History of Companion Animals and the Companion Animal Sector

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1.1 Introduction

Many households in the industrialised Western world own companion animals. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA, 2012) reported that just over a third of US households kept one or more dogs in 2011, and just under a third kept one or more

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cats (AVMA, 2012: p. 1). Figures are similar, though somewhat lower, in the European Union (EU) where, in 2010, just over 25% of households had at least one dog, and just under 25% had at least one cat, according to the European Pet Food Industry (FEDIAF, 2010). In most Western countries, the number of households keeping dogs and cats has been steadily growing for decades.

The AVMA (2012) also gives us information on people's attitudes to the animals in their homes. Two-thirds of US dog owners see their dogs as members of the family; most of the rest, according to the survey, view them as 'companions' or 'pets'. Over half the owners see cats as family members. For both species, the younger the owners, the more likely they are to view their animals as family members (AVMA, 2012: p. 14). According to a survey prepared for a pet food company in 2000, nearly half of American dog owners have taken their dog on vacation, and a similar number have celebrated their dog's birthday (Ralston Purina, 2000). Thus the general trend is not only to allow dogs and cats into the family home but also – in these respects, at least – to treat them as members of the family.

Many owners of companion animals put their money where their mouth is. Thus they both demand, and can access, a growing supply of expensive products and services, including organic dog and cat food, elaborate day-care facilities, special overnight hotels, and advanced veterinary care. It's difficult to pin down the exact sums involved here, as different surveys produce different figures; but all show that animal companions are costly. According to the AVMA (2012: p. 57) in 2011, the average US dog owner spent $378 on veterinary services alone. The American Pet Products Association puts expenditure much higher: $655 on routine and surgical veterinary visits, $254 on food, $274 on kennel boarding and $359 on other products and services, in total more than $1500 per year. The amount spent by the average cat owner is smaller, but not by much according to the American Pet Products Association (APPA, n.d.). Although there may be significant local variations, it is reasonable to claim that the trend to spend increasing amounts on dogs, cats and other companion animals is representative of the industrialised Western world as a whole.

Yet this, surely, raises interesting questions. The number of animal companions is growing, while the costs of keeping them are increasing. Why would so many contemporary households – in particular, urban and suburban households in industrial societies – decide to spend their scarce resources on sharing their lives and homes with members of other species? How did our relationship with animal companions develop such that this could come about, and why? Could companion animals be some kind of substitute for the animals that people formerly lived alongside in rural, agriculturally based societies? Is keeping animal companions a symptom of changing family and household structures, and perhaps increasing loneliness? Or is it, instead, a way of expanding relations to nature that has been made possible by growing wealth? Are companion animals giving their owners tangible benefits or are they, rather, a diversion from other, more important, things?

In this chapter we will try to address these questions in two ways: first, we will sketch an outline of some key historical developments that led to current Western attitudes to animal companions. Second, from the perspective of evolutionary biology, we will consider whether animal companions do benefit their owners, and if so, in what ways and how much.

As we noted in the Introduction, the scope of this book is limited to the Western nations, in particular to Europe, Australasia and North America. Although living with animals as companions is practiced globally, the practice takes so many different forms internationally that – unfortunately – we do not have space to discuss them all in sufficient detail.

1.2 Early Human Relations to Companion Animals

There is sound evidence to show that humans have lived alongside domesticated animals for more than 10,000 years. But there is still considerable dispute about how, when and why animal domestication first occurred (and even what we should take domestication to mean). It is widely agreed, however, that dogs were the first animals to be domesticated, though even here there is uncertainty over whether dogs as opportunistic scavengers 'domesticated themselves' or whether they were deliberately drawn in or captured by people (see Cassidy, 2007: p. 7).

