

“GOING TO THE DOGS”: CANID ETHOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

by Nancy R. Howell

Abstract. Theological reflection often treats animals in the very broadest terms and establishes a dramatic difference between humans and animals. Empirical observations, however, describe animals and their relationship to humans in more nuanced ways. Marc Bekoff's science, which integrates ethology and ecology, generates a view of the complex social behaviors of animals and entails observations about *difference*. Dialogue with Bekoff's sensitive awareness of animal behavior is the occasion to construct a theology of nature that is better informed about diversity among animals and differences within and among species.

Keywords: animals; attention epistemology; comparison; continuity; difference; diversity; ethology; intensity; justice; panentheism; personhood; soul; speciesism; theology of nature; uniqueness; variation.

POINT OF VIEW: A DOG'S-EYE VIEW

Marc Bekoff teaches his students and audiences, who sometimes include theologians, to pay attention. Bekoff coined the term *deep ethology* to name his way of attending to animals, which requires stepping inside the senses, surroundings, and relationships of animals in order to know their behavior (Bekoff 2002, 11). Equipped in the fields of ecology and evolution and committed to serious philosophical and theological dialogue, Bekoff is a cognitive ethologist who studies animal behaviors, mental abilities, and experiences comparatively among closely related species in order to understand why or how behaviors might have evolved over time and to consider how social environment and habitat affect behavior (2002, 87).

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Technical descriptions of Bekoff's field tell only a partial story, however, and the near poetry of Bekoff's writing candidly relates his desire to know the heart of animals. His descriptions of animal behavior, reminiscent of the way a loving eye notices every detail of the beloved's movements, catch the slightest interactions and motions in the ordinary and often unnoticed behaviors of animals. As a specialist in canid behavior, Bekoff follows the dog's point of view rather than orchestrating artificial laboratory experiments because he believes that the key to understanding animals lies in the ordinary rather than the extraordinary experiences of animals. The details of ordinary animal behavior, often invisible to the untrained and unloving eye, invite the caring and careful scholar to enter the complex social and individual experiences, motivations, and actions that typify the canid point of view.

Although the scientific community does not unanimously embrace his methodological assumptions, Bekoff's contributions challenge earlier scientific research and much theological scholarship on humans and animals. In this essay, I respond to Bekoff's challenge by reexamining theology of nature or theology of animals in a scientifically informed reflection on *difference*. Theological treatments of the Other, diversity, and difference are plentiful, but theological reflection on animal and human nature and relationships is limited by inattention to developments in animal-behavior studies. Bekoff's work provides the occasion to question theological assumptions about animals and humans with the result that difference is understood in relation to continuity, comparison, variation, and uniqueness and that Christian theology is pressed toward more nuanced statements about method, personhood, God, and justice. "Going to the dogs"—taking the animal's point of view—promises to reinvigorate theological reflection on God, humans, and animals.

Traditional theology invests its creativity and reflection in supernatural and extraordinary matters, but Bekoff's ethology invests his creativity and empathy in discerning the ordinary, understated, and concrete events of the lives of dogs and other animals. As novices in the ordinary, theologians might adopt Bekoff's discerning eye in order to construct a theology of the ordinary, which calls for reformation of theological commentary that masks the beauty and detail in nature. In particular, Bekoff's critical thinking about appropriate conventions for difference, similarity, continuity, and uniqueness suggests specific ways to re-form theology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCE: NATURE'S VARIATION AND ATTENTION EPISTEMOLOGY

One principle apparent in Bekoff's thinking about similarity and difference is the claim that individuals within a species exhibit variations in behavior and personality, and any accounts of animal behavior must re-

member diversity within species. A critic of speciesism, Bekoff rejects characterization of animal behavior that depends exclusively on a species label, which masks differences among individuals within a species. Speciesism results in simplistic assumptions about individuals and animal behavior, but Bekoff insists that animal research must be attuned to individual behavioral variation and attentive to the evolution of behavioral variation (2002, xviii). Research cannot dismiss individual variation, particularly when comparison of individuals across species lines may be involved, because of the possibility that various traits may be determined to be equivalent among individuals of different species or the possibility that the behavioral traits of an individual may not be shared with other members of the same species (2002, 54). When genetics alone cannot explain variations within a species, ecology or social factors may help explain individual variations in behavioral traits (2002, 61).

