

My conclusion? When it comes to our relationship with animals, we're all a little crazy, deluded, reductive and rationalizing. And yes, that includes you vegans.

Herzog, a psychology professor at Western Carolina University, is an expert in human-animal relations. He has participated in lab research that involved the killing of insects and reptiles, studied the fads for owning various dog breeds, visited slaughterhouses and interviewed hunters. He has read up on American vegetarianism, and knows that more people claim the mantle than actually abstain from eating meat.

From this searching comes an engagingly written book that only *seems* to be about animals. Herzog's deepest questions are about men, women and children -- even the kids who torture kittens and frogs. (They might not be as likely to become abusive adults as you've been told.) He considers the evolution of attitudes about pets, noting that "for most of human history, nonhuman animals have been considered 'them' and were treated accordingly. This is no longer the case."

That's on Page 56 -- where Herzog notes that "Americans collectively spend enough on their pets each year to pay the college tuition for 350,000 needy high school seniors, or, if you prefer, the salaries of 80,000 street cops."

Through his anthro-zoological lens, Herzog frames the wonder of the human psyche. We often rely on what cognitive psychologists call "heuristics" -- a process of mental shortcutting that rests on intuition.

So an emergency room doc uses her gut to quickly distinguish a heart attack from indigestion. That's heuristics in a useful form. Moral heuristics, however, can lead us astray. Herzog tells a story of the bereaved father of a little boy who fell into a crocodile's cage. The next

night, the father slipped into the croc's zoo enclosure and gunned it down.

One of the pleasures here is Herzog's comfort with paradox. He understands the grief-stricken father's thirst for revenge, while giving equal weight to the notion that the encaged croc hardly deserves to die for following its nature.

Herzog takes that spirit of fairness and inquiry into the world of poultry fights. He presents an unflinching depiction of cockfights, and the many upstanding citizens who enjoy them. His question, then, is how those same folks, whom many of us would otherwise welcome as neighbors, can place bets on which bird will successfully cut the other to death with steel blades strapped to its legs.

The territory Herzog tries to cover is almost too wide. His approach serves the book's subtitle: "Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals." But he's a thoughtful enough writer that I would have gladly read deeper on almost any one section of the book.

Meanwhile, I look anew at my 140-pound Newfoundland, wondering how the Chinese ever could have experimented with raising this very breed for -- ugh -- meat. Yet I can't help but acknowledge that her big brown eyes are no more or less soulful than that of the average burger-bound steer.

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