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Is Speciesism Inevitable?

Hal Herzog, *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals*. NY: Harper. 336 pp. $25.99 hb.

"I only care about humans, apes, and dogs."

After hearing a relative make the above remark, I pondered several questions. First: *why* would someone care about only humans, nonhuman apes, and dogs? Then: how could his perspective be so common as to be *unsurprising* to most people? Do most people's thinking about, and behaviors toward, different animal species reflect logically defensible reasoning or intuitions that are never closely scrutinized? Which *should* they reflect?

In *Some We Love…*, Hal Herzog, a distinguished scholar of human-animal relations, discusses research and theory on human thinking about, and attitudes towards, animals. Three (often implicit) themes recur: (a) humans' thinking about nonhuman animals (hereafter "animals") tends to be both speciesist and illogical;[1] (b) for the most part, there is no moral problem with such speciesist thinking and behaving; and (c) such thinking and behaving are inevitable. On (a), Herzog and I agree. Ultimately, however, I believe that although the Herzog introduces important ideas to readers, his conclusions regarding points b) and c) provide an unjustifiably narrow view of human behavioral capacities and are likely to reinforce speciesism.

There are two major strengths of the book. First, Herzog introduces readers to many illogical, speciesist aspects of humans' relations with animals and to their harmful consequences. Second, Herzog discusses a wide range of biological, psychological, and social factors (henceforth "biopsychosocial") behind our thoughts about and behavior towards animals. For example, as Herzog explains, there are approximately 65,000 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish, but humans care about only a few of them. Further, people do not select these favored few based on logical criteria. Instead, one of the most powerful factors is the "cuteness" of the animal. Herzog relies on evolutionary psychology to explain this common finding: animals that look like human infants (e.g., large faces, foreheads, and eyes) are given more favorable treatment than animals that appear less attractive to humans (the "cute response"). Such a preference was necessary for our species' survival, but it unfortunately plays a role in the exploitation of animals that we do not find cute. Herzog notes also the widespread public opposition to

cockfighting, but not to meat eating, noting that "thousands of times" (150) more chickens have died due to humans' food preferences than to cockfighting, and that "it is hard to deny that there is less suffering caused by cockfighting than by our apparently irresistible demand for chicken flesh" (170). Herzog takes up the ethics and biopsychosocial factors regarding several other practices, including pet-keeping, animal research, and meat consumption. I applaud him for introducing these issues to readers and covering them both thoroughly and engagingly.

Unfortunately, throughout the book, Herzog reinforces the notions that there is no problem with illogical, speciesist thinking, and that it is impossible to overcome speciesist thinking, anyway. There are speciesist statements throughout the book, including, for example, "I would sacrifice a lot of mice to find a cure for cancer" (11) and his belief that such research is "perfectly reasonable" (219). However, his most powerful and disappointing statement comes on the last page. After discussing the logical contradictions in humans' thinking about animals, Herzog concludes, "I have come to believe that these sorts of contradictions are not anomalies or hypocrisies. Rather, they are *inevitable.* And *evidence of our humanity*" (279, emphasis added). Herzog's view that non-speciesism is doomed to fail is also reflected in his coverage of vegetarianism (a non-speciesist diet). For example, the three sections on vegetarianism are titled: "The case of meat-eating vegetarians," "Meat avoidance and eating disorders: the dark side of vegetarianism," and "Why do most vegetarians return to eating meat?" In passing, the reader will find a positive statement about vegetarianism (e.g., health benefits), but the bulk of the discussion comprises unbalanced negativity. Finally, Herzog is surprisingly hostile towards those fighting to end speciesism. For example, he refers to Joan Dunayer's nonspeciesist ideology as "foolish" (254) and believes she is merely "caught in the grip of a theory." It is not clear why Herzog takes such a partisan, speciesist approach. Insofar as the goal of the book was to introduce the study of human-animal relations to readers, taking such a partisan approach seems unnecessary. In fact, there is the risk that providing such unbalanced coverage will interfere with the reader's ability to form his or her own views.

I believe Herzog's coverage of speciesist thinking is not only unbalanced but also misleading. Specifically, I challenge Herzog's claim that illogical, speciesist thinking is "inevitable" (279). My challenge relies on the combination of three lines of theory and research. First, there is evidence that as result of evolution, humans feel empathy towards victims being harmed and/or treated unfairly (e.g., De Waal, Altruism"; Haidt & Joseph, "Intuitive Ethics"). Second, it is clear that this empathy can be directed towards animals (e.g., Furnham, "Personality"; Hills, "motivational Bases"). Third,

leading theorists argue that evolution has armed us with tremendous (although not infinite) flexibility in our thinking, feeling, and behaving (Buss, "Human nature and culture"; De Waal, *Our inner ape*). By combining these three points, I believe the human capacity for empathy can be directed towards animals and that this empathy can motivate human beings to re-examine their beliefs and practices. Indeed, it is hard to reconcile the existence of approximately two million American vegans (e.g., 2009 Harris Interactive poll) with Herzog's claim that illogical, speciesist thinking is inevitable. The flexibility that evolution has equipped us with has likely enabled a wide range of beliefs about and practices involving animals — ranging from severe exploitation to compassion. It would seem more realistic to argue that a nonspeciesist,[2] vegan life philosophy is within the reach (but perhaps on the outer edge) of human evolutionary capacity, although severe animal exploitation is also within our evolutionary capacity.

With these two opposing capacities and with the extent of unnecessary animal exploitation and suffering also in mind, I believe it is the responsibility of social scientists to research and report the factors necessary for bringing out the compassionate, empathic elements of human nature. Specifically, they ought to determine what environmental circumstances are necessary to activate and maintain humans' evolved capacity for empathy towards animals. An additional (and related) objective ought to be determining how to reduce speciesism by utilizing what they have learned about other forms of prejudice, attitudes, and persuasion. Unfortunately, Herzog's view on the inevitability of illogical, speciesist thinking may have precluded him from raising such issues. As a consequence, readers are unlikely to realize the critical role social scientists can play in reducing humans' speciesist thinking.
In short, I praise Herzog for raising many important issues and for covering relevant social science engagingly. However, I believe the conclusions he draws are more likely to reinforce than to challenge speciesist thinking and exploitative behavior. Unfortunately, readers are likely to view humans' thinking as hopelessly speciesist rather than to realize the power they have to reduce if not overcome their speciesism.

Notes

1. Despite the subtitle of the book, Herzog neither states what "thinking straight" about animals means nor describes what behaviors it would entail. In the review, I offer my understanding of his usage of the term. I use the term "speciesist" to describe the view

that an individual's worthiness of moral consideration depends on the species to which he or she belongs (Singer, *Animal Liberation*).

2. Whether it is more accurate to describe vegans as "low in speciesism" rather than "nonspeciesist" is unclear. However, Herzog appears to conceptualize speciesist thinking merely dichotomously (either present or not present — and in all cases, it is present). I believe there is much more meaningful variation in such thinking, and social scientists can play a critical role in reducing speciesist thinking, thus sparing many animals from exploitation

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