However domestication began, it is likely that dogs soon became useful to people in a practical sense, in particular by warning of intruders, tracking down prey animals, and finding wounded animals that escaped during hunts. But we do not know whether dogs were more than this; not just helpers and guards, but also objects of human affection. There is some archaeological evidence that prehistoric humans had affectionate feelings for dogs. In 1978, at a late Paleolithic site in northern Israel, for instance, a tomb was uncovered where about 12,000 years ago a person had been buried with a dog or wolf puppy. The hand of the dead person, who was around 50 years old, was placed on the animal's shoulder. It is likely that the dog was sacrificed when the person died in order that it could accompany the person onwards in his or her spiritual journey (Davis & Valla, 1978). There are many other cases, across the globe, where dogs appear to have been buried after death, a practice that was rarely adopted with other animals, with the exception of the mummification of cats in Egypt. In fact, the archaeologist Morey notes that, across many cultures, dead dogs seem to have been treated rather like dead people (Morey, 2006: p. 164).

The history of the emergence of cats as human companions is even less clear than that of dogs, in part because of uncertainty over whether and how cats could have been useful to people. Genetic evidence suggests that all current housecats come from *Felis s. lybica* wildcat populations in the Middle East, and there is some archaeological evidence to suggest that they became human companions as long as 10,000 years ago (Driscoll *et al.*, 2009). It's likely that certain human-tolerant cats came to live near humans to feed on small rodents and trash, that humans in turn tolerated them, and that gradually these bolder cats diverged from their wild relatives (Driscoll *et al.*, 2009). However, it was in Egypt around 3700 years ago that cat domestication really seems to have spread, with cats living in homes, being represented in art, and being bred (Driscoll *et al.*, 2009). From Egypt, the practice of living with domesticated cats seems to have spread across the world.

From ancient times it has also been common to keep other animals, not least birds, as companions. For example, there is ample evidence from ancient Greece that people kept a

number of bird species in cages for company, and according to Kitchell (2011: p. 19) next to dogs, birds 'may have been the second most common type of pet in ancient Greece'.

Living affectionately with animals also seems to have been common in many hunter-forager societies across the globe. Evidence for this can be found in reports from early European explorers, missionaries and, later, anthropologists, who describe the affection with which dogs and other animals in the households of peoples living as hunters, gatherers and horticulturalists were regarded (Serpell, 1996: Chapter 4). Among these peoples, keeping some animals for company, not food, seemed to be the norm rather than the exception; humans were unwilling to sell or give away their animals, and became distraught with grief when the animals were taken away from them by force (Serpell, 1996: Chapter 4). These attachments are seen as strange by the European authors who write about them, and who express amusement or astonishment at the degree of affection so-called primitive peoples expressed towards animals (Serpell, 1996: Chapter 4). These accounts themselves suggest, however, that while attachments to animals were not widely accepted in Europe, they were nonetheless widespread elsewhere. Keeping animals as companions seems to be a widely practiced part of human life; it may be the European failure to do so until relatively recently that requires explanation.

1.3 Animal Companions in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

Christian theology shaped Europe's cultural and political climate from medieval times, and its influence was persistent. Prior to 1600, at least, a dominant view held within Christian orthodoxy was that close relations between humans and animals were theologically and morally troubling, and were best avoided. Of course, different theological traditions had somewhat divergent approaches here, and there were some notable exceptions. The best known of these is St Francis of Assisi, who famously called animals his brothers and sisters, and as Hughes (1996: p. 313) notes, friendships with animals were not unusual among religious ascetics.

A key idea that strongly influenced the dominant Christian tradition of keeping animals at a distance was the belief that humans had a unique status in nature. This idea was supported in multiple ways. One of the most influential was Aristotle's argument that humans, like other animals, have a nutritive and sensitive soul, but that they differ from animals by also having an intellectual or a rational soul. Medieval theologians linked this idea with a second powerful concept of separation, drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, that man is created in God's image:

> Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.
>
> (Genesis 1: 26)

This idea of separation was reflected and revitalised in early modern philosophy in the work of René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes divided the world into souled and

soulless beings, arguing that animals lacked souls while humans possessed them. Since Descartes equated the soul with the mind and consciousness, his view entailed the conclusion that animals lack consciousness and rational thought, and that their actions and responses were purely the result of mechanistic processes. Although Descartes' work is open to more subtle interpretation (see Cottingham, 1978) the claim that animals are essentially mechanisms, lacking both agency and feelings (including the capacity to feel pain) was influential not only in terms of reinforcing the existing view of human supremacy, but also serving as a licence to deny that animals could have morally relevant needs.

