (1195-1231), preached so eloquently to the

fishes in the sea that they all lined up along the shoreline to listen to his words of wisdom (Spencer, 1993).

The particular notion that dogs could heal injuries or sores by touching or licking them also persisted well into the Christian era. St. Roch who, like Asklepios, was generally depicted in the company of a dog, seems to have been cured of plague sores by the licking of his canine companion. St. Christopher, St. Bernard, and a number of other saints were also associated with dogs, and many of them had reputations as healers.

A faint ghost of older, shamanistic traditions can also be detected in the curious medieval cult of the greyhound saint, St. Guinefort. Guinefort, so the legend goes, was unjustly slaughtered by his noble master who mistakenly believed that the dog had killed and devoured his child. Soon afterward, however, the babe was found sleeping peacefully beside the remains of a huge, predatory serpent that Guinefort had fought and killed. Overcome with remorse, the knight threw the dog's carcass into a well, covered it with a great pile of stones, and planted a grove of trees around it to commemorate the event. During the 13th century, this grove, about 40 kilometres north of the city of Lyons, became the center of a pagan healing cult. Peasants from miles around brought their sick and ailing children to the shrine where miraculous cures were apparently performed (Schmitt, 1983).

Centuries later, the close companionship of a "Spaniel Gentle or Comforter"—a sort of nondescript, hairy lapdog—was still being recommended to the ladies of Elizabethan England as a remedy for a variety of ills. William Harrison, in his *Description of England* (1577) admitted to some scepticism on the subject: "It is thought by some that it is verie wholesome for a weake stomach to beare such a dog in the bosome, as it is for him that hath the palseie to feele the dailie smell and savour of a fox. But how truelie this is affirmed let the learned judge." The learned Dr. Caius, author of *De Canibus Britannicus* (1570), was less inclined to doubt: "though some suppose that such dogges are fyt for no service, I dare say, by their leaves, they be in a wrong boxe." He was of the opinion that a dog carried on the bosom of a diseased person absorbed the disease (Jesse, 1866).

Thus, over historical time, a kind of progression appears to occur from a strong, archaic belief in the supernatural healing power of certain animals, such as dogs, to increasingly vague and superstitious folk practices in which the special "spiritual" qualities of the animal can no longer be discerned, and all that remains is a sort of "quack" remedy of dubious therapeutic value. In medieval Europe, this trend was associated with the Church's vigorous suppression of pre-Christian and unorthodox religious beliefs and practices. In the year 1231 A.D., in an effort to halt the spread of religious dissent in Europe, the office of the Papal Inquisition was created in order to provide the Church with an instrument for identifying and combating heresy. Prior to this time,

religious and secular authorities had adopted a relatively lenient attitude to the variety of pagan customs and beliefs that abounded locally throughout Europe. The Inquisition systematically rooted them out and obliterated them. Ancient nature cults and rituals connected with pre-Christian deities or sacred groves, trees, streams, and wells were ruthlessly extirpated. Even the harmless cult of St. Guinefort was the object of persecution. A Dominican friar, Stephen of Bourbon, had the dead dog disinterred, and the sacred grove cut down and burned, along with the remains of the faithful greyhound. An edict was also passed making it a crime for anyone to visit the place in the future (Schmitt, 1983).

Although the picture is greatly distorted by the Inquisition's peculiar methods of obtaining and recording evidence, it appears that the so-called "witch craze" that swept through Europe between the 15th and 17th centuries originated as an attack on local folk healers or cunning folk; the last degenerate practitioners of archaic shamanism (Briggs, 1996). According to the establishment view, not only did these medieval witches consort with the Devil in animal form, they also possessed the definitively shamanic ability to transform both themselves and others into animals (Cohn, 1975). In Britain and Scandinavia, witches were also believed to possess supernatural "imps" or familiars, most of which appeared in animal form. In fact, judging from the evidence presented in contemporary pamphlets and trial records, the majority of these familiars belonged to species we nowadays keep as pets: dogs, cats, cage birds, mice, rats, ferrets, and so on (Ewen, 1933; Thomas, 1971). In other words, close association or affinity with animals, once a sign of shamanic power or budding sainthood, became instead a symptom of diabolism. Animal companions still retained a certain "otherworldly" quality in the popular imagination of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but mainly as potential instruments of *maleficium*—the power to harm others by supernatural means.

