

Creatures of the unconscious: companion animals as mediators

Primitive man must tame the animal in himself and make it his helpful companion; civilized man must heal the animal in himself and make it his friend.

Carl Jung

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of Erika Friedmann's ground-breaking study of recovery rates among pet-owning and non-owning heart-attack sufferers, the emphasis of research on human-companion animal relationships has moved increasingly towards identifying quantitative, physical and/or physiological benefits of pet ownership (Friedmann *et al.*, 1980, 1983; Katcher *et al.*, 1983; Siegel, 1990; Serpell, 1991; Anderson *et al.*, 1992; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995; Friedmann *et al.*, Chapter 8). Associated with this trend has been an increasing tendency to seek mechanistic explanations for some of the apparent medical benefits that have been observed. To date, at least two plausible mechanisms have been proposed involving either the immediate, physiologically de-arousing effects of tactile or visual contact with pet animals (Katcher *et al.*, 1983), and the ability of these animals to provide their owners with a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support (Siegel, 1990; Serpell, 1996; Collis & McNicholas, 1998). Given the need to overcome the natural skepticism and conservatism of the medical profession, this emphasis on the quantifiable benefits of pet-keeping is entirely understandable and unsurprising. Nevertheless, it has produced in its wake a tendency to overlook or ignore some of the earliest writings on human-companion animal relationships that focus more on what I shall call the *psycho-spiritual*¹ benefits

of pet ownership. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit and re-examine some of these early ideas.

THE BACKGROUND

Much of the early literature on animal-assisted therapy, or the so-called 'human-animal bond', contains allusions to the mediating properties of companion animals. These mediating powers fall into three principal areas, which I shall call, respectively, the *social lubricant*, the *animal ambassador*, and the *animal within*.

The *social lubricant* effect refers to the supposed ability of pets to catalyse social relationships between people. Psychiatrists and psychotherapists working in the 1960s and 1970s were among the first to recognize this apparent 'ice-breaking' characteristic of companion animals, and they evidently employed it to good effect when trying to establish therapeutic relationships with abnormally withdrawn or antisocial patients (see Levinson, 1969). Similar effects have also been documented among institutionalized elderly (Corson & O'Leary Corson, 1980), people walking their dogs in public parks (Messent, 1983), and among wheelchair-bound, handicapped children and adults accompanied by service dogs (Eddy *et al.*, 1988; Mader *et al.*, 1989). The mechanism(s) underlying this social lubricant effect of pets is far from clear, although, based on their work with disturbed adolescents and institutionalized elderly, Corson and O'Leary Corson (1980: 107) referred to pets as 'nonverbal communication mediators' and claimed that they offered withdrawn or otherwise isolated individuals 'a form of nonthreatening, nonjudgemental, reassuring nonverbal communication and tactile comfort and thus helped to break the vicious cycle of loneliness, helplessness and social withdrawal'. The key qualities of pets, in other words, would appear to be their special combination of human and non-human traits – their uncritical friendliness and willingness to interact socially with people, combined with their furrieness and their inability to speak – in short, their intermediacy.

The second area of mediation, the *animal ambassador* idea, refers to the capacity of pets to serve as a sort of moral link with other categories of animals, and with the broader category of 'nature' of which other animals are perceived to be an integral part. As Michael Fox (1981: 38) once put it, 'keeping a companion animal can help one mature through understanding, to appreciate the intrinsic worth and basic rights of a fellow earth being'. Recently, this idea has been developed more fully by Serpell and Paul (1994), and it is tentatively supported by empirical findings that demonstrate statistical correlations between humane attitudes

to animals in adulthood and positive relationships with pets in childhood (Paul & Serpell, 1993). There are, of course, other explanations for these correlations, but one plausible interpretation is that sympathetic feelings developed towards companion animals during the childhood years subsequently generalize to encompass other categories of animals, or nature itself, later in life. Pets, so the argument goes, are able to fulfil this ambassadorial role because of their ambiguous, *intermediate* position on the boundary between human and animal, culture and nature (Serpell & Paul, 1994; Serpell, 1995).