That humans have a unique status vis-à-vis the animals does not, by itself, imply anything about whether or not humans should enjoy their company – just as the assumption that flowers lack sentience should not debar us from enjoying their beauty. The claim that humans ought to maintain a clear boundary between themselves and other animals follows from a different aspect of a Christian view of human nature: the idea that to get close to God, humans should suppress and forsake the animal sides of their natures. The historian Keith Thomas maintains that humans were taught 'to regard their bodily impulses as "animal" ones, needing to be subdued' (Thomas, 1984: p. 38). Lust, in particular, was seen as belonging to human's problematic nature; and one of Thomas's sixteenth-century sources is quoted as saying that lust made men 'like … swine, goats, dogs and the most savage and brutish beasts in the world' (Thomas, 1984: p. 38). A tacit premise here seems to be that by enjoying the company of animals, a human being will excite his or her 'animal side'. Bestiality therefore was a particularly heinous sin, since it 'was the sin of confusion; it was immoral to mix the categories' (Thomas, 1984: p. 39).

However, the idea of 'mixing the categories' of human and animal was regarded as more broadly problematic, beyond having sex with them. According to Thomas 'in early modern England even animal pets were morally suspect, especially if admitted to the table and fed better than the servants'; and he quotes a moralist from the early seventeenth century as saying: 'Over-familiar usage of any brute creature is to be abhorred' (Thomas, 1984: p. 40).

Thomas reproduces the following story of a pious woman from the sixteenth century who on her deathbed regrets the way she and her husband have privileged their female dog:

> She … said "Good husband, you and I have offended God grievously in receiving many a time this bitch into our bed; we would have been loathe to have received a Christian soul … into our bed, and to have nourished him in our bosoms, and to have fed him at our table, as we have done this filthy cur many times. The Lord give us grace to repent it" … and afterwards she could not abide to look upon the bitch any more.
>
> (Thomas, 1984: p. 40)

Being too close to dogs, or treating them better than some people, was seen as problematic. Occasionally, dogs were even demonised, although in this respect, the dog's situation during the Middle Ages seems to have been better than that of cats.

There is considerable uncertainty as to the roles cats played in medieval Europe. We have evidence that they were skinned, though this may not mean that they all were kept for their skins; many may have led essentially feral lives, while others were kept as companions (O'Connor, 1992). It is clear, though, that cats were sometimes portrayed as the personification of the devil, and this served as a justification for their persecution. Serpell notes that on feast days, cats were tortured and killed in violent ways as a way of symbolically driving out the Devil:

> By associating cats with the Devil and misfortune, the medieval Church seems to have provided the superstitious masses of Europe with a sort of universal scapegoat; something to blame and punish for all of life's numerous perils and hardships.
>
> (Serpell, 2000: p. 12)

Of course, some people still had close relations with cats, although especially for women, this could be seen as evidence of involvement with witchcraft. The cat typically was ascribed the role of the witch's 'familiar', that is, as a demonic companion that the witch sends out to do her evil deeds in return for protection and nourishment. In some cases it was also assumed that the witch transformed herself into the shape of a cat (Serpell, 2000). Although 'official' Christian views in medieval and early modern times required animals to be kept at a distance, in practice, Thomas suggests, 'human relations with domestic animals were closer than official religion implied' (Thomas, 1984: p. 93). Among the aristocratic social elite, for instance, dogs were frequently kept for companionship or as status symbols (Swabe, 1999: p. 161). There were clear differences between these dogs and the dogs used by working people for pulling, guarding and herding. The dogs owned by aristocrats were different breeds – typically very large breeds such as mastiffs, so-called hounds, including beagles, spaniels, setters and greyhounds, used by the men for hunting, or 'lapdogs' used as company for the ladies (Figure 1.1).

While working people may have felt some attachment and admiration for their dogs, they 'seem to have been regarded unsentimentally; and they were generally hanged or drowned when they had outlived their usefulness' (Thomas, 1984: p. 102). So, although there may have been many different individual relations to the animals with whom people lived, attitudes of affection and closeness towards animal companions were not widespread.

