

PRAIRIE U-U SOCIETY Feb. 26, 1989

CAN A SECULAR HUMANIST LOVE CATS?

I. Chalice Lighting: Among our common household and farm animals, cats were the last to become domesticated. You can see that in the language: there are ancient Indo-European root words for dog (or hound) and cow, but not for cat. The word "cat" probably comes from some Middle Eastern ancient language. Cats joined up with humans after humans became agriculturalists. People cultivated cereals and harvested grain, mice and rats followed the grain to human habitations, and the cats followed the mice and rats.

So let's light the chalice for those first cats whose curiosity overcame their fear and led them to join human households, some 8,000 years ago.

II. How many of you have cats in your households? What are their names? How many of you have had cats with you before? What were their names?

When our cat first joined our household a dozen years ago, we couldn't agree on a name. I think I was responsible for saying, wouldn't it be clever just to give her a generic name, cat. It was a terrible mistake. She had kittens, and one stayed with us. At first we distinguished them by calling one 'cat' and the other 'kitty,' ~~kaxx~~ or 'gatto' and 'gattito,' but the kitten became a cat. Then 'little cat' and 'big cat.' 'but the little cat became bigger than the big cat. So today we still haven't settled on a name. And it was a mistake. ~~kaxx~~ Every household cat DESERVES A name. (And I mean that seriously.)

Or at least one name. I've asked Rick to read T S Eliot's poem about naming cats. Before he reads it, let me note one uncommon word that appears late in the verse. The word is "ineffable," and it means that which is beyond spoken expression, that which is indescribably and can't be put into words. I only learned the word a few years ago when I read William James' THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. James lists 5 characteristics of the religious experience, or what I would call the mystical experience, and one of them is that the religious experience is ineffable. I think you can make a religious connection to this poem, if you want to.

T. S. Eliot, "The Naming of Cats" --- Rick Ruecking

Something about an Angora --- Tally's Trio

(Children leave for RE)

III. Can a secular humanist love cats? It all depends on what one means by "secular humanist" and "love." I'm not going to try to define either expression, at least not explicitly, but I should say something about love to begin with. We use the word in many loose ways.....I love my bicycle and I love my wok (while I tolerate my car and my microwave).....but obviously that won't do. What I mean in the question is whether a secular humanist can love a cat in a way something like loving human beings.

Can a secular humanist love cats? You all know what the answer will be, but let me make a case for the negative to begin with. (And hold off your comments til later cause I don't want to get hung up here.)

The case for the negative can be made by referring to anthropomorphism, the attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to animals, inanimate objects, and and other non-human phenomena. It's often a mistake to make such attributions, and it's a common mistake. Our animals experience the world in different ways than we do. They think differently than we do, and much of this is because they don't use language like we do.

It's easy to come up with lots of examples of the error. One I recall concerns the way a cow loves its calf....the calf died, was stuffed,....the cow continued to lick it....and ate the stuffing.

The Golden's cat's
visit to its old
home....
↓
i.e., our home,
to its mother

Have you noticed how cats hold their tails erect while being petted? ...Desmond Morris says it's because the reaction is the same as when a kitten is being groomed by its mother: it holds the tail erect so the mother can clean up around the anus.....

Vicki Hearne gives the well known example of Clever Hans, the cart horse --- pp. 4f.

Anthropomorphism is a VERY COMMON cognitive error. Very often people project human qualities on to that which is not human. And then they adore, or fear, the objects^{on} to which they have projected those qualities.

This is not only a cognitive error but a MORAL error. When we anthropomorphize, when we project our qualities onto our cat, and then love the cat because it has those human qualities.....we're really engaging in a kind of self-love. And even secular humanists can recognize this as a moral error.

It is a kind of error that is more or less akin to one of the fundamental religious errors. Primitive peoples sometimes live in a world that is a kind of enchanted garden, where everything in nature has human

qualities. Some primitives worship idols, onto which they project human qualities. They may attribute qualities of power and malice to the idols: they fear them, supplicate before them, worship them. It's a process by which people ^{give away} lose their own freedom. [The prophet Isaiah noted this kind of fallacy in criticizing the idol worshippers of ~~xxx~~ ancient middle east.] But we might argue that many ~~xxxxx~~ theists today engage in the same kind of fallacy. They attribute human qualities to god, they fear god, worship god, supplicate before him.