Comparisons of intelligence, cognition, and adaptability among species are especially problematic when individual variations are dismissed. Any comparisons must expect that individuals within a species demonstrate differences in adaptability and intelligence (2002, 91). Faulty comparisons are attributable to the assumptions and limitations of observers whose scientific conclusions “are based on small data sets from a small number of individuals who may have been exposed to a narrow array of behavioral challenges” (2002, 98). Primatologist Barbara Smuts notes that limitations of observers account for perceived limitations of animals, and Bekoff cites her claim that “limitations most of us encounter in our relations with other animals reflect not their shortcomings, as we so often assume, but our own narrow views about who they are and the kinds of relationships we can have with them” (2002, 99).

Typical objective behavioral studies encourage inattention to individual personalities and identities and do not refer to animals with the grammar used for persons. Bekoff, as well as other ethologists including Jane Goodall, contends that naming animals in behavioral research is not less effective than numbering animal subjects (2002, 45–47). The logic of his methodology suggests that naming animals and attending to individual personalities, intelligence and cognition, behavioral idiosyncrasies, social and family relationships, and adaptability are in fact more effective approaches to observation.

Bekoff’s discussion of variation within species suggests two cautions for theology. First, theology informed by empirical science must be attentive to species variation including variations within human behavior and personality. Diversity in human behavior, personality, and morality complicates comparisons within the human species and comparisons of humans with other species (2002, 15, 122). Second, theological method and construction should avoid raw, unsupported generalizations about all animals

and species, including humans, and must engage the natural world with care for diverse, ordinary, and concrete behaviors and traits.

Theology is not entirely without methodological resources to address individuality and particularity along with variation in nature. In her ecological theology, Sallie McFague proposes that attention epistemology is more adequate than other approaches for attending to the intrinsic value and unique perspectives of animals, plants, and other elements in nature. Attention epistemology is “the kind of knowing that comes from paying close attention to something other than oneself” (1993, 49). Instead of making humans the center of theological attention, McFague advocates epistemology that moves beyond assuming the privilege, uniqueness, and superiority of humans. Nature and the marginalized take center stage in attention epistemology.

Attention epistemology, in McFague’s characterization, features a number of emphases compatible with concern for individuals and variation with species. First, attention epistemology is a concrete and embodied form of knowing that integrates the knowledge of another individual into the knower. Second, embodied knowing pays serious attention to differences by engaging the individual as a “unique site from which each is in itself and for itself” (1993, 50). Third, attention epistemology not only entertains the differences among humans but also addresses individuals who are indifferent to human being. Fourth, attention epistemology leaves the embodied knower changed by knowledge of other animals, plants, and creatures, so that knowing breeds new actions that respond precisely to the nature and needs of differently embodied beings (1993, 50–51). Attention epistemology departs from theological reflection that generalizes about nature. The resulting theology has potential for deep, empirical engagement of individuality, difference, and value in nature.

Attention epistemology connects with Bekoff’s approach, which adopts the animal’s point of view. Bekoff uses the phrase *mindings animals* to mean “caring for other animal beings, respecting them for who they are, appreciating their own worldviews, and wondering what and how they are feeling and why” (2002, xvi). He argues that cognitive ethology must take the animal’s point of view in order to understand animal behavior, emotions, and purposes (2002, 60). Both McFague and Bekoff claim that the observer or researcher is transformed by deep encounter with another creature. The transformation evokes compassion or love, creating urgency for justice and advocacy on behalf of nature (McFague 1993, 50; Bekoff 2002, 135–36). Attention epistemology shares its orientation with Bekoff’s approach: “Most important, [my research] has led me into the minds, hearts, spirits, and souls of many other animals. It has also led me deeply into my own mind, heart, spirit, and soul. Animals have been my teachers and healers. Animals are a way of knowing” (2002, 9).

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCE: CONTINUITY
AND PERSONHOOD

A second principle in Bekoff's approach is that all similarities and differences between humans and other animals must be established in light of the scientific basis for continuity in nature. Without question, both the similarities and the differences between humans and other animals must be acknowledged. As Bekoff writes, "Although there are numerous differences between humans and other animals, in many important ways 'we' (humans) are very much one of 'them' (animals), and 'they' are very much one of 'us'" (2002, 142). News reports about gene mapping and comparative protein studies make clear that the functional and morphological differences so long noted among humans and other animals stand alongside continuity and similarity between humans and chimpanzees. Genetics and evolution provide the scientific theoretical basis for asserting the continuity of humans and other animals. Bekoff, for example, is skeptical that human love appeared without "evolutionary precursors in nature," with "no animal lovers" (2002, 20).