1.4 Europe and North America 1600–1950

Gradually during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the habits of the wealthy trickled down to the members of the expanding middle classes, especially in towns. Dogs and caged birds became increasingly popular companions. In the eighteenth century, it also became common to keep cats as companion animals; and in the nineteenth century, children often kept small pets such as rabbits, white mice and guinea pigs (Grier, 2006: p. 32).

Figure 1.1 Five eldest children of King Charles 1 of England, by Sir Anthony van Dyck (1637). In the picture are two dogs of breeds typically owned by aristocrats at the time, a mastiff and a toy spaniel. (Royal Collection Trust, UK)

There seem to have been several parallel reasons for this development. First, the influence of the church gradually diminished, particularly in Northern Europe following the Reformation. Second, during this period many people became wealthier, and a growing urban middle class seems to have supported the expanding numbers of dogs, birds and cats kept as companions. The shift towards urban life also distanced increasing sectors of the population from any direct involvement in farming and livestock exploitation, and this may have helped to promote less use-oriented, more anthropomorphic attitudes and feelings towards animals (Serpell, 1996; Thomas, 1984). Clearly there are significant local differences in the speed with which these developments took place. Most of the sources we use here concern the United Kingdom and, for the later part of the period, also North America. In the United Kingdom particularly, urbanisation and the expansion of the middle classes set in very early; it followed somewhat later in other parts of the Western world.

A further factor that may have played a role in the development of the companion animal sector was a growing interest in biology and, in particular, in breeding. This interest took the shape of an expansion in breeding so-called purebred dogs, and later cats, and the establishment of breeding institutions or 'fancies'. Breeding – along with the development of specialised diets, and the growth of dog training – was one of the

major structural changes in human–animal relations during this period; we will look briefly at each of these factors.

1.4.1 Breeding

The systematic breeding of dogs emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. Although there were already clearly distinguishable breeds of dogs and other domestic animals before this, the new trend was characterised by conscious efforts to 'improve' domestic animals through controlled breeding. These efforts were combined with a sporting element in which people competed for prizes at shows, and this was typically linked to social status. In 1859, the world's first dog show was held in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. The 60 dogs showed were confined to pointers and setters, and a group of judges was appointed to assess the dogs and find a winner in each class (Sampson & Binns, 2006: pp. 21–22). This was the beginning of a trend; subsequent dog shows were organised in Birmingham and Manchester (where they still occur annually) and in other European countries.

While dog shows emphasised the form and appearance of dogs, later 'field trials' were established in which hunting dogs competed with one other for their ability to solve practical tasks such as finding and retrieving a 'lure'. In the early years the same dogs would typically appear both in dog shows and field trials. Later these activities became specialised, and dogs were divided into show or field trial types (Sampson & Binns, 2006: p. 22).

These new purebred dogs had a documented pedigree. This meant that their breed ancestors were documented in stud books. Stud books were established by including particular animals that were thought at the time to represent the best specimens of their breed, after which the stud book was typically closed. This meant that only offspring of those original dogs would count as purebred. So all purebred dogs of a certain breed could be traced back to a limited number of founders. In some cases, a dog's favourable performance at a dog show could also be set as an additional requirement for its offspring to qualify as purebred.

The potential for conflicts to arise concerning whether a dog should qualify as purebred, along with the management of stud books, led to the establishment of kennel clubs. The first was (and still is) simply called the Kennel Club, established in England in 1873. The first *Kennel Club Stud Book* was published in 1874. Other kennel clubs followed suit, including the French Société Centrale Canine in 1882, the American Kennel Club in 1884, and an international umbrella organisation, the Fédération Cynologique Internationale, in 1911.

