Ethical Similarities in Human and Animal Social Structures

William J. Ellos
Loyola University of Chicago

Editors' Note:

This paper was presented at the
Central Division Meeting of the
Society for the Study of Ethics
and Animals, held in Chicago,
Illinois, April, 1989.

Two challenges immediately must be faced in any attempt to study ethical structures. There is little contemporary consensus as to what is the basic starting point or subject matter of ethics. The basic ethical approach used in this paper will be strongly pragmatic in tone. This will allow for the noting of a number of specific elements in human and animal social structures which interrelate and interact in a rich variety of possibilities. Ethical activity will be in evidence in the habitually virtuous workings of practical attempts to deal with and as best as possible solve the constantly perplexing problems present in the dilemmas of everyday life and survival.

PHILOSOPHY

Various approaches are currently suggested as to how to undertake the study of structures. A rather fierce debate rages around the anthropological techniques of Claude Levi-Strauss. At times it seems that his methodology is so harsh and rigid in its delineation of universal structures of human behavior as to exclude the possibility of a pragmatic problematic in human affairs. But various clearly articulated strains in his work point to a much more open-ended view of the meldings and overlappings of the structures. They can be seen as a network of patterned activity in which parts and pieces within a single structure are exchanged and transformed in ways creative of highly ethical behavior. The workings of these patternings will in some sense be common to both human and animal behavior.

One of the most constructive and yet controversial ways of studying the patternings of both human and animal behavior is the sociobiological methodology developed by Edward O. Wilson. His analysis is constantly concerned with ethical behavior. This will not be an ethic of abstract, lofty principles but rather a rough and ready ethic of involvement in the use of constantly threatened and fragmented social structures as tools in the practical solution of problems of survival and development.

Wilson's associate and popularizer David P. Barash maps out four modalities in sociobiological study.¹ The first is basically descriptive. Here there is simply concern to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the behavior of different animal and human social groupings. There is an effort made at simplicity in trying to identify only the most salient and important elements. Important to note would be communal behavior patterns distributed among various groups. Let me use one of the easiest human-animal comparison groups to point out the workings of this sociobiological modality.

Both humans and canines exhibit behavior patterns which show a deep tendency and drive to live in very close-knit family and extended family units. There is in both species also a hierarchical structure within the group, with some members of the group having a higher, more powerful and more important status than others. This creates both strengths and ethical chal-

lenge. There is a rather constant need to reinforce the social order of things. At times this can be a touching and warm show of affection and love. At other times attempts to disrupt the order of things can lead to violence and even to physical harm and in the most dire cases to death. Social groupings of both canines and humans display the same traits. But these traits also cross the lines of both groups, as evidenced by our dogs regularly taking positions of submission to one or another (not everyone!) of us and by our affectionate petting of them.

The second modality is evaluative. This is concerned with the functional significance of behavior patterns. A few years ago I had the opportunity to present a paper on ethical themes in sociobiology to a meeting of the European Sociobiology Association. The meeting took place in a zoo at Arnhem, in the Netherlands, because the zoo has one of the largest chimpanzee colonies under constant observation over a period of a number of years. Very clearly noted were a set of male dominance patterns. Especially important were the leadership displays of the chief males. They regularly made tours of the colony displaying certain attitudes of stance and deportment which demanded deference and subjection from the other chimpanzees.

I live in a male religious community where this kind of behavior is constantly in evidence. Certain of the older members of the group have adapted a style of rather rigid and aloof walking and talking which demands deference and respect. Any challenge to this, just as in the case of the chimpanzees, is met with stern rebuke. This is quite unconsciously done (a point I wish to return to later), so that if one were to try to point out the similarities to animal behavior, there would certainly be as much surprise as indignation. Yet much ethics remains hidden here.

The correlational modality deals with the relationship between behavior patterns and environmental parameters. We generally tend to think that animals are much more sensitive to their environments than humans. Yet in actual fact we both may much more share the same set of problems than not. There are situations where overconcentration of groupings of animals have not only depleted natural resources in an area

but have led to the debilitation or even extinction of animal species. Humans have at least the theoretical possibility of reversing this kind of trend.

The predictive modality works off the central theorem of sociobiology. Because all conscious, surface, phenotypical social behavior has its origin and regulation in unconscious, depth, genotypical singular mechanisms, humans and animals will act to maximize their inclusive fitness. Any biologically, genetically programmed individual will act so as to propagate and promote in the best possible way the best interest of the proximate groupings within the species. This is the only way in which the individual can best survive and thrive.

