



Pets and Human Beings

The love affair between man and animals has gone on since the dawn of time, and it is growing ever more important. Humans need pets. They need their devotion. The question we should consider is: Are we returning the devotion we owe to them?

□ Archaeologists have documented that the dog was the first animal to be domesticated, at least 10,500 years ago. Primitive man originally used this widely-found canine to help in hunting and to carry loads. Then, sometime in the void of prehistory, the moment came when a man, woman or child (probably a child) first patted a dog (probably a puppy) and the dog wagged its tail in appreciation. Whenever and however that happened, it was a breakthrough in the progress of the human race.

It meant that *homo sapiens* was no longer alone in the world. He now had an ally to stand by him and a companion to cheer him. By taming an animal, he became a little tamer himself. To keep his new friend, he had to become less savage, more gentle. With that first pat and wag of a dog's tail, civilization was on its way.

The first civilization we know much about was in ancient Egypt. There, some 5,000 years ago, people tamed African tabby wildcats to serve as hunting retrievers and to keep down mice and rats. Perhaps because of their usefulness, cats went on to be pampered and worshipped. Needless to say, cat-lovers have been pampering and, less formally, worshipping these animals ever since.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare writes about a "harmless, necessary cat." The bard, as usual, found precisely the right words to express a concept. For there is no doubt that pets of all kinds, from turtles to horses, are indeed necessary to human wellbeing.

This applies even to those of us who are not pet "owners," a convenient but inexact way of describing the relationship, since the animal often seems

to rule its so-called master or mistress. The German pet book writer Helga Fritzche suggests it would be more appropriate to refer to cat-owners as "co-cats"

Pets lend a touch of graciousness to all our lives, because they tend to bring out the kindest and most generous impulses of humanity. As early as the 1880s, educational authorities in the United States introduced primary school courses in the humane treatment of animals as a way of building character in the young. One definition of the word "humane" is "tending to civilize and confer refinement." Another is "marked by compassion, sympathy or consideration for animals and *other human beings*." Benevolence towards animals and benevolence towards people go hand in hand.

The fundamental reason for our need for pets lies in the simple fact that they are different from us. Being in touch with creatures outside our own species helps us to see the human race in perspective. Their presence reminds us that humans occupy only a small place in the grand scheme of existence; that we are part of the natural order and not the dictators of it. Pets promote a state of peaceful co-existence between humans and the rest of creation. They keep us from believing that we and the material things around us are the be-all and end-all of the earth.

The presence of a pet makes an excellent antidote to the pride that goes before the fall. A cat may indeed look at a king, and not make any distinction between His Majesty and any of his subjects. In fact, royal personages have always been notoriously fond of pets, perhaps because the animals love them

for themselves and not for their positions. Among their human hangers-on, they can never be sure that the affection shown is sincere.

Sincerity is the trait most commonly associated with pets. "The one absolute, unselfish friend that a man can have in this selfish world, the one that never proves ungrateful or treacherous, is his dog," said the American Senator George Graham Vest in a much-quoted eulogy. In a world in which people are constantly withholding their thoughts and feelings from each other, animals are innocent of duplicity.

Being so simple, they encourage us to take a simpler approach to life ourselves; to cut through the extraneous thickets of complexity that surround us and get back to basics. In moments of personal confusion, we could do worse than pause and emulate the 18th century poet Christopher Smart: "For I would consider my cat Jeffrey, / For he is the servant of the Living God..."

To an animal, there is no such thing as hypocrisy, which is surely one of the least noble of human characteristics. Though he was looking down his aristocratic nose when he said it, many people today would nonetheless identify with the Comte d'Orsay: "The more I see of the representatives of the people, the more I admire my dogs."

'The kids need a pet.' So does everyone in the family

But though we appreciate the differences between them and us, we are also impressed by the similarities. That may be why we give them human names. They are certainly able to communicate, even goldfish, which make a burbling sound on top of the water when they want to be fed or have their water changed. Though it has been said that human beings are separated from other creatures by their ability to laugh, cats and dogs in particular show a sense of humour. Like the good friends they are, they like to share this with their two-legged companions. They will deliberately clown for our benefit — especially, it seems, when they sense we need cheering up.

