SOME WE LOVE,
SOME WE HATE,
SOME WE EAT
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SOME WE HATE,
SOME WE EAT

Why It’s So Hard to Think
Straight About Animals

Hal Herzog
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Why Is It So Hard to Think Straight About Animals?

I like pondering our relationships with animals because they tell a lot about who we are. —MARC BEKOFF

The way we think about other species often defies logic. Consider Judith Black. When she was twelve, Judith decided that it was wrong to kill animals just because they taste good. But what exactly is an animal? While it is obvious that dogs and cats and cows and pigs are animals, it was equally clear to Judith that fish were not. They just didn’t feel like animals to her. So for the next fifteen years, this intuitive biological classification system enabled Judith, who has a PhD in anthropology, to think of herself as a vegetarian, yet still experience the joys of smoked Copper River salmon and lemon-grilled swordfish.

This twisted moral taxonomy worked fine until Judith ran into Joseph Weldon, a graduate student in biology. When they first met, Joseph, himself a meat eater, tried to convince Judith that there is not a shred of moral difference between eating a Cornish hen and a Chilean sea bass. After
all, he reasoned, both birds and fish are vertebrates, have brains, and lead social lives. Despite his best efforts, he failed to convince her that from a culinary ethics perspective, a cod is a chicken is a cow.

Fortunately, their disagreement over the moral status of mahi mahi did not prevent them from falling in love. They married, and her new husband kept the fish-versus-fowl discussion going over the dinner table. After three years of philosophical to-and-fro, Judith sighed one evening and gave in: “OK, I see your point. Fish are animals.”

But now she faced a difficult decision: She could either quit eating fish, or stop thinking of herself as a vegetarian. Something had to give. A week later, friends invited Joseph to a grouse hunt. Though he had no experience with a shotgun, he somehow managed to hit a bird on the fly, and, in grand caveman tradition, showed up at home, dead carcass in hand. Joseph then proceeded to pluck and cook the grouse, which he proudly served to his wife for dinner along with wild rice and a lovely raspberry sauce.

In an instant, fifteen years of moral high ground went down the drain. (“I am a sucker for raspberries,” Judith told me.) The taste of roasted grouse opened the floodgates and there was no going back. Within a week, she was chowing down on cheeseburgers. Judith had joined the ranks of ex-vegetarians, a club that outnumbers current vegetarians in the United States by a ratio of three to one.

Then there is Jim Thompson, a twenty-five-year-old doctoral student in mathematics who was working on his dissertation when I met him. Before beginning graduate school, Jim had worked in a poultry research laboratory in Lexington, Kentucky, where one of his jobs consisted of dispatching baby chicks at the end of the experiments. For a while, this posed no problem for Jim. However, things changed one day when he was looking for a magazine to read on a plane and his mother handed him a copy of The Animals’ Agenda, a magazine that advocated animal rights. He never ate meat again.

That was just the start. Over the next couple of months, Jim quit wearing leather shoes, and he pressured his girlfriend to go veg. He even began
to question the morality of keeping pets, including his beloved white cockatiel. One afternoon Jim looked at the bird flitting around her cage in his living room, and a little voice in his head whispered, “This is wrong.” Gently, he carried the bird into his backyard. He said good-bye and released the cockatiel into the gray skies of Raleigh, North Carolina. It was a great feeling, he told me. “Amazing!” But then he sheepishly added, “I knew she wouldn’t survive, that she probably starved. I guess I was doing it for myself more than for her.”

Our relationships with animals can also be emotionally complicated. Twenty years ago, Carolyn fell head over heels for an 1,100-pound manatee. She had applied for a job—any job—at a small natural history museum in central Florida. The museum had an opening; they were looking for a caregiver for a thirty-year-old sea cow named Snooty. Carolyn had no experience working with marine mammals, but they offered her the position anyway. She did not know that her life was about to change.

On the phylogenetic scale, Snooty falls somewhere between the Creature from the Black Lagoon and Yoda. When Carolyn introduced me to him, Snooty hooked his flippers over the edge of his pool, hoisted his head two feet out of the water, and looked me straight in the eye, checking me out. While his brain was smaller than a softball, he seemed oddly wise. I found the experience unnerving. Not Carolyn. She was in love.