There seems to be a considerable amount of selfishness involved in such an approach, since the basic sociobiological mechanisms seem to center around personal survival at any price. This is really not so, since the practice of altruism is essential to this survival. It is impossible for an individual to survive unless the group survives, so there must be a contribution to the group in the hope and expectation of individual profit. Wilson terms this "soft-core altruism," since while there actually is concern for others, this concern is ultimately because of the advantages to self of such concern.

Ethical questions here abound. While we might predicate this kind of selfish altruism of animal behavior, since we do not experience them as being unrestrictively kind and charitable, we wince at the consideration of human behavior as being fundamentally selfish. But moral and economic theories from Adam Smith to Ayn Rand point out that the pursuit of an enlightened self-interest is the best way to bring about the social good. What really is so wrong about being rewarded for good deeds? If we get no satisfaction we may not be acting ethically correctly. Human assimilation of animal traits may be of help.

Altruistic behavior is displayed in four types of social involvement.² Humans and animals tend to join or become associated with groups which will insure their best productivity. Sometimes accidents of race, geography, health and age place individuals into certain groupings. Yet, as much

as possible we try to control our placement and work in these groups. Important to note here is the role of what we might consider secondary groupings such as clubs or athletic organizations of one type or another. Actually there may be very strong bonds here as evidenced in the fierce arguments that all too frequently break out between sports fans of differing persuasions. Something deeply important to our surviving and thriving seems to be involved. Is it mere coincidence that we name so many of our sports teams after rather fierce animals?

Two kinds of social groupings are directly related to our expectation of genetic reproductive continuance. Our selection of a sexual or marriage partner initiates not only a bonding of one individual to another but the prospect of support or problems from a large number of kin. Most of these situations provide as much challenge as consolation, but the opportunities must be made the best of in order to insure thriving. Parental manipulation of children presents in intense miniature the same set of problems. Psychoanalytic literature thrives on the conscious and unconscious problems presented by the possibilities here for good and ill. While these questions are clearly heightened in the human situation, because of the greater interplay between conscious and unconscious factors, valuable clues can be obtained from the study of animal kin and familial relationships. Especially important for our bifurcated American society would be the role of extended family groupings.

Animal groupings display a good deal of reciprocity. Not only within a single species but clearly between and among species there is a symbiotic working relationship to enhance surviving and thriving. Involved here is a sort of sociobiological Golden Rule, but the soft-core altruism of the rule is rather strongly at work. It is strongly to the advantage of one group or species to work constructively with another. The working relationship is often tenuous and tense, but the balances are maintained more than not. Patterns of human aggression and defense strongly parallel these animal configurations. Here the chances are very high that we have a good deal to learn from animals in that they seem to have worked out far better means of accommodation among

themselves than we have. There are few, if any, documented examples of animal genocide. We unconsciously long for peace and cooperation while consciously preparing for defensive and aggressive war. A more in-depth attunement to our animalistic survival tendencies might be some of the healthiest actions we can take to preserve ourselves and our planet.

Some of the most creative and suggestive study done on the assimilation of animal to human traits is in the massive work of the French structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. In order to understand this method of structuralism we need to consider the work of the pioneer linguist Ferdinand de Saussure on which much of Levi-Strauss' structuralism is built. A great deal of any structuralist approach is based on linguistic considerations. Since language is basically a set of communication techniques, the similarities between human and animal communication can provide a linking clue into common ethical patterns and behavior.

In his project of reformulating the tasks of linguistic study Saussure makes two key distinctions. Language or *langue* is distinguished from *parole* or word.³ *Langue* is the study of the basic structures of language. It is not so bound by the changes and transformations that languages experience over a period of time. This distinction is used as a foundation for the patterns of mythic structure in the work of Levi-Strauss. At a more surface or conscious level the workings of myth look more like *parole*, in that they seem to be ever changing and filled with complexities. At a more depth or unconscious level, however, the structures are more like *langue*, in that they remain constant over time and vary little or not at all from culture to culture.

One of the most important of all elements of myth is certainly the use of animal figures. Myths of various cultures, from various times all over the world, have their sly foxes, wise owls, strong jaguars, wicked wolves and on and on. It is most important to note that the animals in the myths take on human characteristics and the humans animal characteristics. Certainly one of the things which is most strongly being suggested in such a move is the close interrelationship of the two groups in terms of behaviors. The myths are also deeply concerned with forms of ethical behavior.

