



Introduction: The Fox's Wisdom

This is a study of how the animals who share our lives influence who we are. It is based on several sources of data collected during three years of research. Most of this research took place in my work as a volunteer at a humane society that I refer to as “The Shelter.” I also interviewed people who were adopting and surrendering animals, and I observed them as they came to look at homeless dogs and cats. In addition, I observed and interviewed people at community dog parks and drew on my own reflections about a lifetime of living with animals.

The title of this book comes from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s famous story *The Little Prince*, long a favorite of mine. In chapter 21, the prince, after arriving on Earth, crosses deserts and climbs mountains but finds no friends to stave off his great loneliness. To make matters worse, he finds a rose garden, and the sight of the vast numbers of roses makes him realize that his beloved yet troublesome rose, who is back on his planet, is not unique, as she had adamantly insisted she was. He misses her deeply and begins to cry. Then the prince meets a fox, and he invites his new acquaintance to play. The fox explains that he cannot

play because he is not tamed. The prince asks what “tamed” means, and the fox says that it means, “to create ties.” This does not help the prince, who says aloud, “To create ties?” The fox goes on to offer an explanation that translates well to the experiences we have with companion animals:

“That’s right,” the fox said. “For me you’re only a little boy just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you have no need of me. For you, I’m only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, we’ll need each other. You’ll be the only boy in the world for me. I’ll be the only fox in the world for you.”¹

The fox’s wisdom speaks to the questions I examine in this book. This is a study of how the animals with whom so many of us share our lives become the only ones in the world for us. I set out to explore how we develop a sense of self in relation to animals, and I found that, to participate in the process of self-creation, animals have selves, too. Granted, animal selves differ in degree from the selves we possess. Animals do not worry about what they will make of their lives; nor do they write autobiographies. Nevertheless, the selves of animals enable them to participate in relationships with us, and relationships in turn maintain, strengthen, and sustain selves. Throughout this book, I examine how our interaction with animals makes various aspects of animal selfhood available to us.

Skeptics will scoff that this is merely anthropomorphism, but I disagree. Although I treat the topic of anthropomorphism later in this book, I will tip my hand here to say that if people simply projected onto animals the qualities they wanted them to have, then any animal would make a good companion. I did the research for this book in an animal shelter, and anthropomorphic projection would make the adoption process much like ordering a pizza. You would not even have to meet the animal. You could simply fill out a form and ask for, say, a gray, female cat, and take the one you get. Even if you were able to meet the animals, making a match would simply be a matter of selecting a cat or

dog whose appearance you liked. I show in later chapters how the cat or dog who looks right is very often all wrong for a particular person. In observing people meeting and adopting new animals, I learned that they sought one with whom they felt a “connection,” to use the word I heard people use themselves. Appearance and behavior mattered, to be sure, but not as much as the connection. The term suggests that there must be something with which to connect. And, indeed, I argue that this is the animal’s sense of self. Animals have elements of a core self that becomes present to us through interaction with them. Other researchers have found evidence of this core self in infants; thus, it does not require the use of language. Moreover, the elements of the core self correspond with what William James and George Herbert Mead described as the “I,” or the subjective sense that has been so difficult to study. Finding the “right” animal is a matter of finding one whose core self meshes with ours. We recognize the elements of the core self in the animal, and the process of doing so confirms the self within us.

When interaction develops into a relationship, additional dimensions of animal selfhood become available as the animal’s intersubjective capacities become apparent. For example, relationships present opportunities for humans and animals to share intentions and feelings. We share them not only in an “I know what you know (or feel)” way, but also in a more complex “*I know that you know that I know what you know*” manner. Over time, this cannot help but shape our identities. In other words, animals participate in the creation of our identities through many of the same processes that other humans do. They challenge our interactional abilities. They share many of our emotions and our ideas. They can surprise us, and yet they act predictably. In addition, they contribute to our histories, so much so that one woman I interviewed suggested that, instead of translating dogs’ lives into human years, we should measure our own lives by the animals who have populated them.