Many factors drove this early enthusiasm for dog breeding. Apart from the sporting element, and an obsession with exhibitions and shows, there seems to have been a wider, underlying idea of eugenics at play:

> The Victorians were clearly fascinated by the ideas of breed purity and genetic improvement. Indeed, there was widespread concern about the concept of degeneration, the progressive ill health in succeeding generations of a family, and the need to actively reverse this trend. This in turn probably lay behind early ideas of eugenics … that also advanced in parallel with the ideas of breed purity in dogs and other species.
>
> (Sampson & Binns, 2006: p. 27)

It is ironic, as we shall see in Chapter 6, that the same breeding system concerned about generational *ill* health, set up in the nineteenth century, is to blame for much of the current health and welfare problems of modern pedigree dogs and cats.

In addition, engaging in dog breeding may have allowed people to maintain their own social status. As Harriet Ritvo (1987: p. 104) argues, the structures evolving around the breeding and showing of pedigreed dogs ‘figuratively expressed the desire of predominantly middle-class fanciers for a relatively prestigious and readily identifiable position within a stable, hierarchical society’.

The first Kennel Club stud book identified 40 different breeds of dogs. This number has been growing steadily over the years; in 2003, the Kennel Club recognised 201 breeds. Some of these were types of dogs that already existed as geographic ‘landraces’, but were then transformed into breeds through genetic isolation; others were the results of the creative efforts of passionate and entrepreneurial individuals. The English Golden Retriever, for instance, was produced by hybridizing a yellow wavy-coated retriever over a number of generations with a spaniel, a setter, a Labrador Retriever and a Bloodhound. It is, therefore, essentially the product of deliberate line breeding involving a range of different breeds (Sampson & Binns, 2006: pp. 27–29). Eventually, dogs not typically owned by the aristocracy, such as the Staffordshire Bull Terrier in 1935, were recognised as breeds by the Kennel Club.

Cat breeding and cat shows also became established in parallel with dog shows; the late nineteenth-century ‘cat fancy’ was extremely popular both in England and on the European continent (Kete, 1994: p. 131), and successful cat breeders made good profits. However, although certain fine breeds of cats became reasonably popular, the interest in cat shows declined, and the majority of cat owners, unlike dog owners, stuck with ordinary domestic cats that were not purebred or pedigree, nor the subject of planned breeding (Hartwell, 2003–2014).

1.4.2 Diet

Alongside selective breeding for pedigree, a second area in which substantial changes took place during the nineteenth and early twentieth century was in the diet of companion animals. As far back as the eighteenth century, books on dogs began to provide recipes for proper feeding; and in the nineteenth century, the first commercial dog food was developed in the form of so-called Meat Dog Biscuits. Later came granulated and canned versions of ready-made dog food. These products were marketed through relentless advertising, in the beginning aimed primarily at the high-end market. Thus the first main producer of dog food, Spratt’s, targeted their advertisements at dog shows. Later these products gradually gained a wider uptake:

> Dog food, both wet and dry, gradually became part of the middle-class grocery list because of its convenience and availability, its gradually decreasing cost, changes in cooking practices, and changing beliefs about the needs of dogs.
>
> (Grier, 2006: p. 377)

The new dog foods were marketed as providing dogs with a more balanced and healthy diet than that which could come from table scraps; the importance of meat in

dogs' diet was also emphasised. By the 1930s, commercialised canned cat food also became available – although the availability of specialised food for animal companions was severely restricted during World War II. One factor influencing the development of this market was the improvement in human food quality. This led to by-products becoming available, particularly from the slaughter and fisheries industries, for which the dog and cat food industry provided a good outlet. By the later part of the twentieth century, as we will discuss in Chapter 8, commercial cat and dog food came to constitute virtually the entire diet of dogs and cats in the industrialised West. Commercial feed for birds, guinea pigs and other small companion animals also proliferated and became standard stock in supermarkets.

1.4.3 Training

A final development we should note here was an increased focus on obedience training of dogs during the first half of the twentieth century (Cats by tradition have been regarded as being 'untrainable', though as we will see in Chapter 9, this is not necessarily true). Of course, dogs used for tasks such as herding and hunting were always trained to perform these functions. But the early twentieth century saw the broader propagation of dog training.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, programs for systematic training of the dogs used by the military and the police were established. Dog trainers, who had worked in these contexts, began to extend dog training into the civilian world, so that the training of police dogs spilled over to the rest of society (Johnson n.d.). For example, in Denmark, a club for people training police dogs was established in 1909; and this club also allowed 'civilians' to participate in training. However, the non-police members decided to break away and establish their own Civilian Club for Dog Handlers in 1937, now the largest Danish dog-handling club (Hansen, 2012).