For over two decades, Carolyn’s life revolved around Snooty. She spent nearly every day with him, even coming around to visit on her days off. Food was a major part of their relationship. Manatees are vegetarians, and Carolyn fed him by hand—120 pounds of leafy green vegetables, mostly lettuce, every day.

But life with an aging sea cow has its downside. Snooty adored Carolyn as much as she doted on him. When she and her husband would sneak off for a week or two of vacation, Snooty would get in a funk and quit eating. All too often, Carolyn would get a call saying that Snooty was off his feed again, and she would rush back to gently ply him with a couple of bushels of iceberg lettuce.
At some point, Carolyn gave up going on vacations. That’s when her husband accused her of having her priorities screwed up, of loving a half-ton blob of blubber and muscle more than she loved him.

**IS IT WRONG TO FEED KITTENS TO BOA CONSTRICTORS?**

As a research psychologist, I have been studying human-animal relationships for twenty years, and I have found that the quirky thinking when it comes to animals that we see in Judith, Jim, and Carolyn is not the exception but the rule. I began to think seriously about the inconsistencies in our relationships with other species one sunny September morning when I got a phone call from my friend Sandy. At the time, I was an animal behaviorist and Sandy was an animal rights activist who taught at my university.

“Hal, I heard that you were picking up kittens from the Jackson County animal shelter and feeding them to a snake. Is it true?”

I was completely taken aback.

“Arrgh. What are you talking about? We do have a pet snake, but he is just a baby. He could not possibly swallow a kitten. And I like cats. Even if he were bigger, I would NEVER let him eat a cat.”

Sandy apologized profusely. She said she figured the charge was not true, but that she just had to check. I told her I understood, but would appreciate it if she would assure her animal protection pals that I was not dipping into our community’s reservoir of unwanted cats to feed my son’s snake.

But then I started thinking about the moral implications of keeping a predator for a pet. We had acquired the baby boa by accident. I had spent the summer as a visiting scientist at the University of Tennessee, studying the development of defensive behaviors in reptiles. I was in the lab testing animals one day when the phone rang. It was a stressed-out man who had awakened to find that during the night, his seven-foot red-tail boa constrictor had given birth to forty-two wriggling newborns. He and his wife were understandably shaken; the new mom had never shown any amorous
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interest in the male with whom she had shared a cage in the couple's living room for the previous eight years.

The man had heard that I was a snake behaviorist and was looking for tips on how to keep the new babies healthy and where he could find good homes for them. I recommended that he contact a reptile expert I knew at the university's veterinary college for information on raising baby snakes, and agreed to adopt one of the babies myself. That evening, my eleven-year-old son, Adam, and I drove to the couple's house, where they gave him the pick of a very large litter. Adam selected the cutest one and named him Sam.

Sam was a low-maintenance pet. He did not scratch the furniture, keep the neighbors awake, or require daily exercise. He was gentle—except for the time he tried to swallow Adam's thumb. It was Adam's fault. He made the mistake of lifting Sam out of his cage immediately after handling a friend's pet hamster. Sam's brain was about as big as an aspirin tablet, and he could not tell the difference between a rodent and a human hand. He just smelled meat.

The accusation that the Herzog family was feeding kittens to snakes came a few weeks later when we were back home in the mountains of western North Carolina. I had no idea how the rumor got started, but the charge, of course, was ridiculous. While boa constrictors are equal-opportunity eaters when it comes to small mammals, Sam was only eighteen inches long and could barely swallow a mouse.

Over the next couple of days, however, several questions kept nagging me. My accuser had inadvertently forced me to confront questions I had never really considered about the moral burdens of bringing animals into our lives. Snakes don't eat carrots and asparagus. Given Sam's need for meat, was it ethical for my son to keep a boa constrictor for a pet? Is having a pet that gets its daily ration of meat from a can of cat food morally preferable to living with a snake? And are there circumstances in which feeding kittens to boa constrictors might actually be morally acceptable?

The person who started the rumor about me lived with several cats that she allowed to roam the woods around her house. Like many cat lovers, she conveniently ignored the fact that from lions to tabbies, all
members of the family *Felidae* eat flesh for a living. Each day the cats of America chow down on a wide array of meat. The pet-food shelves of my local supermarket are piled high with six-ounce tins of cow, sheep, chicken, horse, turkey, and fish. Even dried cat foods are advertised as containing “fresh meat.” With about 94 million cats in America, the numbers add up. If each cat consumes just two ounces of meat daily, en masse, they consume nearly 12 million pounds of flesh—the equivalent of 3 million chickens—every single day.