All of these trends also reflected the marked medieval tendency to impose a rigid separation between human and nonhuman animals; a tendency that was reinforced by ideals of human conduct that emphasized self-control, civility, and chastity, while at the same time rejecting what were then viewed as animal-like attributes, such as impulsiveness, coarseness, and licentiousness (Elias, 1978; Salisbury, 1994).

V. ANIMALS AS AGENTS OF SOCIALIZATION

The close of the 17th century, and the dawn of the so-called "Age of Enlightenment," brought with them certain changes in the public perception of animals that have been thoroughly documented by historians of the early modern period (e.g., Maehle, 1994; Thomas, 1983). These changes included a gradual

increase in sympathetic attitudes to animals and nature, and a gradual decline in the anthropocentric attitudes that so characterized the medieval and Renaissance periods (Salisbury, 1994). The perception of wild animals and wilderness as threatening to human survival also decreased in prevalence, while the practice of pet-keeping expanded out of the aristocracy and into the newly emergent, urban middle classes. This change in animal-related attitudes and behavior can be plausibly attributed, at least in part, to the steady migration of Europeans out of rural areas and into towns and cities at this time. This rural exodus helped to distance growing sectors of the population from any direct involvement in the consumptive exploitation of animals, and removed the need for value systems designed to legitimize or reinforce such practices (Serpell, 1996; Serpell & Paul, 1994; Thomas, 1983).

The notion that nurturing relationships with animals could serve a socializing function, especially for children, also surfaced at about this time. Writing in 1699, John Locke advocated giving children "dogs, squirrels, birds or any such things" to look after as a means of encouraging them to develop tender feelings and a sense of responsibility for others (Locke, 1699, p. 154). Deriving their authority from the works of John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes, many 18th-century reformers believed that children could learn to reflect on, and control, their own innately beastlike characteristics through the act of caring for and controlling real animals (Myers, 1998). Compassion and concern for animal welfare also became one of the favorite didactic themes of children's literature during the 18th and 19th centuries, where its clear purpose was to inculcate an ethic of kindness and gentility, particularly in male children (Grier, 1999; Ritvo, 1987; Turner, 1980).

In the late 18th century, theories concerning the socializing influence of animal companionship also began to be applied to the treatment of the mentally ill. The earliest well-documented experiment in this area took place in England at the York Retreat, the brainchild of a progressive Quaker called William Tuke. The York Retreat employed treatment methods that were exceptionally enlightened when compared with those that existed in other mental institutions of the day. Inmates were permitted to wear their own clothing, and they were encouraged to engage in handicrafts, to write, and to read books. They were also allowed to wander freely around the retreat's courtyards and gardens, which contained various small domestic animals. In his *Description of the Retreat* (1813, p. 96), Samuel Tuke, the founder's grandson, described how the internal courtyards of the retreat were supplied "with a number of animals; such as rabbits, sea-gulls, hawks, and poultry. These creatures are generally very familiar with the patients: and it is believed they are not only the means of innocent pleasure; but that the intercourse with them, sometimes tends to awaken the social and benevolent feelings."

During the 19th century, pet animals became increasingly common features of mental institutions in England and elsewhere. For example, in a highly critical report on the appalling conditions endured by the inmates of Bethlem Hospital during the 1830s, the British Charity Commissioners suggested that the grounds of lunatic asylums "should be stocked with sheep, hares, a monkey, or some other domestic or social animals" to create a more pleasing and less prison-like atmosphere. Such recommendations were evidently taken seriously. According to an article published in the *Illustrated London News* of 1860, the women's ward at the Bethlem Hospital was by that time "cheerfully lighted, and enlivened with prints and busts, with aviaries and pet animals," while in the men's ward the same fondness was manifested "for pet birds and animals, cats, canaries, squirrels, greyhounds. . . . [Some patients] pace the long gallery incessantly, pouring out their woes to those who listen to them, or, if there be none to listen, to the dogs and cats." (cited in Allderidge, 1991).

The beneficial effects of animal companionship also appear to have been recognized as serving a therapeutic role in the treatment of physical ailments during this period. In her *Notes on Nursing* (1860), for instance, Florence Nightingale observes that a small pet "is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially."

