

Dogs have souls, but you already knew that

Animal behaviorists say dogs possess empathy and compassion, the emotions upon which moral sense is built



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Researchers say that a dog's laugh is a rhythmic pant.

Good dogs

RESEARCHER Marc Bekoff says there's a long list of observable emotional and ethical behavior of dogs. It will seem familiar to most people who have dogs:

- Dogs have a sense of fair play. They dislike cheaters. They experience joy in play. They delight in friends. Big dogs handicap themselves in games with little dogs.
- Dogs get jealous when a rival gets more or better treats or treatment. They are resentful, unnerved or saddened by unfair behavior. They are made anxious by suspense. They get afraid.
- They are embarrassed when they mess up or do something clumsy. They feel remorse or regret when they do something wrong. They seek justice. They remember the bad things done to them, but sometimes choose to forgive.
- Dogs have affection and compassion for their animal and human friends and family. They defend loved ones. They grieve their losses. They have hope.

DENVER — For centuries, humans have imagined they are the only animals with morals. But humans are not alone in the moral arena, a new breed of behavior experts says.

Natural historian Jake Page said some scientists are acknowledging what pet owners have told their canines all along: "Good dog."

Dogs are full of natural goodness and have rich emotional lives, said animal behaviorist Marc Bekoff, professor emeritus at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

A dog's code of ethics is on display daily in parks, backyards and family rooms.

"We're not trying to elevate animals," Bekoff said. "We're not trying to reduce humans. We're not saying we're better or worse or the same. We're saying we're not alone in having a nuanced moral system."

Page, author of "Do Dogs Smile?," said biology no longer dismisses dogs and other animals as "furry automatons" driven by instinct and food.

"People like Bekoff have figured out how to measure these things," Page said. "It's a whole new ballgame for studying dog personalities and emotions."

Bekoff, co-author of "Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals," spent thousands of hours observing coyotes, wolves and dogs. He analyzed videotapes frame by frame. The work convinced him these animals possess empathy and compassion, the emotions upon which moral sense is built.

While much the same can be said of monkeys, wolves, elephants, dolphins, whales and other social animals, dogs are special cases; they share in human lives, he said.

"Dogs know they are dependent. They learn to read us," Bekoff said. "Dogs develop this great sense of trust. We're tightly linked, and there is something spiritual about that unity."

This intimacy and mutual influence prompted Harvard University to open a Canine Cognition Lab, where researchers attempt to gain insight into the psychology of humans and dogs.

"I'm convinced many animals can distinguish right from wrong," Bekoff said.

He said looking for the roots of morality in animals is a difficult scientific undertaking. It begins with looking for emotions central to morality, such as empathy: understanding of another's situation, feelings and motives.

In humans, emotions are centered in specific brain structures and are affected by chemicals called neurotransmitters. Mammals possess the same brain structures, affected by the same chemicals as humans.

"Dogs apparently laugh," Page said. The same brain structures show the same activity in laughing humans and in dogs that are enjoying themselves. A dog's laugh is a rhythmic pant.

Play is necessary for healthy brain development in animals and is seen in many mammalian, and some avian, species, Bekoff said.

Play hones cognitive skills and later helps in hunting and mating. And play would not be possible without cooperation and trust.

"Virtue is its own reward," Bekoff said. "Fairer is fitter."

To prevent any misunderstanding, a dog will signal to another dog that the imminent jostling, nipping and chasing are "just play" rather than aggression, he said.

The game is initiated with the "play bow." A dog, wolf or coyote will crouch on its forelimbs while keeping its rear upright.

Any hard-biting cheats find themselves excluded from games.

"Dogs are thinking animals," Bekoff said. "They seek the outcomes they want. They avoid the ones they don't. They solve problems. They have expectations. They have hopes."

Critics skeptical about some research trends in animal thinking, emotion and morality downplay the evidence as often anecdotal and anthropomorphic, which is attributing human motivation or characteristics to animals.

Bekoff countered that thousands of anecdotes equal data. And anthropomorphism, he said, is a misleading label for what is a shared evolutionary history.

Humans and dogs share most of their genes and a great deal of physiology and behavior. Bekoff sees that shared heritage extending into the spiritual realm.

"If we have souls, our animals have souls. If we have free choice, they have it," Bekoff said. "If we can't know this for sure, let's give them the benefit of a doubt."