Genetic and evolutionary similarity between humans and other animals provides the rationale for medical research involving animals, and Bekoff notes the apparent contradiction in maintaining a strict dualism between other animals and humans intellectually when, practically speaking, medical research demands confidence in the similarities between humans and other animals. Bekoff's concern is that methodological confidence in the similarities demands far better justification for use of animals as objects of study (2002, 55). Rationales for medical research programs are faulty when arguments for continuity accompany assumptions about human/animal dualism, which makes the objectification of animals for research purposes more acceptable.

Bekoff notes a similar contradiction or irony expressed in a linear hierarchy of species. The speciesism of the linear hierarchy ranks some species higher and others lower on a continuum, which reflects at one level the continuity of species. However, the hierarchy inadequately incorporates evolutionary continuity and intraspecies diversity, which results in contradiction of simple linearity and simple valuation of individuals and species (2002, 54).

Bekoff's approach to continuity, similarity, and difference requires theology to develop a more complex and nuanced profile of the animal continuum (including humans), which means that a more comprehensive theology must be empirically informed by genotypic and phenotypic evidence and evolutionary continuity. Bekoff shares with Patrick Bateson the view that empirical evidence is critical to support the continuity of humans and other animals—but in the absence of evidence for similarities,

both science and theology cannot assume that particular continuities do not exist (2002, 95).

One theological and philosophical precedent conforms to Bekoff's discussion of continuity among animal species. Alfred North Whitehead provides the philosophical argument for process theologians who embrace the continuity of humans with other animals. Like Bekoff, Whitehead urged that we exercise restraint in making claims about similarities and differences between humans and other animals apart from relevant empirical evidence (Cobb 1965, 58).

In *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead claims continuity between humans and animals based on similarities with novelty, language, and religion. Attributing to humans a more complex relationship with novelty, Whitehead credits animal intelligence with the ability to respond to "conventional novelty with conventional devices" (1938, 35).¹ Focusing on fundamental features of language, Whitehead claims continuity between humans and other animals in their capacity for basic communication that "varies between emotional expression and signaling" (1938, 52). Defining religion in terms of four components, Whitehead understands ritual and emotion as expressions of religion in humans and other animals but identifies belief and rationalization as exclusively human developments in religion (1926, 20, 21).

Assured of continuity and difference among humans and other animals, Whitehead makes a case for the extension of personhood to describe some animals other than humans. His argument is constructed on the basis of advanced capacities for freedom and creativity in vertebrates and humans and on the presence of the central nervous system, which acts as a central organizing principle to coordinate organic and social relationships. The term *personhood*, then, appropriately refers to any individual whose life and experience are governed by a "presiding occasion of experience" (1978, 107). Whitehead adapts the word *soul* to name the presiding occasion of experience, and the soul (as a naturally occurring phenomenon) consequently describes the basis for continuity between humans and other animals. At the same time, the soul establishes nonhuman animals as persons with souls that preside over their behavior (Cobb 1965, 48).

Independent of Whiteheadian philosophy, Bekoff advocates designating nonhuman animals as persons. Bekoff's argument depends on the claim that personhood is evidenced by conformity to several criteria: "being conscious of one's surroundings, being able to reason, experiencing various emotions, having a sense of self, adjusting to changing situations, and performing various cognitive and intellectual tasks" (2002, 14). Humans vary significantly in realizing the criteria for personhood; yet, Bekoff observes, personhood is still attributed to humans (such as infants) who cannot demonstrate all capacities of persons (2002, 14). Including nonhuman animals among persons in no way compromises the personhood of

humans, but Bekoff argues that other animals have much to gain by being called persons: “that animals would come to be treated with respect and compassion that is due them, that their interests in not suffering would be given equal consideration with those of humans” (2002, 15).

Bekoff’s research program continues to gather the kind of empirical evidence that Whitehead required for interpreting continuity, similarity, and difference among humans and other animals. The resulting challenge for theology is to construct a theology of nature that is aware of the continuity between humans and other animals and open to revised formulations of personhood and the soul.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCE: SPECIES COMPARISON AND PANENTHEISM

A third principle in Bekoff’s approach to difference and similarity is that comparisons between species or observations of characteristics within species must be described and evaluated within the species context (2002, xx). Even scientists sometimes fail to establish the particular habitat or situation that forms the context for comparisons of animal behavior or ability. Bekoff credits scientists with appropriately gathering observations to make proposals about chimpanzees’ sense of self, dogs’ plans for the future, and animals’ experience of emotions, pleasure, and pain. However, scientists sometimes overstep the bounds of their observations, which support learning about cognitive abilities in animals, and succumb to less useful claims comparing levels of cognition in other animals and humans. Bekoff criticizes such comparisons because they are abstracted from the different adaptive contexts of the species under comparison. Bekoff’s criticism extends to cross-fostering studies of chimpanzees, which (he claims) tell us little that is useful about normal chimpanzees or humans because each “organism does what it needs to do in its own world, and surely a young human (or most humans at any age) could not survive in the world of a chimpanzee” (2002, 86).

