

With All Due Respect

by Skye Moody

Novelist, essayist, photographer and world traveler

“Some people talk to animals. Not many listen, though.”

— A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh



© iStock

Over the past century, animal behaviorists have shown that animals possess varying levels of intelligence and even the ability to imagine and create. As a result, our perceptions and treatment of them have changed.



Myystery novelist Bill Fitzhugh keeps chickens in his Los Angeles backyard. Each hen has a name: Aunt Ray, Watermelon, Woody, etc. Occasionally, Fitzhugh posts a “Chicken Report” on Facebook, narrating his videotaped visits to the henhouse and lush grassy pecking yard. Responsive to his gentle commands — Fitzhugh addresses the chickens in an adult tone of voice, in human language — the hens scamper to greet him, stepping eagerly forward for special treats like handfed grape leaves or an affectionate feather ruffle. You might say Fitzhugh’s hens live a dog’s life, and in some ways that would be a fair statement.

My mother’s pet dog, Barney, a pampered wire-haired dachshund, enjoys watching television. When the image of a dog, cat or cow appears on the screen, Barney barks viciously at it. When the screen animal fails to respond, Barney races to the rear of the television and tries to climb inside. I have no explanation for his trying to enter via the back of the television (herding instinct?) instead of executing a frontal attack at the screen, but Barney evidently recognizes screen images and imagines them as real creatures trespassing on his territory.

Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being ordered all forms of existence descending from God to angels to humans, with all other extant forms categorized below humans. In this Ladder of Life, animals were generally treated as non-sentient beings lacking the ability to feel, think, reason, imagine or experience subjectively. Most animals led lives of misery and brutal deaths.

By the 19th century, an upsurge in keeping domesticated pets promoted new attitudes toward animals: Pet owners began observing similarities in animals and humans. Similarity generates empathy, and many pet owners adopted gentler handling of their domesticated creatures, extending kinder treatment even to their farm livestock. Hunting and herding dogs especially demonstrated intelligence and were often pampered, kept by the hearth instead of in the barn. Still, few believed that animals possessed rational thoughts or emotional lives, let alone imaginations, and certainly not immortal souls.

Queen Victoria changed all that. Victoria’s pet menagerie included (but wasn’t limited to) Jacquot the donkey, Dash the King Charles spaniel, Nero the greyhound, a parrot named Lory, Alma the Shetland pony, and numerous Pomeranians. When her beloved collie Noble fell ill at the age of 16, the Queen brought in her private physician to treat him. Many of Victoria’s animals were memorialized in portraiture, and both Noble and Sharp, another collie, were commemorated with statues of their likenesses. Noble and Sharp received ceremonial burials at Balmoral Castle, because Victoria believed that the “higher” animals possess souls and will experience an afterlife, and therefore should be properly mourned. On her deathbed, the Queen requested the presence of Turi, her favorite Pomeranian.

By 1901, the year of Queen Victoria’s death, domesticated pets and “companion” animals were the subjects of many a leisurely *tête à tête* and diary entries, gossiped about as if they were persons, often anthropomorphically to the extreme. Meanwhile most scientists and cynics stuck to the old belief system, rejecting notions of rational animals.

Today, thanks to more than a century of scientific experiments conducted by animal behaviorists, proof exists that most, if not all, animal species possess varying but measurable levels of cognition,



From left to right: Rico the border collie; a New Caledonian crow with a self-fashioned feeding tool; and a herd of cows enchanted with jazz music.

logical thinking, and even the ability to imagine and create.

In Germany, Rico, a border collie and television performance artist, understood the names of some 200 toys. In 2004, researchers at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig testing Rico demonstrated how easily dogs can develop new mental skills. The scientists found that Rico could recall names and even learn new words about as quickly as a human toddler.