If you are still skeptical about this, let me offer another reason not to be. The agenda I had in mind when I began this project was to study people who were adopting animals for the first time in their adult lives, if not for the first time ever. I thought that studying new relationships with animals as they unfolded would give me a window into animals’

roles in the construction of selves. The animal would constitute something new and different in their lives and thus would form a point of comparison of “before” and “after” selves.

In theory, the plan sounds good. In reality, however, I was able to locate only two people who fit this category. Everyone else had had dogs or cats since childhood or as children.² To be sure, there were animal-free gaps here and there, such as the years in rental apartments or while married to an allergic spouse. Overall, though, people who had animals had more or less always had them. Moreover, a majority of people who were adopting animals already had other animals in their household. My inability to find a “virgin” population of first-time guardians suggested that, once animals entered people’s lives, they stayed there. The continual presence of animals suggests something about their role in selfhood. Because people who had animals as companions had done so for much of their lives, animals must provide something that becomes indispensable. Once accustomed to having that “indispensable something,” doing without it seems unthinkable.

I will admit up front that this has been my experience. I have always loved animals and can count only about three years when I have lived without them. My current household contains four cats and two dogs. I began thinking about the questions that orient this book when I was about eight years old. A petting zoo had come to a local shopping mall. In addition to the usual goats and sheep, the zoo had a baby elephant. I do not want to imagine the horrors that forced this creature to a mall in western New York, but my encounter with him forever changed me. He was about a foot or two taller than I was, so I had only to tilt my head slightly to look in his eye. He was chained by one foot to something heavy. The sight of the chain troubled me immensely. He had been rocking back and forth in the way bored, frustrated elephants do until I approached him. I remember seeing his ribs expand and contract in a sigh. I touched his hide and felt his trunk and the bristly hairs on his chin. I ran my hand over his ears. But what I remember as much as what he felt like is what I felt in his presence. He stopped rocking and leaned toward me just slightly. We were both very quiet. I could hear his breathing. I realized that here was another being who preferred contact to

being alone, who had a history, albeit a mostly dreadful one, and who had feelings that could change from restlessness to something like contentment. My father let me spend an inordinate amount of time with the elephant, and I remember having thoughts along the lines of, "This is not a stuffed toy in the flesh. This is not Dumbo. This is another being, like me, and yet not like me." Coming home from the mall, I could not wait to see our dog. I took him to my room and, in a silent conversation, told him how important he was to me and thanked him for who he was. As the fox had put it, he was the only dog in the world for me.³

At that moment, I had begun "minding animals," to use Marc Bekoff's apt term. As he explains, the phrase has two meanings. It means "minding" them, as in caring for them. It also means attributing minds to them, or, as he puts it, "wondering what and how they are feeling and why" (Bekoff 2002, 11). I am interested in both meanings of the phrase, and I can trace my awareness of this interest back to the time in the mall with the elephant. The opportunity to study this would not come for many years. When, in the early 1990s, I began to explore topics for a Ph.D. dissertation, I considered but abandoned the idea of studying relationships with animals because I could find scant sociological literature on which to build. However, I am pleased that, over the decade, that has changed. The growing list of sociological studies includes Clinton Sanders's work on living and working with dogs (Sanders 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1999, 2000; see also Robins et al. 1991); his work with Arnold Arluke on the ways we think about animals (Sanders and Arluke 1993; Arluke and Sanders 1996); Arluke's work on the use of animals in research (Arluke 1991, 1994); Clifton Flynn's studies of animals and family violence (Flynn 1999, 2000a, 2000b); Corwin Kruse's research into gender and animal-rights activism (Kruse 1999); Jennifer Lerner and Linda Kalof's study of animals in advertising (Lerner and Kalof 1999); David Nibert's work on animal rights (Nibert 1994, 2002); and Steven and Janet Alger's analyses of the culture of cats (Alger and Alger 1997, 1999, 2003). In 2002, the journal *Society & Animals* celebrated ten years of publishing interdisciplinary work in human-animal studies. The same year, the American Sociological Association

recognized a section devoted to Animals and Society, which meant that several hundred sociologists had indicated their interest in the topic by joining the section in formation. To be sure, there are detractors who scoff, “Animals and society—good grief! What’s next?” Nevertheless, a critical mass of sociologists has decided that the social world does not consist only of humans.