In addition, unlike snakes, cats are recreational killers. It is estimated that a billion small animals a year fall victim to the hunting instincts of our pet cats. Oddly, many cat owners don’t seem to care about the devastation their feline friends cause to wildlife. A group of Kansas cat owners were informed of the results of a study on the devastating effects of cats on local songbird populations, and then asked if they would keep their cats indoors. Three-fourths of the respondents said no. In a cruel irony, many cat owners also enjoy feeding birds in their backyards, inadvertently luring legions of hapless towhees and cardinals to their deaths at the claws of the family pet. It is likely that at least ten times as many furry and feathered creatures are killed each year as a result of our love of cats than are used in biomedical experiments.

So, pet cats cause havoc. What about pet snakes? Well, first, there are a lot fewer of them. In addition, each snake consumes only a fraction of the flesh that a cat does. According to Harry Greene, a Cornell University herpetologist who studies the feeding ecology of tropical snakes, an adult boa living in a Costa Rican rain forest consumes maybe half a dozen rats a year. This means that a medium-size pet boa constrictor needs less than five pounds of meat a year to stay in good condition. A pet cat requires far more flesh. At two ounces a day, the average cat would consume about fifty pounds of meat in the course of a year. Objectively, the moral burden of enjoying the company of a cat is ten times higher than that of living with a pet snake.

In addition, about 2 million unwanted cats, many of them kittens, are euthanized in animal “shelters” in the United States each year. Presently, their bodies are cremated. Wouldn’t it make more sense to make these...
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The boa constrictor incident got me thinking about other instances of morally problematic interactions between people and animals that I had encountered. For instance, my graduate school friend Ron Neibor studied how the brain reorganizes itself after injury. Cats, unfortunately, were the best model for the neural mechanisms he was studying. He employed a standard neuroscience technique: He surgically destroyed specific parts of the animals’ brains to observe how their abilities recovered over the succeeding weeks and months. The problem was that Ron liked his cats. His study lasted a year, during which time he became attached to the two dozen animals in his lab. On weekends, he would drive to the lab, release his cats from their cages and play with them on the floor of the animal colony. They had become pets.

His experimental protocol required that he confirm the location of the neurological lesions in the animals in the experimental group by examining their brain tissue. Part of this procedure, technically referred to as perfusion, is grizzly. Each animal is injected with a lethal dose of anesthetic. Then, formalin is pumped through its veins to harden the brain, and the animal’s head is severed from the body. Pliers are used to chip away the carcasses available to snake fanciers? After all, these cats are going to die anyway and fewer mice and rats would be sacrificed to satisfy the dietary needs of the pythons and king snakes living in American homes. Seems like a win-win, right?

Yikes . . . I had inadvertently painted myself into a logical corner in which feeding the bodies of kittens to boa constrictors was not only permissible but morally preferable to feeding them rodents. But while the logical part of my brain may have concluded that there was not much difference between raising snakes on a diet of rats or a diet of kittens, the emotional part of me was not buying the argument at all. I found the idea of feeding the bodies of cats to snakes revolting, and had no intention of hitting up the animal shelter for kitten carcasses.
skull so the brain can be extracted intact and sliced into thin sections for microscopic analysis.

It took Ron several weeks to perfuse all the cats. His personality changed. A naturally cheerful and warm-hearted person, he became tense, withdrawn, shaky. Several graduate students in his lab became concerned and offered to perfuse his cats for him. Ron refused, unwilling to dodge the moral consequences of his research. He did not talk much during the weeks he was “sacrificing” his cats. Killing them took a toll on Ron. Sometimes his eyes were red, and he would look down as we passed in the halls.

These sorts of moral complexities also extend to man’s best friend, the dog. My neighbor Sammy Hensley, a farmer who lived just down the road from us on Sugar Creek in Barnardsville, North Carolina, is an example. His two passions were dogs and raccoon hunting. Coon hunting wasn’t really a sport for Sammy; it was a way of life. He didn’t eat the raccoons he killed. He skinned them out and nailed their pelts and paws to the side of his barn so his neighbors could track his success during the hunting season. (It was while helping him skin a coon that I learned that raccoons—and most mammals—have a bone in their penis; humans are one of the exceptions.) I once accused him of nailing the skins up just to irritate my wife, Mary Jean, who once had a pet raccoon and is nuts about them. But it really wasn’t about that. It was just the North Carolina mountain way.