The fact that pets are entertaining is usually why a child is first given one. It is considered a plaything. But there is much more than play involved

in the age-old friendship between animal and child. Psychologists say that pets play a transitional role in children's ability to go from loving their parents to loving other people. They provide an outlet for the development of the nurturing instinct. Caring for pets helps to develop a child's sense of responsibility.

Animals frequently come into a home because parents agree that "the kids need a pet." More likely, pets are needed by the whole family. At a conference of the Society for Companion Animals in Paris in 1982, Anne Ottney Cain, professor of psychiatric nursing at the University of Maryland, reported on a study of 60 families with pets ranging from cats and dogs to skunks, monkeys and goats. She reported that families drew closer together as soon as an animal became part of the group. Children argued less and co-operated more, deflating the tension for everyone in the household. The parents got along better, too.

Are pets sensitive to human emotions? It looks that way

People have known all along that pets are good for the soul, but it has been left to modern science to confirm that they are good for the body. In a series of experiments which brought a new degree of seriousness to the study of the place of companion animals in society, Dr. Aaron H. Katcher, professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, established that pets contribute to physical health.

Dr. Katcher and his associates began by studying a group of people who had returned home after suffering heart attacks. After a year they found that the ones who kept pets survived significantly more frequently than those who did not have them. Researchers then measured the blood pressure of subjects when they were with their pets. It was considerably lower than otherwise. The pressure went down when they merely talked about their pets.

The soothing effect companion animals have on people is accentuated by being able to talk to them. While blood pressure rises when people talk to each other, it lowers when they talk to animals. Dr. Katcher is quoted in *Science Digest* as comparing

the comforts of talking to an animal to the comforts of prayer. "Prayer," he said, "is frequently accompanied by sensual enrichment such as incense, music, special body postures, the touch of folded hands or rosary beads, just as dialogue with an animal is accompanied by the enrichment of touch, warmth and odour. In both instances the talk is felt to be 'understood.'"

Of the 98 per cent of dog-owners in a survey who talked to their pets, 75 per cent believed their dogs were sensitive to their moods and feelings. (In a similar study, it was found that 96 per cent of people who live with cats talk to them.) The sense that pets understand one's state of mind is of growing importance to people in today's urban environment. We are members of "the lonely crowd," which is characterized by impersonality and alienation. People are reaching out for identity, for something that confirms their uniqueness. By strongly identifying with their owners, pets meet this need.

Current social trends in western countries have made the need for pets greater than at any time in history. The lonely crowd is getting lonelier as the society grows more diffuse. With an increasing number of family break-ups and people marrying later in life, more and more of them are living by themselves, without constant human companions. Those who live in pairs often decide not to have children, or to have them relatively late in their lives. Such is the mobility in a country like Canada that family members are likely to be scattered across the country. This makes for loneliness among older people whose children have "left the nest."

Animals have a wonderful way of relieving damaging stress

"That pets should be necessary to fulfil our needs is surely a symptom of man's increasing isolation from his fellow man," said John Hoyt, past president of the Humane Society of the United States. An increasing number of people are realizing that necessity. The number of cats and dogs in Canada, currently estimated at 3 million, is growing at a rate of eight to nine per cent a year.

Animals have a wonderful way of relieving stress, the source of so many of the health problems in our high-pressure society. A survey of pet-owners in

England showed that owners attached special importance to animal greeting behaviour, which is another way of saying how gratifying it is to have "someone" glad to see you after a nerve-shredding day at work. They allow people to let off nervous pressure which might otherwise be bottled up by inhibitions. Human beings are known to have an innate need for touching, but in the North American and British societies at least, people tend to shrink from touching one another. It's "all right," however, to hug or stroke a pet.

The positive effects of animals on psychological health was forgotten about for a long time, only lately to be rediscovered. As early as 1700 an English mental institution called York Retreat was using animals to help patients overcome withdrawal and detachment. Somehow the program was subsequently dropped.

Work in what is now called "Pet Facilitated Therapy" (PFT) was revived in earnest in the 1960s, largely through the efforts of New York City clinical psychologist Boris Levinson, who in 1972 published his *Pets and Human Development*. Dr. Levinson hit upon his future speciality when he was treating a severely withdrawn little boy.