VI. ANIMALS AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Despite the apparent success of 19th-century experiments in animal-facilitated institutional care, the advent of scientific medicine virtually eliminated animals from hospital settings by the early decades of the 20th century (Allderidge, 1991). For the following 50 years, virtually the only medical contexts in which animals are mentioned are those concerned with zoonotic disease and public health, or as symbolic referents in psychoanalytic theories concerning the origins of mental illness.

Sigmund Freud's ideas concerning the origins of neurosis tended to reiterate the Hobbesian idea of mankind's inherently beastlike nature (Myers, 1998). According to Freud, infants and young children are essentially similar to animals, insofar as they are ruled by instinctive cravings or impulses organized around basic biological functions such as eating, excreting, sexuality, and self-preservation. Freud referred to this basic, animal aspect of human nature as the *id*. As children mature, their adult caretakers "tame" or socialize them by instilling fear or guilt whenever the child acts too impulsively in response to these inner drives. Children, in turn, respond to this external pressure to conform by repressing these urges from consciousness. Mental illness results, or so Freud maintained, when these bottled-up animal drives find no healthy

or creative outlet in later life, and erupt uncontrollably into consciousness (Shafton, 1995).

Freud interpreted the recurrent animal images that surfaced in his patients' dreams and free associations as metaphorical devices by means of which people disguise unacceptable thoughts or feelings. "Wild beasts," he argued "represent passionate impulses of which the dreamer is afraid, whether they are his own or those of other people" (Freud, 1959, p. 410). Because these beastly thoughts and impulses are profoundly threatening to the *Ego*, they are locked away in dark corners of the subconscious where they can be safely ignored—at least during a person's waking hours. To Freud and his followers, the aim of psychoanalysis was to unmask these frightening denizens of the unconscious mind, reveal their true natures, and thus, effectively, to neutralize them.

Freud's concept of the id as a sort of basic, animal essence in human nature bears more than a superficial resemblance to animistic and shamanistic ideas concerning animal souls and guardian spirits, and the "inner" or spiritual origins of ill-health (Serpell, in press). In the works of Carl Jung, particularly his discussions of mythological archetypes in dreams and visions, and his concept of the "collective unconscious," this resemblance becomes more or less explicit (Cook, 1987). It is also echoed in the writings of Boris Levinson, the founder of "pet-facilitated therapy." In his book, *Pets and Human Development*, Levinson states:

One of the chief reasons for man's present difficulties is his inability to come to terms with his inner self and to harmonize his culture with his membership in the world of nature. Rational man has become alienated from himself by refusing to face his irrational self, his own past as personified by animals. (Levinson, 1972, p. 6)

The solution to this growing sense of alienation was, according to Levinson, to restore a healing connection with our own, unconscious animal natures by establishing positive relationships with real animals, such as dogs, cats, and other pets. He argued that pets represent "a half-way station on the road back to emotional well-being" (Levinson, 1969, p. xiv) and that "we need animals as allies to reinforce our inner selves" (Levinson, 1972, pp. 28–9). Levinson went beyond the Freudian idea that animals were essentially a symbolic disguise for things we are afraid to confront in the flesh to arguing that relations with animals played such a prominent role in human evolution that they have now become integral to our psychological well-being (Levinson, 1972, p. 15).

VII. ANIMALS, RELAXATION, AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

During the last 20 years, and at least partly in response to the skepticism of the medical establishment, the theoretical emphasis has shifted away from

these relatively metaphysical ideas about animals as psychospiritual mediators, toward more prosaic, scientifically "respectable" explanations for the apparent therapeutic benefits of animal companionship (Serpell, in press). The primary catalyst for this change of emphasis was a single, ground-breaking study of 92 outpatients from a cardiac care unit who, statistically speaking, were found to live longer if they were pet owners (Friedmann *et al.*, 1980). This finding prompted a whole series of other health-related studies (see Garrity & Stallones, 1998) and also stimulated a lot of discussion concerning the possible mechanism(s) responsible for the apparent salutary effects of pet ownership. Of these, at least two have stood the test of time. According to the first, animals are able to induce an immediate, physiologically de-arousing state of relaxation simply by attracting and holding our attention (Katcher *et al.*, 1983). According to the second, companion animals are capable of providing people with a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support (McNicholas & Collis, 1995; Serpell, 1996; Siegel, 1990).

