

Parental Love

The evolutionary approach suggests that parental love--watching over young--makes urgent sense. Parental care allows more young to survive. If parents protect their young, the young can grow bigger before they have to fend for themselves. A baboon can even inherit its mother's status in the troop and an adult female black bear can use her mother's territory while her mother is still occupying it. A young animal can learn survival practices while safely under the protection of its parent. Perhaps--this is debated--the parent even teaches it some of those things.

Not all creatures protect their young. A turtle lays eggs in the sand and departs. Presumably it would not recognize, let alone love, its offspring. But if an animal lays eggs and guards them, as crocodiles do, there must be something that motivates it to do so, and then prevents it from eating the young when they hatch. This might not necessarily be love--it could be brought about by such simple mechanisms as an inhibition against eating eggs and young crocodiles. But expressing care may be evidence of feeling love. Crocodiles also dig their young out of the nest when they hatch, guard the babies, carry them in their jaws, and respond vigorously to their distress calls. Females of a southeast Asian diadem butterfly apparently guard their eggs by standing over them. This probably increases their chances of survival. However, a female will sometimes continue this behavior even unto death, her rotted corpse standing guard over a batch of as yet unhatched eggs.

Mother wolf spiders not only tend their eggs but carry their babies on their backs. Perhaps the babies need to learn hunting skills. More likely, they just need protection while they grow. J. T. Moggridge tells the story of a trap-door spider he had collected and decided to preserve in alcohol. While he knew that spiders twitched for a long time after being put in alcohol, it was then believed that this was mere reflex action. Moggridge shook the baby spiders off her back and dropped her into alcohol. After a while, supposing her to be "dead to sense," he dropped her twenty-four babies in too. To his horror, the mother spider reached out her legs, folded the babies beneath her, and clasped them until she died. After this, Moggridge switched to the use of chloroform.

Can a spider love her babies? Was it a mere reflex that caused the trap-door spider to reach for her young? In this case it seems possible, but it is hard to be certain. One can imagine a simple instinct to draw close to anything that looks like a baby spider. Or she might have seized any objects that happened to be floating in the alcohol. A mother wolf spider is just as kind to strange baby wolf spiders as to her own. This might or might not be accompanied by an emotional state.

Does a spider love its eggs, something the writer John Crompton compares to loving a box of billiard balls? It is so hard to have insight into a spider's mind that it is almost impossible to guess, based on present knowledge. Yet spiders have evolved to produce complex venoms and digestive fluids, and spin silks of varying types from six different kinds of silk glands. Building a spider's web is an extremely complicated behavior. One can argue that a spider is not really a simple organism and that the development of maternal love might well be a shorter evolutionary step than web building. Perhaps one day we will know. What if it was discovered that when a mother wolf spider sees young spiders, her body is flooded with a hormone whose presence is

associated with feelings of love in higher animals? Would that be evidence that the spider loves her young? What if it was a hormone peculiar to spiders? Would that mean it wasn't love?

When trying to comprehend the inner lives of creatures so unlike us, it is more useful and accurate to think not of a hierarchy with human beings at the top, but of a spectrum of creature commonality. A spider might have a rich inner life with a riot of emotions including some so different that using our own emotional range as a touchstone can only fail us.

While the question of whether a spider can feel parental love is baffling, there seems little doubt for "higher" animals. Their behavior is so complex that to dismiss it as the exclusive result of inhibitions, reflexes, and fixed action patterns is patently inadequate. Parental care manifests itself in feeding the young, washing them, playing with them, and protecting them from external dangers....