

Humans, Animals, and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies by Nik Taylor

Nik Taylor, *Humans, Animals, and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, New York, Lantern Books, 2013

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The aim of this book is to present an introductory overview of the growing field of human-animal studies (HAS) from a social science perspective, for non-specialist readers from diverse backgrounds. The Introduction outlines the scope and aims, and reflects on the question of why HAS. This is addressed by highlighting some of the questions that led to the author's involvement in the field – for example how do we justify eating some animals while loving others? – followed by a taster of the broader academic areas on which the field has focussed. A common factor that has emerged across the diverse areas of HAS is the complexity of the relationships between humans and animals. The Introduction next outlines three themes that are important to the book. The first is the assumption that animals are 'socially constructed and are repositories of culturally-mediated meanings'. The second is a critique of anthropocentrism, which is the tendency of humans to judge the importance and interests of other animals by their importance to humans, and to mediate knowledge of animals through a human perspective. The third is ecocentrism, a system of values that is nature-centred, in contrast with the human-centred system of values that is anthropocentrism. Ecocentrism is judged by the author to be an improvement from a HAS perspective on anthropocentrism, but also deficient in that it considers animals only tangentially, as part of nature, rather than as individuals. The final theme introduced is the 'invisibility of animals in social thought'. By this is meant that there is a tendency in the social sciences to view the characteristics that are seen as being fundamental to human social life as distinguishing humans from animals, and consequently animals are considered not to be members of society, but outside of it. And yet, it is argued, animals are in fact central to so many aspects of society (e.g. their representation in popular culture, their role

as companions to humans, political and public debates concerning such things as hunting and vegetarianism) that they warrant more prominence in the social sciences.

The six chapters that follow the Introduction explore some areas of study and literature that build on these themes, and introduce others. Chapter 1 (The Human-Animal Bond) examines the variety of attitudes that humans have towards animals, depending on such factors as the species, the context of the association, and the function of the animal in question. There is a strong focus on the roles of animals in maintaining human health, from the health benefits of keeping companion animals to their use in various kinds of therapy and humane education programs. Chapter 2 (Social Institutions and Animals) demonstrates how human-animal relations are often mediated by social institutions, using the examples of companion animal keeping and meat eating. It opens with a section on the history of domestication, including the institutionalisation of pet keeping. The historical discussion is interesting, although (necessarily) incomplete and with some inaccuracies (dogs did not evolve from jackals, they evolved from wolves). The tone then changes from factual to normative, with an implicit criticism of the 'relations of dominance that underpin human-animal relationships as exemplified by pet ownership and the very notion that we have the right to breed particular characteristics in animals'. The section on meat eating discusses such topics as the increasing prevalence of carnivory in some societies, the apparent paradox that many meat eaters consider themselves animal lovers and yet will sanction mass killing for food, the social mechanisms that have become institutionalised for sheltering meat eaters from the messy details of the killing involved, and the impacts of industrialised meat farming on climate change. Meat eating is clearly a sensitive topic for the author, and the discussion of these topics is unreservedly normative. Chapter 3 (Representing Animals) considers the ways in which animals are represented in visual culture, for example fictional film and wildlife documentaries. The main message is that such representation contributes to the 'social construction' of animals, in which our understanding of animals and consequently our attitudes and actions towards them are influenced. Chapter 4 (Working with Animals) explores human-animal relations in a variety of contexts where people interact with animals in the workplace, including animal shelters, laboratories, slaughterhouses and veterinary surgeries. The theme is that the context of the workplace shapes the attitudes of the workers towards the animals; for example the language that is used in slaughterhouses specifically blurs the distinction between the living animal and the edible product into which it is

converted in the process of killing. Chapter 5 (Human- and Animal-Directed Violence) introduces research that explores the links between violence on humans and animals, and argues that the field needs to be broadened to include what the author considers to be various forms of institutionalised cruelty towards animals, such as ‘factory farming, circuses and rodeos’. Chapter 6 (Protecting Animals) presents an interesting review of the main schools of thought regarding the treatment of animals, including animal welfare and animal rights movements and the historical influences on them. There is a perceptible shift in style in this chapter, towards a more overtly ideologically-driven stance, suggesting that animal protection is a strong agenda for the author.

For me, as a scientist, the argument became particularly interesting as my own profession fell under the author’s heated gaze, with statements such as ‘As we move away from blinkered notions of science and rationality and begin to question historical assumptions about the ways we see other animals, we are able to ask different questions about them’. I suggest that the move away from rationality and science will impact not so much the ability to ask questions, as to answer them – without science and rationality, on what do we base our answers? The concluding chapter helped clarify the author’s view on this, by introducing the emerging field of Critical Animal Studies (CAS). A list of ten points considered the key tenets of CAS demonstrate that this is perhaps more a political than a scholarly agenda. For example, point 2 reads: ‘Rejects pseudo-objective academic analysis by explicitly clarifying its normative values and political commitments, such that there are no positivist illusions whatsoever that theory is disinterested or writing and research is non-political’. Does this mean that we should turn to political leanings and ideologies for the ‘answers’? The issue with this is that it can be non-progressive if answers are based on pre-existing commitment and belief rather than the self-critical processes of science and rationality. The challenge for HAS, as I see it, is to distance itself from such views, and make the most of the tools of science and rationality to develop a debate and an agenda for action that are informed by a sound understanding of the animals it seeks to protect. The natural sciences have produced a substantial body of information that is relevant to these discussions. In my opinion HAS would benefit from taking a more careful look at how this can help to achieve the goals set out in *Humans, Animals and Society*.