Although the de-arousing effects of animal contact have been demonstrated by a considerable number of recent studies, little evidence exists at present that these effects are responsible for more than transient or short-term improvements in physiologic parameters, such as heart rate and blood pressure (Friedmann, 1995). In contrast, the concept of pets serving as sources of social support seems to offer a relatively convincing explanation for the more long-term benefits of animal companionship.

Cobb (1976) defined social support as "information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved, esteemed, and a member of a network of mutual obligations." More recent authors, however, have tended to distinguish between "perceived social support" and "social network" characteristics. The former represents a largely qualitative description of a person's level of satisfaction with the support he or she receives from particular social relationships, while the latter is a more quantitative measure incorporating the number, frequency, and type of a person's overall social interactions (Eriksen, 1994). However we choose to define it, the importance of social support to human well-being has been acknowledged implicitly throughout history. Loneliness—the absence of social support—has always been viewed as such a painful and unpleasant sensation that, since time immemorial, societies have used solitary confinement, exile, and social ostracism as methods of punishment.

The autobiographical accounts of religious hermits, castaways, and prisoners of war provide a clear picture of the psychological effects of social isolation. Most describe feelings equivalent to physical torture which increase gradually to a peak before declining, often quite sharply. This decrease in pain is generally associated with the onset of a state of apathy and despair, sometimes so severe that it involves complete catatonic withdrawal (Serpell, 1996).

Within the last 10 years, an extensive medical literature has emerged confirming a strong, positive link between social support and improved human health and survival (see Eriksen, 1994; Esterling *et al.*, 1994; House *et al.*, 1988; Sherbourne *et al.*, 1992; Vilhjalmson, 1993). The precise mechanisms underlying these life-saving effects of social support are still the subject of some debate, but most authorities appear now to agree that the principal benefits arise from the capacity of supportive social relationships to buffer or ameliorate the deleterious health effects of prolonged or chronic life stress (Ader *et al.*, 1995). In theory, this salutary effect of social support should apply to any positive social relationship; any relationship in which a person feels *cared for*, *loved*, or *esteemed*. As far as the vast majority of medical researchers and practitioners are concerned, however, the only relationships that are assumed to matter are those that exist between closely affiliated persons—friends, marital partners, immediate family members, and so on. Despite the growing evidence of recent anthrozoological research, the notion that animal companions might also contribute socially to human health has still received very limited medical recognition (Serpell, 1996).

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

For most of human history, animals have occupied a central position in theories concerning the ontology and treatment of sickness and disease. Offended animal spirits were often believed to be the source of illness, injury, or misfortune, but, at the same time, the assistance of animal guardian spirits—either one's own or those belonging to a medicine man or shaman—could also be called on to mediate in the process of healing such afflictions.

Although such ideas survived here and there into the modern era, the spread of anthropocentric and monotheistic belief systems during the last 1000 to 2000 years virtually annihilated animist belief in the supernatural power of animals and animal spirits throughout much of the world. In Europe during the Middle Ages, the Christian Church actively persecuted animist believers, branding them as witches and heretics, and identifying their familiar spirits with the devil and his minions in animal form.

During the period of the Enlightenment, the idea that pet animals could serve a socializing function for children and the mentally ill became popular, and by the 19th century the introduction of animals to institutional care facilities was widespread. However, these early and preliminary experiments in animal-assisted therapy were soon displaced by the rise of scientific medicine during the early part of the 20th century. Animals continued to play a somewhat negative symbolic role in the development of psychoanalytic theories concerning the origins of mental illness, but no further medical discussion of their

value as therapeutic adjuncts occurred until the late 1960s and 1970s when such ideas resurfaced in the writings of the influential child psychotherapist, Boris Levinson.

Recent interest in the potential medical value of animal companionship was largely initiated by a single study that appeared to demonstrate life-prolonging effects of pet ownership among heart attack sufferers. This study has since prompted many others, most of which have demonstrated either short-term, relaxing effects of animal contact, or long-term health improvements consistent with a view of companion animals as sources of social support. Despite these findings, the positive therapeutic value of animal companionship continues to receive little recognition in mainstream medical literature, and as a field of research it is grossly undersupported by government funding agencies.

Considered in retrospect, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the current inability or unwillingness of the medical establishment to address this topic seriously is a legacy of the same anthropocentrism that has dominated European and Western thinking since the Middle Ages. Hopefully, with the gradual demise of this old-fashioned and prejudiced mind-set, we can return to a more holistic and open-minded view of the potential contribution of animals to human well-being.

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