Perhaps what is happening is that one piece or aspect of human ethical behavior, such as sly and crafty behavior, is imposed on the more generalized behavior patterns of an animal such as a fox. A piece of mythic *parole* is fitted into the larger *langue* pattern of behavior. The more unconscious aspects of animal fox-like behavior are assimilated to human behavior via the mechanism of a single behavior trait's transference.

I should like to suggest that these single transferences across human and animal lines allow us to take on in an almost unconscious way a variety of animal traits. By and large we tell ourselves in these stories that we would like to be like the animals we portray. There is a deep unconscious affinity which we would like to bring to the surface. So the study of myth will reveal to us a large number of situations of ethical similarity between human and animal behavior.

A second distinction made by Saussure is between signification or signified and signal or

signifier.⁴ Together these constitute the linguistic sign. Unreflectively we think that a word directly and precisely denotes an object, but a little reflection will quickly show that this is not the case. If the word, tree, for instance denoted directly a tree which I might see in front of me, then I could not use this word to denote any other tree I might see. Rather, the sound (signal) which I make when I say tree refers to a concept (signification). When signal-sound and concept-signification are working properly together, then proper reference of the word, tree, to the object can be made. But I can just as well use another sound-word, such as *arbor* or *baum*, to designate the same object.

This shows that any single word-sign is really part of a larger *langue* situation. There is a great deal of unconscious linguistic activity going on in the production of any linguistic sign, thus making any such sign ultimately arbitrary. But this arbitrariness is in the context of the rich connotations that each term picks up in the history of the development and use of the language. When we move from one sign to another, even within the same language, we carry a hidden residual piece of linguistic baggage which provides the foundation for the constant changes in language and vocabulary. Because there is so much unconscious linguistic slippage, we move and develop different patterns of language.

The same thing occurs in mythic situations, where one or another element is assimilated to a different mythic factor via a process of rather unconscious manipulation and substitution. Levi-Strauss has a rich and complex formula to explicate this kind of substitution.⁵ It is a most important formula because so much mythic substitution has to do with the exchange of human and animal characteristics. It reads as follows:

$$F_x(a) : F_y(b) \simeq F_x(b) : F_{a-1}(y)$$

The symbol in the middle of the equation is an equivalence notation. The symbol $\langle a-1 \rangle$ is the opposite to the symbol $\langle a \rangle$. The capital F is just a function notation which will allow the interplay of the symbols $\langle a \rangle$ $\langle a-1 \rangle$ and $\langle b \rangle$, $\langle x \rangle$ and $\langle y \rangle$. We can see that there is a rich substitutionary interplay among the various parts of the equation. The

symbol $\langle x \rangle$ works with $\langle a \rangle$ on one side of the equation, with $\langle b \rangle$ on the other. The symbol $\langle y \rangle$ is associated with $\langle b \rangle$ on one side, $\langle a-1 \rangle$ on the other. Also the equation is structured in a chiasmic form, so that it could be written out in an X shape; the $\langle b \rangle$ factors and the $\langle a \rangle$ $\langle a-1 \rangle$ factors would exchange places on either side of the equation.

Let us say that $\langle a \rangle$ and $\langle b \rangle$ are human traits and $\langle x \rangle$ and $\langle y \rangle$ are animal traits. We would have a mechanism for explaining the move from one set of traits to another. Let us even suppose that one side of the equation is more conscious, the other more unconscious. Then the possibilities of substitution are rich and complex indeed. But it is important to note that at least one of the factors $\langle a-1 \rangle$ is the opposite of another factor $\langle a \rangle$. This is because in any mythic transformation there is a residual element which can never be wholly and precisely explicated. In the transformations involved in the mythic study of human and animal behavior there has to be an ultimately inexplicable factor recalcitrant to full and clear explication. There are deep and rich similarities between human and animal behavior, but they must be studied and explored in the mystic interplay between deeply felt experiences rooted and grounded in the collective unconscious of both animality and humanity.

A rich and fruitful study of the unconsciously mythic character of human and animal experience can be done by working through the richness of the Jungian enterprise, and a large number of the somewhat disparate elements in, for instance, *Symbols of Transformation* could be fitted onto the Levi-Straussian chiasmic scheme. Nonetheless, for the purposes of continuity in the Saussurian linguistic vein it might be useful to consider at least briefly the Freudian approach of Jacques Lacan.