Bekoff relates an incident that illustrates problems associated with assuming human intellectual superiority in behavioral comparisons with other animals. After watching a dog named Skipper retrieve a stick by anticipating the speed and direction of the stick as it floated downstream, he mused about comparisons with young human children who might not be able to intercept the stick under similar circumstances. Bekoff writes, “While there may be other explanations for Skipper’s behavior, I am not sure what I would discover if I were told that children of a certain age usually develop the same ability that Skipper displayed and that Skipper was as smart as a child of that age, but no smarter” (2002, 86). Making intelligence the reference point risks misinterpretation of the real differences in behavior set in appropriate contexts. Bekoff reaches a significant conclusion: “To

claim that variations in the behavior of different species are due to members of one species being less intelligent than members of another species shifts attention away from the various needs of the organisms that may explain the behavioral differences. Dogs are dog-smart and monkeys are monkey-smart. Each does what is required to survive in its own world” (2002, 91). The logical error, which Bekoff spots, is the mistaken assumption that the same context is relevant to both species under comparison, and typically the human species context is assumed to be normative for the sake of the comparison.

Theological reflections are not immune to weak comparisons of humans and other animals that decontextualize characteristics, abilities, and behaviors. Forgetting that behavior is situated in ecological and evolutionary contexts specific to each species, theology not only generalizes about animals but establishes value-laden claims about animals by making human abilities and contexts normative.

An alternative constructive theology embraces panentheism, which entails a worldview that values individuals and species on their own terms and also values the cosmic diversity that different living beings contribute to the world and God. Panentheism describes a relationship with God who encompasses all experiences. McFague proposes that panentheism expresses God’s radical transcendence and immanence—God the all-embracing embracer or all-experiencing experience (to use my language) embodies the universe of embodied experiences because the world is God’s body (1993, 134). Panentheism supports creative reciprocity between God and the world: God acts creatively and relationally to influence the emergence of cosmic experiences, while the world’s experiences become divine experiences and creative events in the body of God (Whitehead 1978, 348). The animal, human, plant, and inorganic experiences that constitute the world’s embodiments hold sacramental value and significance because they constitute divine embodiment and experience.

Whitehead uses the term *intensity* to describe God’s inclusive experience of all cosmic experiences. Intensity refers to the capacity to engage the variety, depth, and breadth of the world’s experiences without loss of personal integrity (Whitehead 1978, 83). Whitehead’s description of intensity invites two interpretations of how the world’s experience contributes to divine intensity. The first interpretation is common in Whiteheadian scholarship and posits that complex individuals, particularly humans, live richly and intensely and that the experiences of such individuals richly enhances divine experience. To credit complex individuals with a greater share in God’s intensity naturally tends to create gradations of value in nature, which subordinate less important, simple creatures to beings with greater freedom, creativity, and intensity. However, cognitive ethology may provide evidence that nonhuman individuals achieve intensity of experience (different than human experience but perhaps comparable in inten-

sity), and the dismantling of hierarchical gradations of value may give way to acceptance of the intrinsic and sacramental value of animal behavior and experience. The second interpretation of intensity shifts attention to the collective and related world of experiences. The cosmic community entails diversity as an inclusive source of rich experience contributing to the body of God, and no experience is lost or unimportant in the divine being. An inclusive ecological interpretation of intensity that renders gradations and comparisons less important values the diversity of cosmic experience—human and nonhuman, animal and plant, living and nonliving—as sacred in the experience, body, and being of God.