Finally, there is also a clear suggestion in the early literature that companion animals can help to connect or reunite people with something fundamental within themselves – a sort of unconscious *animal within* – and it is primarily this mediating role of pets that provides the focus of the present discussion. In his book *King Solomon's Ring*, Konrad Lorenz hints at this third area of mediation when he describes the pleasure he derives from the company of his dog as 'closely akin to the joy accorded me by the raven, the greylag goose or other wild animals that enliven my walks through the countryside; it seems like a re-establishment of the immediate bond with that unconscious omniscience we call nature' (Lorenz, 1952: 126). Lorenz's tone is somewhat vague and metaphorical, but in the writings of Boris Levinson the *animal within* idea was more clearly articulated. In *Pets and Human Development*, for example, he stated that:

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: 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: xiv) and that 'we need animals as allies to reinforce our inner selves' (Levinson, 1972: 28–9). In other words, the process of empathizing with, and relating successfully to, our pets involves tuning into and accepting our own repressed animality.

Levinson's notion of the *animal within* is clearly derived, to a large extent, from psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious, and the symbolic roles that animals are thought to play within it. According to

Sigmund Freud's ideas concerning the origins of neurosis, 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. As children mature, their adult caretakers endeavour to '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: 410). Because these beastly thoughts and impulses are profoundly threatening to the ego, they are locked away in dark corners of the subconscious where their terrifying howls and shrieks can be safely ignored, at least during a person's waking hours. During sleep, however, the cage doors are unlocked, and these creatures of the unconscious rampage through the psyche like foxes in a chicken coop. 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.

Although empirical support for Freud's overall thesis – let alone his interpretation of dreams – is unimpressive (Foulkes, 1982), the validity of the Freudian concept of the dream animal is at least tentatively confirmed by the results of recent surveys. In his exhaustive quantitative analysis of children's dreams, Foulkes (1982: 81) not only detected an extremely high prevalence of animal figures in the dreams of children between the ages of three and seven, but also found evidence that dream animals were associated with 'problems of impulse control'. Among five to seven year olds, animal dreams were reported more frequently by children diagnosed as being behaviourally impulsive and socially immature, and an increasing prevalence of animal characters was associated with a decreasing level of self-participation in dreams (implying that the animal figures substitute for the missing self). High rates of animal dreaming were also associated statistically with dreams involving aggression. Studies of adult dreams have produced comparable findings. According to one such survey:

dreams with animal figures are more likely to be short, take place in an outdoor setting which is unfamiliar or distorted, have a great deal of activity, often of a violent nature, or be the scene of a calamity . . . As the emphasis upon animal figures increases and a greater predominance of animal figures occurs, all of the previous dream parameters become proportionately more intensified. Animal dreams are not exclusively negatively toned; sometimes the dreamer attempts to respond in an accepting or supportive role toward the animal figure, but almost without exception, if the animal figure initiates any response to the dreamer, it is some form of threat or hostility. (Van de Castle, 1983: 170)

In Freud's view, the interpretation of animal symbols in dreams depended entirely on the personal history and experience of the dreamer. He rejected the Jungian idea of 'archetypes' or universal animal symbols. Again, ethnographic survey results seem to support Freud's position. Dogs, horses and cats predominate in the dreams of American college students; marine or aquatic animals dominate the dreams of Pacific islanders; Australian Aborigines tend to dream about such things as kangaroos, wallabies, crocodiles, snakes and sting rays, while birds are relatively common in the dreams of all three groups (Van de Castle, 1983). In other words, the animal figures that find their way into our dreams tend to be the same animal figures we are most likely to encounter in everyday life.

In addition to their role in dreams, animals are also one of the universal raw materials of myths, folktales and fables the world over (Bettleheim, 1976; Sax, 1990; Doniger, 1995). Freud, like Lévi-Strauss (1966), would doubtless have accounted for the universality of this animal symbolism by arguing that animals are essentially 'good to think' - that, for the purposes of disguising uncomfortable or threatening thoughts and emotions, no other category of things could serve as well. Such a view was also consonant with the already long-established Calvinist and Hobbesian tendency to represent all antisocial or improper human conduct as the product of mankind's fundamentally 'brutish' or beast-like nature (Myers, 1998). Levinson, however, took the argument an important stage further than this by suggesting that the popularity of animal symbolism is basically innate - 'an expression of the unconscious affinity between man and animals' - rather than simply a convenient means of dressing up things we are afraid to confront in the flesh. Relations with animals played such a prominent role in human evolution, he felt, that they have become integral to our psychological well-being (Levinson, 1972: 15). In this sense, Levinson's ideas appear to anticipate those of various New Age spiritual ecologists (e.g. see Merchant, 1992), as well as E.O. Wilson's 'biophilia hypothesis' - the postulate that humans possess

a biologically based, inherent predisposition to attend to, and affiliate with, life and lifelike processes (Wilson, 1984; Kellert, 1993).