The main focus in dog training clubs was, and still is, on obedience training as a sport. However, increasingly, many clubs opened their doors to ordinary dog owners who wanted to train their newly acquired puppies to become well-behaved members of a modern suburban family. More recently, training became necessary to enable owners to follow requirements to control dogs in public, and, in particular, to walk them on a leash.

By the mid-twentieth century, then, the companion animal sector had changed and expanded dramatically. The lives of animal companions had become considerably more structured and heavily influenced by people in terms of breeding, training and diet. While the hardships and shortages of World War II put many of these processes on hold, the end of the war and the growth and prosperity that followed led to an unprecedented boom in the companion animal sector.

1.5 From the 1950s to the Present

The most striking post-war trend was the major growth in the number of dogs and cats kept as companions. Other animals, especially birds, became much less popular. This trend can be seen in the following graph mapping ownership of dogs, cats and budgerigars (also known as common pet parakeets – a common type of caged bird in the United Kingdom) (Figure 1.2).

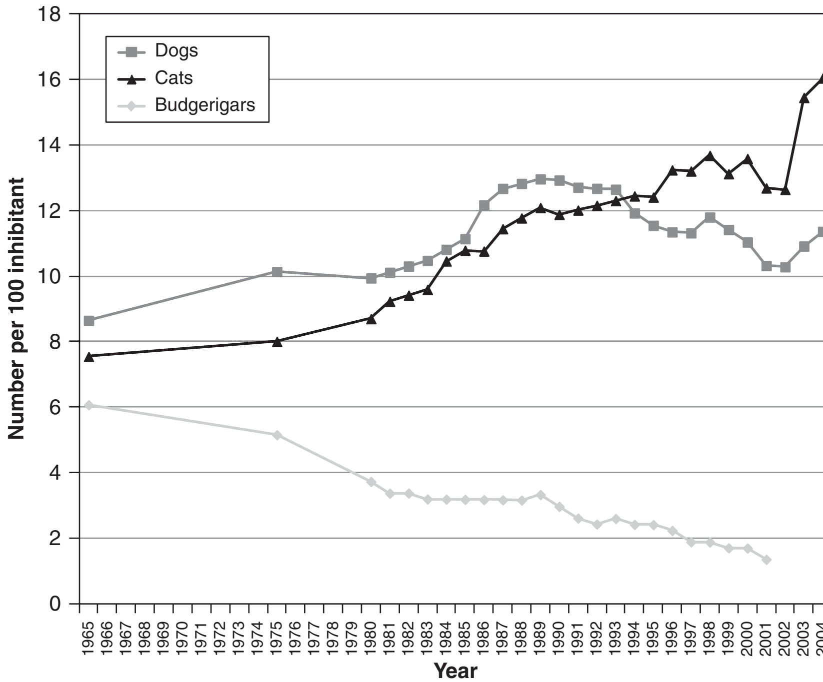

Figure 1.2 Dogs, cats and budgerigars per 100 inhabitants in the UK. Based on information from the Pet Food Manufacturers Association (n.d.) and from the UK Office for National Statistics (2012).

The graph also shows a trend for an uneven, and roughly parallel, increase in the number of dogs and cats kept as companions until the 1990s, followed by an increase in cats and a temporary decline in dogs. This seems to be a general phenomenon across the Western world, apparently driven by socio-economic and demographic changes. First, there has been an unprecedented growth in wealth, and an expansion in urban and suburban development. The growing number of middle-class families living in suburban areas has been an ideal background for an expansion in the number of family dogs and cats. More recently, changes in the family structure, in particular more working women and more singleton and single-parent households, have made cats a more manageable option than dogs, because they are generally less demanding companions.

