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Eat, Love, Hate

Hal Herzog. *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals.* New York: HarperCollins, 2010. 336pp. \$25.99 pb.

“Why is it so hard to think about animals?” asks Herzog in the introduction to the book. We are, as he cogently argues, highly inconsistent in our dealings with animals — as the title of the book makes plain. There are indeed some animals we love, with whom we share our lives and affections; there are others we hate, or fear, and try to exterminate; there are still others destined for food. And this is not only a distinction of how we use different species: individuals of one species may be treated quite differently by humans in various contexts. Think, for example, of horses, who are pets as well as partners in competition in my household, but are seen as a primary source of food in other places. Or mice, who can become our saviors when they bear our diseases in medical research, or — perhaps in the same lab — can be pests bringing in unwanted diseases.

Herzog explores the myriad paradoxes in human dealings with animals, from cockerels to cats to cows. Our dealings with other species often (perhaps usually) defy logic. In his introduction, he tells the stories of people who choose to eat some animals and not others, making apparently arbitrary decisions; of the colleague who woke up one day and released his caged cockatiel, as he now felt it to be wrong (and despite realizing that she would probably not survive), of the implications for his own family keeping a pet snake — who would need to eat. Herzog faced this dilemma when an animal rights activist asked him about his pet boa constrictor, saying that she had heard that he was feeding kittens to his snake. That provocative question made him sit up and think hard about how we make ethical distinctions with regard to animals. What, he asks, is morally preferable — keeping a predator who eats canned meat or one who eats small animal carcasses? To some, it might seem preferable to feed the bodies of kittens that had been killed by the local animal shelter, than to give the snake other pet animals (such as the mice some snake owners might buy from the pet shop). But how and why do we decide what is ethical?

Herzog is, undeniably, right that we are morally inconsistent in our thinking about other animals — even (or perhaps especially) those of us who work in animal studies or activism. I do not deny that I live with predators — I share the house with three dogs — and if they do manage to kill a rabbit or a hare I am upset. Yet I also know that two of them are hunters — one is a greyhound, and one a lurcher (the third one is a border

collie, bred to chase sheep instead). I am a lifelong vegetarian, yet I know that if the doctor prescribes any medicines for me, they will have been tested on animals.

Herzog has also long been working in animal studies, and tells us of how he became increasingly fascinated by these moral inconsistencies. How, he ponders, can so many people (he cites 60 % of Americans) believe both that animals have the right to live and also that people have the right to eat them? He explores a wide variety of issues and data — from purported connections between cruelty to animals and violence to people, to the paradox of Nazi animal protectionism, to our relationships with dogs, to hunting and cockfighting — just about all our dealings with other species are profoundly complex. Our behavior toward other species, and the language we use to describe them, betray our deep ambivalences. Herzog notes the extensive euphemisms we use — we talk about “culling” or “sacrifice,” rather than killing lab animals, for example.

Take one example from the many that Herzog examines — cockfighting. Illegal both here in Britain and in many states of the US, it persists underground. It is also loathed by many people, who consider the bloody practice of pitting cocks against each other to be abhorrent. Driving on a very hot day to a meeting with someone who keeps fighting cocks, Herzog passes a large truck, stacked with crates packed to the brim with live chickens, bound for the slaughterhouse. Working out the cage numbers, he calculates “that’s over 1000 animals on each truck, the chickens crammed together like anchovies packed in a jar of oil.” And however gruesome the cockfight might be, he realizes, many, many more chickens end their lives in this kind of transportation misery (and often inhumane slaughter), to contribute to the “six-piece McNugget Happy Meal” just down the road (150).

Herzog recounts how he managed to befriend people who were cockfighters, and was trusted enough to be allowed to attend. Cockfighting is taken very seriously by practitioners; they maintain bloodlines as carefully as the horse racing industry, and run the fights according to strict protocol. More relevant, though, is that they do not consider what they do to be cruel. They emphasize that the fight is only the culmination of a long period of caring for the animal. One fighter told Herzog: “You will never find a nicer group of people. Where else can you go where that much money changes hands on a nod without any controversy? Cockers are gentlemen” (163-64). And these are men who claim to “love their chickens.” They provide them with “the best” food, the best housing, and daily care.

