

The Morals of Animal Minds

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On January 13, 1962, the *London Daily Mirror* ran a story, *The Death of a Hero*. The hero was a dog, Blackie, who tried to drag Ian Beech, the human infant with whom he lived, from a blazing fire that was consuming the Beech house. Blackie was unable to escape in time, and both he and Ian perished in the fire. The coroner remarked at the inquest that Blackie's teeth marks on Ian's shoulder were gentle, gripping marks s... [indicating] that this dog made an attempt to get the body away from the fire. Ian was found just a foot away from Blackie's outstretched paws.

On August 16, 1996, at the Brookfield Zoo near Chicago, a 3-year-old boy fell 18 feet onto the concrete floor of a gorilla enclosure. The child hit his head and was unconscious. Nervous onlookers and the child's parents panicked, believing the child was in danger from the gorillas. To their astonishment, a 7-year-old gorilla mother named Binti Jua, with her own baby on her back, gently picked up the child and carried him to a door within easy reach of zoo staff. The boy was taken to the hospital and recovered quickly.

In 1871, Darwin described a case of a little American monkey.

Several years ago a keeper at the Zoological Gardens showed me some deep and scarcely healed wounds on the nape of his own neck, inflicted on him, whilst kneeling on the floor, by a fierce baboon. The little American monkey, who was a warm friend of this keeper, lived in the same compartment, and was dreadfully afraid of the great baboon. Nevertheless, as soon as he saw his friend in peril, he rushed to the rescue, and by screams and bites so distracted the baboon that the man was able to escape, after, as the surgeon thought, running great risk of his life.

Such anecdotes capture our attention perhaps because they show cross-species concern in an unusual direction. We humans care about animals, but it is remarkable when animals act as if they care about us. But does it make sense to describe these behaviors as motivated by what might be called moral concern? When animals behave in heroic or generous ways within or across species; when tolerance and assistance is offered to handicapped conspecifics; when animals behave as if they are experiencing guilt, shame, or embarrassment; when they build alliances, cooperate, and reconcile after conflicts; when they shun individuals who do not play fair; when they seek revenge or retribution for previous unacceptable behavior, can we usefully and meaningfully describe their actions as stemming from moral sentiments? (Bekoff 2001; de Waal 1989, 1996; Flack and de Waal 2000).

The systematic study of behaviors that might be described as morally motivated -- behaviors that are empathetic, sympathetic, compassionate, trustworthy, shameful, vengeful, conciliatory, or that display a sense of friendship, loyalty, justice, or fairness -- has just gotten underway. But interest in the topic is certainly not new and the idea that we might achieve a better understanding of morality by studying animal cognition has been suggested at least since Darwin's day. As he noted, his "investigation" into the development of mental capacities in humans and non-humans "possesses, also, some independent interest, as an attempt to see how far the study of the lower animals throws light on one of the highest psychical faculties of man" -- the moral sense (Darwin 1981/1871). Recent studies being done to explain putatively moral behaviors and the complex emotional and cognitive capacities on which such behavior depends, raise interesting and important questions relevant to those working in ethics. There are obvious questions about the boundaries of the moral community, i.e. who should matter, how should they matter, and why (DeGrazia 1996; Singer 1975; Van de Veer 1979; Varner 1998) as well as questions about human obligations to non-humans within the moral community, i.e. if animals feel sadness when separated from their kin, should we endeavor to keep families together in captivity? If anesthetized animals are being physically manipulated in laboratory experiments should we be sure that their conspecifics do not witness these actions? What sort of cognitive enrichment for animals in captivity should be provided? (Fouts 1986).

Work that examines moral sentiments in non-humans also raises less obvious, but