

Book Reviews

Animals and Ethics: An Overview of the Philosophical Debate

A Taylor (2003). Published by Broadview Press, PO Box 1243, Peterborough, Ontario, K9J 7H5 Canada; <http://www.broadviewpress.com>. 214 pp. Paperback (ISBN 1 55111 569 7). Price £12.99.

Animals and Ethics is a short, clear, readable book that is “intended for students and members of the general public who wish to know what philosophers have been saying about the controversial issue of animal liberation” (p 11). Under “animal liberation” Taylor includes the various views of philosophers such as Peter Singer, Tom Regan and others who call for “a fundamental reassessment of our traditional views of animals” and “radical changes in our treatment of them” (p 11). The book describes the arguments that philosophers have advanced both for and against these ideas.

The book consists of six chapters and an extensive 30-page bibliography. Chapter 1 introduces the moral status of animals as a theme in moral philosophy, and briefly outlines five major ethical approaches to the issue: utilitarianism, rights-based views, contractarianism, feminist ethics, and virtue ethics. The second chapter briefly gives some highlights of the historical debate, touching on Aristotle, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Bentham and Darwin. Chapter 3 deals with rights-based views, emphasising especially Tom Regan and his critics. Chapter 4 uses the issues of eating and hunting animals to examine the question of animal suffering, focussing especially on utilitarian views and some alternatives. In chapter 5, Taylor uses animal-based research, including genetic engineering, to discuss the issue of balancing human and animal interests. Chapter 6 describes the extensive debates, and occasional truces, between animal liberation and environmental ethics.

What is truly impressive about the book is Taylor’s ability to summarise, in a brief and accessible manner, a large and sometimes obscure philosophical literature. For most contributions he provides a succinct summary in a single paragraph; for more complex works, like those of Tom Regan, he gives several paragraphs which cover the key concepts with a minimum of jargon. Thus the book — which is an updated version of Taylor’s 1999 book *Magpies, Monkeys and Morals* — is an admirably clear, concise summary that makes an often difficult literature accessible at a level suitable for students, animal care professionals, or other educated readers.

Taylor is careful not to take sides or inject his own ideas into the debate, and that is both a strength and a limitation of the book. In practicing this neutrality, Taylor rarely analyses or questions the validity of the claims that philosophers have made. This is especially noticeable in his handling of empirical statements. Philosophers dealing with animal ethics make many empirical claims. Some declare that “animals” (often

treated as a general category, collapsing huge taxonomic diversity) “cannot be self-conscious and so cannot be aware of what is in their interests” (p 59); or “have no conscious experiences and therefore cannot suffer” (p 91); or alternatively “have beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future, including their own future; [...and] a psychophysical identity over time...” (p 66). Other philosophers make empirical claims about the world: that a vegetarian diet would help alleviate world hunger (p 94); that humans have a pro-human bias which “is an aspect of evolved human nature” (p 84); and that “human beings outdo all other creatures in terms of cruelty and unnecessary aggression” (p 103). The truth or falsehood of such claims is fundamental to the issues, yet only rarely does Taylor critically evaluate these issues. He questions the claim of one philosopher that there is “a deep-seated human instinct to hunt” (p 109), and he calls for scientists to justify their claims about the benefits of research; but for the most part he seems content to report, rather than analyse, the many and often contradictory claims that philosophers have made as a basis for their arguments. Thus, while the book could be useful background for readers wanting to delve into the field in a critical manner, Taylor leaves the critical thinking almost entirely to the reader.

As a second limitation, the book rarely attempts to show how the academic contributions connect (or not) with the broadly based, non-academic debate about our proper relations with animals. The ethics of our treatment of animals is an issue that we see debated in the classics of Ovid, Porphyry and Plutarch; depicted in the art of William Hogarth, Jean-Francois Millet and Sue Coe; expressed in the poetry of William Blake, Robert Burns and Margaret Atwood; described in the novels of Sarah Scott, Anna Sewell and Richard Adams; and passed from parent to child for generations in peasant, farming, and ranching families. The philosophers reported in this book are mostly recent (and rather peculiar) participants in this ages-old debate. Only occasionally does Taylor tie the philosophy to its social and historical context. He alludes briefly to religious perspectives, covers a few historical forerunners of the modern debate, and begins several chapters with interesting historical quotations. However, readers wanting to appreciate the history, diversity and richness of social debate about human treatment of animals will need to look to other sources such as Rudacille (2000) or Preece (2002).

