

Companion Animals and Us

Exploring the relationships
between people and pets

Edited by

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1

Introduction

To me you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world . . .

(*The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1945: 64).

Not so long ago, the idea of studying social relationships between humans and other animals would have been regarded as tantamount to heresy. In Europe, until the early modern period, animals were viewed as irrational beings placed on earth solely for the economic benefit of mankind, and most scholars would have insisted that affectionate relationships between people and animals were not only distasteful but depraved. Happily, those days are now gone. Attitudes to animals have changed, and, during the past three decades, the subject of relations between people and other animals has become a respectable area of research. The field of ‘anthrozoology’, as it is often called, now crosses a wide variety of academic disciplines, including anthropology, art and literature, education, ethology, history, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and human and veterinary medicine. In 1991, the International Society for Anthrozoology (ISAZ) was formed in Cambridge, England, its stated aim being to promote the study of all aspects of human–animal relationships by encouraging and publishing research, holding meetings, and disseminating information. To facilitate this process, there are now two academic journals dedicated to publishing original research in the field: *Anthrozoös* (published since 1987), and *Society & Animals* (published since 1993). In addition, ISAZ publishes a biennial Newsletter containing review articles and book reviews.

But why study relationships between people and animals in the first place? What purpose does it serve? The key to answering these questions lies in the unique ability of anthrozoology to create theoretical and conceptual bridges that not only link together widely separated disciplines but also span the gulf between the world of humans and the life of the rest of the planet. As the fox intimates in his speech to the little Prince, it is through the medium of social relationships that we find our true connection with others, irrespective of whether those others are human or non-human. Poised as we are on the brink of environmental catastrophe, the importance of establishing or reinforcing this sense of connection and identity with other lives can hardly be over-emphasized. In the past, medicine, psychology, sociology, anthropology and the humanities have all been guilty of studying humans in isolation, as if our species somehow evolved in the absence of interactions with anyone or anything except other humans. The existence of relationships with beings outside this strictly 'human' domain was either denied or dismissed as aberrant. And yet humans have been dependent on animals as sources of food, raw materials, companionship, and religious and artistic inspiration since the Palaeolithic Period, and animals have continued to mould the shape of human culture and psychology ever since. We are who we are as much because of our relationships with non-human animals as because of the human ones, and we do ourselves a great disservice – and probably great harm – by denying or ignoring this.

Anthrozoology is still a young science, and the primary goal of this book is to introduce readers to the richness of this emerging, interdisciplinary field by bringing together a collection of diverse and eclectic research papers and reviews representing the broad theme of human–pet interactions and relationships. While this compilation is designed to be illustrative rather than exhaustive, we hope that the breadth of topics covered, and the results achieved so far, will not only help stimulate discussion and debate, but also encourage the field to move ahead with new and ground-breaking research.

For convenience, the book has been divided into four parts. Part I addresses fundamental questions about the origins of the human–companion animal relationship, and highlights some of the cultural differences and similarities that exist in how these relationships are perceived. In Chapter 2, a novel interpretation of why Amazonian Indians tame animals and keep them as pets is presented. Chapter 3 explores the importance of pets in the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans through an examination of pet epitaphs. Chapter 4 moves to the Middle Ages and examines the positive impact of aristocratic hunting on the nobility's

attitudes and attachments to dogs. In Chapter 5 the importance of insects in the lives of Japanese children is examined from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Chapter 6 looks at the reasons why many people impose human celebrations and festivals upon their pets. Finally, Chapter 7 looks at conceptions of animality in various cultures, and discusses the potential for pets to help people psychologically by reconnecting them with the natural world via the 'animal within'.

Part II deals with other aspects of our relationships with pets. Chapter 8 takes a critical look at the evidence for the potential health benefits that pet owners are thought to derive from their animals, including the possible mechanisms responsible. In Chapter 9 conceptual issues to do with human and pet personalities are discussed. In addition, literature is reviewed on whether human personality can influence pet personality and whether the personalities of pet owners are significantly different from those of non-owners. Chapter 10 considers the emotive question of whether or not love of pets is associated with love of people.

Part III focuses on the role of the pet in contemporary Western families. Chapter 11 asks whether people sometimes adopt or purchase pets because of a lack of one or more social provisions in their relationships with humans. Chapter 12 examines the role of the pet in family networks: are human-pet relationships similar to human-human relationships in terms of the social provisions they provide? And this theme is further explored in Chapter 13 in relation to pets and the elderly. All of these chapters use Weiss' theory of social provisions as their theoretical framework. The human-cat relationship forms the focus of Chapter 14, in which owner assessments of cat behaviour, together with independent observations of the interactions between owners and different breeds of cats, are reported.

Part IV examines some important welfare and ethical issues concerning our relations with companion animals. Chapter 15 reports on an understudied aspect of animal abuse: secondary victimization in pet owners; while Chapter 16 explores the ethical dilemmas that veterinarians face on a day-to-day basis when dealing with pets and their owners. Finally, Chapter 17 re-evaluates the topic of bestiality, and proposes a new definition of this ancient and long-tabooed practice.

The idea for this book was conceived at a conference organized by the first editor at Downing College, Cambridge, in 1996 for the International Society for Anthrozoology. Although the conference covered many kinds of animal-human relationships, the wealth of material addressing different facets of the human-pet relationship was particularly striking, and we decided that this would be an opportune

time to re-examine the field critically. Thanks are due to Pauline and David Appleby for their invaluable help with conference organization, and to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), Waltham, Pedigree Petfoods, Universities Federation for Animal Welfare (UFAW) and the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA) for providing funding for this meeting. This book contains chapters based on talks presented at the conference as well as some invited ones which we considered complementary to the book's overall theme.

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