This book is a work of interpretive sociology aimed at building empirically grounded theory that can expand the notion of what constitutes “the social.” However, I intend the arguments contained in these chapters to be useful beyond the field of sociology, and I hope that the readers will include people who are not sociologists. My goal in this book is to provide a theory of animal selfhood. Most of us who live with and love animals know that they have feelings, preferences, personalities, and other, similar characteristics. Sanders and the Algers have studied people’s relationships with animals and documented that attributing selfhood to animals is indeed commonplace. However, it is also commonplace to dismiss these attributions as something silly and sentimental in which “animal lovers” indulge but that have no verifiable basis. The task I set for myself was to provide such a basis, or to learn what capacities in animals allow us to attribute selfhood to them. Here is an overview of where the discussion will go along the way.

The first three chapters discuss how we—by which I mean human beings—arrived at a historical moment in which we could begin thinking seriously about animal selfhood. The broad brush I use to portray vast expanses of time will make historians wince, but my intention is to offer a reasonable summary of the literature. In Chapter 1, I trace the questions of how and why we came to have close relationships with particular species of animals. The chapter opens with a history of dogs’ and cats’ domestication. Although much of what we know is open to debate, I focus on the most convincing current evidence of how dogs and cats came to be the companion species of choice in human societies. I then examine several prevalent explanations of why we continue to want them in our lives. Among these are the notion that animals are surrogates for human relationships (the deficiency argument); that animal

companionship accompanies wealth and leisure (the affluence argument); that relationships with animals allow people to demonstrate power (the dominance argument); and that evolution has designed human beings to want to be close to animals (the biophilia argument). I maintain that any one-factor explanation is bound to fail, largely because our relationships with animals have meant so many different things over time. Chapters 2 and 3 then examine some of these meanings. In particular, I trace the concepts of “animal,” “pet,” and “companion animal,” concentrating on the social and cultural factors that helped bring each term into currency at certain times. I argue that our relationships with animals, on the cultural level, have as much to say about human beings as about animals themselves. In other words, working out who is an “animal” and what rights and privileges come—or, more accurately, do not come—with that designation has much to do with defining who is fully “human.” “Pet,” in turn, reveals the working out of class relations.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus of the book from the theoretical and historical to the empirical by drawing on research in the adoption areas in the place I refer to as The Shelter. (Readers who are curious about my methods will find details in the appendix.) The discussion begins with the observation that most people who come to The Shelter do so only to look at the animals, not to adopt. The chapter goes on to analyze the appeal of looking at homeless animals, focusing on two dimensions that point in the direction of animal selfhood. The first dimension refers to the “trying on” of possible selves, similar to window shopping but different in that animals, as agentic beings, involve structural changes in people’s lives. A second dimension refers to the aesthetic experience of looking at animals. I draw on aesthetic theory and social psychology to argue that looking at animals establishes them as coherent, physical beings. This, in turn, hints at animals’ subjective capacity, which consequently confirms our own sense of self.

Chapter 5 examines first interactions between adopters and potential adoption candidates. The chapter establishes the principal “types” of adopters: those who come in search of animals of a certain breed,

size, or color, and those who simply want the “right” companion dog or cat. Ultimately, the attraction hinges on whether the person feels an emotional connection with an animal. The analysis shows that many of the social-psychological theories and concepts of liking and attraction come into play during initial interactions with companion animals.

It is easy to dismiss this feeling as anthropomorphic projection, but that does the experience a disservice. For if the sense of connection with an animal came solely through anthropomorphizing, then people could project almost anything they want onto an animal. Adopting an animal would involve finding a cat or a dog of the right color who could obey the right commands. However, there is usually much more to making a good match, and the right cat or dog is sometimes all wrong for a particular person. What prospective adopters seek is a sense of what the dog or cat is like. In other words, they are trying to get a preview of the animal’s self. In specifying how animals communicate this to potential adopters, the chapter lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussion of animal selves.

