The Unexplained Powers Of Animals

The psychic powers of animals is explored and its implication for human consciousness is considered by Rupert Sheldrake.
by Rupert Sheldrake {mosgoogle}Psychic powers in animals? What does it tell us about ourselves? For many years animal trainers, pet owners and naturalists have reported various kinds of perceptiveness in animals that suggest the existence of psychic powers. Surprisingly little research has been done on these phenomena. Biologists have been inhibited by the taboo against ‘the paranormal’, and psychical researchers and parapsychologists have with few exceptions confined their attention to human beings.

According to recent random household surveys in England and the USA, many pet owners believe their animals are sometimes telepathic with them. An average of 48 per cent of dog owners and 33 per cent of cat owners said that their pets responded to their thoughts or silent commands. Many horse trainers and riders believe their horse can pick up their intentions telepathically.
Some companion animals even seem able to tell when a particular person is on the telephone before the receiver has been picked up. For example, when the telephone rings in the household of a noted professor at the University of California at Berkeley, his wife knows when her husband is on the other end of the line because Whiskins, their silver tabby cat, rushes to the telephone and paws at the receiver. “Many times he succeeds in taking it off the hook and makes appreciative meows that are clearly audible to my husband at the other end”, she says. “If someone else telephones, Whiskins takes no notice.”

For several years, with the help of hundreds of animal trainers, shepherds, blind people with guide dogs, veterinarians and pet owners, I have investigated some of these unexplained powers of animals. There are three major categories of seemingly mysterious perceptiveness: telepathy, the sense of direction and premonition.

Animal telepathy

The commonest kinds of seemingly telepathic response are the anticipation by dogs and cats of their owners coming home; the anticipation of owners going away; the anticipation of being fed; cats disappearing when their owners intend to take them to the vet; dogs knowing when their owners are planning to take them for a walk; and animals that get excited when their owner is on the telephone, even before the telephone is answered.

As skeptics rightly point out, some of these responses could be explained as routine expectations, subtle sensory cues, chance coincidence and selective memory, or put down to the imaginations of doting pet owners. These are reasonable hypotheses, but they should not be accepted in the absence of evidence.

My colleagues and I have concentrated on the phenomenon of dogs that know when their owners are coming home. Many pet owners have observed that their animals seem to anticipate the arrival of a member of the household, often 10 minutes or more in advance. The pets typically wait at a door, window or gate. In random household surveys in Britain and America, an average of 51 per cent of dog owners and 30 per cent of cat owners said they had noticed such anticipatory behaviour.

The dog I have investigated in most detail is a terrier called Jaytee, who belongs to Pam Smart, in Ramsbottom, Greater Manchester. Pam adopted Jaytee from Manchester Dogs’ Home in 1989 when he was still a puppy, and soon formed a close bond with him.

In 1991, when Pam was working as a secretary at a school in Manchester, she left Jaytee with her parents, who noticed that the dog went to the French window almost every weekday at about 4.30 pm, around the time she set off, and waited there until she arrived some 45 minutes later. She worked routine office hours, so the family assumed that Jaytee’s behaviour depended on some kind of time sense.

Pam was made redundant in 1993 and was no longer tied to any regular pattern of activity. Her parents did not usually know when she would be coming home, but Jaytee still anticipated her return.
In 1994 Pam read an article about my research and volunteered to take part. In more than 100 experiments, we videotaped the area by the window where Jaytee waited during Pam’s absences, providing a continuous, time-coded record of his behaviour which was scored ‘blind’ by a third party who did not know the details of the experiments. To check that Jaytee was not reacting to the sound of Pam’s car or other familiar vehicles, we investigated whether he still anticipated her arrival when she travelled by unusual means: by bicycle, by train and by taxi. He did.

We also carried out experiments in which Pam set off at times selected at random after she had left home, communicated to her by means of a telephone pager. In these experiments, Jaytee still started waiting at the window around the time Pam set off, even though no one at home knew when she would be coming. The odds against this being a chance effect were more than 100,000 to one. Jaytee behaved in a very similar way when he was tested repeatedly by sceptics anxious to debunk his abilities.

The evidence indicates that Jaytee was reacting to Pam’s intention to come home even when she was many miles away. Telepathy seems the only hypothesis that can account for the facts.