There were two kinds of dogs in Sammy’s life—pet dogs and coon hounds—and they led very different lives. He kept four or five hounds at a time, a couple of experienced hunters and a pup or two in training. I loved the names of the breeds: treeing walkers, Plott hounds, blueticks, redbones. Lanky animals with deep voices, languid eyes, oily coats, and the pungent smell hounds have, they usually looked lethargic. That’s because they lived most of their lives lying in the dirt, tethered to dog houses by eight-foot chains. But they came alive during hunting season, when they got to tear through the rhododendron thickets in the middle of the night, baying, nose to the ground. You could hear them baying all through the cove.

Sammy loved his hounds. He could tell their voices apart; he knew
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by the tenor of their yips and yells when they had treed the coon (good) or when they were on a possum’s trail (not good). He worried when they got lost and didn’t come home in the morning. But they were working dogs, not pets. If a dog couldn’t do its job, he would sell it or swap it for a new one.

But Sammy and his wife, Betty Sue, also had pet dogs. While the hounds never saw the inside of the house, the pet dogs—smallish animals like Boston terriers—had the run of the place. Unlike the hounds, these dogs were part of the family. They were petted and played with and allowed to beg for food at the dinner table. One afternoon, when Sammy was mowing hay on a steep section of hillside pasture, his tractor flipped over, killing him. After Sammy died, Betty Sue didn’t keep the hounds long, but their little terrier helped her get through the tough times more than anything else. In the Hensley home, the hounds and the pet dogs might as well have been different species.

Most of the dogs living in American homes are simply companions, but our attitudes toward them can be as convoluted as Sammy’s relationships with the two categories of dogs in his life. Over half of dog owners think of their pets as family members. A report by the American Animal Hospital Association found that 40% of the women they surveyed said they got more affection from their dogs than from their husbands or children. Yet there is a dark side to our interactions with dogs. One in ten American adults is afraid of dogs, and dogs are second only to late-night noise as a source of conflict between neighbors. (My friend Ross had to sell his house and move because his neighbor’s barking dogs turned his life into a nightmare.) In a typical year, 4.5 million Americans are bitten by dogs, and two dozen people, mostly children, are killed by them.

From a dog’s eye view, the human-pet relationship isn’t always rosy either. Between 2 million and 3 million unwanted dogs are euthanized in animal shelters each year. Then there are the horrendous genetic problems we have inflicted upon dogs in our attempts to breed the perfect pet. Take, for example, the English bulldog, a breed that dog behavior expert James Serpell refers to as a canine train wreck. Bulldogs have such monstrous heads that 90% of bulldog puppies have to be delivered by cesarean
section. Their distorted snouts and deformed nasal passages make breathing a chore, even during sleep, and they suffer from joint diseases, chronic dental problems, deafness, and a host of dermatological conditions caused by their wrinkly skin. To add insult to injury, English bulldogs also easily overheat and have a tendency to slobber, snore, fart, and suddenly drop dead from cardiac arrest.

Things are worse for dogs in Korea, where a puppy can be a pet or an item on the menu. Meat dogs, which are typically short-haired, largish animals that look disconcertingly like Old Yeller, are raised in horrific conditions before they are slaughtered, usually by electrocution.

We usually ignore these contradictions but as a psychologist, they began to fascinate me.

FROM THE BEHAVIOR OF ANIMALS TO THE BEHAVIOR OF ANIMAL PEOPLE

In the weeks after I was accused of feeding kittens to boas, I found myself thinking more about the paradoxes associated with our relationships with animals and less about my animal behavior studies. By conventional standards, my research program was a success. I published articles in good journals, received my share of grant funds, and presented my research at scholarly meetings. But it dawned on me that there were plenty of smart young scientists investigating topics like vocalizations in cotton rats, tool use in crows, and the offbeat reproductive habits of spotted hyenas (female hyenas give birth through their penises). On the other hand, there were only a handful of researchers trying to understand the often wacky ways that people relate to other species. Here was an emerging field, one that I could enter on the ground floor and possibly make a contribution to. Within a year, I had closed up my animal lab to concentrate full time on the psychology of human-animal interactions.

