The Emotional Lives of Animals

article by Professor Jeffrey Moussaieffe Masson

Jeffrey Masson has been a university professor and a Freudian psychoanalyst and is a co-author of the best-selling book When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals. A self-confessed animal lover, he has written about his extraordinary findings in the uncharted territory of animal emotions. Here he talks about his research and writings, and how they have changed his life.

How did a Professor of Sanskrit and a Freudian psychoanalyst come to write about the emotional lives of animals? I grew up as a vegetarian. When I went off to Harvard to study Sanskrit however, I found it too difficult to stay vegetarian, and for years I ate meat, always with some qualms and a kind of moral self—disgust. I knew it was wrong, but I was not sure why.

After many years at the University of Toronto, where I was Professor of Indian Studies and where I trained, for eight years as a psychoanalyst, I discovered that I did not like psychoanalysis and I was no longer interested in academics. So I renounced my members in Sanskrit, and my membership of the analytic establishment and turned to my earliest love, animals. I had seen that we really knew very little about the emotional lives of humans. Could the reason possibly be that we had neglected to study the lives of our evolutionary cousins, animals? I began doing research about the emotional lives of animals in the wild, especially elephants. I learned that almost all animals had complex and deep emotions. Elephants, for example, feel grief for the death of other elephants as deep as our own, and mourn them in particularly poignant ways. There have been reports of elephants refusing to leave the body of a dead relative, with some elephants removing the tusks, and hiding them in the jungle, as if they somehow knew that humans were hunting elephants for their ivory. Young elephants who had seen their mothers killed in front of them, would often wake up in the night screaming, evidently from nightmares in which they relived the trauma they had been through as witnesses of mass murder.

The more I researched the topic, the more clear it became to me that we had been remarkably short-sighted when we thought we were the only species to have profound feelings. I wrotC up my research in a book called When Elephants Weep: The Emofional Lives of Animals. To my surprise, this book became a New York Times best seller, and was translated into more than twenty languages. The more I thought about the implications of my own study, the more I realized I could no longer go on eating meat, and I became a vegetarian again. My next book was about dogs, animals I had always loved and shared my home with. I soon realized that when it came to purity and intensity of emotions, especially positive emotions like love, loyalty, compassion, generosity and joy, dogs were probably our superior, that is, they felt some of these emotions more purely and more intensely than did most humans. The book I wrote, Dogs Never Lie About Love, also became an international best seller.

I turned my attention to fatherhood: were there lessons to be learned in the animal world about how to father children? There were, and I drew them in a book, not quite so popular (human fathers don't care that much about animals, and animal lovers don't care that much about fathers, so I did not have a captive audience!) called The Emperors Embrace: The Evolution of Fatherhood. I called it that because of the remarkable paternal abilities of the Emperor Penguin, who holds his egg on his foot for several months of the bitterest Antarctic winter, all the time fasting, while the female is hundreds of miles away. What paternal devotion! It was a true model, though obviously one men would rather not imitate. Humans love to see themselves as superior

to animals in all possible respects. Of course when it comes to physical characteristics we have no choice but to concede that most animals are our superiors; they are stronger: they can fly, run faster, climb better, dive deeper and dig further than any human. It is a frightening thought for most humans to think that some animals may be our superiors when it comes to feelings. Could a cat, for example, have a greater sense of contentment than any person, or a dog a greater joie de vivre? I find this possibility exhilarating rather than depressing. It shows how much we can learn and benefit from living with animals.

It became clear to me, though, after I had finished these books, that there was one area of animal feeling that I had not yet thought about in any depth, and that was the lives and especially the feelings of farm animals. The reason was obvious: I was a vegetarian, true, but I ate eggs and drank milk and wore leather. I knew, vaguely, about how these animal products came to us, but I was not thrilled with the idea of learning the real details. Yet I could not allow personal cowardice and an attachment to an old lifestyle get in the way of learning the truth, so I set about writing my next book, about the emotional lives of farm animals. Sure enough, the more I learned, the more appalled I was at how eggs were produced, and how milk was taken from the animal to whom it belonged, the calf, to feed to humans. We were, I soon realised, the only species that drinks the milk of another species, (with the possible exception of ants who, like us, enslave other species), even though that milk was not designed for us and was possibly toxic. It was strange, since human babies had a drink specifically designed for them that is superior to any other product available, mother's milk. How could I continue to eat eggs once I had been inside an American chicken farm and seen the appalling conditions under which these poor birds must live (‘even the word is wrong — it is no life)? I could not. So I became, reluctantly, a vegan, and gave up eating or using all products that came from an animal.

Becoming a vegan was no easy matter, Society does not cater to vegans, even less in New Zealand than in Europe and the United States (where there are delicious alternatives to cheese and yogurt, for example), and yet I found I simply could not justify continuing to use animal products once I knew something about the inner lives of farm animals. It would be like using the products of concentration camp survivors. I just could not live with myself. These farm animals, I soon discovered, had every bit as much feeling as their wild counterparts, if not more (since they were in constant contact with another species, humans, even if that contact was from both points of view highly unsatisfactory). A pig could be as devoted, as affectionate, as good a companion, as a dog, given half a chance. Chickens, like many birds, could form close bonds with a human who took the time to get to know these fascinating animals. Sheep, who had been dismissed as stupid animals, turned out to have remarkable discriminating powers, allowing them to recognise, know and have feelings about two hundred other sheep. Goats were as individualistic and as mysterious and complex as cats, and when permitted could live in delightful harmony with humans. Yet this topic had been completely ignored by animal scientists. Why? The only reason I could think of was that delving into the emotional complexity of farm animals is bound to give us a moral headache. How could we justify the cruelty we inflict on these uncomplaining beings at the rate of many billion a year?

We slaughter and torture them and treat these living beings as if they were no different than pieces of tin, yet they have families, form friendships, love and yearn every bit as much as we do, in some cases even more. It is high time that humans gave up our sense that we are a unique species, with unique abilities, except in the sense that every animal is unique and does some things that other animals can not do or do not want todo. We have a unique opportunity, and that is to learn 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. Since we share so

much of our genetic heritage with other animals, it is high time we realised how much we share emotional capacities as well, and once that is realised perhaps we can begin to share the earth, which has been given to all animals, human and otherwise, in common.

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson moved to New Zealand from California. He is now living in Auckland with his two children, Ilan and Manu, his wife, Leila, a German pediatrician, and five cats, (Miki, Moko, Minna, Megala and Yossie) about whom he is writing a book, to be published in autumn, called The Nine Emotional Lives of Cats: A Journey into the Feline Heart.

Ed note: Sanskrit is the language of ancient India in which most of its sacred texts are written.

A Freudian psychoanalyst is the graduate of an 8-year training programme using Sigmund Freud's methods, which means that every analyst (generally a psychiatrist first) must undergo a long personal analysis (five times a week for at least five years) before he can treat others with the same couch-based psychoanalysis.