Thus, Taylor’s book is an excellent summary of the ideas of (mostly recent) academic philosophers in the debate for and against a radical re-evaluation of our dealings with animals, but it is not much more than a summary, and it does not stray much beyond the borders of academic philosophy. It would make an admirable primer for students before they delve into the field in a more analytical manner, or for animal-care professionals wanting to gain basic literacy in the ideas

of academic philosophers; and with its comprehensive bibliography, it is also a handy way for specialists in the field to find references and catch up on missed papers.

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References

Preece R 2002 *Awe for the Tiger, Love for the Lamb: A Chronicle of Sensibility to Animals*. University of British Columbia Press: Vancouver, Canada

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International Zoo Yearbook, Volume 38

Edited by PJS Olney and FA Fiskén (2003). Published by The Zoological Society of London, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY, UK. 406 pp. Hardback (ISBN 0074 9664). Price £69.00.

The International Zoo Yearbook was first published in 1960 by the Zoological Society of London to provide an authoritative channel for international exchange of information about zoos. This volume is the thirty-eighth, and it continues the tradition and follows the same general style and layout of previous editions. It is divided into three sections. The first is devoted to a special subject, the second is more general and comprises articles on captive wildlife husbandry and management, and the third is a reference section listing data and survey results collated from information in the annual questionnaires returned from zoos and aquariums around the world.

Volume 38 is particularly interesting because it takes as its general theme "Zoo Challenges: Past, Present and Future". Despite their popularity and their place in our tourism history, in recent years zoos have undergone considerable change in both their structure and their function. While remaining attractive places to visit, they have seen their survival as being dependent upon their changing direction and becoming a more relevant part of today's society. As such, zoos now market themselves not only as places of entertainment and recreation, but also as important conservators of wildlife. In Section 1, fifteen articles about zoos have been written by a number of eminent authors, all of whom either work in the zoo industry or know it intimately. They discuss and demonstrate how zoos have addressed the challenges of the past and present, and how they have changed and developed to meet them. In addition, as the Editor, PJS Olney, points out, the authors provide warnings and predictions for the future of zoos and for the conservation of wildlife.

The first three papers provide us with an overview of zoos and the zoo industry. The authors, W Conway, M Hutchins and JM Knowles, are all zoo directors of considerable experience and reputation, and their views of how zoos need to

respond to the challenges confronting them should be compulsory reading for anyone interested in their future.

Most of the remaining articles outline the various aims and objectives of today's zoos and their progress towards achieving them. Thus they review topics of importance to the zoo community including education, genetics, reproductive technologies, environmental enrichment, population management and wildlife reintroductions. These are well researched and well written, informative, interesting, and serve as a valuable summary and reference for the current state of the world zoo industry.

Yet, in spite of these achievements, there is no doubt that zoos are still seen by some as being superficial, ineffective and therefore indefensible. These people are philosophically opposed to keeping wild animals in captivity, believing that zoos in their present form provide stressful husbandry conditions. Recognising this issue, the ethics of zoos and the welfare of their animals are also covered in this volume. The two articles in question are interesting because they illustrate just how our attitudes to animals have changed and how quickly this has occurred. In "Ethics in zoos", PMC Stevens and E McAllister provide an interesting historical overview of ethical standards in zoos, beginning with the precept that humans have a moral obligation to treat animals in captivity as living, sentient beings. They explain how, today, 'Codes of Ethics' have been adopted by many individual zoos and their national or regional zoo associations. However, they also point out that while in some regions these codes are strictly enforced, in others they are only morally enforced through self-regulation. They conclude by urging the zoo profession to adhere to a strict code of ethics to avoid giving "ammunition to those who say that zoos are a 'nineteenth century anachronism'".

JK Kirkwood's article "Welfare, husbandry and veterinary care of wild animals in captivity: changes in attitudes, progress in knowledge and techniques" discusses exactly what this title indicates. It too reminds us of how attitudes have changed and of the comparatively recent and rapid growth in concern for animal welfare by both zoos and their public. The author outlines the substantial improvements that have been made over the last few decades in husbandry, veterinary science and the care of zoo animals, but also leaves us with a timely warning that in spite of the important role that zoos can play in species conservation, it is still vital that they recognise and balance the 'welfare costs' associated with their actions, and strive to minimise these through high standards of husbandry, medicine and further research.

The final article in this volume is entitled "Characteristics of a world-class zoo or aquarium in the 21st century", and is written by M Hutchins and B Smith. It summarises some of the expectations of a world-class zoo and aims to provide a "road map for a new generation of zoo and aquarium directors, governing boards and staff". In so doing, the authors move beyond the commitment to conservation, science and education as the principal way forward, and argue that the objectives of the zoo will not be reached without due consideration of other vital factors. These include