Another example is the apparent ability of dogs to know when they are going to be taken for walks. In these experiments the dogs are kept in a separate room or outbuilding and videotaped continuously. Meanwhile their owner, at a randomly selected time, thinks about taking them for a walk and then five minutes later does so. Our experiments have shown dogs exhibiting obvious excitement when their owner is thinking about taking them out, although they could not have known this by normal sensory means. They did not manifest such excitement at other times.
If domestic animals are telepathic with their human owners, then it seems likely that animals are telepathic with each other, and that this may play an important part in the wild. Some naturalists have already suggested that the coordination of flocks of birds and herds of animals may involve something like telepathy, as may communication between members of a wolfpack.

The sense of direction

Homing pigeons can find their way back to their loft over hundreds of miles of unfamiliar terrain. Migrating European swallows travel thousands of miles to their feeding grounds in Africa, and in the spring return to their native place. Some dogs, cats, horses and other domesticated animals also have a good sense of direction and can make their way home from unfamiliar places many miles away.

Most research on animal navigation has been carried out with homing pigeons, and this research over many decades has served only to deepen the problem of understanding their direction-finding ability. Navigation is goal-directed, and implies that the animals know where their home is even when they are in an unfamiliar place, and have to cross unfamiliar terrain.

Pigeons do not know their way home by remembering the twists and turns of the outward journey, because birds taken in closed vans by devious routes find their way home perfectly well, as do birds that have been anaesthetized on the outward journey, or transported in rotating drums. They do not navigate by the sun, because pigeons can home on cloudy days and can even be trained to navigate at night. However, they may use the sun as a simple compass to keep their bearings. Although they use landmarks in familiar terrain, they can home from unfamiliar places hundreds of kilometres from their home, with no familiar landmarks. They cannot smell their home from hundreds of miles away, especially when it is downwind, although smell may play a part in their homing ability when they are close to familiar territory.
Some biologists hope that the homing of pigeons might turn out to be explicable in terms of a magnetic sense. But even if pigeons have a compass-sense (which is not proven), this could not explain their ability to navigate. If you were taken blindfold to an unknown destination and given a compass, you would know where north was, but not the direction of your home.

The failure of conventional attempts to explain pigeon homing and many other kinds of animal navigation implies the existence of a sense of direction as yet unrecognized by institutional science. This could have major implications for the understanding of animal migrations, and would shed light on the human sense of direction, much better developed in traditional peoples, such as the bushmen of the Kalahari or Polynesian navigators, than in modern urban people.

Premonitions

Very little research has been done on animal premonitions, even in the case of earthquakes where such warnings could prove very useful.

Some forewarnings might be explicable in terms of physical clues, such as electrical changes before earthquakes and storms. Other premonitions are more mysterious, as in the case of animals that anticipated air raids during the Second World War long before they could have heard enemy planes approaching, or animals that become agitated before unforeseeable accidents. Here precognition or presentiment may be involved, implying either an influence passing backwards in time, or a blurring of the distinction between future, present and past.

All three types of perceptiveness—telepathy, the sense of direction and premonitions—seem better developed in non-human species like dogs than they are in people. Nevertheless they occur in the human realm too, but they seem to be better developed in traditional cultures than in the modern industrial world. Maybe we have lost some of these abilities because we no longer need them: telephones and television have superseded telepathy; maps and global positioning systems have replaced the sense of direction. And perceptiveness is not cultivated in our educational system. Indeed the existence of unexplained powers is not only ignored but often denied.

Nevertheless, human ‘sixth senses’ have not gone away. They look more natural, more biological, when they are seen in the light of animal behaviour. Much that appears ‘paranormal’ at present looks normal when we expand our ideas of normality. But we need to expand our view of physics as well as of biology if these phenomena are to be explained at a more fundamental level.

Telepathy from people to animals usually occurs only when there are close emotional bonds. This may well be an important factor in human telepathy too. My hypothesis is that these bonds depend on fields that link together members of a social group, called social fields. These are one type of a more general class of fields called morphic fields (described in detail in my book The Presence of the Past). These bonds continue to link members of the social group together even when they are far apart, beyond the range of sensory communication, and can serve as a medium through which telepathic communications can pass.

Morphic fields may also underlie the sense of direction. Animals are not only linked to members of their social group by morphic fields, but also to significant places, such as their home. These fields continue to connect them to their home even when they are far away, rather like invisible elastic bands. These bonds can consequently give directional information, “pulling” the animal in a homewards direction.

We have much to learn from our companion animals about animal nature, and about our own. Dr Rupert Sheldrake was a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge University, and a Research Fellow of the Royal Society in biochemistry. He is currently a Fellow of the Institute of Noetic Sciences in Petaluma, California, and lives in London. His book Dogs That Know When Their Owners Are Coming Home, and Other Unexplained Powers of Animals is published in paperback by Three Rivers Press at $14. His web site is www.sheldrake.org.

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