

Introduction

Like most children who share their homes with dogs, cats and other animals, my siblings and I never had any doubt that the non-humans in the family were essentially 'creatures like us'. Like us they mostly enjoyed company, games, exploring and fine weather and disliked being alone, enforced baths and wet days. There were differences of course — for one thing the animals enjoyed the privilege of staying at home while we went to school — but the differences seemed, on the whole, less significant than those between ourselves and adults.

It came as a shock, then, to discover that the acceptance of animals as pretty much like ourselves was not universal. For me it was not until I reached junior school that I realised the implications of this as teachers and other well-meaning adults attempted to persuade me that although 'of course' we must 'be kind to animals', we must never forget that they are still 'only animals' and that our 'kindness' must not be allowed to interfere with our acceptance of the fact that only humans *really* matter. Later on, when career choices were discussed, my determination to spend my life with animals was dismissed as frivolous, not suitable for anyone of reasonable intelligence and even as a wicked waste of time, effort and abilities that could only legitimately be devoted to human beings.

Not surprisingly, the attempts to change my attitude were counter-productive. Instead of distancing me from animals they made me feel increasingly alienated from human society. If my views were wicked, then wicked I must be, since I could not change them. Most frustrating of all, since I was never given any

arguments to support the objections so often put to me, I had no opportunity of challenging them.

Many years later, when, aged forty, I found myself – almost by accident – on a philosophy degree course, I was delighted to learn that ‘the animals issue’ was increasingly attracting attention from philosophers. But again I was in for a shock, for I soon discovered that among the wide range of opinions held by these philosophers were all of the prejudices that I had met so often before. There was, however, an important difference, in that at least the opinions of the philosophers were supported by arguments and arguments were something I could challenge.

The selection of philosophers that I have chosen to discuss in this book may seem eclectic but it was made because the views they express reflect the range of those that I have heard most often expressed by the general public. What they all have in common is the conviction – often unquestioned – that *Homo sapiens* is not only ‘special’ but *superior* to all other species. Many of them also share a residual form of mind/body dualism which regards animals as essentially bodies while human beings (or at least, those of them who are ‘like us’) are essentially minds.

The advantage of having come late to philosophy is being able to draw on the accumulated experience not only of a lifetime spent in the company of animals as family, friends, neighbours and workmates but also of many different aspects of human life. Particularly influential has been my experience as a teacher, especially of language and languages, to all ages from pre-school to post-retirement and all abilities from ‘special needs’ to university level. My interest in language and communication has deepened through many years spent as an interpreter and translator. An earlier period of several years as a nurse to the elderly, the senile and the dying also helped to shape my thought.

Although the motivation for this book came from the challenge of those with whose views I disagree, it would never have been written had I not been emboldened by the discovery that I was not alone in holding the views that had been described as ‘wicked’ by my teachers long ago. The anthropocentric bias of much of my early philosophical reading had seemed only to reinforce that judgement but the work of Mary Midgley revived my confidence with its good sense and humanity and when I read Stephen Clark’s books I felt vindicated indeed. I realised how much I had been affected by this support when, addressing

a philosophy seminar on a chapter of this book, I was again called 'wicked' – by a professional philosopher – but this time I felt that the wrong was his.

I do not expect that *Creatures Like Us?* will change the views of such people or of the philosophers whose work I challenge but I do hope that it might give confidence to those who, like me, believe that 'we' are just one group of creatures among many, all of which have their own lives to lead on this shared planet which is no more 'ours' than theirs.

Chapter One starts by challenging the view that the moral status of animals can be decided according to whether they are 'like us'. I examine a number of claims that humans or 'persons' or 'we' are more valuable or more important than other creatures and argue that none of the cases made in support of these claims withstands close examination. I also conclude that the very idea of lives as having a measurable or comparable value is misconceived. Further, I suggest that the intellectual and introspective characteristics cited as evidence of 'our' superiority are not those which are most important to or about normal human beings and that these theories give a distorted view of humankind. Equally distorted is the view of animals as being merely concerned with seeking pleasure and avoiding pain; animal lives are therefore trivialized because of a failure to recognise that they – like us – have many interests and concerns which are quite as important to them as ours are to us.

One of the conclusions of Chapter One is that the philosophers discussed, in spite of their professed egalitarianism, are in fact deeply prejudiced in favour of their own kind and in Chapter Two I examine the evidence for this more closely in the context of attitudes to personal relationships. Again I find serious misrepresentation not only of animals but of humans too, especially in a tendency to underestimate the importance of relationships to all social creatures, including, of course, *Homo sapiens*. After a brief introduction to some social and historical evidence for contrasting theories about attitudes to animals, I discuss the importance of knowledge gained by living with animals in social relationships and the vital role that such understanding must play if discussions of the 'interests' of animals are to be valid.

Having amassed considerable evidence of a deep-rooted anthropocentric bias even among some philosophers who argue

for animal rights or equal consideration of animal interests, I move on in Chapter Three to explore the widespread assumption that 'we' are at the top of a natural hierarchy in which all other creatures are ordered according to how closely they resemble 'us'. I challenge the view that language use and the introspective self-consciousness that it makes possible are the most significant features that any animal can have, arguing that they are neither necessary nor sufficient for membership of a mixed-species community. The failure to realise this is responsible for one of the leading advocates of equal consideration for the interests of animals making demands which could not possibly be in the interests of the animals concerned.

Using examples both from my own experience of living with animals and from such publicly observable human/animal partnerships as those with guide dogs and ridden horses, I contrast the mutually beneficial relationships with these language-less animals with the wretched lives of captive language-using great apes. The chapter ends by questioning not only the validity of the 'personhood' theory but also the notions of 'equal consideration of interests' and of 'speciesism' as analogous to racism.

The first half of the book has discussed the views of those who, although retaining the traditional view of humans as occupying the top place in the alleged species hierarchy, present their theories as a radical move towards equal consideration of the interests of all. In Chapter Four the focus switches to a group of philosophers who argue that animals are given too much consideration already and that this is anthropomorphic since any suggestion that they are significantly 'like us' is misguided. Like the first group, they believe that language-use is crucial to human experience and perception but they go further in arguing that even the pain of language-less animals is not comparable with that of humans.

My examination of these views, however, reveals that these thinkers also base their arguments on pre-conceived theories without any useful understanding of animals. In many cases their attempts to illustrate the differences between humans and animals serve only to emphasise similarities. I consider the use of the term 'anthropomorphism' — originally used for the belief that God could be described in human terms — and conclude that it is not an appropriate term to describe the mistakes that we sometimes make in our thought about animals, since, unlike

God, non-human animals really do have many things in common with humans and need not be a mystery to us.

Having dismissed various views that animals are either alien to us or that they are Cartesian automata more akin to machines than to human beings, in Chapter Five I first consider the ways in which we can and do come to know, to understand and to communicate with, our non-human fellows and then go on to explain my claim that at least some animals have an understanding *with* us.

The Epilogue is a short section in which I attempt to crystallise one of the main themes of the book by returning to the views with which I opened the discussion in Chapter One. John Harris is interested in the possibility of there being other 'creatures like us' among non-humans, not on earth but on other planets. Even a brief examination of Harris's suggestion that these alien 'people' would not only be sufficiently 'like us' to allow communication, but would also recognise us as 'creatures like them' and therefore 'valuable', is enough to show that Harris's optimism is ill-founded. There are, however, plenty of non-human 'creatures like us' living all around us on our shared earth.