Chapter 6 sketches out a model of the self that does not depend on language, which animals can therefore share. There are many different ways to conceptualize the self. These include the soul or spirit of religion, the “inner child” of pop psychology, and the more academic portrayal of the collection of roles we perform for an audience. There is also a growing focus on the self as narrative, a model that I have used in previous work (Irvine 1999, 2000).⁴ In short, no one can agree on exactly what the self is. Postmodern scholars even argue that the concept itself has become irrelevant (see Gergen 1991). In this view, technology’s compression of time and space has so multiplied the possibilities for interaction that discussions of a single, “true” self have become outmoded. However, everyday experience tells us that the lack of theoretical or conceptual agreement about what the self is—or whether it is—means little; there is a “there” there. We have a very real experience that we are or we have a sense of self that has a central position in daily life.

In examining the structure of interaction between people and animals in the adoption areas, I found that different types of interactions

shared the theme of the self. In other words, the ways that people interacted with animals suggested that people saw animals as contributing to a sense of who they are. Although many things contribute to who we are—art, music, hobbies, nature—animals do so in a different way. Our relationships with animals are more like relationships with other people than with objects. We see animals as having minds, emotions, preferences, and other things that indicate subjectivity. However, the question of what enables us to see them as such raises important questions for social psychology, which relies on a language-based model to explain subjectivity among people. The reliance on language eliminates a considerable amount of interaction as a source of information that contributes to selfhood. If factors beyond spoken language matter, and I argue that they do, then animals can participate in the creation of human selfhood. For animals to do so, they must themselves be subjective others. But how can we sense the subjective experience of animals when they cannot tell us how they feel and what they think? I argue that, even with other people, we cannot observe subjectivity directly. We have no direct access to it. Rather, we perceive it indirectly in the course of interaction.

Chapter 7 examines how we sense the subjective presence of animals. The discussion combines insights from William James's (1950 [1890], 1961 [1892]) attempts to explore subjective experience with Gene Myers's (1998) research on children's interaction with animals, which builds on Daniel Stern's (1985) work on the emergence of the self in infancy. Although my interests are in adult experience, these works provide insight into pre-linguistic capacities for selfhood. Because several indicators of selfhood appear before the acquisition of language, it is reasonable to look for them in other highly social animals besides humans. Using this framework, the chapter investigates the capacities animals have that allow us to perceive them as having subjectivity. The discussion describes four domains of experience through which we order the world around us. These, in turn, serve as empirical indicators of a "core" self, distinguished as capacities for agency, coherence, affectivity, and self-history. Drawing on data from interviews and observation with animal

guardians, I systematically illustrate how dogs and cats manifest these four elements of core selfhood. Animals' core selves become available to us through our interaction, and interacting simultaneously confirms the existence of a core self within us. The feeling of connection is thus not simply anthropomorphizing. Rather, it originates in a match between the core selves of guardians and animals.

The core self goes to work, so to speak, in the capacity for intersubjectivity, by which I mean shared subjective experiences. In Chapter 8, guardians describe instances in which they shared intentions, a focus of attention, or emotions with their companion animals—despite the lack of a shared verbal language. The discussion focuses on play as an activity that evokes all aspects of intersubjectivity and enriches the experience of selfhood for humans and non-human animals alike.

The book concludes by extending the findings to theory and practice. I discuss the theoretical relevance of animal selfhood in an era that is intellectually dismissive of “the self” as a concept. Arguing that the demise-of-the-self critics lack empirical support for their argument, I maintain that, in light of evidence, we *must* theorize the selves of animals. I then argue that, given the weight of the evidence in support of animal selfhood, that status must change our treatment of animals. By first outlining the major positions on animals (that is, welfare and rights), I conclude by saying that the logical—and moral—choice is to support the notion that animals have equal inherent value and must not be treated as property. Most Western societies have long acknowledged that animals can feel pain and thus have an interest in not suffering. Humane-treatment laws are evidence of widespread agreement on our moral obligations not to cause unnecessary suffering. However, we need to justify those obligations by extending equal consideration to animals, for it is illogical to have moral obligations to things. This will mean that we cannot treat animals as property, for their interests in *not* being treated so deserve equal consideration.

