

[THE SECRET LIFE OF ANIMALS](#)

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NATURE

THE SECRET LIFE OF ANIMALS

One man's discovery of the surprisingly rich mental and emotional life of creatures

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Like any bestselling author with more than 20 books to his credit, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson has attracted criticism. Yet when he started writing about the inner lives of animals--in books such as *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals* (co-authored with Susan McCarthy) and *Dogs Never Lie About Love: Reflections on the Emotional World of Dogs*--his detractors got more serious. Some called his ideas "unorthodox, " "far-fetched " and "pseudo-scientific nonsense." And those were among the kinder observations.

Many in the farm industry see Masson as downright subversive--someone trying to stir up trouble by inviting people to perceive that animals have feelings and are unhappy living in confinement. The author is not deterred. He is convinced that all animals, not just dogs and cats, are sentient beings who display a full range of emotions, including hope, love, grief and even happiness. An animal is happy, he contends, if it can live according to its nature. While his viewpoint is generally rejected by behaviorists, animal lovers around the world applaud it.

In his latest book, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals*, Masson asserts that the animals humans routinely eat have feelings, intelligence, thoughts, emotions and even dreams. He recounts stories of pigs dying of broken hearts, of a ram who mourns the death of a cow, of a newborn calf and a mother who are separated and then call for each other until they are hoarse. As a result of writing this book, for which he spent five years studying farm animals and

interviewing those who seek to protect them, Masson has converted from a vegetarian to a "vegan " lifestyle, neither eating nor using any animal products.

The Pig Who Sang to the Moon has become fodder for his opponents and doctrine for animal-rights activists, turning the former religious studies instructor into an international celebrity. Not only does he tell stories of animals experiencing joy, sorrow and compassion, but he also posits that they fear death. "Farm animals, " he asserts, "may understand and dread the fate that awaits them." One such anecdote is the story of two pigs that went to extraordinary lengths to escape slaughter in England and won the hearts of locals. "For some people, " Masson writes, "it was the first time they realized that a pig does not want to die."

Jeffrey Masson was born into a Jewish family that was deeply influenced by Paul Brunton, the celebrated mystic whose book *A Search in Secret India* introduced Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi to the West. Brunton lived with the Massons in New Zealand for many years and encouraged Jeffrey to study Sanskrit. Brunton's influence led the Masson family to embrace Advaita Vedanta.

"I was studying Sanskrit at 13, " he says from his home in Auckland, New Zealand. "When other kids read comic books, I was studying Shankara. I spent much of the first 18 years of my life absorbed in Indian religious texts like the *Asthavakra Gita*, which is still one of my favorite pieces of literature. And from the *Ramayana*, which is my most favorite text, I still know whole chunks by heart, in Sanskrit."

Masson later traveled to India--first to Calcutta, where he attended university and studied with traditional pundits, then to Poona, where he spent two years working with late Pandit T. Shrinivas Shastri, the man he claims was a mentor to the Shankaracharya at the Shri Kanchi Kamakoti Pitham in Kanchipuram in South India. "This direct contact with Hinduism and with the ancient Sanskrit texts had a very strong influence on my life. Ahimsa, for example, is my central philosophy of life. I think it is one of the great concepts of all time."

The author eventually earned his Ph.D. in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from Harvard University. He attributes his inspiration to have compassion for animals to the influence of Hinduism in his life, but credits his training as a psychoanalyst for his interest in animal emotions. In his preface to *Dogs Never Lie About Love*, Masson

writes, "So little was known about a person's inner life that for years analysts claimed that women who recounted episodes of abuse in their childhood were not remembering but engaging in fantasy. We know now that they were wrong. If we were so ill-informed about the experiences of our closest associates, what mysteries still lie undiscovered in the emotional lives of animals?"

Masson's work depends upon anecdotalism, an approach most in the scientific community regard as unreliable. In collecting his anecdotes, he observes animal behavior and develops, in his words, "a careful description of an unusual event." Such events range from the whimsical to the utterly reckless, like the time in India he approached a group of elephants grazing with their calves, greeting one of the large adults with the Sanskrit salute to Lord Ganesha: "Bhoh, Gajendra " ("Greetings, Lord of the elephants "); the enraged pachyderm chased the terrified author, who barely escaped with his life.

Hog Heaven

Some critics argue that because Masson's observations are not based on empirical evidence, his work is "sophistry." Although he acknowledges that anecdotes do present difficulties for scientists, such as the inability to control events, Masson rejects the claim that the only valid conclusions about animals are those based on empirical study.

