PERSPECTIVES IN ETHOLOGY

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Edited by

P. P. G. Bateson

*Sub-Department of Animal Behaviour
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, England*

and

Peter H. Klopfer

*Department of Zoology
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina*

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PREFACE

In the early days of ethology, most of the major developments were in the realm of ideas and in the framework in which animal behavior was studied. Much of the evidence was anecdotal, much of the thinking intuitive. As the subject developed, theories had to be tested, language had to become more public than it had been, and quantitative descriptions had to replace the preliminary qualitative accounts. That is the way a science develops; hard-headed analysis follows soft-headed synthesis. There are limits, though, to the usefulness of this trend. The requirement to be quantitative can mean that easy measures are chosen at the expense of representing the complexly patterned nature of a phenomenon. All too easily the process of data collection becomes a trivial exercise in describing the obvious or the irrelevant.

Editors and their referees require authors to maintain high standards of evidence and avoid undue speculation—in short, to maintain professional respectability. In the main, this process is admirable and necessary, but somewhere along the line perspective is lost and a body of knowledge, with all the preconceptions and intellectual baggage that comes with it, becomes formally established. New ideas are treated as though they were subversive agents—as indeed they often are. Radical or novel theories must be fully formed if they are not to be laughed to scorn, and as new ideas peep out of the ground in the conceptual flowerbed, it is easy enough to shout “Weeds!” and dig them up by the roots. Embryonic ideas which have tremendous potential may not be easily distinguishable from embryonic nonsense. So what is to be done? We believe that occasionally the upholders of standards in a discipline—heads of departments, editors, referees, grant-giving agencies, and so on—should be rather more permissive than is their custom and should encourage the development of new theories within a subject, even though the initial attempts may be vulnerable to attack.

Feeling as we do, we could, of course, have attempted to persuade heads of departments, editors, etc., to relax their constraints on the would-be theorist. Instead, we have attempted to encourage some scientists whose work we knew about to let their hair down a little and write in a less inhibited way

than they would normally if they were writing for straight journals in the field of animal behavior. Five of the articles in this volume were commissioned on topics which we suggested to the authors. The remaining three were submitted to us when word got around that we were interested in encouraging some fresh thinking. The manuscripts which arrived on our desks by the deadline were extremely diverse. Some were orthodox reviews and some were written in a style that approached blank verse. We were faced with a problem entirely of our own making. What standards should *we* apply? It is all too easy to modify and criticize in the manner of conventional editors and referees. But to do that would be to violate the principles on which the whole project was first launched. Coherence and consistency might seem obvious criteria to apply, and yet to insist on normality in these respects might emasculate an author's argument. Well, we have compromised uneasily. Where necessary, we have attempted to persuade an author to make himself intelligible to us, but left him with the option of going his own way. The formula is obviously messy, and we have no confidence that we shall please everybody. However, if we encourage some liberalizing of thought in ethology and, more tangibly, lead others to develop their ideas in print, this volume will have achieved its object.

P. P. G. Bateson
Peter H. Klopfer

ADVICE TO POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTORS

When we assembled these articles, it was with the thought that this volume might become the first in a series. The need for theoretical and speculative treatment of developments in ethology cannot be satisfied by this single present collection of essays. Furthermore, we are conscious that the range and character of material published here were very much affected by our own contacts and knowledge. Obviously, the preparation of other volumes and the time of their appearance will depend in part on the response to the present one. Nevertheless, if potential contributors to the putative series have ideas which they would like to develop, we should be grateful if they contact one of us at the addresses given below for further advice and for guidance on the preparation of manuscripts. If we do proceed, it will be with the same understanding as before, that articles will appear within a fixed and reasonably short period of time after submission. If this volume does mark the start of a series, it is our intention that it be a series that stimulates and directs new lines of research rather than chronicles the past.

Dr. P. P. G. Bateson
Sub-Department of Animal
Behaviour
High Street, Madingley
Cambridge CB3 8AA, England

Dr. Peter H. Klopfer
Department of Zoology
Duke University
Durham, North Carolina 27706
U.S.A.

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