Theology informed by cognitive ethology promises to construct a more adequate, panentheistic concept of God who embraces the rich diversity of animal behavior, motivations, experience, and emotions belonging to individuals and species. Deeper appreciation of the beauty and intensity of animal experience (including varieties of similarity and difference) might generate and support a deeper and more interesting concept of God.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENCE: UNIQUENESS AND JUSTICE

The fourth principle in Bekoff's approach to difference and similarity is that human uniqueness resides alongside dog uniqueness (and dolphin uniqueness, elephant uniqueness, chimpanzee uniqueness, and so on). Human uniqueness continues to have meaning, but the meaning shifts with new information about humans and other animals. Tool use, language, culture, art, and reason have been associated with human uniqueness, and Bekoff suggests that contemplation of mortality is arguably a uniquely human characteristic (2002, 13). Even when claims about human uniqueness are compromised by findings that animals use tools or language, the logical conclusion is not that humans and other animals are identical, a claim that the evidence does not support; counterevidence against particular definitions of human uniqueness simply underscores continuity and emphasizes the inseparability of humans and other animals in relation to specific behaviors. For example, complex communications and language skills among animals establish continuity with humans but do not necessarily credit nonhuman animals with human language (2002, 138).

One of Bekoff's critical observations is that similarity does not eliminate uniqueness. Observed behaviors may warrant the conclusion that animals experience emotions similar to human emotions, but similarity does not imply the absence of difference. Bekoff asserts the importance of recognizing species differences in expression of emotions or experience of feelings: "Even if joy and grief in dogs are not the same as joy and grief in chimpanzees, elephants, or humans, this does not mean that there is no such thing as dog-joy, dog-grief, chimpanzee-joy, or elephant-grief. Even wild animals (for example, wolves), and their domesticated relatives (dogs), may differ in the nature of their emotional lives" (2002, 119).

Incomparable aspects of behavior, emotions, contexts, and social interactions, even where similarities prevail, render all animals (including humans) unique in some sense. Bekoff asks, “Are humans unique? Yes, but so are other animals. The question is ‘*What differences make a difference?*’” (2002, 138).

Given that theological habits of mind are confident about human uniqueness and animal differences, Bekoff’s discussion of uniqueness challenges theology not only to question the claim that only human animals are unique but also to consider how claims about human uniqueness contribute to injustice. Further, theological revision of concepts of human uniqueness requires more constructive reflection on the meaning of *difference* and on differences among animals.

Because mainline theology can be entrenched in its view of human uniqueness and difference, contextual or liberation theologies provide better options for considering issues of diversity, difference, and uniqueness. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a Cuban American *mujerista* theologian, reflects on difference and diversity:

Usually in mainline discourse, in traditional theological discourse, difference is defined as absolute otherness, mutual exclusion, categorical opposition. This is an essentialist meaning of difference in which one group serves as the norm against which all others are to be measured. . . .

This way of defining difference expresses fear of specificity and a fear of making permeable the boundaries between oneself and the others, between one’s ideas and those of others. Specificity tends to be understood as unique—lending it a certain air of the unknown of which one is afraid or which is romanticized as exotic. (1996, 80)

Isasi-Díaz expresses the dangers associated with claims about essentialist difference and uniqueness in traditional, mainline theology. Obviously her comments address issues of human difference, painfully highlighted by the marginalization of Latino/a culture in relation to dominant culture and carefully nuanced by *mulatez* and *mulatto* diversity in Latino/a culture. What interests me about her comment is that injustice results from theological failure to revise concepts of uniqueness and difference, and such failures reverberate across human and nonhuman differences. Theological calls for justice are continuous with Bekoff’s advocacy on behalf of the ethical treatment of other animals.

NAMING THE CONNECTIONS: THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

I have great appreciation for Bekoff’s research and writing. I obviously read his work as a theologian, not a scientist, but my theological interpretation of his research suggests that theology needs awareness of individual variation in behavior, of continuity of human and animal behavior, of the contextual basis of comparison, and of the diversity of uniqueness among animals. The awareness that Bekoff’s research creates points toward new

theological reflection on attention epistemology, personhood, panentheism, and justice. The theological task is not so far from the tasks that Bekoff sets for himself: cultivating interest in the animal's point of view, attending to particularity in behavior and emotions, and responding with justice and compassion.

NOTES

This article is based on a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, Texas, in November 2004. For a more extended treatment see Howell in press.

1. Whitehead writes about the human relationship to novelty: "When we come to mankind, nature seems to have burst through another of its boundaries. The central activity of enjoyment and expression has assumed reversal in the importance of its diverse functionings. The conceptual entertainment of unrealized possibility becomes a major factor in human mentality. In this way outrageous novelty is introduced, sometimes beatified, sometimes damned, and sometimes literally patented by copyright" (1938, 36).

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