In the following chapters, we will discuss significant ethical issues raised by developments since the mid-twentieth century in how companion animals are kept, bred, cared for and thought of. Here, we will just briefly mention some of these developments:

The growth of animal professionals: A number of professions have arisen or developed to cater for the perceived needs of companion animals. The veterinary profession has transformed since the 1940s, to include companion animals as a key area of work. This transformation coincided with the gradual disappearance of horses associated

with the rise of motorised transport. Alongside vets, there has been a significant growth in other animal professionals including nurses, therapists, trainers and shelter workers. The growth in companion animal professionals has led to a corresponding expansion in services available to companion animals, from vaccinations and spaying, to complex surgeries, to grooming and kennelling.

Control over animal companions' lives: Following the pattern from the early twentieth century, animal companions' lives have become increasingly controlled, in a variety of ways. Freedom of movement is curtailed: in most Western countries, dogs must be leashed, exercised in controlled areas, and must undergo at least basic training; most are also neutered. Cats' movements are controlled even more, particularly in North America, where they are routinely confined indoors, and are also, in most places, routinely neutered, unless they are used for breeding; and (again, especially in North America) may undergo declawing surgery, in order to make them better indoor companions – an issue that will be discussed in Chapter 11.

Expansion in numbers of purebred dogs: Today most dogs in the Western world are of a specific breed, although far from all of them have a pedigree. Those that are not of a specific breed are mostly crosses between dogs of specific breeds. Mixed-breed dogs are increasingly acquired from shelters. The increase in purebred and pedigree dogs has led to an increase in genetically related health problems in dogs (see Chapter 7). Among cats, only a minority are of any specific breed; most are shorthair domestic cats, although recently there have been a number of experiments in creating new cat breeds, including crosses with wild cats.

Commercial pet food: Most animals are fed a standardised diet of commercial pet food produced according to legally defined nutritional standards. However, recently there has been movement towards more 'natural' forms of commercial food for both dogs and cats (see Chapter 14).

Higher moral significance: Most people value companion animals more highly than was usual in the past. This concern has underpinned legislation aimed at protecting companion animals in a number of countries. While the world's first anti-cruelty law, which came into force in the United Kingdom in 1822, only covered horses and cattle and did not even mention dogs and cats, current animal welfare legislation in many European countries now has special provisions protecting dogs and cats. In the United States, the first federal animal law that was passed in the 1960s focused mainly on the protection of family dogs and cats from being stolen and used in research.

Furthermore, it seems clear (though we lack documented evidence of this) that the many organisations aiming to promote animal welfare or animal rights have, over the last 50 years or so, increasingly focused on dogs and cats. This is particularly true of issues that have a strong emotional appeal, including cases of cruelty, commercial breeding of puppies and kittens (puppy and kitten mills), the selective breeding of animals with extreme phenotypes, and dealing with stray or relinquished dogs and cats. While this development reflects a greater public concern about dogs, cats and other companion animals, these welfare organisations have also contributed to raising public awareness about such issues (many of which will be discussed in detail in the following chapters).

So, the dogs have moved out of the kennel and the cats have moved out of the barn; both have instead moved into the family home. Here, the average Western dog or cat owner, as we have noted, lavishes money on special food, veterinary care, boarding kennels and so on – often taken for granted as part of a normal life of a family dog or cat. In addition, the typical owner spends not only his or her *money* on the companion animal, but also his or her *time*. These are significant costs. Yet, despite this, numbers of companion animals have increased.

How can this be explained? In the following section, we try to situate this historical discussion within a wider biological discussion about the role of animal companions in human life.

1.6 Are Companion Animals Benefactors or Social Parasites?

One opening thought here is this: if people spend their precious time and hard-earned money on caring for dogs and cats, they must feel that they get something in return that is worth the investment. As there is no sign of this process stopping, this appears to be a good indication that the animals make a positive contribution to people's lives.

However, in an influential paper, the British psychologist Archer (1997) questioned whether people are right to claim that dogs and cats really make a positive contribution to their lives. Are they instead really being conned by clever social parasites? Archer's provocative answer is that companion animals or pets, as he calls them, are indeed social parasites that divert time and energy away from what should, from a biological point of view, be our highest priority – that is, to look after our own offspring and other close relatives.