"What is empirical evidence? asks Masson. "If a scientist observes animals in a laboratory, what he sees is considered data. But if he sees the same thing in the wild, it is not. Or at least, that used to be the case. Jane Goodall [who has documented the social organization of chimpanzees in the wild] has changed all that for good. Of course, some anecdotes are better than others. And accumulation is not always a guarantee of authenticity, but I believe that observing farm animals under natural conditions is a good way to get evidence of what they are like. Sanctuaries are the best place to do this."

One such sanctuary is Animal Place, where animals that have been rescued from slaughter or abuse share 60 bucolic acres in northern California. "Jeffrey Masson eloquently makes the case that pigs, cows and chickens have a rich emotional life, very much like our companion dogs and cats, " says Kim Sturla, director of Animal Place.

While researching *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon*, Masson spent a lot of time at Animal Place, getting to know such residents there as "Jesse the cow" and "Lulu the pig." Lulu was here with her brother Wilbur. One evening Sturla and some of the staff watched Lulu "tuck in" Wilbur. "We peeked into their straw and we could not see Wilbur anywhere," Sturla recalls. "Then we noticed Lulu going to one end of the stall with a mouthful of straw and bringing it over to the other corner of the stall where she dropped it. She continued doing this. We soon observed that she was burying Wilbur under the huge mound of straw. Lulu had succeeded in completely covering him up to endure a cold winter evening!"

Masson regards animal sanctuaries as being crucial for the education of the public on the proper treatment of animals. "I think they are the only hope," he says. "There, people get to see what these animals are truly like. We need more of these places in different countries. School kids need to go to them as regularly as they go to zoos."

Fowl Play

Animals, it seems, are just waiting to express their affection and happiness. The kinds of friendships that we might expect to find only between humans are common between animals. It is not unheard of for even wild animals to bond with humans. Among the examples Masson uses to illustrate this point is the story of naturalist Joe Hutto. Joe spent a year living with wild turkeys and in the book describes his friendship with one of the birds. "Each time I saw him," Hutto says, "he greeted me with a happy dance, a joyful display of ducking and dodging, with wings outstretched and a frisky shake of his head, like a dog with water in his ears."

Perhaps even more touching is the relationship between a chicken named Mary and a young rooster named Notorious Boy. They spent all their time together and liked to sleep on a picnic table near the main house at Animal Place. One day a storm broke, so Sturla went outside to bring the birds indoors. "She found them huddling close together," Masson writes, "Notorious Boy's wing draped over Mary to protect her from the wind and rain, just as a mother hen would protect her chicks. If we can't call this love, the word has no meaning."

And there's the remarkable story of another pig named Lulu. This was a 200-pound, Vietnamese, potbellied pig living on Presque Isle in Pennsylvania. Upon seeing the woman she lived with having a heart attack, Lulu struggled through a small doggie door in the wall of her owner's house--injuring herself in the process--ran out into

the street and lay in the road until a car stopped. She then led the driver to the house. Lulu received international attention for saving the woman's life.

It is hard to deny the altruism exhibited by an African elephant in *When Elephants Weep*. When a baby black rhinoceros became mired in mud after a rainstorm, it called for its mother, who could do nothing to help it. A herd of elephants arrived, and an adult with large tusks knelt and began lifting the little rhino. But the mother rhino charged the elephant, who retreated. The elephant made several attempts to help the baby, yet each time the large rhino, trying to protect her young, charged. Finally, the elephants moved on, and the humans observing the encounter rescued the rhinoceros. What besides compassion, the author asks, would motivate an animal to risk its life to save an animal of another species?

Masson addresses other characteristics of wild animals that seem all-too human: chimpanzees who rejoice upon discovering a cache of food, embracing, holding hands and pressing their mouths against one another before calming down enough to eat; dolphins who "chuckle" to indicate friendly contact; two groups of elephants who race toward each other over a quarter mile, trumpeting with delight, and finally meet in a thundering display, clasp trunks and spinning around.

Science Friction

Throughout his books on the inner lives of animals, Masson refers to Charles Darwin, whose 1872 magnum opus, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (still in print), is generally regarded as the first scientific exploration of its kind seeking to solve such puzzles as why dogs wag their tails and why cats purr. Darwin argued that not only do animals feel emotions but they also display them in ways similar to humans.

