

“Animals Matter”: Reflecting on the Work of Marc Bekoff

INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

by Donna Yarri

The disciplines of religion and science are often considered to be at cross-purposes with each other, and yet increasingly there has been recognition that more dialogue is needed between the two. Nowhere is this more clear than with regard to the ethical treatment of animals. Although science has been studying animals and experimentation on animals for a long time, serious religious and ethical concerns about our attitudes toward and treatment of animals has become widespread only in the last thirty years or so. *Zygon* attempts to bridge the gap between religion and science, and thus it is fitting that it should give attention to the work of Marc Bekoff, a very successful cognitive ethologist (one who studies animal behavior in an animal's natural habitat) who also has concerned himself with the implications of his work for the ethical treatment of animals.

Versions of the articles in this section were presented at the 2004 American Academy of Religion conference as part of the session “Religion and Animals: Minding the Work of Marc Bekoff.” The intention of the session, cosponsored by the Animals and Religion Consultation and the Religion and Science Group, was to tease out the implications of Bekoff's work for religious studies. Bekoff was present at this session and provided a response at the end.

Graham Harvey's article, “Animals, Animists, and Academics” (pp. 9–19), focuses on the situation of what happens when the three perspectives of academics, animists, and animals meet in the contemporary world. He takes as a given the results of the work of individuals such as Bekoff, who have established the cognitive competence of animals. Harvey challenges

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in particular the traditional academic mindset that sees the world as objective as opposed to participatory and believes that animists and academics can learn much from each other. However, he also maintains that the dialogue will go nowhere unless animals are an integral part of this “conversation,” as Bekoff has aptly demonstrated in his work.

In my essay, “Animals as Kin: The Religious Significance of Bekoff’s Work” (pp. 21–28), I provide an overview of the approximately thirty-year career of Bekoff’s studying and writing about animals. There has been a shift in his work; his more recent writings address the implications of findings in cognitive ethology with regard to our understanding of animals and thus our treatment of them. I argue that Bekoff’s evolutionary approach to life impacts in particular Christian theology in several ways. First, by stressing the connectedness of all species, he regards animals as our kin in the widest sense of the term. This challenges the traditional Christian hierarchy of beings with humans in an absolutely superior position to animals. Second, if the differences subsequently between us are differences of degree rather than kind, we need to develop a better moral theology, or ethics, with regard to our treatment of them. Finally, exploring the similarities between ourselves and other animal species can be a starting point for deepening our own spirituality.

In Jay McDaniel’s essay, “All Animals Matter” (pp. 29–57), the author argues that Bekoff can be viewed not simply as an ethologist but also as a theologian, albeit not in the traditional sense. While not operating from a particular religious viewpoint or even speaking specifically about God, Bekoff is a theologian in the sense that he is able to give voice to the sacredness of nature and its implications for how we live our lives. McDaniel maintains that Bekoff’s approach is eclectic and focuses on the deep connections we have with animals in general and with companion animals in particular. He provides an overview as well of Process theology and suggests that Bekoff’s approach is consistent with theologians in this tradition.

Nancy Howell (pp. 59–69) focuses on Bekoff’s handling of “difference” between species and also between individuals. She lays the groundwork for a more sophisticated theological approach to animals, within the framework of Whitehead’s philosophy, that promises great significance for future thinking in this area.

Bekoff offers a response to these articles (pp. 71–104), presenting clearly in his own voice the significance of animals in our modern world for the sake of not only animals but ours as well. May his vision of a peaceable kingdom be one that we all consider deeply, hold dearly, and work to make a reality.