So: If you start thinking of your cat as someone who has a human personality, maybe like Garfield, or maybe a little bit sweeter.....you're on ~~xxx~~ a slippery path that may ~~xx~~ lead you to kneel before some god or other.

IV. Can a secular humanist love cats? An obvious answer is that we DO.

It's not so obvious that we ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ can JUSTIFY loving cats ~~in~~ *that we can give* a cognitive or moral ^{justification} way. Before addressing the cognitive justification, ~~xxxxxxxxxxx~~ I've asked some of our artists to give you some of the empirical evidence.

"Some Felines I've Known (But Never Really Owned)" --- Pat Watkins.

(re the first verse: our nicely trimmed lawns and gardens are really frustrating to cats.....that's not the way they hunt in nature, they use concealment....and wait.)

Rossini duet ---- Metje Butler, Dodie Chapru, Mike Briggs

If we sometimes project human qualities onto cats, we can also impute feline qualities to human beings... although

V. Vicki Hearne is a professional animal trainer who is also a university professor who talks to psychologists, zoologists, and philosophers. She observed that the animal trainers and the academics used quite different languages in talking to and about animals. The professional animal trainers use a highly charged moral language in talking about animals.

Trainers, e.g., have no hesitation in talking about how much a mare loves or worries about her foal, a cat her kittens or a dog or a horse their work.... Trainers still speak of whether or not a horse is 'mean,' 'sneaky,' 'kind' or 'honest..... etc. p. 9.

The scientists and philosophers react very strongly to that kind of language. They say it's the error of anthropomorphism. (And have strong feelings about it: fire Vicki Hearne, p. 10.) In talking about animals, and trying to train ~~xxx~~ animals, they will use the language of behaviorism and whatever is used for instinct nowadays. To train animals, they would use operant conditioning, perhaps based upon some knowledge of the animal's instinctive behavior.

Vickie Hearne persuades me that the animal trainers are more nearly correct. Cats, dogs, and horses are moral animals. Sometimes we can trust them morally. Sometimes we don't - and can use a moral language to describe them.

Our domestic animals are moral in ways in which wild animals, animals like wolves and chimpanzees, are not. Chimps may be the species most closely related to us genetically, but they aren't moral animals in the ways of dogs, cats, and horses.

In the second chapter of her book, Hearne asks what happens to those chimps who have been raised from infancy with human beings - like Washoe, or Lucy in the book Growing Up Human. Until about age 2 they do quite well in comparison with human babies, even learning lots of American Sign language. But when they mature, they never live with human families. They're ^{all} in cages, somewhere or other - sometimes desperately signing to keepers who don't know ASL. Why? ... They bite: You can't trust them. Chimps have their own social life, but it isn't a human social life.

~~In contrast, you can trust your cats, dogs, and horses. I'd be willing to place my life in the care of a dog, before in the care of many a human.~~

In contrast, our domestic animals ~~animals~~ can often be trusted. They can be trusted in serious things, but they can also be trusted in play - which might be ~~more~~ a better evidence of moral reasoning. Hearne has a chapter on "How to Say 'Fetch'" to a dog.

pp 28f. She describes how her dog Salty could be "dishonest" (her word, but ok) when she taught Salty to play Fetch, pp 72f. ... They can learn the rules of the game.

In doing so, they show how well they can communicate with us. Dogs ~~don't~~ don't learn ASL. ~~Vide Hearn~~ But they understand what we say enough to engage in complex cooperative behavior with us... much more than chimps & wolves. → Hearn, p.42

Of course, they don't pay attention only to words, to semantics & syntax. In living with us, they often pay more attention to us than we do to one another. Think of Clever Hans again, the cart horse... (but don't give me any stuff about ESP, think of Clever Hans) -

VI I would willingly put my life in the care of a dog. But... this is a program about cats... Put your life in the care of a cat? ... Preposterous... as your cat ^{can} ~~and~~ communicate to you without spoken language. [inter reader] But what does this have to do with love? ... Love isn't given just for services rendered. ~~They~~ After all, we do love babies — & not just not as investments in the future, as some economists might argue. And most of us certainly don't like cats because they give us the corpses of mice & birds from time to time.

So 'What Is It about Cats?' (Ch 10 of Hearn's book. They are difficult animals.

Difficult animals for psychologists, pp 224 ff.

What is it about cats? It's hard to study them objectively because they study us. They observe us, almost continuously
pp 230 ff.