The doctor's dog Jingles happened to be in his office on the boy's first visit. The boy ran over to the dog and hugged him; from then on, Dr. Levinson included the dog in his therapy sessions. Because Jingles wished to include his master in the relationship, the child accepted the psychologist. The three-way friendship which centered on the dog led to the successful treatment of the boy.

Pet Facilitated Therapy moved into an institutional setting when, in 1978, a patient at the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Lima, Ohio, found an injured bird and tried to nurse it. Other patients who had been severely withdrawn took an interest in the project, catching bugs to feed the bird, and began talking about it to each other and the staff.

Seeing the results, the staff psychiatrists installed an aquarium in its men's lounge, and found that patients began to relate better to the staff and to one another. Cockatoos, parakeets, gerbils and guinea pigs followed. Previously violent men showed tenderness towards the animals, and became more amenable to treatment. The pets acted as catalysts for communication and trust between patients and staff therapists.

"Animals are such agreeable friends," George Eliot wrote. "They ask no questions, pass no criticism." This is an unscientific way of explaining why Pet Facilitated Therapy has recently become so successful in various types of therapy. Animals accept a person unconditionally. They don't care how you look or talk or are dressed; they don't care how young or old you are. Their only criteria is the goodness they find in a person, and they seem to be able to detect a core of goodness in almost anyone.

To capitalize on this advantage, non-human "therapists" have been put to work throughout the western world to break through psychological barriers and re-motivate apathetic patients. Pets are being used to help the mentally handicapped learn, and help stroke victims recover their speech without being held back by self-consciousness.

Physicians are also capitalizing on the fact that pets make people feel good in the psychological sense, and a sick person who feels good mentally is likely to get better faster. There has been a proliferation of volunteer programs to bring pets regularly into hospitals, where they cheer up patients. Pets are also being used to comfort the dying. In many palliative care units, it is now standard practice for patients to have animal "family members" with them in their rooms.

Love is what's behind it, and what the world needs is love

The therapeutic role of companion animals is bound to expand as the average age of the population keeps rising. Often, when people are left alone in old age, the only strong emotional attachment they have left is to a pet. Having "someone" to care for gives meaning to life, a reason to get up in the morning. Pets satisfy the need to be needed, an emotion which runs deeply in all of us, at any age.

Considering how valuable pets are to our society, it is surprising how badly some people treat them. Outright abuse and neglect are distressingly common; short of that, animals are subject to shocking thoughtlessness and callousness. Many thousands of healthy animals are "put to sleep" every year because people no longer want them.

Humans have nothing to be proud of their attitude towards pets. Domestic animals are often regarded not as companions, but as status-building possessions. Men and women can be seen on city streets "wearing" a great dane or a poodle the way they would wear designer clothes. Dogs, cats and horses are bred for aesthetic or convenient characteristics. In fact, they are frequently over-bred, resulting in a congenitally temperamental animal or one that has physical defects that keep it in pain.

In the sensation over pit bull dogs, the tendency has been to blame the dogs. In an article in the Toronto Humane Society's magazine *Humane Viewpoint*, Vivian Singer-Ferris points out that some pit bulls are deliberately bred and trained to bring out maximum ferocity. "The issue can only be fully understood and humanely dealt with when considered in its historical and sociological context, a context which refocuses attention from the dog to the dog owner. For the pit bull controversy is, to a large degree, tied up with the problem of irresponsible pet ownership," she writes.

One controversy over pets concerns the amount of food they consume. Pet food in Canada is a \$2.8 billion industry. Should we in the developed world be feeding all this to animals when people are starving in underdeveloped countries?

There is indeed something disconcerting about those long rows in supermarkets devoted to nothing but feeding — and in many cases, over-feeding — domestic animals. It has been pointed out, however, that most pet food is made from waste products which we would not eat anyway. The point has also been made that desperately poor people in underdeveloped countries commonly keep pets and share food with them. Often a pet is their only "luxury."

People, of course, can be silly about their pets, going to such excesses as buying them expensive jewellery. The most that can be said about such cases is that — sensibly or not — we all have our own ways of showing our love. Love is the prime mover in the human relationship with pets, and as the popular song goes, the world can never get enough of it. But there can be no real love without responsibility. We all share a responsibility for the general welfare of pets in repayment for their contribution to the welfare of humankind.