THE 'SAVAGE' MIND

One obvious implication of Levinson's hypothesis is that this sense of unconscious affinity with animals is an ancestral trait; an inherited legacy of the days when humans lived closer to 'nature' than they do now. It therefore seems appropriate, at this point, to examine the validity of this claim by exploring the status of animals in the mental lives of subsistence hunter-gatherers whose lifestyles and worldviews are thought to lie closest to the original or ancestral human pattern.²

A remarkable degree of consistency in attitudes and beliefs about animals exists (or existed until recently) among hunter-gatherer societies from regions as far apart as Siberia, Amazonia or the Kalahari Desert of southern Africa. Briefly summarized, these beliefs include the notion that animals are fully rational, sentient and intelligent beings, in no way inferior to humans, and that the bodies of animals, like those of people, are animated by non-corporeal spirits or 'souls' that survive the body after death. While it is recognized that certain skills are needed in order to be a good hunter, it is also believed that no amount of skill or ingenuity will succeed if the animal quarry is unwilling to submit to being killed. Game animals must therefore be treated at all times with proper respect and consideration in order to earn their goodwill. Failure to treat the animal respectfully may cause either the animal's spirit or that of its spiritual guardian to demand some form of posthumous restitution. Types of spiritual retribution that may result from disrespectful behaviour include the infliction of illness, injury, madness or death on the hunter or other members of his family or clan, or loss of success in future hunting (Hallowell, 1926; Benedict, 1929; Speck, 1977; Martin, 1978; Campbell, 1984; Nelson, 1986; Guenther 1988; Wenzel, 1991; Erikson, Chapter 2). As Ingold (1994: 15) has observed, 'The hunter hopes that by being good to animals, they in turn will be good to him. But by the same token, the animals have the power to withhold if any attempt is made to coerce what they are not, of their own volition, prepared to provide . . . Animals thus maltreated will desert the hunter, or even cause him ill fortune'.

As well as being potential sources of sickness or misfortune when offended, animal spirits also provide hunter-gatherers with the means to heal illness and improve bad luck. This 'therapeutic' communication with the spirit world is typically achieved through the medium of

dreams, visions or hallucinations during which the relevant animal spirits appear to the visionary, explain the spiritual source of his or her problem, and provide ritual guidance as to the best method of effecting a 'cure'. Most people are thought to be capable of experiencing these spirit dreams or visions from time to time, either by chance or through their own personal efforts. Certain individuals, however, are believed to possess extraordinary visionary powers that enable them to enter the spirit world at will. Known in anthropological circles as shamans, these individuals are credited with having an unusual affinity with the spirits of animals and nature, and a special, almost symbiotic relationship with one or more animal helping-spirits. Shamans can reputedly adopt the material form of these animal 'familiar' in order to travel about incognito, and the familiar is also the medium through which the shaman is able to enter the world of spirits and influence events at a distance from his or her body (Eliade, 1964). Some of these ideas about familiars are summarized in the following early account of Shamanism among the Penobscot Indians of New England:

Every magician [shaman] had his helper which seems to have been an animal's body into which he could transfer his state of being at will. The helper was virtually a disguise, though we do not know whether the animal was believed to exist separately from the shaman when not in the shaman's service or whether it was simply a material form assumed by the shaman when engaged in the practice of magic . . . Direct information from Penobscot informants says that the *baohi'gan* [familiar] could be sent to fight or to work for his master the shaman. It could be sent on any mission whatsoever according to the shaman's will. We are told, too, that the owner remained inert while his *baohi'gan* was away. (Speck, 1918: 249-51)

The apparent parallels with Levinson's notions of the animal within are quite striking. In both cases, we have the concept of an unconscious domain populated by powerful animal figures. We have the idea of animal helpers mediating between people and their unconscious worlds. And we have the notion that this process of animal mediation can be used for healing purposes. However, there are also some equally striking differences. If we assume, for the sake of argument, that the hunter-gatherers' 'spirit world' is essentially synonymous with our own 'unconscious' - just different ways of representing the same thing - then one obvious difference between us and them is that hunter-gatherers are habitually engaged in a process of positive negotiation and dialogue with their inner animals. There seems to be little evidence of repression in the Freudian sense of the term. Hunter-gatherers, moreover, use the information obtained from this dialogue with the uncon-

scious, not only to help them cope with the ordinary vicissitudes of life, but also to guide them in their dealings with nature and real animals. Consider, for example, the following description of the ways in which Bushman hunters attempt to influence the progress and outcome of their hunts:

Throughout the hunt the hunter would monitor his every thought, emotion and action, in order to sustain the bond of connectedness with the animal by which he felt he could steer the hunt towards an auspicious conclusion . . . The bond of sympathy was something set up in the hours or days preceding the hunt, when the hunters would attune themselves spiritually to one animal species or another and, in the process, attempt to gather whatever presentiments they could about the impending hunt: the animals they might encounter, the direction they could come from, the likely dangers, the duration of the hunt. These presentiments . . . activated the hunter's entire body; they were felt at his ribs, his back, his calves, his face and eyes. His body would be astir with the 'antelope sensation', at places on his body corresponding with those of the antelope's. (Guenther, 1988: 199)

From this cultural distance, it is probably impossible for us to comprehend fully the experiences of these Bushman hunters. It appears that they not only represent aspects of their unconscious worlds in animal terms, just as we often do, but that also, at some unconscious or semi-conscious level, their thoughts and feelings actually resonate with the pulse of nature, and with the lives of the animals on whom they depend. For anyone educated in a post-Aristotelian, western tradition, it is extremely hard to imagine the profound level of identification with animals that this degree of resonance implies. Yet it is unlikely that hunter-gatherers would go to such extraordinary efforts to establish this metaphysical communion with other species if it served no useful purpose; if it did not also improve their success as hunters, and their capacity to deal with life's misfortunes. In other words, an ability to tune into and resonate with the lives of other organisms via internalized *animals within* may, indeed, be part of our biological heritage; an evolved mental skill that once enhanced our survival as hunters and gatherers.³

PARADISE LOST

So what became of this skill, this hypothetical, archaic ability to connect with the animal within? According to Levinson, we lost touch with it through the process of becoming civilized and urbanized, and our lives are now greatly impoverished as a result. But, while the increasing physical separation of people from nature associated with urban life has

probably helped to attenuate this ability, it is possible that the process of atrophy began much earlier in human history than Levinson believed.

Subsistence hunters need to understand and identify with the animals they depend on for food because a good hunter is essentially one who learns to 'think like' his prey - to empathize with it. Hence, the marked hunter-gatherer tendency to view animals as near equals or even kinsmen, and the attendant moral conflicts associated with hunting and devouring them (see Serpell, 1996). At the same time, hunters do not ordinarily interact socially with their prey and, except at the moment of the animal's death, they exercise little or no control over it. The animal remains an independent being with a mind of its own, and it is possible for the hunter to convince himself that, if the animal allowed itself to be killed, it did so of its own free will (Ingold, 1994; Serpell, 1996).

Such an egalitarian moral ideology was incompatible with the ecological shift from hunting to animal domestication that began some 12 000 years ago. It would require, after all, a supreme feat of self-deception for a farmer or herdsman to claim that his animals were free agents. The domestic animal, almost by definition, is totally dependent for survival on its human custodian. It has no free will, as such. Moreover, because they live together in what is, to some extent, a combined social group, it is not unusual for farmers and herdsman to establish social bonds with their animals and *vice versa*. The moral dilemma is therefore far more intense for the farmer than for the hunter, since killing or harming the animal in this context effectively constitutes a gross betrayal of trust (Serpell, 1996).

Farmers, herdsman and others who benefit from the exploitation of domestic species have dealt with this ethical dilemma using a variety of coping strategies, but perhaps the most pervasive and durable was the idea that humans are both morally separate from and superior to all other animals (Serpell, 1996). As Ingold (1994: 16) has recently noted, the ideological difference between hunters and herdsman primarily involves a shift from human-animal relations based on *trust* to those based on *domination*:

In the world of the hunter, animals, too, are supposed to care, to the extent of laying down their lives for humans by allowing themselves to be taken. They retain, however, full control over their own destiny. Under pastoralism, that control has been relinquished to humans. It is the herdsman who takes life-or-death decisions concerning what are now 'his' animals . . . He sacrifices them; they do not sacrifice themselves to him. They are cared for but they are not themselves empowered to care. Like dependents in the house-

hold of a patriarch, their status is that of jural minors, subject to the authority of their human master. In short, the relationship of pastoral care, quite unlike that of the hunter towards animals, is founded on a principle not of trust but of domination.