Any such approach will be much involved in the kind of parental manipulations modality of the practice of altruism already discussed in the material on sociobiology. Especially in the mechanisms of the Oedipus cycle we encounter the inability to clearly articulate our relationship to the closest of our social groupings, the family. Father figures play large roles here, in that they force a move into an order of clarity which is much resisted by the very structure of our uncon-

scious. Lacan reads Freud in a very linguistic way; he thinks that the analysis of the language of his patients was the basic and only primary operation on which Freud concentrated the force of his psychoanalytic technique. Lacan builds a Saussurian component into the process. The crisis in the Oedipal cycle has to do with the correct connections to be made between signal-signifiers and signified-significations. This is expressed in a central formula:⁶

$$\begin{array}{c} S' \\ F - S \sim S (+) s \\ S \end{array}$$

Another way of stating the same formula which puts it in more chiasmatic form is as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccccc} & & S' & & \\ & & - & & \\ S' & & S & & s \\ - & x & - & --- & \\ S & & s & & S \\ & & - & & \\ & & S & & \end{array}$$

In both versions of these formulae the capital S stands for the signal-signifiers and the small s for the signified-significations. It is quite clear that the majority of the emphasis is on the latter. The reason for this is that Lacan holds that the unconscious is structured like a language, but it is a Saussurian language in which the emphasis is on the free play of linguistic signals. Our experience of language is conditioned by the free play of the unconscious, as this is dramatically condensed in the workings of the Oedipus complex. The actual points of precise clarity in our understanding of our place in the family configuration and the ability to thus neatly play out our assigned roles are few and far apart. Our early familiar experience grounds the attempts we make throughout our life to achieve clarity. This familial experience forms the foundation for any social groupings into which we enter during the rest of our lives. Ethics never occurs outside the context of a social group. The instabilities and unpredictabilities of social groups form the questions and challenges pointing to proper or improper ethical behavior.

When we come to try to recognize ethical similarities between ourselves and animals, we have to realize that in some sense they also experience this kind of crisis of social and ethical identity. Almost all animal groupings as a result manifest rather rigidly hierarchical patterns of familial and social structure. Any interaction which we have with animals must take these structures into account. Careful attempts must be made to integrate these structures into the kinds and patterns of structures to which we humans are accustomed.

The difficulty is that our human patterns are governed in great part by the free play of our unconscious. We cannot be totally secure about our human social and ethical structures. The greatest promise and the greatest challenge of ethics resides in the opportunities and pitfalls of social interaction. Human ethical behavior in this context remains unpredictable and not subject to a neat scientific study or explanation. Rather, it operates more like a narrative or language in which we have to go with the flow of events and affairs in order to reach some degree of fulfillment and satisfaction.

We also perceive that animal behavior seems to be more or less socially successful and ethically appropriate. Anyone who lives with a dog knows that there are displays of accomplishment and displays of guilt. These behavior patterns are much involved with the proper or improper integration of animal behavior patterns into human behavior patterns. This occurs all through the preliminary oral and anal stages of proper feeding and housebreaking to the crucial parental-type Oedipal patterns of integration into the family unit.

At both the human and the animal level these patterns are never completely controlled or understood. Rather, there is a perilous and gratifying interaction with considerable room for surprise developments. It is the element of lack of predictability and control which furnishes the very stuff of ethics. Because of the unconscious mechanisms of unpredictability which underlie both human and animal behavior, we can never be sure what may occur in the interactions among ourselves, we develop social and ethical codes to have some order and structure in our relationships. Ethical behavior in both humans

Ethics is not so much understood by study as by practice. It is rather like being proficient in a game or sport. One of the reasons that animal wildlife presentations remain so popular on television is that a good deal of the behavior seems plainly playful fun. Yet, even the play of young offspring is play with a purpose, the learning of personal skills for survival and growth which will ensure the thriving of individual and species group.

and animals is always a risky and chancy affair. This is why we never can discover or enforce any final and complete ethic which will be accepted and agreed upon by all. Rather, there is usually a very cautious approach to any ethical conclusion or consensus. Ethical behavior must remain an area of excitement and adventure. Since we find human ethics so problematic, puzzling, promising, and satisfying, we feel a need to want to explore the same areas in animal behavior. Our common and shared experiences should provide clues to greater clarity but will undoubtedly also lead into ever more mystery.

We find ourselves in ethical matters playing more of a game than working out precise scientific answers. A good deal of our relationship with animals carries a great deal of this games-like atmosphere. It is certainly true of our dealings with pets, but is also the case in working with such domesticated animals as farm animals. It is vital to know their own needs and drives and

the mannerisms derived from them. You have to play along with them.