Archer reviews the literature on the benefits conferred by pet ownership, and concludes that indeed there are some benefits. The average dog or cat owner will, according to him, have better health and a higher quality of life, compared to the average person who does not own a companion animal. Archer does not want to deny this: rather his claim is that the resources spent achieving these benefits would, from the point of view of promoting the owners' 'biological fitness', be better spent on people's next of kin.

Archer also does not seek to deny that companion animals have strongly appealing features that motivate us to care for them. Quite the contrary – his claim is that the appeal of a puppy or a kitten serves as a very strong motive, what evolutionary biologists call a *proximal mechanism*, through which dogs and cats trick us into looking after them.

Archer neatly summarises his argument in the following way:

> Why do people love their pets? In answering this question, we had to separate the ultimate Darwinian explanation from the proximal mechanism through which people develop attachments to their pets. As we have seen, these attachments are often strong ones when judged by the standards of human attachments. I argued that, in evolutionary terms, humans are manipulated by pets: they are cuckoos in our nests, albeit not as destructive to our own offspring as are cuckoo chicks.
>
> (Archer, 1997: p. 253)

So, Archer's claim is that dogs and cats appeal to dispositions and instincts that developed in humans through evolution, 'to care for their children, to form relationships with mates and kin, and to show empathy with other human beings'; and that dogs and cats divert our attention away from alternative ways of spending our time and resources which would be more useful from a biological point of view.

There are at least two ways in which someone who wants to claim that living with companion animals is nonetheless worthwhile for us may try to respond to Archer. One way is to grant Archer's point, but to say that it is merely a biological point that does not cut any ice in an ethical discussion about how to lead our lives. So, even if it is true that, biologically speaking, humans could be more successful if they turned energy and spending away from companion animals and instead directed it at their relatives, it does not follow that this is the right thing to do from an ethical perspective. There is no ethical imperative to spread our genes more effectively than we already do – perhaps rather the opposite.

The other way in which one may try to answer Archer is by arguing that the reason why he cannot see significant benefits in terms of biological fitness from keeping pets is that he has not looked hard enough. Archer himself would be sympathetic to this reply, since he clearly admits that the available evidence on the matter is incomplete. And he suggests that there may be some 'additional benefits that are hard to quantify, such as the contribution to children's psychological development, longer-term effects on self-esteem and well-being, and the facilitation of social interactions with other humans' (Archer, 1997: p. 254).

There are a number of other hypotheses about how keeping of companion animals may possibly affect the biological fitness of their owners. One is that keeping companion animals serves as a social buffer against the negative health effects of psychosocial stress. Another is that looking after a companion animal gives future parents experience that will be useful in caring for their own offspring. (See Serpell and Paul (2011) for more on this.) In Chapter 3, we will review some of the literature concerning the potential benefits of keeping companion animals.

From the perspective of biological fitness, it is not, at present, possible to give a final verdict on the value to humanity of keeping companion animals. However, there is no doubt that, throughout history, dogs and cats living with human beings as companions have found an important biological niche. How well they are looked after is another question that will occupy us in many of the following chapters.

Key Points

- Keeping animals as companions is a widely practiced part of human life found throughout most human history and across the globe.
- A possible exception to this is medieval and early modern Europe, where attitudes of affection and closeness towards animal companions were less accepted; this gradually changed in Europe and other parts of the Western world from the seventeenth century onwards.

- By the mid-twentieth century, the companion animal sector had expanded significantly, and the lives of animal companions had become considerably more structured and heavily influenced by people in terms of breeding, training and diet.
- Over the last 50 years, we have witnessed a further dramatic expansion of the companion animal sector, with substantial increases in numbers of dogs and cats kept as companions (though declines in some other pets) and the typical owner not only spending a significant part of his or her *money* on commercial food and veterinary and other services, but also investing more *time* in their companion animals.
- Whether companion animals benefit their owners or whether they are effectively social parasites is still the subject of debate, but from the perspective of biological fitness, it is not, at present, possible to give a final verdict on the value to humanity of keeping companion animals.
- However, there is no doubt that, through history, humans have created an important new biological niche for companion dogs and cats.

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