ANIMALS AS KIN: THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF MARC BEKOFF'S WORK

by Donna Yarri

Abstract. Although the disciplines of religion and science often may seem to be at cross purposes with each other, some individuals are attempting to bridge the gap, particularly with regard to animals. Cognitive ethologist Marc Bekoff, who studies animals in their natural habitat, has addressed in his work the implications of the findings of animal study for religion and ethics. I provide here an overview of some of his most important ideas for the study of religion and animals. Bekoff argues that the differences between humans and animals are primarily ones of degree rather than kind and that our similarities are greater than our differences—and that this reality should influence our actions. I explore three issues in particular. First, Bekoff's work, with his view of evolution, challenges the traditional Christian hierarchy of beings. Second, this evolutionary connection needs to move us in the direction of modifying our treatment of animals to make it more ethical. Third, our understanding of and relationship with animals can deepen our own spirituality. Applying some of Bekoff's findings to our religious and ethical understandings of and treatment of animals can move us closer to the peaceable kingdom toward which we all strive.

Keywords: animal behavior; animal cognition; animal emotions; animal minds; animal morality; animal play; animal rights; animals and spirituality; animals as kin; cognitive ethology; evolution; hierarchy; human superiority; spirituality and animals; treatment of animals.

For the past approximately thirty years, Marc Bekoff has taught and done research in the fields of organismic biology and cognitive ethology (the study of animal minds in the context of evolutionary theory), having edited and written numerous books, articles, and essays. He operates out of

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[*Zygon*, vol. 41, no. 1 (March 2006).]
 ISSN 0591-2385

an evolutionary understanding of biological life that emphasizes both the physiological and mental connections and similarities between humans and other animals.

Bekoff has attempted to study these connections in his work, but, if one reads his works chronologically, it is apparent that there has been a shift and development in his thought and approach to the study of animals. His early work focused on the study of animals in the field, and the emphasis was primarily on understanding animal behavior. His work then broadened to focus on the study of the explanation and interpretation of this behavior. Then he began to address the ethical implications of this understanding for the treatment of animals, and, in his more recent work, he has become more activist in his orientation, explicitly advocating for animals and criticizing even some of his own earlier field work that in hindsight he considers to have been harmful to animals. He also has begun to address religious themes, suggesting that studying animals and animals themselves are an important part of human spirituality.

Overall, Bekoff's view is that animals are our kin in the broadest sense of the word, in terms of both the actual physiological, mental, and emotional similarities between us and the ways that we should treat them. Because humans are part of nature, animals are our kin. He argues that we must step into their world in order to better understand them (Bekoff 2003b, 11) and also try to take the animals' point of view as much as is possible (2000b, 95). This understanding of animals as kin permeates his work and is manifest in several themes in his work that have considerable significance for the religious study of animals—from a theological and especially from an ethical perspective.

The idea of animals as kin has religious significance in three ways. First, it challenges the traditional Christian hierarchy of beings. Along with Charles Darwin and many in the "animal rights movement," Bekoff believes that the differences between humans and animals are one of degree rather than kind and that the connections between us are deep. Second, he believes that this understanding of animals as kin has significant ethical implications, which moves the discussion into the arena of moral theology. Third, his understanding of animals as kin helps to persuade us that emphasizing the similarities between us animals can be a means of deepening our own spirituality. I return to each of these points later.

In what ways does Bekoff understand animals as kin? First, they are our kin in terms of the deep *evolutionary connections* that we share. To say that we share this connection is to undermine the traditional notion that humans are superior to other animals in any absolute way. He focuses on the physiological, behavioral, and cognitive similarities between humans and animals primarily in his earlier work and moves in the direction of studying animal emotions in his later work. His focus is primarily on animal minds, the significance of such study for an understanding of humans,

and drawing conclusions about inter-species commonalities. While at times emphasizing the mental superiority of humans, Bekoff spends considerably more time exploring the connections between humans and animals with an emphasis on our commonality. He argues that animals do have mental lives and experience emotions similarly to humans. Much of his work focuses on the cognitive abilities of animals. He stresses that each species, and ultimately each individual animal, needs to be studied in its individuality. In considering the minds of animals, he uses the expression "minding animals" in a twofold sense: caring for other animal beings (in which we respect who they are, appreciate their worldviews, and attempt to understand how they are feeling and why) and acknowledging that many animals have very active and thoughtful minds (Bekoff 2003a, 235). He writes that studying animal minds can tell us much about not only the animals but also ourselves: "The way we answer such questions [about animal cognition] and apply the findings may tell us much about ourselves as a species as well as having serious consequences for other inhabitants of this planet" (Bekoff, Allen, and Burghardt 2002, xii). He believes that animals do have emotions and that this is important for a number of reasons, including the idea that certain emotions affect or are related to a sense of morality. He includes many anecdotes about animal emotions in his work and edited a volume titled *The Smile of a Dolphin* (2002), which contains many stories of animals that seem to indicate that they do indeed experience emotions similarly to humans. He focuses in particular on emotions such as love, fear, aggression, anger, joy, and grief. Overall, the evolutionary connection between humans and animals on a number of levels reinforces this idea of animals as kin rather than animals as other.

