

Our conflicted relationship with animals

Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard to Think Straight About Animals

by Hal Herzog

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Attitudes to animals are strongly held and hotly contested. In *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat*, psychologist Hal Herzog opens up the new field of anthrozoology, the study of how humans interact with other animals. Showing wide sympathy with all the actors in this drama, he draws attention to the inconsistency of our views.

Herzog strives for what philosopher Strachan Donnelley called “the troubled middle”. He argues that moral absolutes are not readily available in a complex world — one that exists in shades of grey, rather than the black and white of animal activists and their opponents. Those who adopt the centre ground are not fence-sitters, Herzog says. Instead, “moral quagmires are inevitable in a species with a huge brain and a big heart”.

Cats are a good example of our conflicted attitudes. They share our homes, and



Cat owners favour their pet's freedom over its prey.

experiments on cats are a prime focus of animal-rights extremists. Yet these cute carnivores cause countless bird and rodent deaths each year, even when well fed. Pet cats in the United States consume 4.5 million kilograms of animal flesh in cat food every day. In one study, three-quarters of a group of cat owners who

were informed about their pets' destruction of songbirds said that they would still let their cats play outdoors.

Herzog has a clear eye for the essence of a scientific study, but he leavens his narrative with illuminating personal stories and self-deprecating humour. He offers a vivid account of his job in a chemical ecology lab, when he found himself unable to follow instructions to boil a mouse alive to collect samples from its skin. His accounts of cock fights in the mountains of North Carolina are full of wit and relevant detail, and he lets the breeders, gamblers and protestors speak for themselves. Herzog concludes that he would rather be raised as a fighting rooster than as a battery chicken headed for the cooking pot. He takes the same nuanced approach with vegan animal-rights activists, neither demeaning nor endorsing them.

Herzog's acknowledgement of complexity puts him in a good position to try to understand pet keeping. Could this unique human characteristic be adaptive, such that pets serve useful functions? Or are they parasites? Herzog concludes that there is no need to assume the myth of single causation. Pets can have many purposes: some adaptive, others less so.

The author's sympathy will not save him from the ire of those with black-and-white attitudes. Vegetarians will not appreciate studies relating vegetarianism in teenage girls to eating disorders. He will get no thanks from the 70% of animal-rights activists who feel that avoiding animal products in clothing should be a top priority for their movement, yet wear leather themselves. Some biomedical scientists will be annoyed by Herzog's belief that the truth about the contribution of animal experimentation to medicine is "somewhere in between" the claims of anti-vivisectionists and animal experimenters.

Herzog contextualizes attitudes to research

using animals in the jaws of a Darwinian dilemma. On the one hand, lab animals are useful to science because shared descent with humans implies important similarities in biological function. On the other, this common ancestry carries with it the possibility of shared perceptions, emotions, intentions and — most worryingly — pain and suffering. In a chapter that covers the different moral status of mice in different locations in a research facility, and the inability of animal-ethics committees at different institutions to reach consistent conclusions about identical studies, Herzog ends up only partially endorsing animal research: "Yes, I would swap a million mice to wipe out

dengue. But ... for a treatment for baldness? Or erectile dysfunction? Probably not."

The book's ending initially seemed disappointing — our attitudes, behaviour and relationships with the animals in our lives are "more complicated than we thought". But Herzog is right to hold back from offering glib solutions to complex issues. The troubled middle may be the best resting place we have. ■

Clive Wynne is a professor of psychology at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida 32601, USA, and professor as an international scholar at Kyung Hee University, South Korea. He is the author of *Do Animals Think?*
e-mail: wynne@ufl.edu