Betsy of Vienna, another border collie, could be shown a picture of an object and then go to the next room and fetch the actual three-dimensional object or its picture. In March 2008, Betsy's picture appeared on the cover of *National Geographic Magazine* for an article describing her amazing intelligence. Chaser, yet another border collie, trained by retired Wofford College psychology professor John Pilley in South Carolina, also tests positive for cognition and word learning, understanding a vocabulary of about 1,000 words and comprehending syntax.

Like chimpanzees, New Caledonian crows shape and manipulate tools to forage food. Betty the Caledonian crow appears on YouTube demonstrating how a crow modifies a tool to solve a specific task, in this case, fetching food. The leap to flatware isn't far.

In my aunt's Palo Alto backyard lives a mockingbird who renders a perfect imitation of a ringing cellphone. The constant ring causes my aunt to run for

her cellphone dozens of times a day, and no matter how many times she changes the ring tone, the bird immediately learns the new sound. Does the woman's running to and fro, and her evident frustration, serve any purpose other than entertaining the mockingbird sitting in a tree peering through the window?

Chickens have distinct personalities, strike up friendships and make enemies among their broods, and are increasingly acquired as urban pets. Cows also possess individual personalities, nurture friendships among the herd, bear grudges against other cows, and elicit a particular behavior described as an excited "eureka" moment when they learn something new. Maybe that's why the cow jumped over the moon.

In 2011, in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, farmer Tom Grant's herd of dairy cattle mysteriously escaped from their barn and the next morning were discovered chewing cud in the barnyard. These mass bovine escapes continued nightly for weeks. Baffled, suspecting rustlers were behind the nocturnal breakouts, Farmer Grant and his brother rigged a video camera outside the barn. The next morning, the video revealed a cow named Daisy using her tongue to unbolt two latches on the barn door, pushing it open, and freeing herself and her fellow cows. Daisy now has her own Twitter account.

In Autrans, France, a herd of cows basks in the sounds of New Orleans style jazz. The YouTube site *jazzforcows* demonstrates this bovine jazzfest, proving that Irish Daisy isn't the only cool cow. The trendy new quarterly magazine *Modern Farmer* carries a story by journalist Andy Wright (*Modern Farmer*, March 10, 2014) about pigs who, unlike many a toddler, put away their toys and also recognize themselves in a mirror. Meanwhile, the Utrecht School of the Arts with Wageningen University in the Netherlands have created a video game called "Pig Chase" in which humans from "the comfort of their own homes" bounce a light onto a touchscreen connected to a ball-shaped device set up in a pig stall. "When the pig touches the ball with its snout, sparks of light fly off. Humans enjoy a little more contact with livestock; the pigs are stimulated." Silly, but "it does train people to associate pigs as pets," says one of the inventors.

Today we may not lavish Victoria's pomp and circumstance on animals, but increasingly domesticated creatures are the glad recipients of kinder, gentler masters, like Fitzhugh with his chickens, whose basic animal instincts are respected while with added human interaction, they enjoy opportunities to develop their chicken brain potential. Maybe chickens have imaginations too. But where is the line drawn between

absurd levels of anthropomorphism and ignorant theories of behaviorism (animals as machines)? Do we reward creatures who mimic us more than those we feel share nothing in common with us?

Fitzhugh never made Aunt Ray wear a dress. He and his savvy urban chickens seem to have forged a mutu-

ally respectful and rewarding bond while their endearing interaction continues to fascinate and instruct their Facebook fans. Seems that Aunt Ray is broody — again. ♦

Read more:

The Website www.AnimalLaw.com covers issues of animal welfare in great

detail, including surprising discoveries in animal behavior and intelligence.

The November 2014 *National Geographic* is devoted to animal minds, another example of how much interest imaginative animals are generating among their human friends.

Be Good To Yourself. Volunteer.

Research shows that people 55+ who volunteer lead stronger, healthier lives.

GetInvolved.gov

[Facebook.com/SeniorCorps](https://www.facebook.com/SeniorCorps)

Corporation for
NATIONAL &
COMMUNITY
SERVICE

Making A Difference
For Generations



The three Senior Corps programs – RSVP, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents are administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering.

