



Soul of a Dog: Reflections on the Spirits of the Animals of Bedlam Farm

Jon Katz

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Do animals have souls? Some of our greatest thinkers—Aristotle, Plato, Thomas Aquinas—and countless animal lovers have been obsessed with this question for thousands of years. Now New York Times bestselling author Jon Katz looks for an answer and finds even more questions as he recounts the lives and stories of the residents of his celebrated Bedlam Farm: Rose, his beloved workaholic sheepdog who runs the farm, and an array of gentle donkeys, industrious chickens, docile sheep, obnoxious goats, and a murderous yet loving barn cat.

Do these remarkable creatures have consciences? Do they possess free will and reason? Do they have a sense of self, or an existence in the spirit world? Do they shape their own lives? Or are we projecting onto them traits we want and need them to have, allowing ourselves to be manipulated into trading food and shelter for what we see as unconditional love?

With his signature wisdom, humor, and clarity, Katz relates the stories of the animals he lives with and finds remarkable kinships at every turn. Whether it is Rose's brilliant and methodical herding ability, Mother the cat's keen mousing instincts, or Izzy's canine compassion toward hospice patients, Katz is mesmerized to see in them individual personas and sparks of self-awareness. He marvels, too, at the distinctions between the species—our desire to change and our ability to edit and censor ourselves, and their capacity to live in the now. And yet the differences never keep Katz from fully enjoying, loving, and cherishing his unusual cast of Bedlam Farm characters. Katz's reflections on this eternal debate will resonate with anyone who loves dogs, cats, or other animals—and who wonders about the spirits that animate them and the deepening hold they have on our emotional lives.

“If no two dogs are alike,” Katz says, “neither is there a universal relationship with them.” Such an observation helps to shine a light on the powerful interspecies connection that is redefining the human-animal bond in our time.

Soul of a Dog: Reflections on the Spirits of the Animals of Bedlam Farm Details

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Brittany says

I love it when liberal arts city folk move to the country, acquire animals, discover love, and then feel the urge to get philosophical about it all. The books they write are wonderful.

In this case, the deep question at the root of the book is: Do animals have souls? Katz has obviously done some of his own soul-searching on the subject. He ponders what it would mean for animals to have souls: he ponders why the question matters so much to some people. In the end, his conclusion is an intriguing one: Animals either have souls, or don't, independent of how much human angst is spent on the subject. Animals are what they are.

This is a much stronger conclusion than I was hoping for. I was worried he was going to conclude for or against souls definitively. Which was worrisome to me, as I can't recall any quantitative, scientific study proving *humans* have souls, and there's certainly a *high* degree of debate about at what point in development humans are issued souls.

On one hand, this is an extremely interesting debate. If we take it as read that humans have souls, it makes sense that other animals would as well. There are very few things, evolutionarily, that separate us from non-human animals.

On the other hand, this is really a question of faith. I believe that I, and all humans, have a soul. I can't prove this, any more than I can prove love exists. On this basis, and this basis alone, I believe that other creatures have souls. I'm especially sure of mammals and birds. I don't know where the line is. Do frogs have souls? Or snakes or lobsters or beetles? What about tuna? Do cephalods have souls? What if I can only recognize souledness in animals that think relatively like me, and cephalopods have them, they're just too alien to me for me to understand?

With all that in mind, I can forgive the length to which Katz thrashes around philosophically. It's a very deep question. And it touches on the question of animal intelligence. What frustrated me is his immovably anthropocentric viewpoint. At several points, he concludes that we need animals to have souls more than they themselves need to have souls. And that animals "don't think like us" and so may not have souls.

Even more frustratingly, this line of thinking got a Disney song stuck in my head (always the mature response to a philosophical debate): "You think the only people who are people, are the people who look and think like you." Just because they don't think like us, doesn't mean they don't have souls.

He also talks about his dogs "becoming the dogs [he] needed them to be." I'm sure to some point that's true, but it's also a dangerously egocentric way to think. Dogs aren't blank slates when they come to us. They're hard-wired for aspects of their personality and intelligence, and, if I'm to be believed, they already have a soul, regardless of who owns them or how they're treated.

The other part of this book that required some deep thinking on my part was his discussion of the morality of our interaction with pets. He frequently disparages people who treat dogs like children or treat them "better than humans." I will agree that treating dogs (or any animal) like human children is dangerous, unhealthy, and unfair to both human children and the animals.

But the "treating dogs better than humans" link smacks of the argument "Why are we spending all this money on dogs when there are hungry humans?" implying that we can take care of the animals only once we've saved all the people. He brings this up as he's discussing the dog rescue movement, snidely writing that it "says something" about our society that there's no parallel rescue network for humans.