Masson explains that the British naturalist was severely criticized for anthropomorphizing animal behavior, and cites as an example the story Darwin tells of a monkey who bravely stood up to a fierce baboon to save a human. "Bravery and courage are not words scientists are eager to see applied to a monkey by the founder of evolutionary theory," Masson writes in *When Elephants Weep*.

Later in the same book, readers meet Alex, an African gray parrot who is famous for his English vocabulary--and his dislike of veterinarians. Dr. Irene Pepperberg, who

has worked with this parrot since 1977, dropped Alex off at the veterinarian's office one day. Alex called out, "Come here. I love you. I'm sorry. I want to go back." While African grays are known for their intelligence, Alex may well be the Einstein of the breed. He can count. He can identify objects, shapes, colors and materials. He understands the comparison of opposites like big and small, like and unlike. He even manipulates lab assistants to modify his environment to suit his whim. Pepperberg asserts that Alex can think, and presents evidence suggesting he may one day be able to read.

Why aren't more people interested in the inner lives of animals? How can ethologists (who study animal behavior), zoologists and other "experts" ignore so many instances of animals expressing themselves? Masson contends that while some scientists are indeed willing to explore the emotions of animals, most are fearful they will be ridiculed by their peers and, like Darwin, be labeled anthropomorphic. Mainstream scientists, he says, stay clear of the emotional complexity of farm animals in order to avoid the moral consequences involved in killing them--ten billion a year in the US alone. Perhaps it's easier on the conscience, he muses, to dismiss these animals as dumb and without feelings when in fact they are not so different from people.

Masson offers the cow as example. They have enormous, complex, folded brains, not unlike those of humans. "What do they use such large brains for?" he asks. "To relate to one another, to keep track of family relations, just as we do. Any farmer can tell you about the long moans (they sound like 'moo') that a cow gives forth when her calf is taken away from her a few hours after birth. Her mental anguish is probably not so different from the anguish of a mother who loses her child at birth."

When questioned why humans have remained ignorant of the emotions of animals for so long, Sturla replies that it is in our own self-interest not to know them; that is, it is more convenient to not know whom we are exploiting.

"In general," Masson writes, "the more we know about something, the more we care." As he sees it, the abuse of animals has gone on too long. "We have a unique opportunity to live with other animals in a kind of harmony that has never been possible in the past, but could well be the one and only way we can continue to live on this planet into the future. Since we share so much of our genetic heritage with other animals, it is high time we realized how much we share emotional capacities

as well. Once that is realized perhaps we can begin to share the Earth, which has been given to all animals, human and otherwise, in common."

Evolution of Animal Sanctuaries

Cow protection is the gift of Hinduism to the world, " said Mahatma Gandhi. India runs more than 3,000 shelters, called Gaushalas, to care for bovines in need, but Hinduism's respect for animals includes providing sanctuary for other creatures as well. You'll find monkeys protected among the temples of Mandala Wisata Wanara Wana (Sacred Monkey Forest Sanctuary) in Bali, for example. Though the West was slow to catch on, animal sanctuaries have been popping up across the United States and Europe over the last 20 years. So what's changed? Factory farming. As Jeffrey Masson observes, the cruel concepts of factory farming go back nearly 2,000 years. But it was just after World War II--when small, family-scale farming in the US and Europe gave way to large-scale confined animal feeding operations--that factory farming became the model, with domesticated animals like cows, sheep, chickens and pigs being forced to exist in shocking conditions, treated as commodities and subjected to institutionalized abuse. Many scientists believe these conditions are the cause of illnesses like bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("mad cow disease ") and its human variant, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

Occasionally an animal escapes a slaughterhouse, is deemed too sick by a farmer and finds its way into one of a handful of animal sanctuaries. One such haven is Animal Place in Vacaville, California. Founded in 1989 by Kim Sturla and Ned Buyukmihci, Animal Place takes in animals who have been abused or neglected and have no place else to go. Animals rescued from auctions and stockyards and left over from laboratory research also peacefully live on the 60 acres of forest, meadow, pasture, hills and a small lake. In addition to providing the day-to-day care of animals, Animal Place is an advocacy organization offering outreach activities such as vegetarian cooking classes.

For more information concerning the humane treatment of animals, visit these web sites:

<http://www.animalplace.org> <http://www.cowprotection.com>
<http://www.farmanimalshelters.org> <http://www.animalrescuers.co.uk>