Because this research took place in a shelter, the setting controlled the conditions under which people and animals met. In other words, I studied only those who adopted homeless animals rather than, say, those

who found strays, who got their animals from other people, or who bought animals from breeders. These other relationships deserve investigation, too. Although the animals in this research came in a variety of colors and sizes and from disparate backgrounds, the people were white and mostly middle to upper-middle class, reflecting the demographics of the setting. This is an interpretive study, and although it is based on empirical research, it is aimed at theory building. It describes what appeared within a sample that was available to me. I hope that it can provide a point of departure for studies that include a greater diversity of participants, both human and non-human.



How and Why

Not surprisingly, the species that first achieved the status of domestic companions were those, such as the dog and cat, that were already better adapted to fit this role.

—PETER MESSENT AND JAMES SERPELL (1981, 19–20)

This research focuses on our bonds with dogs and cats for several reasons. First, they are numerically the most popular companion animals in the United States, with nearly 60 percent of all households including either or both species (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002).¹ Granted, many households include fish, birds, rabbits, hamsters, reptiles, ferrets, and other animals. However, all of the “specialty” or “exotic” animals taken together occupy only about 10 percent of American households. Second, few other species can share our lives and our homes in the ways that dogs and cats are able to. Although some people have rabbits who sleep with them and birds who know when they are coming home, dogs and cats are uniquely suited to living closely with us. Third, and related to this suitability, few other species have been domesticated for as long as or to the extent that cats and dogs have been. This chapter begins by discussing the “how” and “why” of the domestication of dogs and cats, then examines various explanations of why we continue to want them in our lives.

Domestication can be defined as the process through which the care, diet, and, most important, breeding of a species come under human control. The first animals to become domesticated were canids, members of a family of carnivores that includes thirty-eight species such as the coyote, the domestic dog, and the wolf. Indeed, early dogs probably helped domesticate other species, because their herding and guarding abilities suggest their involvement in the management of grazing animals, such as cows, sheep, goats, and cattle. Scholars disagree on exactly when dogs were domesticated. There are also several views on their ancestry.² One names the wolf, *Canis lupus*, as the dog's progenitor. Another argues that dogs are hybrids of wolves and other species of the genus *Canis*, such as coyotes and jackals, and a third view suggests that wild canids, such as the pariah dog of North Africa and Asia and the dingo of Australia, are the domestic dog's wild progenitor.³ In any case, the domestic dogs who share our homes today exist because of human intervention, which incorporated both cultural and biological processes (see Clutton-Brock 1994, 1995). Biologically, domestication resembles natural evolution. Through selective breeding, humans can—and did—introduce changes in behavior, size, color, ear and tail position, and other features within just a few generations. Culturally, domestication means that a species is “enfolded into the social structure of the human community” (Clutton-Brock 1995, 15). The wolf became a dog, for instance, not just because its physical and behavioral characteristics changed, but also because these changes adapted wolves to material, aesthetic, and ritual purposes in human communities. That adaptation, in turn, may have initiated other changes. For example, Helmut Hemmer (1990) points out that domestication lessens responsiveness to certain kinds of stress. This consequently produces physical changes. Domestic dogs generally have shorter coats than wolves because they do not have to live in the wolf's harsh environment, and the greyhound can run faster and see better than a wolf but may not hear as well. In short, the perceptual worlds of domestic animals are markedly different from those of their wild ancestors. I experienced something of this when my dog Skipper encountered two young foxes at play while he was off his leash in a large

field near their den. Once the foxes saw Skipper (I was some distance away), they froze and then ran, but Skipper attempted to initiate play. To the foxes, Skipper was a threat; to Skipper, accustomed as he was to playing with other four-legged visitors to the field, the foxes were potential playmates.