Second, animals are our kin in terms of his *inclusiveness with regard to all animal species*. He argues that, just as we should not establish a hierarchy with regard to humans and animals, we should not establish one within the animal kingdom, between species. He explicitly criticizes approaches to the study of animals that favor certain species over others, regardless of the reason. Traditionally distinctions have been made that have the effect of dividing animals into "higher" and "lower" species. Such distinctions Bekoff explicitly rejects. He even resists placing a higher value on those animals who seem to be more self-aware than others (Bekoff 2002b, 97). He challenges the idea that only large-brained animals are self-aware, calls for fair species-specific tests (Allen and Bekoff 1997, 13), and hopes that one day this kind of separation of species will be a historical curiosity (Bekoff and Sherman 2004, 4). In some places he criticizes approaches that favor only mammals and birds, maintaining that more than lip service needs to be paid to other species if a broad understanding of development is sought (Burghardt and Bekoff 1978, ix). In other places he criticizes approaches that favor only chimpanzees and other apes, going so far as to question The Great Ape Project, which seeks greater protection for our nearest primate

relatives. Although he admits that this is a good place to begin, he opts for a Community of Equals that includes all animals (Bekoff 1998, 33). In fact, in exploring the concept of social play, which he argues has significance for morality, he holds that studying this phenomenon among social carnivores rather than primates would reveal more to us about human social behavior (Bekoff and Allen 1998, 12). Finally, he cautions against judging every species by the same cognitive standard: "If the point was to answer the question, 'Are monkeys smarter than mice?' this is a confusion, for there is no reason to expect a linear scale of intelligence. In the world of mice, it might be more important to be able to do some other things than it is in the world of monkeys, but in other respects a monkey may have capacities that a mouse lacks" (Allen and Bekoff 1997, 180). Put another way, "Dogs are dog-smart and monkeys monkey-smart" (Bekoff 2002b, 91), and the implication is that humans are human-smart. Thus, dispensing with the usual line drawing between species deepens the connection not only of animals with other animals but also of humans with other animals.

Third, animals are our kin in terms of *their emotional experience, which forms the basis for morality*. Bekoff wants to move in the direction that animals can be moral, which traditionally has been a very radical notion, because the concept of morality generally has been restricted to humans. Bekoff admits the difficulty of studying morality in animal species (2001b, 81) but maintains that the existence of emotions in animals is the foundation upon which morality is built (2002c, 34). In a sense, he believes that animals are our moral precursors. He argues for the existence of animal morality on the basis of the existence of both animal emotions and animal play. He argues that he and many other researchers conclude that animals are capable of the emotions and empathy that underlie morality (Bekoff 2004, 496), although he expressly rejects the notion that there is a single gene for moral behavior (2004, 503). He writes that "in their own worlds animals may indeed have their own form of genuine morality, and there might indeed be long-term goals and ideal states to be achieved" (2002b, 121). In addition, Bekoff often uses the concept of play in animals to demonstrate that animals do have a form of morality, because it provides insight into the concept of behaving fairly (Dugatkin and Bekoff 2003). However, he does not think that animal and human morality are on the same level: "It is clear that morality and virtue didn't suddenly appear in the evolutionary epic beginning with humans. While fair play in animals may be a rudimentary form of social morality, it still could be a forerunner of more complex and more sophisticated human systems" (Bekoff 2004, 510). The implication of animal morality is that we need to remember that we did not invent virtue, that we should stop seeing ourselves as morally superior to animals (2002c, 37), and that there are ethical implications of our treatment of animals as our moral kin.

Bekoff's approach is *activist-oriented*. He argues that what we learn about animals has ethical implications both for cognitive ethology and in general. If animals are truly our kin, we need to treat them with the respect that they deserve. We need to especially try to answer the question for each species: "What is like to be a _____?" (2002b, 55). Because humans are part of nature, he recommends extending respect, empathy, caring, sharing, and compassion to animals. He does think that all individuals should live up to certain ideals with regard to consideration of animals as kin: do no intentional harm, respect all life, treat all individuals with compassion, and step lightly into the world of other beings (2002a, 23). He recognizes animals as kin who deserve special treatment on the part of all people and focuses specifically on two groups: children and scientists. He wrote a book specifically for children, titled *Strolling with Our Kin: Speaking for and Respecting Voiceless Animals* (2002b). In this book, the primary theme is the ABCs of animal protection and compassion: "Always be Caring and Sharing." He emphasizes that the close, intimate, and reciprocal relationships that exist between humans and animals (p. 10) should motivate us to be voices for voiceless animals (p. 100). He directs some very pointed comments toward scientists who work with animals, in particular that they should consider the potential harmful impact of their work on animals and consider far-reaching changes in light of this potential harm. Many of the procedures undertaken even by cognitive ethologists, who primarily study animals in their natural habitat, can harm animals in unintentional ways, such as in manipulations including trapping, handling, and marking (Bekoff and Jamieson 1996b, 361–62). One of his suggestions for scientists, in addition to providing them with a list of ethical questions to consider (Bekoff and Jamieson 1996a, 31–33), is that scientists who use animals should act as advocates for animals, much as human physicians act as advocates for their patients (2002b, 172). He argues that, in general, we must be aware that unrestricted human actions may bring us closer to extinction and that we must be closely aligned for our mutual survival (Bekoff and Jamieson 1990). Thus, we must move in an activist direction on behalf of our animal kin.

