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## BLOGS

# One Among Many

The self in social context

by Joachim I. Krueger, Ph.D.

## No Dog Delusion

Anthropomorphize your pet without compunction.

Published on January 31, 2009

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This post is for all you dog lovers out there. This morning (1/31/2009), our cocker spaniel [Kirby](#) "Yawnie" Krueger passed on. He was 13 years and 9 months old. For a year, he had heart disease, which entailed trouble breathing and fluid build-up in his abdomen. A regimen of [drugs](#) had stabilized him, but lately he was getting worse. A couple of days ago, he collapsed three times and he was frightened. At the vet's he gave us a final perfect moment. As the barbiturates entered his blood stream, he

went calm, then heavy and limp. Even in death, he looked perfect.

We knew how attached we were to Kirby, and the tears and the [grief](#) were no surprise. Over the years, we had referred to him as a person so many times, always consciously blurring the line between metaphor and [self-deception](#). But how self-deceptive is it to treat an animal like a human? In Western culture, we have a long history of regarding humans as unique and as better than other animals. With Darwin, this view began to erode, and modern evolutionary science mercilessly keeps chipping away at humanity's superior [self-image](#).

Traditionally, the anthropomorphizing of animals was seen as the mark of a weak intellect and an over-active emotional system. I don't mean to imply

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that there are no differences between dogs and humans, but let's not overlook the similarities. Dogs are social animals. They experience a variety of emotions. They play. They know how to defend themselves. They guard their territory. Sam Gosling at the University of Texas and others have suggested that dogs and other animals have personalities. From a traditional intellectual position, this is a silly notion, but it is not so silly for the dog lovers (and lovers of other animals) among us.

Gosling (is it a coincidence that his name evokes zoological imagery?) studies animal [personality](#) using the same methods he uses for the assessment of human personality, that is, observer ratings on the Big Five personality dimensions. Sure enough, the Big Five can be recovered from ratings of [pets](#), and systematic within-breed individual differences emerge. There are two interpretations of this finding. One interpretation is that animal personalities are so complex that they are equivalent to human personalities. The other interpretation is that with the trait-rating approach human personalities are so simplified that they are equivalent to animal personalities.

I think both interpretations are correct. The point is that humans and animals (pets in particular) can be similar and they can be very significant to one another. Measuring their personalities only scratches the surface. Studying their interactions and emotional attachments reveals deeper connections. We have known for a long time that pets, and dogs in particular, can reduce human [stress](#) even by their mere presence. Curling up with a dog and feeling the warmth of his or her body is not that different from contact with a human body. Likewise, although dogs have a very limited range of facial expression, they do seek and maintain (sometimes uncomfortably long) eye contact. I think it is a mistake to believe that eye contact between humans is a finely-honed tool for [mind-reading](#), whereas eye contact between human and dog is delusional—because presumably there is no mind behind those eyes.

As the psychological life of animals (and dogs in particular) gradually gives up its secrets to science, animal lovers can take heart. We have known all along that our best friends are not mere automatons (at least no more than we are). In our anthropomorphic perceptions, we are often two steps ahead of science. Even if some beliefs about the Kirbys of this world turn out to be too lofty, they help us treat them with dignity and love.

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