Regardless of how the domestication of dogs occurred, as a species dogs have fared extremely well under domestication. They have adapted marvelously to human society (see Budiansky 1992). Whereas dogs exist throughout the inhabited world, the canids who remained wolves have been eradicated with ferocity.⁴ The dog's success stands out because very few species are actually well suited to the process. Francis Galton, a pioneer of modern thinking on domestication (and cousin to Charles Darwin), maintained that candidates for domestication "should be hardy and able to survive with little care and attention. They should have an inherent fondness for humans. They should be comfort loving and useful. They should be gregarious and hence easy to control in groups" (as quoted in Sheldrake 1999, 18). In short, dogs fill the requirements quite nicely.

The best-known account of canine domestication is also the least tenable. It credits dogs' superior hunting abilities as the catalyst for relationships with humans. In this depiction, human hunting parties followed packs of wild dogs. Once the dogs made a kill, humans moved in and took the carcass, leaving scraps for the canids. Over time, this may have evolved into a symbiotic relationship in which predatory canids helped shape human hunting technology. The support for this argument comes from the earliest extant discovery of remains of a domestic dog—clearly not a wolf—from a burial site in what is now Oberkassel, Germany (see Serpell 1988a; Clutton-Brock 1995). The findings date from a cultural period that witnessed the introduction of tiny stone arrows called microliths, which replaced heavy axes for hunting. In this view, the efficiency of microliths would have depended on the use of dogs who could chase and bring down wounded animals. However, another account holds that "the idea of an early hunting symbiosis between men and dogs is a myth" (Messent and Serpell 1981, 8). Dogs bred specifically for hunting with humans are a relatively late development, and

hunter-gatherers did not (and still do not) use dogs in the hunt, although dogs often accompanied hunting parties (see Sauer 1952). Instead, commensalism, or shared scavenging, may have led to the domestication of dogs. The catch in this argument is that Mesolithic human settlements “were probably too small and produced too little refuse to provide waste in sufficient quantities to sustain a permanent population of scavenging wolves” (Messent and Serpell 1981, 9).

A third view, and one I find convincing, suggests that the domestication of the dog was “free of utilitarian considerations” (Messent and Serpell 1981, 10). The historical record shows that early humans tamed animals of all sorts. Useful canine skills in hunting, guarding, and herding may have cemented the relationship between humans and dogs, but they probably did not initiate it. Instead, several biological and behavioral factors predisposed dogs to fit easily within human groups. For one, canids have a long primary socialization period. There are several months during which, given sufficient contact, puppies can form attachments to humans. In contrast, animals such as cows and horses are precocial at birth. On their feet immediately, they become adults much sooner than dogs do. Although they can bond emotionally to humans, they do not incorporate humans into their social groups. Dogs, in contrast, relate to humans as litter mates and pack members. As Constance Perin (1981, 80) explains, “The human family provides a parallel to the sort of group dogs are equipped to relate to. In the ‘good family dog’ we recognize that biological basis for the two species coming together.” Another factor that predisposes dogs to human companionship is their intense interest in play, a topic I explore in later chapters. Because dog-human play is non-competitive, it can be enjoyed by people of any age, offering opportunities to enhance the interspecies bond. In addition, dogs, like humans but unlike wild canids, are diurnal.⁵ Dogs’ activity cycles mean that they are alert when their people are also awake. Moreover, because dogs are particular and habitual about where they eliminate, they can be house-trained more easily than many other animals. Their physical size may also be a factor: Even the largest dog is still smaller than an adult human and can live in human homes more easily than can, say, horses, giraffes, or elephants.

For these reasons, and probably others, dogs were predisposed to the role of companion animal. Once they had filled that niche, no alternative species were necessary. Although numerous other animals have become companions to humans, none has done so with the success of dogs.

