Book review of The Human Use of Animals: Case Studies in Ethical Choice

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The well-known aphorism that a "camel is a horse designed by a committee" implies that creative decision-making by a small group of people is unlikely. Muddled thinking and action, however, are not the inevitable outcome of group thought. This volume is an example of the best of multidisciplinary group action. The writing is simple, the description of cases clear, and the associated analyses rich and to the point.

An introductory chapter provides a brief primer to moral theory and the moral status of animals. The next 16 chapters detail a variety of cases, the majority of which deal with research (xenotransplantation, head-injury studies, animal patenting, cosmetic testing, dissection, pound animal use, aggression research, Harlow's deprivation studies, and "right-to-know" challenges). One chapter deals with ape language studies, one with wildlife studies, one with tail docking, three with farm animals (foie gras production, veal, and broiler chickens), and one with ritual sacrifice in Santeria.

Although the book establishes a very high standard, the authors have left some room for improvement—perhaps for a second edition. Except for a few minor errors (I am cited as estimating that 14 million animals are used in cosmetic and household product testing—this figure is actually an estimate for all therapeutic and other chemical safety testing), the main potential for improvement lies in the breadth of the case selection and in the analyses found in one or two of the chapters.
Ten of the 17 chapters focus on laboratory animals. I would recommend adding at least three more wildlife cases. For example, the poisoning of gulls on Monomoy Island off Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to promote nesting by endangered tern species raises all sorts of issues about endangered versus common species and the focus on population well-being rather than on individual well-being. Another well-documented case is the deer hunt on the Quabbin Reservoir land (see Dizard, 1994). The Metropolitan District Commission, which managed the Quabbin Reservoir reserve to provide safe drinking water for Boston, was worried about the impact of the growing deer population on forest regeneration and the resulting loss of diversity in the watershed. Finally, one might examine the attempts at breeding and reintroducing the endangered black-footed ferret into Wyoming prairie habitats.

The companion animal section also needs greater representation. The case of the condemned New Jersey dog (for biting and aggression) might be used to explore issues about the consequences of blaming an animal rather than its owner, when the animal is simply behaving as programmed. A famous companion animal case involved the dog Sido, whose owner left her estate to the San Francisco SPCA, provided that they euthanize Sido. The owner felt that Sido would not be happy with any other owner. In the end, the SPCA refused to euthanize the dog, and Sido seemed very content with her new human companion. I also would like to see an examination of the use of dogs in sled-dog racing—perhaps focused on the Iditarod. Although evidence suggests that the dogs enjoy the activity, every year some dogs die in the race because of the tremendous stresses. In addition, the human mushers also endanger their lives. Finally, one might examine a case involving a mine-detecting-and-destroying team composed of a human and a dog.

In the farm animal area, the three cases chosen are reasonably representative, but the broiler chicken case contains little of note. It might have been more interesting to examine a slaughter issue (perhaps kosher slaughter or the slaughter of horses to supply the demand for horse meat in Europe) or to look at the face-branding issue (both the dairy cow buyout in the 1980s and the branding of Mexican cattle in the 1990s). The uproar over the dairy cow branding led to some of the first cooperative interactions between farmers and animal protection groups in the United States.

Of the cases actually chosen, I have few criticisms. As mentioned, I do not believe that the broiler chicken chapter is particularly interesting or illustrative, and I think that the analysis of Harlow’s work is a little too gentle. From what I have been able to gather, Harlow caused a lot of his own later problems with the animal movement because of his flippancy and his delight with such unfortunate verbal imagery as the “well of despair” or the “rape-rack.” In addition, there is evidence that even Harlow’s contemporaries were uneasy with his work. In the mid-1970s, British behavioral scientist Thorpe commented on how horrible Harlow’s research was (but did acknowledge that it had been productive).
In the end, my comments and criticisms are meant largely as a stimulus to the authors to broaden the scope of their next edition and to make what small improvements they choose to this first-rate publication.

REFERENCE