To counter the last argument first, there *are* rescue networks for humans. All sorts of government programs, church outreach programs, non-profits, you name it. It's just that, logically, it's way easier to rescue a dog, so the networks aren't as well meshed together. You don't have to worry about what the dog wants, for instance. It's much easier to take a dog away from bad owners than it is to take a child away from bad parents, which is as it should be. It's also much easier to care for a dog once you have it than it is to care for a baby, a child, a teen, an adult, or a family.

This book made me think very deeply. It made me laugh, and cry, and while I didn't agree with everything he said, I thoroughly enjoyed reading it, and will seek out some of the sources he references.

JennyDB says

Really? 4* average? I need to become an author then because I could have written a better book about my dogs. I'm a sucker for a good animal book but this isn't it. Couples (wannabe) academia with vignettes from his farm life with cows, donkeys, sheep, cats, goats, and dogs. Not cohesive or particularly entertaining. Doesn't do it for me.

Kathy says

The title is ill chosen, since each chapter focuses on a different animal or group of animals at Bedlam Farm: Elvis the steer, chickens, goats, cats, sheep, burros. Of course, the most interesting is Rosie, the workaholic border collie and Katz's "right hand" on the farm. The story includes the author's own soul searching as he struggles with depression, so he is actively trying to figure out what a soul is. I didn't agree with all of his conclusions, but it makes interesting reading.

M says

Lovely stories of life on the farm. The animals all have their own personalities. Interesting take on animal souls. Read this for book club.

Ranette says

Such a nice book which asks the question, Do animals have souls?. interesting topic and discussion with plenty of stories about animals.

Jacquelin says

This book, written by Jon Katz, attempts to answer a question we will never really know the answer to: do animals have souls? It has been pondered by many of the world's greatest thinkers, Aristotle and Plato included. Despite that and my own beliefs on the matter, I was interested to read Katz's take on it.

Katz lives on a farm in upstate New York and (up until recently) shared his life with sheep, goats, donkeys, chickens, steers, cats and dogs. He uses experiences with his animals to explore the idea of animal spirituality. He sees in them individuality and remarkable self-awareness. He also wonders if it is their souls he is communing with or if he is projecting onto them - a human need to feel a connection to a world most of us are very disconnected with.

He attempts to objectively approach the topic by researching poets, philosophers, animal behaviorists and a pastor, which ends up being the most poignant discussion in the book. While some of the chapters don't seem to flow into one another, reading as more individual essays rather than a cohesive story, Katz manages to inject humor and levity into what is a very serious subject. He never crosses the line into sappiness, over-tugging on readers' heart strings. He is aware of his own tendency to anthropomorphize his animals but remains grounded by appreciating animals' true nature. That is, they are not human and have their own unique gifts and place in the world which is not superior or subordinate to us, just different. Maybe, he wonders, that in and of itself is soulfulness. Maybe we rob them of soul when we only see them in human terms.

In the end of course the question really comes down to one of perspective, as most things do. How do you define soul? (Katz never does in the book.) Oh, that. Plato spent most of his life pondering that one. Some other little questions Katz alludes to in the book: Does one need to have a conscience to have a soul? Is having a soul equivalent to having an afterlife?

Talk amongst yourselves.

Marsmannix says

I've almost all of Jon Katz's books. This is lighter book, with the usual complement on the souls or personalities of animals. If you are not familiar with the author's work, you may find some of his stances on animal lives a little surprising. But Katz has "street cred" (farm cred?) and i've learned much from his life with his animals. Easy read for me.

Joan Colby says

I enjoy Katz's style though I often have a conflict with his conclusions regarding animals. In this book, he investigates whether animals have a soul, by which he means self-awareness and personality. He cites philosophers such as Augustine and Aquinas who both thought of animals as automatons who were put on earth by God to serve man. Modern day behaviorists harbor similar ideas about animals claiming that since individualization cannot be adequately measured in species other than humans, it cannot be presumed to exist. Anyone who has to do with animals on a daily basis (outside the laboratory where desocialized creatures are studied) knows how comical that is. Katz himself indicates this in his anecdotes about his various livestock;

yet he buys into the behaviorist philosophy in thinking that animals merely manipulate humans for food; thus they cannot experience emotions like love. Examining this more closely, one realizes that humans too have self-serving motivations that govern how they respond emotionally to others; in that they are exactly like animals. Augustine and Aquinas postulated that animals cannot make moral judgements citing this capacity as indications of a "soul" in humans...however moral judgements are generally derived from the Golden Rule (self-protection) rather than any absolute. It is our advanced brain power that causes us to apply such arguments, but they are based in survival mechanisms which in animals are more instinctive or primitive. Katz is astonished at the personality exhibited by the hen Henrietta terming her a poultry anomaly; yet he would not be surprised that a particular human had a more magnetic personality than most. Thinking of animal psychology as something apart from human psychology sets up a false premise that renders the rest of his debate specious. Aside from that, the book is enjoyable for the portraits of Katz and his flock of animals.