Since shifting from studying animal behavior to studying animal people, my research has largely focused on individuals who love animals but who confront moral quandaries in their relationships with them—the
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veterinary student who tries not to cry when she euthanizes a puppy, the animal rights activist who can’t find someone to date because “just going out to eat becomes an ordeal,” the burly circus animal trainer whose life is completely focused on the giant bears he hauls around the country in the dreary confines of an eighteen-wheeler, the grizzled cockfighter who beams when I offer to take a picture of his beloved battle-scarred seven-time winner.

I have attended animal rights protests, serpent-handling church services, and clandestine rooster fights. I have interviewed laboratory animal technicians, big-time professional dog-show handlers, and small-time circus animal trainers. I’ve watched high school kids dissect their first fetal pigs and helped a farm crew slaughter cattle. I analyzed several thousand Internet messages between biomedical researchers and animal rights activists as they tried—and ultimately failed—to find common ground. My students have studied women hunters, dog rescuers, ex-vegetarians, and people who love pet rats. We have surveyed thousands of people about their attitudes toward rodeos, factory farming, and animal research. We have even pored over hundreds of back issues of sleazy supermarket tabloids for insight into our modern cultural myths about animals. (The original title of our article on tabloid animal stories was “Woman Gives Birth to Litter of Nine Rabbits.” Unfortunately, the editor of the journal to which we submitted the manuscript did not find the title sufficiently scientific and insisted we change it.)

Like most people, I am conflicted about our ethical obligations to animals. The philosopher Stranch Donnelley calls this murky ethical territory “the troubled middle.” Those of us in the troubled middle live in a complex moral universe. I eat meat—but not as much as I used to, and not veal. I oppose testing the toxicity of oven cleaner and eye shadow on animals, but I would sacrifice a lot of mice to find a cure for cancer. And while I find some of the logic of animal liberation philosophers convincing, I also believe that our vastly greater capacity for symbolic language, culture, and ethical judgment puts humans on a different moral plane from that of other animals. We middlers see the world in shades of gray rather than in the clear blacks and whites of committed animal activists.
and their equally vociferous opponents. Some argue that we are fence-sitters, moral wimps. I believe, however, that the troubled middle makes perfect sense because moral quagmires are inevitable in a species with a huge brain and a big heart. They come with the territory.

I wrote *Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat* for anyone interested in human-animal relationships. As a researcher, I normally write for specialists whose job it is to wade through jargon-laden prose that can quickly make your eyes glaze over. But I am convinced that scientists have an obligation to communicate with the public, people who do not know the difference between an analysis of variance and a factor analysis but who are eager to read about current research findings and the hot controversies in our field. The trick is to inform readers about the latest results in a way that is interesting, but at the same time respect the complexity of the issues and be honest about what we know and what we don’t.

Many of the topics in the book are controversial. Researchers disagree, for example, about whether your dog feels guilty when it poops on the living room rug; whether children who abuse animals become violent adults; and about the role that meat eating played in human evolution. The passions of the public run high over animal issues such as whether the ownership of pit bulls should be outlawed, or whether trying to discover a cure for cancer is worth the deaths of millions of mice each year. Some of these debates have become bitterly divisive, with the partisans viewing the issues with passion approaching religious zeal. (For this reason, as is customary in ethnographic research, I have changed the names of some of the participants.)

For the most part, I have tried to approach these issues as objectively as I can. This means, of course, that well-intended and intelligent people on both sides of some of these controversies will sometimes disagree with me. That’s fine. To this end, I have included an extensive list of research citations and recommended readings at the end of the book. If you want to delve further into the effects of pets on human health or the psychology of animal activism, I point you to some of the relevant studies. My goal is not to change your mind about how we should treat animals but to encourage you to think more deeply about the psychology and moral implications of
some of our most important relationships: our relationships with the non-human creatures in our lives.

Late one afternoon in 1986, I was standing in a hallway of a posh Boston hotel deep in conversation with Andrew Rowan, the director of the Center for Animals and Public Policy at Tufts University. We were at one of the first international conferences on human-animal relationships, and we were discussing the paradoxes that so often crop up in our attitudes toward the use of animals. How can 60% of Americans believe simultaneously that animals have the right to live and that people have the right to eat them?

Andrew looked up at me and said, “The only consistency in the way humans think about animals is inconsistency.”

This book is my attempt to explain this paradox.