Cockfighting illustrates well the complex relationships we have with other animals. It may indeed end in a vicious bloodbath, but the life of the gamecock until that time is, Herzog notes, rather more comfortable than that of the average broiler chicken — who lives and dies in unimaginable squalor and discomfort. This is not to exonerate the fights; rather, it is to emphasize that how we require animals to live matters, perhaps as much as how we impose their manner and time of death. Cockfighting is, moreover, an example of how human relationships with animals play out within the context of human social divisions — gender and social class, for instance. Not only are cockers almost entirely men, but cockfighting is seen by many to epitomize poor, rural, working-class communities — unlike some other sports using animals. “Like cockfighting,” notes Herzog, “horse racing represents a confluence of gambling and suffering. But unlike cockfighting, thoroughbreds are the passtime (sic) of the rich” (172).

Some we Love, Some we Hate, Some we Eat ranges widely, drawing on many different examples of our bewildering ambiguities about other animals. The style of writing is friendly, drawing on many anecdotes: Herzog often recounts tales of animals who helped him to unravel human stories, or of particular people he has met whose beliefs about animals illustrate the paradoxes. He tells, for example, of how his Labrador, Molly, inadvertently allowed him to discover the clandestine world of cockfighting; deciding to cure Molly of chasing chickens, he sought some of his own, and met a breeder of game cocks in the process. Or he tells contrasting stories of people living with animals: the bond may work well, and provide person (and perhaps the animal) with companionship and quality of life — or it may fail. Sarah, an administrator at a veterinary hospital, for instance, wanted a dog, but when she and her husband acquired two animals, they rapidly became the “dogs from hell”; eventually, the marriage could not take the strain.

The many anecdotes make for “a good read”; they bring a personal touch. To read about Sarah, or Nancy, or Molly, is to contemplate real people, and real animals — and the dilemmas of real-life decisions. The easygoing style means that the book will have popular appeal — even while it engages with a set of really thorny issues. Herzog weaves between the paradoxes well, forcing us to confront ambivalences we probably knew we had, and to realize others we did not know about. And he connects these moral inconsistencies to other, wider, questions. One example is his discussion of gender (a theme he has written about also in the research literature in human-animal

studies). Gender undoubtedly has an impact on our behavior toward animals: women outnumber men in animal activism, and are more likely to become animal hoarders. Sadistic abusers of animals, on the other hand, are more likely to be men. Yet there is also plenty of overlap; some women shoot animals to death in hunting (seen as a masculine endeavor); many men work hard in animal protection (sometimes seen as a female preserve). And despite gender stereotypes, there is actually little scientific evidence to differentiate women and men in terms of attitudes, he suggests.

It is just those abilities to make connections while appealing to a wider public and at the same time asking awkward questions that make this a noteworthy book. It poses many questions that are not asked often enough. Take one example, from an issue I am particularly interested in — what happens in animal labs. Herzog points out the contrast between “good” mice (those intended for research) and “bad” mice (those, usually escapees, who run wild and are seen as pests). He explores, too, the (considerable) variability of judgments from different institutional ethical committees on the same experimental protocols. And he discusses in detail the legal framework in the United States, which makes a distinction that is completely incomprehensible to anyone living in the United Kingdom: in US law controlling animal research, rats, mice and birds don’t count as animals.

That attention to fine details of our moral distinctions is a strength of this book. It is one thing to be an advocate for animals, or an animal rights activist; it is quite another to think through and confront the incoherency of many of our ethical positions. I found Hal Herzog’s discussions of his own personal ambivalences about our use of animals refreshing. He does not shy away from admitting his own unease and difficulties — so exposing himself to criticism for precisely the inconsistency that forms the focus of the book. The easygoing style of writing, too, introduces readers to many complex philosophical and scientific issues. The book has evidently been widely picked up and its issues discussed in the media, so that it reaches a wider public than many of our academic journals can. Its accessibility makes it appealing to many people outside the narrow frames of human-animal studies or animal activism, and its many anecdotes of our inconsistent behavior provides a good base for teaching and discussing questions of moral ambiguity and decision-making.