Kevin says

An interesting look at the personalities of animals and asks if they have souls. I am not certain if the question is ever answered in this book, but it was an enjoyable read.

Kristen Nace says

This is second book I've read and really enjoyed by Katz. In this book he describes various animals he lives with on his farm in upstate NY. He ponders whether or not they have souls and also briefly touches on humans' changing relationship with animals etc. What I like about Katz is his obvious deep love and respect for his animals, without romanticizing them. He makes the case that we should respect them for their dog-ness, cat-ness etc and that we do animals a disservice by anthropomorphizing them. (hope I spelled that right) I thought his chapters on Rose, the border collie and Mother, the barn cat were especially insightful and touching.

Melissa says

Another thoughtful dog book from Jon Katz. More introspective than his other books, *Soul of a Dog* examines human-animal relationships as observed on Bedlam Farm and its environs. Izzy's work in hospice, Rose's work with sheep, and even Henrietta the hen's personality traits are represented in well written and insightful essays. And as always, Katz turns a keen eye on himself and his foibles as he chronicles his life on Bedlam Farm.

Ann says

A visit to Bedlam Farm and everything that goes on there. A mindful connection to the people and animals.

Kristy Engel says

Good, but not great. The writing style was easy to read, though the series of stories didn't seem to have a good flow to them. The stories themselves were enjoyable, but I don't think Katz clearly defined the point he was trying to make about animals souls. (He seemed to contradict himself at times.) I also found myself disagreeing with many of the conclusions he did draw.

Bill Sleeman says

Not too long ago my “men’s class” at church spent some time on a study devoted to Noah, the various animals of the ark and humanity’s duty to these creatures. Why did God have man put so much effort into saving animals when He could just as easily have created them anew? Was there a lesson about the role of man’s dominion over the animals in the charge God presented Noah with? In the class the mostly dog owners (in true librarian fashion I was the only guy to own up to being a cat person) insisted that their dog would go to heaven and these owners would brook no disagreement on that notion. Even if they could not claim Jesus as Savior *their* dogs had souls and Jesus most certainly loved their animals as much as they themselves did.

Animal ‘respecter’ (I would not call him an animal lover) and author Jon Katz considers the same question in his 2009 work **Soul of a Dog: Reflections on the Spirits of the Animals of Bedlam Farm** which I just completed. Katz, an experienced animal hand and a definite “dog person” knows his animals and understands the place they hold in our lives – his ability to capture in words the trust, the love (and I use that word purposefully) and the devotion between species is skilled and sincere, perhaps only exceeded by the great James Herriot. **Soul of a Dog** is a wonderfully thoughtful and thought-provoking work; no matter where you fall on the question of the soul of animals Katz will certainly make you love and care about his animals and perhaps, reconsider your own. It is a wonderful read for animal lovers and animal watchers.

Jami says

I enjoyed this book, as I liked the stories of the animals and farm life. The animals have their own personalities, such as the donkey who liked Paul Newman popcorn, including the bag! I also liked reading how the animals used devious measures to obtain more food. The stories were both heartwarming and humorous. I listened to this through Audible; the narration was good, but I wish that the chapters corresponded to the tracks.

The author asks the question throughout: do dogs have souls? To me, that isn't even a question. I answer that with a resounding "YES" and the proof I have is just looking into a dog's eyes. It bothers me that humans are such an arrogant species that we believe that we are the only ones capable of having a soul. I generally am not interested in the religious themes, but in this case, there was a chapter where the author discusses the issue about animals and souls with a religious friend. The friend was insistent that dogs cannot go to heaven and do not have souls because they don't accept Jesus. That view of things, while I respect the right of others to have that view, disturbs me, as it is so exclusive; there are many creeds that exist that believe otherwise, and who is one person to tell another that their beliefs are wrong. I like that the author does not jump into this

theory and notes that he has been influenced by a mixture of religious philosophies.

I particularly liked the discussion about animals as social support. I also love this quote that was near the end of the book, as I think it sums up our relationship with our dogs nicely (I am paraphrasing, as I don't have the exact quote): "Dogs let humans live their lives, and do not tell them HOW to live their lives."