The theme of animals as kin has tremendous significance for religion in terms of theology, ethics, and spirituality. With regard to *theology*, the most significant point is the undermining of the traditional Christian hierarchy, with humans above and beyond other animal species and with a seeming divine mandate to have "dominion" over the earth (Genesis 1:28). Of course, Bekoff is not the first to argue against the helpfulness and validity of such an understanding of the universe, but he provides this notion with strong scientific and empirical underpinnings. To challenge any absolute notion of human superiority, as he does, leaves significantly more room for a more wholistic, intertwined, and interdependent view of life on Earth. If, as he argues, animals are our kin with regard to physiology,

cognition, emotion, morality, and spirituality, we need to move beyond unhelpful dualisms that have predominated especially in the Christian tradition, such as "we" versus "them" and "higher" versus "lower." An emphasis on what it is that binds us rather than on what divides us will more fully enable us to view animals as our kin and perhaps extend the notion of kinship altruism beyond a merely human experience.

The idea of animals as kin also has relevance for our *morality and ethics*, in two ways. One way is that animals themselves can be moral role models for humans. Bekoff argues, "I have no doubt that studying and learning about animal play can teach us to live more compassionately with heart and love" (2001a, 634). It is especially in our relationship with our companion animals that our humanness comes to the fore (2001a, 645). In addition, understanding animals as kin should affect our treatment of animals: "We need to move forward with grace, humility, respect, compassion and love" (2002a, 25). In the book he coauthored with Jane Goodall, *The Ten Trusts: What We Must Do to Care for the Animals We Love* (2002), the following directives are presented and described in detail:

1. Rejoice that we are part of the animal kingdom.
2. Respect all life.
3. Open our minds, in humility, to animals and learn from them.
4. Teach our children to respect and love nature.
5. Be wise stewards of life on earth.
6. Value and help preserve the sounds of nature.
7. Refrain from harming life in order to learn about it.
8. Have the courage of our convictions.
9. Praise and help those who work for animals and the natural world.
10. Act, knowing that we are not alone and live with hope.

They conclude with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: "After all is said and done, silence is betrayal" (2002, 177).

Finally, Bekoff maintains that appreciating animals as kin has repercussions for our *spirituality*. He has explored his own spirituality to see the connections between himself and other beings and argues that science does not have a monopoly on truth, is not value-free, and cannot discount a religious worldview (2001a, 619–21). His understanding of spirituality is not necessarily traditional but views nature as providing us with wisdom, which we can gain primarily by simply being in the presence of animals (2003b, 919). In fact, learning about other animals is essential for gaining a full appreciation of human spirituality (2002b, 13). Even "putting animals to sleep" can be lessons in spirituality (2002b, 29). However, he challenges the notion of hunting as a spiritual encounter with animals: "There is nothing reciprocal in these sorts of interactions, and an increase in the spiritual life of a human who kills another animal unnecessarily brings along with it the end of any spirit or life spark that the hapless victim might have possessed" (2002b, 134–35). With regard to the experience of animals and spirituality, Bekoff says of his personal experience:

"My own spirituality is based on a deep drive for a seamless unity that is motivated by compassion, respect, and love. During my brief tenure on this wondrous planet, I am more than happy to open the door of my heart to all beings. I dream of and envision a unified, peaceable kingdom—a peaceable kinship—based on respect, compassion, forgiveness, and love" (2001a, 649).

Bekoff's interdisciplinary approach to animal behavior and animal minds thus affords us much material with which to work in our religious traditions. Viewing animals as kin rather than other, divorcing ourselves from the traditional hierarchical models of the universe that have served to further enslave animals, and permitting ourselves to view animals as both sources and inspiration for our ethics and spirituality will enable us to work toward creating the kind of peaceable kingdom in which we all would love to dwell. I conclude with Bekoff's own words: "The guiding principle for all of our interactions with animals should stress that it is a privilege to share our lives with other animals; we should respect their interests and lives at all times, and the animals' own views of the world must be given serious consideration" (2002b, 139).

NOTE

This article is based on a paper delivered at the American Academy of Religion, San Antonio, Texas, 20 November 2004.

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