

Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce: *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*

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Occasionally, a book is published that challenges many deeply-held convictions about the nature and extent of morality, and about what kinds of beings are capable of exhibiting moral behavior. This book is one such example. Marc Bekoff, an ethologist, who has published many books including *The Emotional Lives of Animals*, and Jessica Pierce, a philosopher and teacher, and author of the book, *Morality Play: Case Studies in Ethics*, have constructed in *Wild Justice* a fairly convincing case that nonhuman animals do indeed exhibit what we humans would call moral intelligence or moral behavior. Readers should keep in mind that Bekoff and Pierce are not saying that moral behaviors in humans and in animals are comparable in every sense. Indeed, the authors make it clear that they are not trying to do a comparative analysis of human and animal morality. And to the possible charge that their analysis is highly anthropomorphic, they maintain that anthropomorphism is not unscientific.¹ The nonhuman animals in their study (and not all nonhuman animals are included) are those mammals that exhibit strong social behaviors and form social bonds.

The book consists of six chapters, in addition to the Preface. In this review, I will discuss each chapter only briefly.

Chapter 1, “Morality in Animal Societies: An Embarrassment of Riches,” opens with the story of a female western lowland gorilla, named Binta Jua, who lived at the Brookfield Zoo in Illinois. Binta Jua saved a three-year old boy who had managed to climb to the top of the enclosure separating the gorillas from zoo visitors, and who had fallen into the gorilla side of the enclosure and knocked unconscious. This story helps set the tone, in many ways, for the book’s themes by

¹ I have no doubt that some skeptical readers may disagree with this claim, but I encourage them to keep an open mind when they read the book.

laying the foundation for making the case that animals do exhibit moral behavior. In this case, what fascinated this reader is the demonstration of care and compassion across species.

Gorillas are certainly not the only species Bekoff and Pierce focus on. The book is full of examples of social mammal behavior. Behavior among baboons, chimpanzees, elephants, bats, wolves, wolverines, monkeys, whales, foxes, bears, dogs, and cats are all included at one point or another throughout the book, although some are given more attention than others.

Chapter 2, “Foundations for Wild Justice: What Animals Do and What It Means,” focuses primarily on the concept of Cognitive Ethology, or the study of animal minds and what’s in them. Here Bekoff and Pierce point out to would-be skeptics that answers to the question, “what is morality?” have been shifting and evolving. Here they also discuss the role of philosophy for their argument, but I will leave it to the book’s readers to examine and assess what they say about that in detail.

In this chapter, the authors are interested in exploring two related questions: What can the study of animal behavior tell us about moral behavior? and What can be learned by looking at the similarities and differences [in animals] across species? They maintain that such comparisons are very helpful in understanding animal moral behavior.

Chapter 3, “Cooperation: Reciprocating Rats and Back-Scratching Baboons,” develops the theme of cooperation. Here the authors put cooperation in an evolutionary context, pointing out that Darwin was puzzled that certain animal behaviors didn’t seem to fit his proposed theory of evolution through natural selection. (p. 66) This leads the authors to a discussion that links “moral emotions” to the “affective foundations of cooperation.” (pp. 76 and ff.) I will leave it to the book’s readers to explore this section on their own, but I will point out that in this chapter the authors do provide a working definition of “morality,” defining it “as a suite of other-regarding behaviors that cultivate and regulate complex interactions within social groups.” (p. 82).

Chapter 4, “Empathy: Mice in the Sink,” focuses, as the chapter title suggests, on the phenomenon of empathy. The argument in this chapter is that animals do indeed exhibit empathy toward others, especially those of one’s own species. This chapter is rich in examples of empathetic behaviors exhibited by other species, including wolves, dogs, and foxes, cetaceans, and elephants.

Chapter 5: “Justice: Honor and Fair Play Among Beasts,” continues many previous themes. Here, again, wolves are discussed. Wolves pay attention to what others need, the authors point out, and quote (p. 112) from page 141 of Robert Solomon’s book, *A Passion for Justice*, where he says that “Wolves have a keen sense of how things should be among them...justice is just this sense of what ought to be, not in some bone-in-the-sky ideal theoretical sense, but in the tangible everyday situations in which members of the pack find themselves.”

The authors include in this chapter examples taken from domestic species. For instance, dogs, the authors say, have a sense of what fair play is when they play with other dogs. That is, “When animals play, they must *agree* to play. They must cooperate and behave fairly.” If fairness breaks down, “...play not only stops, it

becomes impossible.” (p. 116) Some animals, dogs in particular, sometimes will engage in role reversing and self-handicapping to maintain social play (p. 123) and will penalize other animals that break trust. (p. 129).

Chapter 6, “Animal Morality and Its Discontents,” is the final chapter. Here the authors’ findings are summed up, but they also provide additional examples of cooperation among some species. As an example, female bats that have given birth before have been known to assist other female bats who have not given birth before by helping the inexperienced mothers-to-be to adopt a proper birthing position. Normally, bats hang head down with their feet up; but when they give birth, they are supposed to reverse this position, putting their heads up and their feet down. Experienced bats have been observed to demonstrate to new pregnant females the proper birthing position by adopting that position alongside the new mother. The new pregnant bat then adopts that position, putting her feet down and her head up. The experienced bat, in other words, serves as a midwife to the inexperienced bat.

Finally, in this chapter Bekoff and Pierce address possible objections to their claims. Those possible objections are given on page 142 of the paperback edition, but I will leave it to readers of the book to examine them as well as assess Bekoff’s and Pierce’s responses to them.

In conclusion, this reader found in *Wild Justice* a fairly compelling case for the idea that nonhuman animals do exhibit what can only be described as moral behavior. True, nonhuman animals probably don’t deliberate over moral choices, and do not read scholarly works on moral theory or moral agency, but they do exhibit, at times, behaviors that it only makes sense to call moral. Bekoff and Pierce conclude the book (p. 153) with a final question and an answer: “Do animals have a kind of moral intelligence? Yes, they do.”

In this reviewer’s opinion, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* is well worth careful reading and consideration.