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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

To Love and To Kill: Everyday Moralities in the Parallel Lives of Human and Non-human Laboratory Animals

Reviewed by Carrie Friese

Sharp, Lesley A. (2019) *Animal Ethos: The Morality of Human-Animal Encounters in Experimental Lab Science*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Lesley Sharp opens her book on the moralities of animal life and death in laboratory science with John Berger's famous question that entitles his essay: "Why look at animals?" Berger's answer to this question is: because of the ways in which human and animal lives are both similar and dissimilar, a parallelism that only converges at death. It is this moment of convergence, of death broadly speaking, that Sharp focuses her attention upon, providing a thorough analysis of what it means to systematically kill another today. And lest anyone think that this systematic killing is a sign of uncaringness at best or wonton cruelty at worst, there is another useful quote from John Berger's essay that Sharp's analysis similarly rotates around: "A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*" (Berger (1980) 2009). Sharp's analysis hinges upon the parallel fact that, in science, animal technicians and scientists are

both fond of and even love the laboratory animals in their care as sentient subjects *and* as objectified units of data, which requires that the animals they care for will potentially suffer and almost certainly die (see in particular Sharp, 2019: 217-218).

Sharp draws on more than two decades of ethnographic research conducted largely in the US but also in the UK in order to consider the everyday moralities that make this *and* possible. Sharp (2019: 15) points out that “human ‘pre-eminence’ is a foundational principle of lab research, where experimental animals are used specifically to avoid causing undue harm to (more highly valued) human subjects” but that this is never the sole logic shaping life in the lab. Sharp argues the reason for this is because lab animals are “multiple” (Mol, 2002); any animal in question may be a generic source of valuable and transferrable data while also being many other things, including a favourite, named individual (Sharp, 2019: 18, chapter 14). By exploring the multiplicity of laboratory animals, Sharp is able to see and name the everyday moralities engendered in science, which she probes through three themes that structure the book: intimacy, sacrifice and animal exceptionalism.

Sharp delineates, what she refers to as, the sentimental structure of laboratories as an entanglement of notions regarding species proximity developed through evolutionary thinking (e.g., humans as most closely related primates) with personal histories (e.g., prior relationships with pets or working animals) that create particular forms of animal favouritism (Sharp, 2019: 41). This animal favouritism is patterned without being deterministic, shaping the kinds of interspecies intimacies created (or not) in the doing of science. One person’s favourite species to work with is, for another person, the species that they absolutely will not work with. Dogs are iconic in this sense, as pets that, as a result, some people enjoying working with while others categorically will not; rodents are, in turn, often viewed as an

entry point to animal experimentation, one that many novices plan to ‘move on’ or ‘move up’ from. And it is within this sentimental structure that Sharp explores the common practice of using television not only as a research tool but also to give primates some ‘downtime’ and ‘enrich’ their laboratory life. Being ‘close’ to humans, sentimental structure here becomes entangled with the human hierarchies of lab labour – where caring for monkeys and caring for animal technicians (as another and as self) becomes blurred in a manner that creates yet another kind of interspecies intimacy.

Through anthropological attention to the details of language use, Sharp highlights how the simultaneous pervasiveness and muteness around animal death – the fact that ‘killing’ is so rarely spoken of in favour of euphemisms that range from euthanising to ‘sac-ing’ -- denotes the “inherent contradiction” (Sharp, 2019: 108) of experimental life science research.

Sacrifice is the major trope used by both scientists and social scientists to articulate the meaning of this inherent contradiction, and Sharp here extends this analysis in order to ask when and how ‘sacrifice’ is used within experimental science and the kinds of work it does. By opening ‘sacrifice’ up in this way to critical consideration, Sharp is able to show that the inherent contradiction of experimental science, one that is also embodied by Berger’s farmer, is disproportionately shouldered by the animal technician, who represent the invisible labour of experimental science. Killing well -- that is killing animals without them experiencing pain or stress -- is a key tool for doing ‘humane’ experimental research and remaining ‘human’ in this context.

With ‘exceptionalism,’ Sharp turns the theme of human exceptionalism that is central to animal experimentation on its head, looking instead at when and how a generic laboratory animal becomes an exceptional individual and the practices that result. These practices

include ‘rescuing’ a laboratory animal from death, through rehoming and adoption for instance but also reuse. But these practices also include memorializing the life and death of particular laboratory animals as individuals or laboratory animals as a general class. While the memorialized animal can and does stand as a trophy, demonstrating human skill and thus reproducing ideas of human dominance, the memorialized animal is often also, or can instead be a totem.

This book will be of clear substantive interest to social science and humanities scholars of experimental science and laboratory animals, while also being of general interest to anthropologists as well as medical sociologists of emotions, invisible work as well as death and dying. But this book will also be of great interest to a more general readership, including animal rights activists and the full range of professionals involved in working with laboratory animal (e.g., animal technicians, veterinarians and scientists). Animal rights activists may, for example, be interested in seeing how their ideologies of care overlap with those of animal technicians (Sharp, 2019: 160) – raising the potential for new kinds of practices. Those working with laboratory animals would find interest in the clear set of recommendations for practice that Sharp makes in the Conclusion, which clearly build upon her years of empirical research. For example, there is currently a move to create ‘cultures of care’ in experimental science, at least within the UK, which includes caring for both animals and people; Sharp’s recommendations provide further evidence and support for this type of organizational reform.

Bibliography

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