“Nor have they wanted to,” I imagine my cats saying in unison. The origins of the domestic cat are more difficult to trace than are those of the dog. Although the dog’s morphology differs significantly from that of its wolf ancestors, the cat differs only slightly from its presumed ancestor, the North African wild cat, *Felis sylvestris libyca*.⁶ Moreover, “domestication” hardly seems an accurate term for portraying the feline scenario, because that scenario involved “deification” as well. Both processes apparently began in Egypt around 5,000 years before the common era, as large agrarian societies were emerging (see Clutton-Brock 1981). Whereas the domestication of dogs occurred *prior to* the development of agriculture, the domestication of cats probably occurred *because of it*. The Egyptians valued cats because they hunted the rodents that threatened stores of grain, the basis of Egypt’s economy. Cats gained not only esteem; they also, ultimately, gained the status of the deity named Bast, the goddess of joy, fertility, and motherhood (see Berghler 1989; Siegal 1989). This marked the beginning of the cat’s association with the feminine, which in other cultures would bring a stigma and even a death sentence. In ancient Egypt, however, laws protected cats; temples honored them; and art paid tribute to them. The cat’s incorporation into Egyptian family life began what one author has called “the age of glory in the checkered history of the domestic cat” (Siegal 1989, 4). A cat’s death meant that the family went into mourning, shaving off their eyebrows as a sign of their loss. If the family had wealth, the cat received an elaborate funeral; archaeological digs have revealed numerous remains of mummified cats. Egyptian laws prohibited exporting cats, but cats eventually reached Europe by way of Greece around the sixth century B.C.E. (Berghler 1989; Málek 1993). Archaeological evidence reveals the presence of domestic cats in Britain from the middle of the fourth century and throughout Europe by the tenth century (see Serpell 1988b). Cats did not arrive in North America until much later, when they accompanied white, European settlers.⁷

Although originally drawn to humans because we offered a steady food supply, cats maintained their independent characteristics. Like the association with the feminine, this worked against cats, who were considered not only “sexually charged” but also “dangerous, egotistical, and cruel” until the late nineteenth century, when their image was “rehabilitated” sufficiently for them to become acceptable house pets like the dog (Kete 1994, 116; see also Ritvo 1988). The cat’s incorporation into middle-class homes signaled a change in attitudes whereby the allegedly excessive independence and sexuality of the cat became less threatening. However, even today cats retain vestiges of stigma. For example, I know of no canine equivalents to such best-selling books as *A Hundred and One Uses for a Dead Cat* (Bond 1981).

One author claims that cats may be *domestic*, but they have never been *domesticated* to the extent that dogs are (see Leyhausen 1979). As a species, cats have not responded to human efforts at selective breeding as enthusiastically as dogs have. Although there are more than 400 dog breeds, there are fewer than 50 breeds of cats.⁸ Unlike dog breeds, which vary widely in size, temperament, and other physical and behavioral characteristics, cat breeds differ primarily in coat color and length.⁹ Like dogs, cats are pre-adapted in a number of ways to live with humans. They have a long primary socialization period that allows kittens to bond with humans. Cats sleep a considerable amount—up to twenty hours a day—but they are crepuscular, having periods of high activity at morning and evening, when most humans can enjoy their company. Granted, anyone who has lived with cats knows that their idea of “morning” is often much earlier than many people would like to start their day. Still, feline rhythms coincide more or less with those of humans. In addition, cats will readily use litter boxes and can adapt to life in even the smallest apartment. Humans can easily participate in cat play, as well. However, some factors make cats’ incorporation into human life distinct from dogs’, and somewhat incomplete. As a species, cats are not gregarious (although there are certainly individual exceptions). Cats are territorial, but they also love comfort; thus, they formed symbiotic relationships with humans while retaining qualities of the solitary hunter. The ubiquity of present-day feral-cat colonies attests to the ease with which they revert to life without humans.

In sum, although human societies have incorporated animals of all kinds, certain members of the Canidae and Felidae families were predisposed to coexist with us. The factors that made them so are not simply anthropomorphic projections. Rather, they are behavioral and biological traits that exist independent of our perception of them. For example, the feline instinct to seek loose material on which to urinate and defecate existed prior to the invention of cat litter, not because of it. The canine instinct to bark at threats to the group existed independent of the human desire to guard property. Cats and dogs did not learn these behaviors from humans. They are instinctual, and they appear at developmentally appropriate times. Granted, humans manipulated instinctive traits in domestication, but the traits existed before that.