That said, I have some reservations. First, the style is certainly easygoing. Yet it is precisely that quality that I sometimes found difficult. Of course, that is partly because it is not intended to be academic, and I am a university professor: I always want to check sources, and find it frustrating when they are not supplied except as generalized

further reading (as is the case here). But I also felt that the style did not quite work for readers outside North America. Any references to American baseball or popular culture go right over my head, and the particular kind of culturally specific, jokey, writing sometimes fall flat for me. Perhaps I am alone in this, and I'd be interested to see how my students in the UK react. It would be a pity if they were to miss the point of the debate because they couldn't quite "get" the text.

I also had reservations about the discussions of vegetarianism — and I have no doubt that Hal Herzog will smile when he reads this. As a vegetarian, I have had many times to confront the challenges: you can't get enough protein; the diet is bland; you are hypocritical because you don't eat animals but you do live with dogs..... etc. etc. etc. I refuse to be intimidated by them. But I did feel that the several discussions of vegetarians who had given up and begun to love raw steak, or who had become ill or anorexic, a little irritating. To be sure, I've met ex-vegetarians who tell me they didn't feel healthy enough: then I find out they are lousy (or lazy) cooks who paid no heed to a balanced diet.

It was, I think, the references to vegetarianism that made me wonder if there was an underlying question that assumed that we can arrive at a morally consistent positioning. Certainly, these are good examples of our confusions; yet I ended up feeling that there was a subtext — "why be veggie?" — which I found at odds with the open-mindedness Herzog displays in his approach to so many of the issues raised here. Too often, it seemed, the book was emphasizing ways in which vegetarianism falls short of some ideal. Yet can we ever achieve an ethically pure stance? I doubt it. I know full well that taking any moral position cannot be done absolutely, and that almost everything that we do means compromise. That does not, however, mean that I want to take no moral position. Inconsistent? Hypocritical? Perhaps, but maybe a pragmatic and partial position is the best we can do.

My second problem is that, while Herzog notes that species differences matter, at least some of our collective ambivalence arise precisely because of our ingrained habit of generalizing to "animals." One reason why "it's hard to think straight about animals" is that "animals" is such a catch-all word. Sometimes, and for some species or individuals, we move "the animal" into our human family — whether that is dogs living literally within our family home, or primates who we come to realize have cognitive abilities "like ours." Some of the dilemmas Herzog documents arise when we disagree, or

cannot make up our minds, about where (or if) boundaries might be drawn; it is practically impossible to be consistent about “animals” when we often make decisions about particular individuals or species, or in relation to specific (human) uses. One example: Herzog suggests that “[i]f you really want to know how people feel about the treatment of animals, follow the money” (40). He then goes on to note the large sums of money given to animal protection organizations, but notes that far more money is put into killing animals — buying hunting supplies, the meat industry, pest control, and so on. We are inconsistent about “animals” in part because we make distinctions between them.

It is almost impossible to avoid collapsing species variation into the generic animal — in Herzog’s book, or, indeed, in this review. But it is an issue which human-animal studies needs to grapple with more explicitly — and which I would like to have seen brought out more in this book, if only to clarify when we are being inconsistent about “animals” or about specific species or types. What is being accomplished when we use the animal word?

Quibbles aside, what the book acknowledges is how so many of us feel a deep need and connection to the nonhumans around us. Herzog’s book will no doubt have popular appeal for that very reason: but, as he notes, what we also learn from these studies is the very complexity of our attitudes towards others (be they others of any species, including our own). The anomalies and contradictions are, he concludes, inevitable, and they reveal that “...our...relationships with the animals in our lives—the ones we love, the ones we hate, and the ones we eat—are....more complicated than we thought” (279). There is plenty of work, then, to be done in animal studies and animal activism if we are to understand those contradictions.