There is again a specifically linguistic way of understanding this dynamic. One of the most influential linguistic theorists of the first part of this century is Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his early work Wittgenstein stressed very much the logical precision of language. But he encountered severe difficulties in trying to understand how such a rigid language could refer to or picture reality. The work of his later period conceived language rather as a set of games.⁷ Here there are rules but they are malleable. Even more importantly, the basic thing about a game is not so much the understanding of the rules but the playing of the game.

Ethics is not so much understood by study as by practice. It is rather like being proficient in a game or sport. Animals seem to display to a great extent these playful characteristics. One of the reasons that animal wildlife presentations remain so popular on television is that a good deal of the behavior seems plainly playful fun. Yet, even the play of young offspring is play with a purpose, the learning of personal skills for survival and growth which will ensure the thriving of individual and species group. The colorfully playful courtship displays so often cinematographically recorded for our entertainment have a pointed pragmatic purpose.

Ethics itself remains pragmatically playful. Different approaches and solutions must be tried out in a variety of contexts and circumstances to attempt success. Like a game ethics is also never really finished. The excitement and fun is in the playing of the game, not in the conclusion. Hence, both human and animal ethical behavior are incomplete and unfinished.

It seems not coincidental that a renewed interest in animal behavior and ethics is occurring when, at least in the areas of the social sciences, there is a re-examination of basic methodologies. This is sometimes termed a post-modern approach. Jean Francois Lyotard, in his work on the postmodern condition, cites some differences between the older scientific approach and current trends in the sociology of knowledge.⁸ First, in its older mode scientific language makes denotation central. There must be an attempt

made to delimit and delineate as precisely as possible the exact parameters of the matter under study. A postmodern approach (sometimes called a deconstructive approach) would be more interested in the narrative interactions between conceptual and linguistic frames and the area of investigation or study. Rather than attempting to clearly define the ethical parameters of human and animal behavior, it is much more important to playfully, commonly explore the possibilities of interaction. This awakened realization of the wealth of shared human and animal possibilities probably underlies a good deal of the rising concern over what is perceived now to be an unethical use of animals in research projects. Such crass research settings for human and animal interaction force us back to viewing animals more as scientific objects of study than partners in a common social and ethical search.

Second, in a context of hard scientific research there is a stress only on the role of the researcher. The subject is relegated to the status of being a mere object of investigation. Our social and ethical behavior is too closely related to that of animals to allow for such a separation. We are much more involved with the life and destiny of animals, and they with us, to allow either of us to objectify each other. While there is little evidence that animals so treat us as objects, in the rather few instances where we interpret their behavior as so motivated, we tend to hold them ethically responsible. The man-eating lion is somehow guilty. It is interesting to note that guilt is surmised in this situation because there is an unwarranted intrusion of the patterns of animal social behavior into the patterns of human social behavior. It is interesting to note that we might well consider the lion guilty but are, at least until recently, less concerned to consider the hunter guilty when the death of the prey severely disrupted the patternings of lion social structure.

Third, science as we have known it, claims to discover and establish truth once and for all. There is a stress on the role and function of rather absolute theorems and principles. Knowledge of the workings of these factors will provide a key to the absolute and unchanging patterns of reality. But advances in all areas of science, from physics to physiology and psychology, show that the real-

ities studied are in a constant process of change and development. Our theories must playfully mimic these processes. This also means that our theories and studies must have a past, present, and future. We have to be attuned to the personal and collective memories of ourselves and our species. We must also have some sort of project in mind for the future.

In questions of human and animal behavior there is both the history of the respective groupings in each category as well as (at least from the human side) the present sense of need for a better rapport in the future. A basic start has been made by the very recognition that there are profound similarities between human and animal social behavior. This recognition immediately carries with it an ethical imperative that all social groupings manifest the playful possibilities and pitfalls which are the very stuff of ethical inquiry and striving. The more we recognize the ethical similarities between human and animal behavior, the more we will be able to foster and facilitate the playful gaming which has been going on between us from the earliest aeons of evolution.

Notes

¹ David P. Barash, *Sociobiology and Behavior* (New York: Elsevier, 1977): 52-69.

² Barash: 70-103.

³ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, Albert Reidlinger (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986): 9, 13.

⁴ Saussure: 65-70.

⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, 2 vols. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972): 228.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1981): 248.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1969): 11-12.

⁸ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988): 25-26.