Despite the suitability of dogs and cats for life with humans, or perhaps because of it, our relationships with them are unique. We humans are, for example, the only species that habitually and intentionally adopts other species into our midst. Although the relationship is mutually beneficial, its existence raises a number of questions. Why, for example, do we invite a carnivorous predator such as the dog into our homes? Why extend the invitation to cats, with their razor-sharp claws and tendency to regurgitate the fur they swallow while grooming?¹⁰ The relative ease with which dogs and cats adapted to life with humans explains the start of our mutual relationship. I turn now to some of the accounts of why we continue to want to have animals around us.

WHY HAVE PETS?

The Deficiency Argument

One explanation of the appeal of dogs and cats maintains that our relationships with them are surrogates for the relationships that we should have with other people (see Shepard 1978, 1996). In this view, human–animal relationships are distorted and deficient substitutes for human–human relationships. I call this the deficiency argument, because it assumes that people who enjoy the company of animals lack

the qualities or skills that would allow them to enjoy human company. Other targets of the deficiency argument include environmentalists and animal-rights activists, who are derided with claims that they would rather save a tree or a lab rat than a human being.

The deficiency argument has a long history. As I explain in the next chapter, the ancient association of animals with perversity endured well into the modern era, representing Western anxieties about the boundary between humans and animals. It took its most violent form in the witch hunts, in which companionship with animals alone was evidence of consorting with the devil, and the animal friends of the accused went to death with him—or, more likely, with her. Contemporary versions of the deficiency argument are favorites of the media, making it easy to get a distorted view of human–animal relationships. One does not have to look far to find accounts of people—usually women who live alone who are so concerned about saving animals that they become “hoarders,” as they are known in animal-welfare circles, accumulating far more creatures than their resources allow them to care for (see Arluke et al. 2002). Other stories emphasize the extremes—financial and otherwise—to which people will go for animals because they have no other family members. Then there are accounts such as the one of the woman whose husband left her because she loved her dog more than she loved him.¹¹ Granted, some people have remarkable relationships with their animals. Nevertheless, stories that focus on the extremes distort what we know about the majority. Just as stories of alcoholics and anorexics reveal little about typical, moderate drinking and eating, stories of hoarders and eccentrics teach us nothing about average relationships with dogs and cats.

In addition to its sensationalism, the deficiency argument has two fatal flaws. First, no extant study reveals evidence of any qualities, skills, or lack thereof that predispose certain people toward companionship with animals. If animals were substituting for relationships with humans, then we could expect to find evidence that “animal people” differ on some significant psychological indicator from “non-animal people.” Psychologists and others have tried to demonstrate this, to no avail. The most comprehensive review of personality research on animal

caretakers failed to find definitive differences between those who had animals and those who did not—or, for that matter, between people who had dogs as companions and those who had cats (see Podberscek and Gosling 2000).¹² Most studies indicate that people who enjoy animal companionship are, on average, more or less like everyone else. One study suggests that people who do not have companion animals do not avoid having them because they dislike animals (Guttman 1981). Instead, people who do not have animals display somewhat stronger tendencies to avoid permanent ties than animal caretakers do. They also tend to place more importance on cleanliness in their home environment. The same study shows that animal caretakers more often mention the benefits of companionship as a reason that they have animals. They report feeling alone without an animal. Once one is accustomed to animal companionship, the relationship is not easy to do without. In my research, I found this to be the case. For example, many people spoke of the empty feeling in the house after the death of a pet and looked forward to having a dog's or cat's company again. In addition, people who could not have animal companions because of lifestyle issues, such as frequent travel or a landlord's prohibitions, often said they looked forward to the time that they could again have dogs and cats. This is consistent with research demonstrating that the most significant difference between people who have animals and those who do not seems to be that those who have animals usually had them during childhood (Poresky et al. 1988). Overall, however, there are probably more differences within the category of "animal people" than there are between "animal people" and "non-animal people."¹³

The second flaw in the deficiency argument is this: If animals offer substitutes for human relationships, then we could expect to find the highest frequencies of pet ownership among single people. Instead, single-member households are the *least* likely to include companion animals (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002). Animal companionship is highest in households with parents and children. Similarly, no evidence indicates that relationships with animals detract from or interfere with relationships with other people. Instead, data suggest that animals serve as "social facilitators" (see Messent 1983; Robins et al.