From the typical subsistence farmer's perspective, wild animals are basically 'vermin' - annoying or menacing creatures that pose a continual danger to his life and livelihood by devouring either his crops or his livestock. Similarly, nature, in the sense of uncultivated wilderness, is a profoundly threatening concept to most farmers; the antithesis of all they hold most dear. The only animals that are considered good or beneficial are the domesticated ones that conform to the harmless and highly subordinate roles of servants or slaves (Thomas, 1983; Serpell, 1996).

In other words, the change in relations between humans and animals associated with the switch from hunting to farming produced a fundamental shift in our mental and moral taxonomy. The hunter's biological worldview, based on an egalitarian sense of continuity and connection between people and animals, was gradually displaced by a hierarchical, dualist schema that emphasizes discontinuity and difference. And the position that animals have come to occupy in the mental lives of many 'civilized' humans seems to reflect this change in status quo. In the process of distancing ourselves from other species we have also separated what we perceive to be the most human and animal-like aspects of our personalities, relegating the latter to inferior, subordinate positions where they can be mastered and controlled like domestic beasts.

Interpreted in this light, the fear of the animal within, and the repression that Freud and his followers associated with this fear, can perhaps be viewed as the product of a longstanding western tendency to deny affinity and moral obligation towards the rest of the animal kingdom. Whereas it had once been a source of therapeutic mediation and healing knowledge, the animal within became instead the potentially malevolent and destructive embodiment of our own alienation from nature and other animals.

CONCLUSION

To what extent, then, can relationships with companion animals help to heal this psychic rift? How, if at all, can they help to reconnect us with the lives of other organisms, or with nature itself? The answer must surely depend on both the animal and our relationship with it. The mediating power of pets evidently rests on their liminal, intermediate

properties – their ambiguous mix of human and non-human characteristics. Eliminate this ambiguity and, presumably, you also risk eliminating their therapeutic potential. If we are willing to accept and appreciate the *animal* as well as the *human* attributes of our pets by allowing them the freedom to express at least most of their natural behaviour, they may indeed provide us with a means of overcoming what Searles (1960: 122) once called ‘the existential loneliness’ of our species. But if we deny and suppress our pets’ animality in the way that we seem to repress and deny our own, it is hard to see what benefit either partner could derive from this relationship.

Sadly, since about the middle of the nineteenth century, the trend in pet-keeping has been towards progressively modifying, limiting and curtailing the abilities of companion animals to express the ‘animal’ aspects of their natures. Selective breeding has deformed their bodies to the point where some can no longer function biologically without human intervention, and, where breeding has failed, we mutilate them surgically to conform to our own arbitrary, and often bizarre, standards of physical beauty. In the interests of convenience or ‘public health and safety’, their behaviour and their freedom of expression have been severely restricted, and those that unwittingly transgress the boundaries of ‘civilized’ conduct are often swiftly disposed of (Serpell, 1995). In short, we have turned many of our pets into mere cultural artifacts, incapable of existence outside the human domain. By doing this, it could be argued, we not only turn a blind eye to the welfare of these animals, we simultaneously destroy their capacity to mediate on our behalf.

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NOTES

1. The term ‘spiritual’ is used here without necessarily implying the involvement of supernatural powers or agencies.
2. Anthropologists and archaeologists are understandably cautious about using living or recent hunter-gatherers as a source of insight concerning the attitudes and beliefs of our pre-agricultural ancestors. Among the very few that still survive, most living hunter-gatherers have been more or less acculturated by their more aggressive agricultural neighbours, and nearly all of them have been substantially marginalized economically. Nevertheless, as surviving exemplars of a particular – and once universal – mode of economic subsistence, recent

hunter-gatherers can hardly be ignored as a reference point, particularly when the same ideological themes are found to be shared in common by many otherwise ethnically diverse populations.

3. Recently, the archaeologist Steven Mithen (1996) has developed the idea of a separately evolved ‘natural history intelligence’ in humans that comes close to explaining the possible origins of hunter-gatherers’ apparent psychic affinity with other animals.

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